

Volume 51 Issue 2 - Apr, May, Jun 2012

The newsletter of the Humanist Society of NSW Inc.



V *HUMANIST* viewpoints



Can the Twelve Steps work without 'God'?

HUVAT

Humanist Viewpoints Afternoon Talk 4pm
2nd Sunday each month.

Apr 8 - Affie Adagio "Language of Love?"

May 6 - SGM 'Expulsions' tbc by letter (Note: first Sun)

Jun 10 - Ian Bryce "Can civilisation survive the next 30yrs of climate change?"

Opportunity to socialise over light refreshments.

Also in this issue...

- Religion for Atheists
- Islam's Genetic Timebomb

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Honorary Secretary Comments

Affie Adagio



The March meeting was spectacular as it was a celebration of the 90th birthdays of Dorothy Buckland Fuller and Vicky Potempa; the 80th birthday of David Tribe and my 68th which takes place on 8th March (International Women's Day) having taken place only a few days earlier. Angela Drury and Fred

Flatow had organised the party and we had a beautiful cake, Champaign and great food. Many thanks from us to all those who contributed and participated in the celebration. Here are some photos...



Dorothy, Vicky, Affie and David



MEETING WITH OUR BARRISTERS: Nasty rumours have been circulated by some whom we are in the process of expelling from the membership. These rumours are that we have withheld information from our members about having made a greater

expenditure than we have done on legal representation with the out of court settlement of the Styles defamation case. So the time has come for you the members to become aware of our legal benefactors through whom we received valuable PRO BONO legal assistance. The Hon R. J ("Bob") Ellicott QC, a former federal minister and retired Federal Court judge, and Mr Michael McHugh, who did most of the work, were our barristers. However, most of the research and preparation was put together by our member and retired solicitor Peter Young, therefore reducing our fees for the solicitor considerably. Peter was our Legal Liaison Officer. However as you know we paid for our Solicitors Sweeney Tiggerman. A delegation (pictured) attended Wardell Chambers to formally thank

Mr Ellicott and Mr McHugh for their valuable pro bono assistance.



M. McHugh, J. August, B. Ellicott, A. Adagio and V. Bien

The delegation consisted of John August (President), Affie Adagio (Hon Secretary), Victor Bien (Treasurer), and taking the photo Peter Young (Legal Liaison Officer).

UNAANSW INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY – PARLIAMENT HOUSE – ALSO HUMSOCNSW SUPPORTED: KEYNOTE SPEAKER PROFESSOR LESLEY CAMPBELL: As Convenor/M.C. I can report that feedback from this event has been extremely favourable. Soon there will be a link on our website for a film of this one hour event.



S. Conde, B. Heitman, L. Campbell, A. Adagio, V. Weekes

Subscriptions are due by the 1st of July every year as follows:

Single \$35, Double \$45, Concession \$20, Viewpoints only \$20

Please send cheque to Humanist Society of NSW, 10 Shepherd St, Chippendale NSW 2008

President's Report

John August



We managed to make our submission to the NSW Ethics Inquiry. You'll find it at on the NSW Parliament website and can access it via this shortened link <http://tiny.cc/kbhtbw>

While there might well be a few submissions against the ethics classes, I've not found any submissions in several I've checked. When such classes were pushed for in Queensland, the religious lobby managed to rise up and quash them. I think it bodes well with Fred Nile's influence in NSW being much diminished.

However, in spite of this progress, we did hear from Richard Mills of Dying with Dignity at the last HuVat. He was skeptical that we'd get much progress on Voluntary Euthanasia with both political parties against it as they are - in contrast to Labor supporting ethics classes and the Liberals being at least not openly committed against it; it seems they implemented the inquiry as a result of Fred Nile's influence. Still, we can only endorse the Green's push in NSW Parliament for Voluntary Euthanasia; we can do our best to hold accountable members of both major parties who vote against it.

At the last HuVat we also had a party to celebrate four birthdays : that of our patron, Dorothy Buckland Fuller, founding member Vicki Potempa, Secretary Affie Adagio and also David Tribe, a longtime commentator on Secular issues in both Australia and the UK.

We also held our annual Darwin Day HuVat event. Victor Bien spoke on "Evolutionary Economics" - the lesson is that unregulated competition can be wasteful and destructive, but setting some limits on the competition means people are more likely to compete in terms of creativity - rather than making destructive trade offs or forcing the costs onto others. I spoke on "Evolutionary Psychiatry" - where we look at mental illness and dysfunction in terms of how our evolutionary processes can go wrong - in terms of not being adapted to new phenomena, rare events - or the results of destructive trade-offs that made their own evolutionary sense.

Brian Edwards also spoke on the existence of God, and going back further we had our end-of-year party.

In conjunction with Steve Maxwell (a member of both the NSW Humanists and the NSW Rationalists) and the Sydney "Art Cycle" group, I ran a cycle tour of the "Sydney Freedom Trail". Along with Steve, we were

joined by Victor Bien our Treasurer. Amongst other things I found out about the sculpture of a crucified woman which was to appear on the Sydney War Memorial - till the Catholic Church kicked up a storm and stopped that from happening. Perhaps you've heard of that story ? In any case, it was great to reach out to other groups in Sydney - many people on the ride found our viewpoint intriguing.

We've also meet up with several Humanists from overseas. There was Jose Antonio Vegara from Chile, who attended the recent international conference and was an advocate for Esperanto. He told some amazing stories about how much stronger the hold of the Catholic Church is on Chile, and was amazed at the presence of the very progressive versions of Christianity like the Unitarian Church that we have outside of Chile.

We also met up with Patricia Rogers, Vice-Chair of the British Humanists, and Guy Otten from the Manchester Humanists.

Member Sue Hurst has put me onto Hanifa Deen, a writer on Islam in Australia. Certainly, we're against Female Genital Mutilation and Sharia Law. Ayan Hirsi Ali's narrative is a shocking one. You have public forums on Islam where the Islamic speakers are intimidating, or - at worst - have made threats of violence which have meant the forum was shut down - as has happened in the UK. Then you have the machinations by Islamic Republics in the UN trying to make Blasphemy an exception to free speech. These abuses and excesses need to be identified - and challenged.

However, it seems from reading Hanifa Deen that there are Islamic sentiments that embrace the law of the land in Australia. These Muslims would rather keep their heads down and not make a fuss, working and raising a family as people tend to do. So, the voices of Radical Islam tend to be the ones we hear.

Deen wrote "The Jihad Seminar" on that well known sermon against Islam in Melbourne which was the trigger for a protracted court case. On reading it, it becomes apparent that while there is something called "hate-speech" - something which needs to be limited - hate-speech is a secular concept, and is fundamentally different to Blasphemy. Some Muslims do think that something Blasphemous is also an example of hate-speech. And it ain't necessarily so. And while something might seem clear in the legislation, once a concept hits the courts it is pored over and pulled apart - and you wonder just what happened. That's the courts I guess. Of course, I can only say so much here - the book itself is worth reading for all that I can't say here.

Another book I read was "Contempt of Court" by Jean Ely on the Defence of Government Schools case. People have mentioned DOGS from time to time, but it was only after reading this book that the case made sense to me. The book makes a good case that Australia's founding fathers meant for Australia to have a "wall of

separation" between Church and State much as the US has - drawing directly from them as an inspiration. However, it seems the Australian courts made a technical semantic reading of a sentence in the Constitution which went in an entirely different direction, betraying the intent of our founding fathers. It seems they deliberately blinded themselves to the historical context which was plain for all to see.

However, Lionel Murphy did recognise the argument of the DOGS group. Both Whitlam and Murphy are still causing heated argument and controversy to this day. But, one thing you'd never guess - they were on opposite sides of the DOGS argument. Whitlam believed in giving State Aid to non-Government Schools - but Murphy, in his minority judgement, found it to be unconstitutional.

There's a rich-but-hidden secular history of Australia. Some of it is exposed in Vicki Potempa's book "Off My

Shoulders", which exposes an incredible series of regressive laws supported by the Catholic Church.

"Contempt of Court" shows us another important side. Our research for the submission to the Inquiry into Ethics Education prompted Stephen Stuart from the Victorian Humanists to point us towards newspaper articles from the 1860s and 1870s which show that Parkes' support of Special Religious Education (SRE) was a compromise to reduce the waste resulting from sectarian education - rather than being any particular endorsement of SRE.

We are starting to uncover this rich history. It is worth taking on board - there's been a lot happening.

Regards,

John August

Member News

from the membership secretary

Welcome new members Peter Miller, Les Shearman (who has recently been very helpful with Humanist House maintenance) and to Margaret Kirkby, a leading light in the Womens Abortion Action Campaign in Sydney for over 30 yrs.

Vale - Dorothy Simons

1913 - 2011 (Obituary extract from the Sydney Morning Herald 16 Feb 2012.)

In 1960, Simons joined the Humanist Society and campaigned with it for civil liberties, particularly contraception, while working as a research assistant in the department of economic history at the University of Sydney.

In 1969, through the Humanist Society, Simons attended a public meeting which resolved to form the NSW Homosexual Law Reform Society. She became a member of a working group which was quickly swept up by the Campaign Against Moral Persecution, formed shortly afterwards. In 1972 she joined WEL, which took over the Family Planning Association.

With a medical practitioner, Simons co-founded Preterm, which ran Sydney's first legal abortion clinic, and she joined its board in 1974. In 1975, she was elected president of the FPA.

Simons retired from the university in 1978, and the next year headed a team of volunteers in 1979 to produce WEL's newsletter, WEL-Informed. She wrote witty satires for Sydney University's *Honi Soit* and the Humanist Society's *Viewpoints* and, presenting the feminist viewpoint, was an avid *Herald* letter-writer.

In the mid-1990s, Simons began campaigning for voluntary euthanasia. She co-founded the Voluntary Euthanasia Society, telling a journalist in 1994: "Euthanasia has as much to do with murder as making love has to do with rape." She became a board member of the society and was instrumental in ensuring a ban on the publication and distribution of *Final Exit* was overturned.

Even the secular yearn for ritual

The following letter from Humanist Chaplains Network Chairman, Dally Messenger III, was written to the Age newspaper who chose not to publish it. We have pleasure in publishing it.

Your correspondent Mic Looby (Straight and narrow not so hallowed - The Age -Feb 10) by his subconscious attitude, takes the joy out of life. He takes it for granted that he is sensible in doing so - that traditional marriage is “nonsense”. But he is in a traditional marriage - he just hasn’t celebrated it with a ceremony.



We have wedding ceremonies for the same reason we have graduations, citizenship ceremonies, Oscars, Brownlows and Dally Ms. We have wedding ceremonies for the same reason the women of Melbourne get dressed up in their hats for the Melbourne Cup. These are events which milestone our lives, give us a level of dignity, and strengthen us with joyous memories. It is no mystery to me why heteros and gays want to celebrate one of life’s great occasions with recognised equality. Mr Looby has no understanding that his dry and insensitive attitude guts the culture. He sees himself as rational. But as any advertising mad man will tell him - with human beings emotions are much more important than “reason”.

The only reason many who do not get married “can’t see the sense in it” is because they live in the swampy mental residue of the time divorces were few and weddings for secular people were humiliating and degrading - the pre-Lionel Murphy days - the days before civil celebrants.

It was presumed then that dignity and beauty were the sole prerogatives of the church and that celebrations by secular people had to be dumbed down and degraded - unfortunately an attitude which is still rife in the Attorney-General’s Department, which appoints celebrants.

I need to tell Mr Looby that the basic components of a wedding, or any other ceremony - music, poetry, choreography, symbolism, the visual arts, and celebration in general, belong to everyone. And we need it.

Vale - Ron Leverett

Ron was a member of the Humanist Society of NSW for over forty years. He was our Peace and Environment contact and was active on these issues. He faithfully attended General Meetings up to and including AGM 2011, and spoke on his issues from time to time.

Ron was born in Rockhampton in 1932. He graduated as Bachelor of Engineering from the University of NSW and worked as an engineer for the Commonwealth and State Public Service holding various city and country positions. Ron had lots of interests and skills; sailing, competition tennis, bushwalking, photography, carpentry and he rode his bicycle daily right up to his death. In retirement he and his wife Pat went on extended camping holidays, visiting national parks beaches and historic houses. He maintained all his own vehicles including 3 combi vans. He attended U3A and joined in bushcare locally.

Ron and Pat had four children, and were married for one week short of 51 years. Apart from being a long standing member of the Humanist Society, Ron was also a member of the All Nations Club in Kings Cross (now defunct). He died, quite suddenly, in November 2011 and is greatly missed.

Our condolences to Pat, and children Lynette, Malcolm, Stephen and Glen.

Islam's genetic timebomb

Bryan Fischer

Nicolai Sennels is a Danish psychologist who has done extensive research into a little-known problem in the Muslim world: the disastrous results of Muslim inbreeding brought about by the marriage of first-cousins.

This practice, which has been prohibited in the Judeo-Christian tradition since the days of Moses, was sanctioned by Muhammad and has been going on now for 50 generations (1,400 years) in the Muslim world.

This practice of inbreeding will never go away in the Muslim world, since Muhammad is the ultimate example and authority on all matters, including marriage. The massive inbreeding in Muslim culture may well have done virtually irreversible damage to the Muslim gene pool, including extensive damage to its intelligence, sanity, and health.

According to Sennels, close to half of all Muslims in the world are inbred. In Pakistan, the numbers approach 70%. Even in England, more than half of Pakistani immigrants are married to their first cousins, and in Denmark the number of inbred Pakistani immigrants is around 40%. The numbers are equally devastating in other important Muslim countries: 67% in Saudi Arabia, 64% in Jordan and Kuwait, 63% in Sudan, 60% in Iraq, and 54% in the United Arab Emirates and Qatar.

According to the BBC, this Pakistani, Muslim-inspired inbreeding is thought to explain the probability that a British Pakistani family is more than 13 times as likely to have children with recessive genetic disorders. While Pakistanis are responsible for three percent of the births in the UK, they account for 33% of children with genetic birth defects. The risk of what are called autosomal recessive disorders such as cystic fibrosis and spinal muscular atrophy is 18 times higher and the risk of death due to malformations is 10 times higher.

Other negative consequences of inbreeding include a 100 percent increase in the risk of stillbirths and a 50% increase in the possibility that a child will die during labour. Lowered intellectual capacity is another devastating consequence of Muslim marriage patterns. According to Sennels, research shows that children of consanguineous marriages lose 10 – 16 points off their IQ and that social abilities develop much slower in inbred babies. The risk of having an IQ lower than 70, the

official demarcation for being classified as “retarded,” increases by an astonishing 400 percent among children of cousin marriages. (Similar effects were seen in the Pharaonic dynasties in ancient Egypt and in the British royal family, where inbreeding was the norm for a significant period of time).

In Denmark, non-Western immigrants are more than 300 percent more likely to fail the intelligence test required for entrance into the Danish army. Sennels says that “the ability to enjoy and produce knowledge and abstract thinking is simply lower in the Islamic world”. He points out that the Arab world translates just 330 books every year, about 20% of what Greece alone does. In the last 1,200 years of Islam, just 100,000 books have been translated into Arabic, about what Spain does in a single year. Seven out of 10 Turks have never even read a book.

Sennels points out the difficulties this creates for Muslims seeking to succeed in the West. “A lower IQ, together with a religion that denounces critical thinking, surely makes it harder for many Muslims to have success in our high-tech knowledge societies”. Only nine Muslims have ever won the Nobel Prize, and five of those were for the “Peace Prize”. According to Nature magazine, Muslim countries produce just 10 percent of the world average when it comes to scientific research (measured by articles per million inhabitants).

In Denmark, Sennels' native country, Muslim children are grossly overrepresented among children with special needs. One-third of the budget for Danish schools is consumed by special education, and anywhere from 51% to 70% of retarded children with physical handicaps in Copenhagen have an immigrant background. Learning ability is severely affected as well. Studies indicated that 64% of school children with Arabic parents are still illiterate after 10 years in the Danish school system. The immigrant drop-out rate in Danish high schools is twice that of the native-born.

Mental illness is also a product. The closer the blood relative, the higher the risk of schizophrenic illness. The increased risk of insanity may explain why more than 40% of patients in Denmark's biggest ward for clinically insane criminals have an immigrant background. The U.S.A. is not immune. According to Sennels, “One study based on 300,000 Americans shows that the majority of

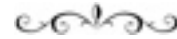
Muslims in the USA have a lower income, are less educated, and have worse jobs than the population as a whole”.

Sennels concludes: There is no doubt that the wide spread tradition of first cousin marriages among Muslims has harmed the gene pool among Muslims. Because Muslims’ religious beliefs prohibit marrying non-Muslims and thus prevents them from adding fresh genetic material to their population, the genetic damage done to their gene pool since their prophet allowed first cousin marriages 1,400 years ago are most likely massive. (This has produced) overwhelming direct and indirect human and societal consequences.

Bottom line: Islam is not simply a benign and morally equivalent alternative to the Judeo-Christian tradition. As Sennels points out, the first and biggest victims of Islam are Muslims. Simple Judeo-Christian compassion for Muslims and a commonsense desire to protect Western civilization from the ravages of Islam dictate a vigorous opposition to the spread of this dark and dangerous religion. These stark realities must be taken into

account when we establish public policies dealing with immigration from Muslim countries and the building of mosques in the U.S. Australia and the rest of the West.

Let’s hope the civilized West and the North Americans wake up before a blind naiveté about the reality of Islam destroys what remains of our civilisation.



Editors note: Bryan Fischer is a renowned American religious conservative who has made inflammatory and often unsupported claims about various topics including that HIV does not cause AIDS. The Humanist Society does not endorse his views but offers this article as a catalyst for further discussion and enquiry.

Vale Marjorie Saul

Marjorie was the president in 1980-81. She died on Sunday 18th March aged 88. She led a campaign against female genital mutilation, convened a sub-committee of the Society investigating the incidence of this scourge in Australia, gathering information about the practice in various forms including contacting Muslim women's groups; disseminated information to women's health organisations and to lobby, on a nation wide basis, including the Federal Government, for the eradication of this practice. During the 70s and early 80s was the Sexist advertising contact for the Womens Electoral Lobby investigating the stereotyped portrayal of women in advertising. She contributed significantly to gaining government supporting parents' benefits. She fostered social relationships within the Society by starting the Humanist half-yearly weekends away when we all took to the bush, the pool and the hearth, to explore ideas late into the night over a glass or two, with the kids tucked up in their dorm probably doing the same.

In more recent years she lived with her family in the Nowra area.

Acknowledgement: compiled from information from *Secular Who's Who* by Ray Dahlitz. Perspective and additional information from Peter Saul, Marion Hosking and Ann Young.

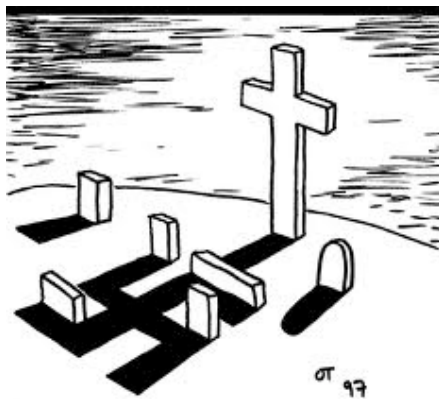
News in Brief

Australian Secular Lobby says Government's changes to chaplains program are a con

In September the Schools Education Minister Peter Garrett announced that from next year schools will be able to choose between a chaplain or a secular student welfare worker.

Hugh Wilson from the Australian Secular Lobby says the arrangements being put in place will make no difference, except to make it less clear when religion is involved. "Con job. The department has failed to provide a definition for secular so nobody knows what they mean by it except by their actions and their actions are well, deceitful at best," he said.

The Department of Education has published lists of organisations that are in the running to get funding to provide student welfare workers - many of them are religious organisations. Hugh Wilson says that's inappropriate and added "If the Australian Atheist Foundation were applying to employ student welfare workers, that would be just as inappropriate as if Access Ministries was"



EC to Take Action against Vatican in Holocaust Case

When the European Commission referred a long running Holocaust money laundering case against the Vatican Bank to the newly organized Autorità di Informazione Finanziaria, the Vatican agency tasked with anti money laundering, it left open the possibility of legal action by the European Commission against the Vatican.

Dr. Jonathan Levy, the attorney for over a thousand claimants, is accusing the Vatican of misfeasance and violating European anti money laundering laws. The Vatican is an associate member of the Eurozone (it issues Euros) and part of the European Anti Money Laundering regime through the Vatican Bank and must adhere to certain Directives.

In correspondence earlier this year from the European Commission, an official indicated the European Commission could institute legal proceedings against the Vatican City State if it violates European anti money laundering Directives. (Benjamin Angel to Jonathan Levy, January 4, 2011).

According to Levy, the Vatican cannot continue to ignore post war money laundering allegations of gold looted from former Yugoslavia: "While we do not dispute the Vatican state answers solely to its God in matters of faith, in matters of finance the laws of Man apply."

Words and Music



Words and Ideas by David Tribe is available for \$15 for the total benefit of the Humanist Society of NSW. A very popular piece of literature which is selling fast so send in your order with your cheque or money order.



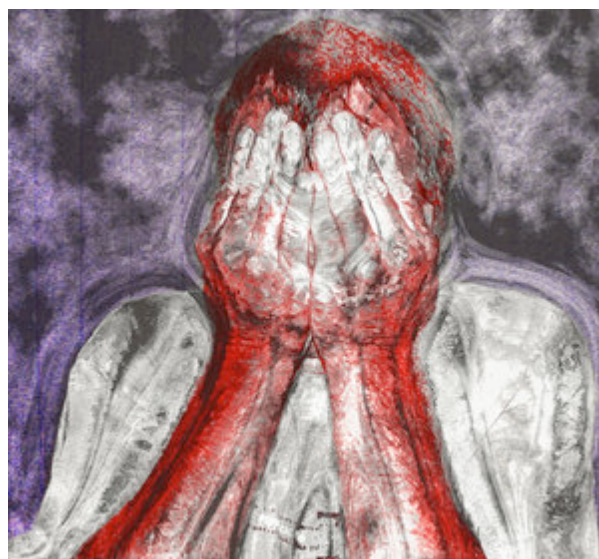
Love is Born CD is composed and the lyrics are written by Dennis Morris (past President of HumSocWA). The songs are English interspersed with Zulu, and are highly relaxing. The \$15 is totally for the benefit of the HumSocNSW so please send in your order with your cheque or money order.

An atheist at Alcoholics Anonymous

Spirituality is central to the Twelve Step programme. But when Frank B reached rock bottom, he discovered that even the godless can be saved.

I am crunched tight in the fetal position, whimpering pitifully on a piss-stained carpet covered with a layer of crushed plastic Wild Oak Cider bottles. I have ended pretty much every day for the last decade in this fashion. It is May 1999, I am 31 years of age, a skeletal eight and a half stone, my teeth medieval and I smell a little like a pet shop in summer. I am emotionally desolate, haunted by a profound sense of sadness, a thousand nameless fears and the threat of some terrible impending catastrophe. I believe I am ugly and worthless. I hurt all over. My drinking is killing me. My thinking is killing me. My behaviour has made everybody who knows me want to cry or punch me. I have become a peculiar fusion of fox and snake, saloon-bar ponce and high-street pest. My mind is vicious in its pursuit of alcohol. I will steal your wallet and help you look for it. In the previous week I have begged, borrowed, manipulated, collapsed in the street carrying the last of my record collection to the pawn shop, drunk my poor mum's bingo money and carried out countless other charmless acts of ruthless deviousness. It is a relentless, degrading, endlessly humiliating existence. Everything I held dear has gone and I am close to the end. Trapped. Compelled to harm myself. Day in and day out. Hello, my name is Frank and, though I do not know it at the time, I am an alcoholic and my head has very nearly broken my heart.

Alcoholism is a pernicious, progressive mental and physical illness that will insidiously strip away and annihilate everything in your life that contains love and goodness. Its pathological nature is to isolate you, imprison you and then ultimately bring about your demise. If you are suffering from alcoholism and unable to stop drinking, life will absolutely definitely end in tears. Those tears will typically be shed in prison, on a park bench in the rain, after being sectioned under the Mental Health Act with or without Korsakoff's Syndrome or alone in a darkened room as I was, drink in hand, arguing with the curtains or sobbing in my underpants to Phil Collins' Face Value.



As a hard-boiled eight-year-old I had rejected God along with Santa and The Six Million Dollar Man. As a London-Irish Catholic, at ten years old I survived the trauma of being an altar boy by being on permanent nonce alert and taking cheeky swigs of the communion wine. How could any sentient being watch a single episode of the BBC One O'Clock News and still maintain the existence of a loving, interventionist God? Life itself demonstrated every minute of every day that it was completely arbitrary and random. Bad things happened inexplicably to good people all the time, there was no real meaning to life and my life in particular as viewed in the broken mirror of the toilets of The Sun pub was spectacularly, unavoidably doomed.

I had clocked the shady figures, smoking away, huddled around the side entrance of the church, many times as I stumbled around. I usually hid my face and hurried past. Until, on one unremarkable Monday evening, 6 June 1999, utter exhausted desperation led me to shuffle into a back-row seat for my first meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous. Very occasionally, when a human being finds themselves in a position of complete mental and physical collapse, there is a fleeting moment of such tremendous intensity that it can serve as the starting-point for a life-saving change of direction. I needed truth. And honesty. And simple practical help. And eventually I found it.

Coming from a very physically and verbally violent background, I had instilled in myself a

sense of guarded self-sufficiency. Trust no one and keep your anguish to yourself. My initial conditioned understanding was that a drink problem was overcome via a "Battle with the Bottle" war of attrition. But sustained recovery doesn't work like that. It is the wrong dynamic. AA is a program of everyday selfless constructive action. To get sober you need to get vulnerable. Breathe. Discover the power of softness. A big ask if you have operated in a state of advanced survivor's hustle all your life.

AA's masterstroke in contrast to other therapeutic and holistic disciplines is that it establishes early doors that you cannot think yourself well. No amount of mental exertion or willpower is applicable against alcoholism. You come for your drinking and stay for your thinking. And with the thinking comes the fear. The true bogey-man of all alcoholics. If my thinking is the problem and I cannot solve the problem with the problem, then I need a new internal line of defence against picking up the first fatal drink and equally, without a drink, against becoming mentally unwell again. For the majority of AA members that line of defence means God. God as you understand Him. Underlined and in italics in Step Three of the 12 Step Program of Recovery. And often an old-school God with a capital G who protects, guides and takes the time to schedule the events in your life. Divine intervention and acts of providence are commonplace interpretations of life-altering experiences shared throughout the 77-year history of AA. A benevolent God steps in when all else has failed. This is an approach to sobriety that essentially means from here on in letting God run the show and you getting out of the way through prayer, faith and appropriate loving actions. Seductive, comforting and empowering. But not for me.

If you are an atheist in AA and AA is your last-chance saloon, then you have to develop an authentic and powerful workaround to make sobriety breathe for you. Pioneering atheist and agnostic AA members fought long and hard to make it explicit that belief is not a prerequisite of staying sober. And I champion their bold lead. I do not participate in any of the prayers. I ignore any raised eyebrows. God is not looking after me and the Cosmos does not care if I relapse on cheap vodka or not. Outing myself as an atheist in AA proved to be an incredibly liberating act. It pared away any delusions or expectations of life. It gave me a way forward of simplicity and responsibility. It made me look deep inside myself for the answers. It made me embrace the strength and healing to be found in real unconditional human love and compassion. Love as a group of people sharing their darkest concerns. Love as putting the kettle on. Love as making amends for harms done. Love as sitting all night in A&E. Love as being quiet. Love as being brave. It allowed me to honour my former broken self, lost and petrified in that darkened room, and tiptoe falteringly into the world again. It makes me take nothing for granted. Be simple. Live the moment. To not be afraid. And to know that by staying true to my disbelieving self and under no circumstance picking up a drink, a remarkable second chance at life is here to be lived.

As the name implies one of the rules of AA is that members remain anonymous. For this reason the author is only identified as Frank B.

Reprinted courtesy of New Humanist magazine.

CAN YOU HELP?

The Book Room at Humanist House needs book donations and volunteer assistance (please ring Gillian on 9660 9658)



Future world without growth?

Forum at the University of Technology Sydney on 14 April.

11am Julian Cribb will explain the reasons why we are facing - future famine.

1:30pm Dr Graham Turner will speak about the famous book - "Limits to Growth".

3:15 Professor Dexter Dunphy will lead a discussion on - corporate change programs aiming for sustainability.

VENUE: UTS, Haymarket Campus, lecture room 31. From north end of Quay St, enter Block C, ground floor, go down corridor, turn right, lecture room 31 is on right; or enter Block D, go through courtyard and sliding door, turn right, lecture room 31 is on right.

Refreshments will be provided. Organised by Sustainable Population Australia.

BOOK REVIEWS

Religion for Atheists

by Alain De Botton

De Botton looks around and sees a secular society denuded of high spiritual aspiration and practical moral guidance.

Centuries ago, religions gave people advice on how to live with others, how to tolerate other people's faults, how to assuage anger, endure pain and deal with the petty corruptions of a commercial world. These days, he argues, scientists, teachers, artists and philosophers no longer even try to offer such practical wisdom.

Museums were once temples for the contemplation of the profound. Today, he says, they offer pallid cultural smorgasbords: "While exposing us to objects of genuine importance, they nevertheless seem incapable of adequately linking these to the needs of our souls."

Can the "best" in religion be retrieved by those who regard themselves as atheists? It's a question worth asking.

It wasn't a loss of faith that brought us to this sorry pass, de Botton argues; it was a loss in understanding about how to transmit wisdom. The religious authorities had a low but realistic view of human nature. We are fragile, sinful and vulnerable — unable to create moral universes on our own. We therefore need self-confident institutions that will transmit a secular version of religion's wisdom and rituals.

Today's secular institutions, by contrast, have nothing to say about morality or wisdom. We are each charged with the task of coming up with our own philosophy and moral laws. We are supposed to have the ability, on our own, to remember the key things we learn and to put these ideas into practice. The key thing is that we are given enough freedom and autonomy to complete the task.

De Botton is not calling for a religious revival. He finds it impossible to take faith in a supernatural

god seriously. He assumes that none of his educated readers could possibly believe in spooky ghosts in the sky which is why the title of the book is clearly addressed to non-believers.

Instead, he is calling on secular institutions to adopt religion's pedagogy, to mimic the rituals, habits and teaching techniques that churches, mosques and synagogues perfected over centuries. For example, religious people were smart enough to combine spirituality and eating, aware that while dining in a group, people tend to be in a convivial, welcoming mood. De Botton believes that secular people should create communal restaurants that mimic the Passover Seder. Atheists would sit at big, communal tables. They would find guidebooks in front of them, reminiscent of the Jewish Haggadah or the Catholic missal. The rituals of the meal would direct diners to speak with one another, asking questions of their neighbors like "Whom can you not forgive?" or "What do you fear?"

De Botton's book is provocative when it comes to diagnosing the current cultural ills but his suggestions are often impractical or silly. He seems to ignore that secular phenomenon such as sport, music concerts and dance parties that provide fleeting moments of communal connection without the need for sky gods.

He also ignores many religious and philosophical traditions and pays attention to just three religious cultures: Roman Catholic, Jewish and Zen Buddhist and doesn't explain why.

Nevertheless, Botton will not be the last person speculating about the need to create a humanist or secular religion.

Frank Gomez

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