

# The Smith Lecture 2007<sup>1</sup>

## Outgrowing Religion: Is Christianity an asset or a danger to Australia's future?

Dr Greg Clarke<sup>2</sup>

I begin with a quotation, the source of which some of you may know but others may not:

When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me.

The quotation is found in Christopher Hitchens's popular book promoting atheism and opposing religion, *God Is Not Great*. There is loud chatter today about the immaturity, the childishness, of being religious. Along with Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, in his bestselling book, *The God Delusion*, has led a throng of commentators who have pursued something of an atheistic church, a new community of voices telling us it is time that we put childish ways aside and emerged into the world as post-theological, post-religious grown-ups.

Dawkins writes with confidence of the adult age beyond religion:

There is something infantile in the presumption that somebody else...has a responsibility to give your life meaning and point. It is all of a piece with the infantilism of those who, the moment they twist their ankle, look around for someone to sue. Somebody else must be responsible for my well-being, and somebody else must be to blame if I am hurt. Is it a similar infantilism that really lies behind the 'need' for a God?...The truly adult view, by contrast, is that our life is as meaningful, as full and as wonderful as we choose to make it." (p.360).

Hitchens similarly describes religion as an early phase of human development, one which he jettisoned as an illusion "before my boyish voice had broken" (p.4)<sup>3</sup> "I can't believe," said Hitchens just last week in an American interview, "there is a thinking person here who does not realize that our species would begin to grow to something like its full height if it left this childishness behind, if it emancipated itself from this sinister, childish nonsense."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Delivered at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Australia, on Friday, 26<sup>th</sup> October 2007

<sup>2</sup> Contact the author at [info@publicchristianity.org](mailto:info@publicchristianity.org)

<sup>3</sup> Christopher Hitchens, *God is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, Allen & Unwin, 2007, p.4.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week1107/newsfeature.html>.

Humans will grow out of religion, it is said. *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism* goes so far as to suggest that as a society matures—as it becomes wealthier, healthier and politically more stable—there is a trend towards atheism. Sociologist Phil Zuckerman, in a hotly disputed chapter on statistics for worldwide atheism, writes that:

High levels of organic atheism are strongly correlated with high levels of societal health, such as low homicide rates, low poverty rates, low infant mortality rates, and low illiteracy rates, as well as high levels of educational attainment, per capita income, and gender equality. Most nations characterized by high degrees of individual and societal security have the highest rates of organic atheism, and conversely, nations characterized by low degrees of individual and societal security have the lowest rates of organic atheism.<sup>5</sup>

Zuckerman acknowledges that it is difficult to determine causality: does being an atheist make for a better society, or does a better society generate more atheists? However, he leans towards the latter: as people become better off, they stop believing in God. Whether this contributes anything to the question of God's existence is debatable. At any rate, Zuckerman's findings are in conflict with a meta-study of 100 evidence-based enquiries into human well-being, where 79 of them found a positive correlation between having some kind of religious involvement and well-being.<sup>6</sup>

In a more philosophical mode, the recently deceased American philosopher, Richard Rorty, described a movement through human history from the age of religion, through the age of reason, to the age of literature. As an arts graduate myself, this gives me not a little pride to consider literature as indicative of a greater stage of evolution for the human species! However, Rorty's claim is a serious one about the nature of knowledge: it was first considered to be God-given, then to be carefully discerned by the logic of human reasoning, and finally, in a recognition of the limitations of such thinking, to be considered a 'most impressive' exercise in aesthetics.

These claims all strike a consistent note. Religion is a thing of childhood, it is claimed—whether it be an individual's childhood, who through moral and philosophical education 'outlearns' it, or a

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<sup>5</sup> Phil Zuckerman, "Atheism: Contemporary Numbers and Patterns" in Michael Martin (ed), *The Cambridge Companion on Atheism*, Cambridge University Press, 2006, p.65.

<sup>6</sup> Harold G. Koenig & Harvey J. Cohen, *The Link Between Religion and Health: Psychoneuroimmunology and the Faith Factor*, Oxford University Press, 2001, p.101; cited in Alister McGrath, *Dawkins' God: Genes, Memes and the Meaning of Life*, Blackwell, Oxford, p.110-11.

society's childhood, when nascent attempts at organising a community on supposedly God-given foundations give way to something that seems solid and dependable, and has no need for reference to God.

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All of the thinkers thus far mentioned are foreign figures, writing from within the contexts of Britain's church-state confections, or America's fundamentalist hothouses. But what about Australia, a young nation without such elaborate religious and political baggage? Is Australia outgrowing religion? Are Australians emerging into the 21<sup>st</sup> century with a new adult conception of life that has moved on from theological foundations?

For, although we may not have an established church or a religiously complex past, it is true that the theological foundations were there. Next year, Sunday 3<sup>rd</sup> February, will mark 220 years since the first Christian sermon was delivered on Australian soil, by the chaplain to the colony, Richard Johnson, given not far from here on what is now the corner of Castlereagh and Bligh Sts. Efforts to impress Christian doctrine and behaviour upon the colony made a mark, notwithstanding the fact that the first Australian church was burnt down just a handful of years after it was built.

It is almost beyond dispute that Australia has a strong Christian heritage, and yet much of it is not written. A forum last year, held at Parliament House in Canberra, highlighted the need to reconsider and re-explore the idea that Australia had a Christian heritage. It is a notion exploited by both sides of politics, and yet this ought not to prevent us from recognising that some of Australia's strong institutions—even those often considered now most secular—have benefited from Christian understandings of humanity, of ethics and of human purpose.

Take, for example, William Guthrie Spence, after whom the Canberra suburb of Spence is named. He is remembered as a key figure at the beginnings of the labour movement, but his Christianity usually passes without comment. A Sunday School superintendent and regular preacher, he saw the protection of worker's rights as a working out of the attitude of Jesus. In 1892, he said, "New Unionism was simply the teachings of that greatest of all social reformers, Him of Nazareth, whom all must revere".<sup>7</sup> In a speech that year on the

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<sup>7</sup> *The Worker*, June 4, 1892. Quoted in Stuart Piggins, "Australia's Christian Heritage: The Untold Story", address to the NACL, Old Parliament House, 26 November 2005. Online at <http://www.anchist.mq.edu.au/CTE>.

ethics of unionism, he gave a Christian underpinning to the movement: “In taking up this new unionism, we must see if we cannot get back to the level of the founder of Christianity, imbibe some of His spirit and get rid of musty theology, for some of it is very musty.”<sup>8</sup>

Supreme Court Judge, Keith Mason gave a paper at the Canberra conference last year, highlighting the significance of Christian thinking in the formation of Australian law. “At the time of white settlement in this country, the idea that Christianity was not embedded in the law would have been regarded as a heresy both of a legal and a religious nature...Our Australian legal system is replete with Biblical and Christian values,” he wrote. While not wanting to overstate the degree to which our laws are derived from Christianity, Justice Mason, took to task those who view the law as “value-free” and thus somehow beyond the reach of religion.

National security, self-reliance, the unhindered pursuit of profit, the good of the environment, individual healthiness, protection of the vulnerable, tolerance and privacy are all values. Of course, some of them derive from Biblical principles and have been given effect through law because they are widely supported by voters or embedded in authoritative legal precedents. Of course, some policies in statute and common law will be hostile to gospel values, although one might expect disagreement in identifying them.<sup>9</sup>

The Australian legal system owes a large debt to the Christian values and Christian ideals held by lawmakers of the last two hundred years.

But this is the past. While Christianity may be the “often-unacknowledged matrix of Australian culture”,<sup>10</sup> recent census data shows us that Australians are in many ways *not practitioners* of their Christian heritage. There are more Buddhists than Baptists in Australia 2007 – but are there more secularists? Have Australians moved on from religion? The short answer is no. There is in fact a renewal of interest in religion in general, including Christianity.

As Hugh Mackay points out in his recent book, *Advance Australia...Where?* only 15% of Australians now go to church in any regular manner, but the trend of decline has halted. There is in fact strengthening interest in diverse forms of religious expression among

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<sup>8</sup> *The Ethics of the New Unionism*, Sydney, 1892, p. 8. Quoted in Piggin, op.cit.

<sup>9</sup> Keith Mason, “Law and Religion in Australia”, in Stuart Piggin (ed), *Shaping the Good Society in Australia*, Australia’s Christian Heritage National Forum, Macquarie Centre, 2007, 154. Available online at <http://australiaschristianheritageforum.org.au/achnf-resources/default.aspx>.

<sup>10</sup> Graeme Davison, “Christianity and Australian Culture”, in Piggin, op. cit., 100.

Australians. “While many people express a yearning for clearer articulation of non-material values without resort to institutional religion,” writes Mackay, “the whole idea of *spirituality* has acquired new currency.” (p.14). Our Christian heritage is taken for granted, in some places ignored and yet spiritual expression is experiencing an upswing.

There has been a flurry of books and essays by Australian public intellectuals recently exploring the social phenomenon of contemporary Christianity. Marion Maddox’s book, *God Under Howard* began a movement of thinking that suggested Australian political life was becoming too influenced by the agendas of the churches. There were at first suggestions that a ‘religious right’ was forming in Australia and had the ear of government, but Kevin Rudd’s essays in *The Monthly* just before his ascension to the leadership of the party, which loudly proclaimed the origins of his own political vision in the Christian social justice tradition, have balanced up the situation: God can belong as much to the progressives as to the conservatives.

Phillip Adams’s publisher has taken the opportunity of all this interest in religion to re-release old Adams columns as the book, *Adams Vs God: The Rematch*. Even the boisterous anti-theistic Adams acknowledged that the ALP would need to court the vote of the churches, and although he longs for the days when cathedrals are simply museums, he’ll support “the god-bothering Rudd” because issues of religion are so important to the public at this time.<sup>11</sup> “Stand by,” wrote Tasmanian academic Amanda Lohrey in her *Quarterly Essay* ‘Voting for Jesus’, “for more talking up of a Christian revival as part of the ongoing culture wars.”

Journalist Margaret Simons, in the Pluto Press publication, *Australia Now*, explores what the “religious revival” means for Australian politics. Although hers is largely a cynical essay about the influence of the Pentecostal church, Hillsong, seen through the eyes of a few Christians she interviewed, Simons ends her account in an unexpected way. Wondering whether she should have taken a needy student along to a church in order that she might find hope in her desperate life, Simons writes, “I could not, in all honesty, have taken Caroline to church. And yet I think I understand, now, why they raise their hands to heaven. I can’t get up there. Pick me up. Pick me up.” (p.102)

This affecting, childlike call to God suggests two things: firstly, the incapacity of the human being to ‘get up there’ on her own; and

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<sup>11</sup> Phillip Adams, *Adams Vs God: The Rematch*, Melbourne University Press, 2007, p.330.

secondly, the lingering, remaining, unquenchable desire to get up there. We will need to say more about this need for God.

But one Australian academic thinks it is all sheer wish-fulfilment. Tamas Pataki, an Honorary Senior Fellow in Philosophy at the University of Melbourne,<sup>12</sup> has recently described all forms of religious beliefs as narcissistic fantasies. Using psychoanalytical theory, especially the concept of attachment between an infant and a parent, Pataki dismisses religions as delusional beliefs forged through psychological need. He writes:

...the object-relational perspective on religion is surely inviting to anyone impressed by the immense human need for other people and the semblances of them<sup>13</sup>

Pataki's claim is that the psychological dimension of human behaviour overrides any claims to truth that religion might make: if a belief fulfils a human need, then it is simply wish-fulfilment, not a true belief. Of course, this begs the question: is it possible that some religious beliefs might not only fulfil a human need, but *also* be true? Just because a human being longs for meaning, for relationships and for a parent, does this mean that no religious beliefs which fulfil these longings could possibly be true?

Pataki claims that, "Thought, unguided by reason or self-understanding, captive to infantile needs for attachment and omnipotence, becomes more or less fantastic and delusional". But is all thought captive to these infantile needs? Is there an *adult* version of religious thinking that fulfils human needs, but does not jettison reason and self-understanding in the process?

We have seen the call from atheists for society to move on from the "childish nonsense" of something like the Christian faith. But we have also seen that Australian society has emerged from such a faith, sometimes in the background to its most influenced institutions. If Australia were to keep growing, to 'grow up' into something new, what would it be? It may sound like an arrogant question, but is there, in fact, anywhere else to go?

On the wider stage, beyond Australian society and Australian history, there is immense interest among intellectuals in whether or not the Christian understanding of humanity, the world and God is basic to social goods. I want to alert you to this, because sometimes

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<sup>12</sup> One can easily make the mistake of thinking that all the smart, philosophical types are anti-religious like Pataki; but a quick head count of the University of Melbourne Philosophy department suggest that 20% of the senior teaching staff are religious in one way or another.

<sup>13</sup> Tamas Pataki, "Against Religion", *Australian Book Review*, February 2006, p.39.

the most-read intellectual press does not pay sufficient attention to these voices. I want to alert you to some of the brightest, most considered and scholarly thinkers on the topic of Christianity's value to society, in order to demonstrate that they are claiming a very significant place for Christian thinking for today's western civilisation. This is not Richard Dawkins, with his vein-popping rhetoric and dismissive anecdotes. This is not Christopher Hitchens, with his faux-history and tabloid moralising. These voices come from places of deeper learning concerning how societies are formed, what holds them together, and what is lost when key beliefs are removed.

Take, for example, Professor Jürgen Habermas. Habermas has for 40 years been at the forefront of German political philosophy, seeking a democratic culture from the rubble of totalitarianism. His philosophy has sought to articulate a rational conception of a just and humane society. He has recognised that modernity has as much capacity to destroy human community—as witnessed by the mass violence of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—as it has to structure and improve it. Having spent many decades arguing that religion would have to be right on the edges of this project of modernization, recently Habermas has changed his position. He now argues that religious thinking is at the centre of the task.

A long quote from a recent interview will serve to focus his ideas around our subject of religion and social maturity.

Christianity has functioned for the normative self-understanding of modernity as more than a mere precursor or a catalyst. Egalitarian universalism, from which sprang the ideas of freedom and social solidarity, of an autonomous conduct of life and emancipation, of the individual morality of conscience, human rights, and democracy, is the direct heir to the Judaic ethic of justice and the Christian ethic of love. This legacy, substantially unchanged, has been the object of continual critical appropriation and reinterpretation. To this day, there is no alternative to it. And in the light of the current challenges of a postnational constellation, we continue to draw on the substance of this heritage. Everything else is just idle postmodern talk. (pp.150-151).<sup>14</sup>

This difficult passage is making at least three significant assertions. First, it is acknowledging that the values held dear in a globalizing world such as ours (human rights, liberty of conscience, social

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<sup>14</sup> Jürgen Habermas, "A Conversation about God and the World", in Ciaran Cronin and Max Pensky (trans.), *Time of Transitions*, Polity Press, 2006. (reprinted from a chapter in J. Habermas (ed. Eduardo Mendieta), *Religion and Rationality: essay on Reason, God and Modernity*, Polity Press 2002.

democracy) spring from Judeo-Christian thinking. This is what I have been asserting already in relation to Australian society. Second, Habermas is saying that Western societies have been adopting and adapting Christian principles all the while; it is how we have achieved what we have achieved. And third, he is asserting, to the amazement of many of his followers, that there is no obvious alternative vision for human society. To suggest that there is an alternative to the justice of the Old Testament and the love of the New Testament, is silly postmodern waffle, says Habermas.

Even if a society wanted to ‘outgrow Christianity’, says Habermas, it would struggle to know where to go next.

Next, I call on another already mentioned philosopher. Richard Rorty, the recently deceased pragmatist from Stanford, famously dismissed religion in most of his writing. However, in his last decade, he too, like Habermas, came reluctantly to see a place for religious people in the social project of America. Rorty suggested that there is a kind of religious enquiry which suits our age: he calls it “a religion of democracy” or “romantic polytheism”.<sup>15</sup> In romantic polytheism, the religious instinct of human beings would be preserved (rather than denied or despised, as it was in his earlier writing), but any reference to capital-t Truth, or to God or even gods would have to be surrendered. Theists could be involved in today’s social plans, as long as they were willing to...

...get along without personal immortality, providential interventions, the efficacy of sacraments, the Virgin Birth, the Risen Christ, the Covenant of Abraham, the authority of the Koran, and a lot of other things which many theists are loath to do without.<sup>16</sup>

In other words, Rorty saw something good in Christianity and other religions, but couldn’t accept any of its supernatural teachings. In his last work before he died, he had a dialogue with the Catholic philosopher Gianni Vattimo. In it, Rorty speaks of his sense of the holy:

My sense of the holy, insofar as I have one, is bound up with the hope that someday, any millennium now, my remote descendants will live in a global civilization in which love is pretty much the only law...I have no idea

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<sup>15</sup> Richard Rorty, “Pragmatism as Romantic Polytheism” in M. Dickstein (ed), *The Revival of Pragmatism: New Essays on Social Thought, Law, and Culture* (Duke University Press. Durham, NC,1998). See also Jason Boffetti, “How Richard Rorty Found Religion”, *First Things*, 123, May 2004,pp. 24-30. Retrieved 17 June from <http://www.firstthings.com/ftissues/ft0405/articles/boffetti.html>.

<sup>16</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, Penguin, London, 1999, p. 156.

how such a society could come about. It is, one might say, a mystery. This mystery, like that of the Incarnation, concerns the coming into existence of a love that is kind, patient, and endures all things.<sup>17</sup>

Rorty's hope is consistent with the hopes of a Christian—that love will reign, that a time of peace will come, and humanity will fulfil its potential. Rorty's social vision has not moved on from Christianity, rather, one might say, it has appropriated Christianity: it has borrowed the story and just changed the names.

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What are we to make of these subtle and complex statements about the Christian religion? It seems to me that there are aspects of religion that thoughtful people of our time feel they must outgrow. But our enquiry so far is suggesting that there is not really any way of outgrowing them. They are at the very base of who we are as Westerners, what we value, and how we got to be the society and the individuals we are today.

There is an urge to outgrow the Christian moral framework. But it has provided the principles of justice and love and other-person-centredness that we hold dear.

There is an urge to outgrow the metaphysics of Christianity, with its belief in a personal God, an incarnate Son of God, a Holy Spirit and a heavenly realm. But these are the very teachings from which the social vision, accepted as good, emerges. Throw out the Christian God of love, of justice and mercy, and of providence, and the teachings float freely in mid-air, lost in mystery just as Rorty said.

I suggest that far from being immature aspects of human yearning, these are in fact *mature* concepts, proper and true fulfilments of human needs. Is it perhaps a sign of immaturity in someone like Richard Dawkins that he refuses to explore theological ideas in any detail? Dawkins claims that theology is an improper field of study—a view that philosophers such as Habermas take great issue with, along with (not surprisingly) theologians down the centuries.

Could it not be that these teachings of Christianity, so fruitful for society, delivering multiple social goods, tried and tested for many centuries, are also, in fact, true?

I want to finish with three calls to those who are interested.

My first is for a mature type of Christian expression, that is intelligent, informed and self-reflexive (a quality Habermas identifies

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<sup>17</sup> Richard Rorty & Gianni Vattimo, *The Future of Religion*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2005, p.40.

as essential in a pluralistic, postnational world). By this I do not mean a religion that changes its teaching simply to reflect the etiquette of the age – that would be pointless—but a religion that can revisit its way of speaking, say sorry when it needs to, and try again to express its ancient beliefs about God in a way is attractive and make sense.

There are infantile expressions of Christianity. Sometimes they are simply unsophisticated – which doesn't mean they are false. But other times they are caricatures, lies or misunderstandings. It is beholden upon Christians to correct these errors and continually explain what is and is not a true understanding of the Christian faith.

My second is for a mature kind of Australian secularism, that sees the importance of Christianity to the past, present and future of Australian life rather than only seeing the negative in Christians and in churches. This is the kind of secularism we see in Habermas and Rorty. Both are seeking what Christianity claims to provide, even though neither acknowledges Christianity as the specific provision of what they long for. For myself, I am willing to see in Christianity the provision of the 'longed for' by so many of our philosophers, our artists, our activists, our moral and ethical leaders, and so many ordinary citizens. I recognise that it is this specific Christian claim to be true that is so offensive to many. But simply because it is offensive does not mean it is false.

My third call is for a mature kind of Australian thinker, a thoughtful Australian, who gives religion the time of day, who is at least as interested in what is in the Bible as what is in the *Financial Review*, who has taken the time to form a view on Christianity, given its significance to Australian life. Even if this mature thinker eventually decides Christianity is but a "useful delusion", he will have at least made this decision through genuine enquiry, not through preconceived and untested hearsay. He may, of course, decide that it is not a delusion at all; that Christian faith not only provides a basis for society, but it also, and even more immediately, addresses the needs of the individual human being in God's world.

To conclude, I return to the quotation with which I began. I said it was found in Christopher Hitchens's angry anti-religious book, and it is. But it is not his own—he is in fact quoting Paul of Tarsus, the Apostle Paul, the zealot-turned-Christian who encountered Jesus Christ on the Damascus road. "When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child" writes Paul in his letter to the Christians living in Corinth, a letter preserved for us to read in the pages of the New Testament. He says, "When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me".

It may sound ironic to Australians who have not explored the meaning of Christianity in much detail, but Paul is himself writing ‘against religion’. He is writing against the small-mindedness of human beings who seek to capture God in a set of laws, which they then cannot keep, who seek God in temples and vestments and deprivations and ecstatic hand-raising. Paul’s adult heart and mind were enthralled by the revelation that God is not interested in the so-called religious things, but in the *spiritual* things, the matters of the heart, and that Jesus came to lead human beings away from empty religiosity towards true spirituality. Jesus is interested in faith, hope and love, the three things that Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13, “remain” in this world of shadows and imperfections. It is open to all to ‘grow up’ into this reasonable faith, this life-giving hope and this neighbourly love, taking seriously the words and deeds of Jesus as not only the legacy of successful civilisation, but also the true communication of God to the needy human heart.

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