Miscellaneous Jottings

of Lindsay Falvey from diverse books read over a couple of decades

Introduction: Why Write?

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George Orwell's essay 'Why I Write' suggests that writers' motives cannot be understood without knowing something of their early development and the age they live in. He goes on to list the *four great motives* for writing prose, which for him are, sheer egoism, aesthetic enthusiasm, historical impulse and political purpose. Orwell identifies the first three motives in himself, even though he was cast as a political *pamphleteer* by his times, which defines political purpose as a desire to push the world in a certain direction. Later he describes more of himself, *When I sit down to write a book, I do not say to myself. I am going to produce a work of art. I write it because there is some lie that I want to expose, some fact to which I want to draw attention, and my initial concern is to get a hearing. But I could not do the work of writing a book, or even a long magazine article, if it were not also an aesthetic experience.* I like this, even though it omits the importance of writing to me as a means of clarifying thought and calming my mind.

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Looking back through the last page or two, I see that I have made it appear as though my motives in writing were wholly public-spirited. I don't want to leave that as the final impression. All writers are vain, selfish and lazy, and at the very bottom of their motives there lies a mystery. Writing a book is a horrible, exhausting struggle, like a long bout of some painful illness. One would never undertake such a thing if one were not driven on by some demon whom one can neither resist nor understand. For all one knows that demon is simply the same instinct that makes a baby squall for attention. And yet it is also true that one can write nothing readable unless one constantly struggles to efface one's own personality. Good prose is like a window pane. I cannot say with certainty which of my motives are the strongest but I know which of them deserve to be followed. And looking back through my work, I see that it is invariably where were I lacked a 'political' purpose that I wrote lifeless books and was betrayed into purple passages, sentences without meaning, decorative adjectives and humbug generally.

Orwell's statement applies less to these miscellaneous jottings that to the books I have written, and in the case of those books I can agree with his summation. Where a book advances a useful thought, an Epicurean argument seems even more apt: *if only one or a few persons were in a bad way, I should tell them personally, but as the majority suffer from a common disease as in a plague ... I advertise publically this salve*. This might apply to some of my books.

This collation is, however, mainly for my own edification, not as a memory-jogger in case I live long enough to become demented, but as a means of understanding and extending my own thoughts at the time each section was written. In this context I am comfortable with Benjamin Franklin's alter ego Poor Richard who observed that the man who *can compose himself is wiser that he that composes books*. But perhaps in Australian terms Don Watson's answer to 'why I write' may approach a explantion intelligible to others, *maybe its because I can't dance. Maybe because writing involves the Puritan's requisites of pain, frustration, self-loathing, and (guilty) satisfaction.* For me, these requisites have flowed, and are now ebbing.

By writing this introduction I am sealing this eclectic collation. I no longer feel it is useful to me. Compared to the poet Hugo von Hofmannsthal who stopped writing at age 26 I am a slow developer. Samuel Beckett reached a point at which he felt *there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express.* But for these men there was a difference, they became disenchanted with the world, which Max Weber attributed to a loss of *the supernatural agency casting man back on his own small self as the source of all authority and comfort*. I worry less about such supernatural matters than did 19th century writers, although my grounding in the wisdom of religion in a healthy society informs me of the danger of the scientism, superstition and nihilism that infects modern thought. This may be what a philosopher whose name I missed meant when he said something like 'now that man has been given his freedom twice over – by God and by the French Revolution – he does not know what to do with it but torment himself with the sense that he is wasting his life'.

I have never felt that I am wasting my life, and the jottings that follow must therefore have been valauable already – the value of writing as a meditative activity as my friend Charan has described it. Even though I have ceased to write thoughts stimulated by what I have read, I continue to read widely. My recent and more profound book 'Agriculture & Philosophy' contains the culmination of other reading built on some of the thoughts mentioned here.

With these cryptic words of introduction I offer what has been useful to me in the hope that it might be of use to others.

Literature and Learning

Literature is said to be essential to the civilized man. I sometimes wonder what cosmosmological thoughts passed through pre-civilized minds as they sat in the shade or lolled on their bedding. I then imagine that many of their thoughts were the same as mine and others, some more profound, and most just a passing of the time. Today, with literacy somehow being assumed to be creatively linked to literature, we have the passing thoughts of others made available in books in case we are unable to conjure up our own timefillers. Hence my unkind description of the books that make up many bookshops

today. One among these is Shafer and Barrows' 'The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society'; hailed as 'smart and delightful' it is less than that to me. It is better than much popular writing but I am clearly not the audience for the weak WWII descriptions, veiled sighs, and misty exotica. Perhaps my reading it when off-colour didn't help, and in any case it was sent to Simone not me. Repetitive and cliché in its treatment of Germans and war events, it nevertheless contains a couple of thought-provoking lines, all taken from others, such as the mind's ability to be satisfied with anything if we are balanced – but even then the authors assume a superior attitude to the island peasants. What an inverted worldview we have created with this system! It is better for me to read anecdotes that inform knowledge, such as I hoped for from neurologist Oliver Sacks.

The theme of Sacks' 'Musicophilia' appealed to me, but either I have become more particular with age or Sack's writing became more verbose as he aged. Again I wonder about this 'literacy' that requires subjects to be simplified to the lowest-common reader, and to avoid offending his denomination. Is it my impatience with the layman-is-king style of writing that bestseller academics now effect, or is it something deeper? After having pondered this, I found it to be both. The dumbing-down seems to require repetition and page-filling, with footnotes used to retain an aura of authority. Sacks has done a great service with his earlier books, not to literature but to public awareness of our brains' functioning. In this recent book he addresses a theme apparently closer to his own heart and yet his passion obscures his creativity. A pity since he is a link in the science that could inform this struggling form of reflective replacement for the loss of traditional religion in our society, one that is imbued through objective and disciplined education.

Education is Paradise

What passes for education in many situations has downgraded the term to mean mere training to undertake tasks designed by others, often persons who are more 'highly trained'. This only serves to perpetuate unforeseen accidents that must later be mopped up. To the public's mind, this type of 'education' is fine – it guarantees jobs for their children, is intelligible to the manually-oriented and the mopping-up tasks create more manual jobs – which create the need for more mopping-up and so on. Thus we have a society that is busy employing itself in unnecessary tasks and making employment itself a virtue. On the increasingly rare occasion that an educated and insightful person is entrusted with a conspicuous role, less activity can result in to greater effect even when the values of busyness and employment are seen to be lacking. And this is criticized as not 'contributing to society'.

In such a society it is little wonder that ancient bigotry is easily dressed in new clothes that portray 'not contributing to society' to be actually anti-society. Such is the coloration with which Islam has been tinged in the West. It is all very well for the educated Westerner to point out that Islam is a source of the West's Renaissance, of the European Jews reconnection to their Hebrew language and hence to Israel as a state, and of the various Muslim inventions and trade initiatives that the world has gladly employed. But such educated voices are muted at best, and more often decried as false and biased, especially when speakers are Muslims themselves. This is why Ziauddin Sardar's

‘Desperately Seeking Paradise’ – a learned gem hidden in the mire of uneducated comment about Islam – should not be allowed to pas unnoticed.

Sardar is an Englishman of Pakistani parentage. Raised in England with a sound education, he writes delightfully and openly of the excesses of his religion, Islam. He describes his search for the peace that is Islam – a search that takes him to various sects and continents, to historical sites and hotbeds of fundamentalism. He is today’s John Bunyan – some of whose words even find their way into his fine prose – on his pilgrimage and we share his progress towards the paradise he seeks. The paradisiacal metaphor embedded in the tradition of journeying to Mecca became real in this personally revealing work. And so the metaphors for personal journeys to seek the truth that link deep words of the Koran are, by Sardar, not to be taken literally.

Had the book not been written in this era of concern about Islam, it might have been classified as travel, like Paul Theroux’s works, although it is more profound. Sardar uses historical passages to great effect in a skillfully woven texture that in another age might have been called a sutra, or a collection of sura. The New Statesman’s comment that ‘upon finishing the book, I turned back and started reading it all over again’ is no mere hyperbole – this is a book with multiple layers and more detail than can be absorbed in bedtime reading.

Simone gave the book to me for Christmas after hearing Murray Clapham describe it to me as we lunched sparingly at the Parliament of the World’s Religions in Melbourne. It was a wonderful gift, from Simone, from Murray, from Sardar and from the Islamic world that has produced the tradition of writing to correct wrong views. For that is what Sardar seems to be doing – correcting Muslims’ erroneous views of Islam, while at the same time informing those Westerners who are open enough to be educated. His book humbles such a Westerner.

And the book is witty in the style of an educated Englishman of a disappearing type. He mentions with admiration for example, Al-Ghazali the great intellectual, as not just a doubter who used reason to examine all sides of a matter, but *an equal opportunity doubter* for he also doubts reasoning itself. In another instance, Sardar discusses how Western education conflicts with Islamic understanding, such as in natural sciences being oriented to ‘progress’ defined as man’s desires when Islam holds that ‘man’ is natural and should work in harmony with nature. In the social sciences he contrasts the popular view that society and its values are always evolving with the Islamic understanding that human nature doesn’t change and some values are enduring, such as goodness, mercy and so on. In these terms the societies classified as ‘underdeveloped’ would be those like the West that had forgotten the basic nature of life. Such paragraphs of his book would be equally at home in one on Buddhism. In terms of education, he reasons that the artificial disciplinary divisions common today do not need to be Islamized for use by Muslims but ignored in favour of an Islamic worldview. I am inclined to agree, for ‘our’ categorizations are relatively new and now constrain much of our learned dialogue – we have strayed from the integrated insights of our culture’s own Enlightenment. This

implication is hard to escape on reading this the book – such as in the following paragraph.

There would be no West as we know it today without Islam. Where did the European Enlightenment come form? Did it emerge ready-made from the minds of the 'philosophes', the intellectuals who supposedly perfected it? No. Its foundations were laid by Islam. Islam taught Europe virtually all it knew about science, philosophy and education. Starting with the basics, Islam taught Europe how to reason, how to differentiate between civilization and barbarism, and to understand the basic features of a civil society. Islam trained Europe in scholastic and philosophic method, and bequeathed it its characteristic institutional forum of learning: the university. Europe acquired wholesale the organization, structure and even the terminology of the Muslim educational system. Not only did Islam introduce Europe to the experimental method and demonstrate the importance of empirical research, it even had the foresight to work out most of the mathematical theory necessary for Copernicus to launch 'his' revolution. Islam showed Europe the distinction between medicine and magic, drilled it in making surgical instruments and explained how to establish and run hospitals.

Of course, we can argue that the monastic tradition preserved a faithful intellectual remant across Europe through its dark ages, but Sardar's general point remains. The book advances his quest for paradise by seeing the dead ends that what seem to be great advances can deteriorate into. These he attributes to *zulm*, the Islamic concept of injustice, which extends to all kinds of wrongdoing, withholding of right-doing and even injustice to one's self. And that leads to him to see post-modernism (which I admit I do not fully understand – I keep looking for something deep in it that may not be there) as self-wronging in the form of denying religion, and even failing to value its great literature at least as much as fiction when it reveals at least as much about the human condition.

So Sardar exposes the Emperor of the West as naked. I wonder what the West will do with him. Murray, who has since died, told me that he would like to bring Sardar to Melbourne to lecture, another generous use of wealth. But I am skeptical of my fellow Melbournians' ability to rise above their comfortable denied-yet-embedded Christian biases to learn about life as it was, is and ever shall be. To have one's eyes open, be it through Islam, Buddhism, revelation or mind practices is to have a right view. Sardar's book is one way of getting us to have our eyes right.

Eyes Right!

The search for a history is a search for identity. It is not, as I see it, a search for truth or an explanation of origins for intellectual curiosity alone. Of course, the 'search for truth' version of history is always a justification of an author's or sponsor's view – just as we are beginning to now witness in revisions of previously sacrosanct Western interpretations. As China and Asia in general reassert their influence on global understanding, we may expect to see more corrections of Western inventions, omissions and claims – and also to see some excesses from the new powers. Our transparent Western non sequitur that maintains a direct link from Egypt to Greece to Europe to the

New World is already wavering as we are forced to acknowledge Chinese, Indian and Muslim learning. And, if I ever need further encouragement in this view, the journal that has been kind enough to retain me on its international board since its inception – The Asian Agri-History Journal – provides me with near monthly reminders of futile colonial efforts to denigrate India's own illustrious past.

With that grounding, I found Wolters' 'The Fall of Śrīvijaya in Malay History' a refreshing way of balancing historical perspectives. I had taken it with me to Thailand to read in the South that was part of the Srivijaya influence. I wanted to know more of the history of that part of the Malay world in order to inform myself about the region we were to assist by creating graduate research at Thaksin University. The book did not disappoint, for it noted from the outset that we usually look through biased eyes – we can try to have our 'eyes right' by considering all perspectives on an era by reading diverse sources, and then we find as Wolters did, that the objective of chroniclers differ. Once we divine their objective we better balance contradictory information to sketch out how things might have been.

How things might have been in the Malay world in and before the Srivijaya period turns out from this approach to be different from what modern national histories prefer and from the hero-creating myths of earlier times. Thanks to incidental Chinese references and diaries, many events can be contextualized to show a vigorous and sophisticated trading culture from the early centuries of the current era. By the tenth century Palembang on Sumatra was already famous as the most important regional port outside China, and even in the fifth century the Chinese knew that both the Straits of Malacca and the land-route across the Malay peninsula were well used by 'barbarian' merchants. Arab missions to China are documented for the year 724 dealing in Malay products and in 758 Arabs were numerous enough in the China trade to join in the sacking of Canton. *A tenth-century Arab writer gives an impression of the cosmopolitan merchant community, safely protected in Palermbang, when he mentions the languages spoken by parrots there*, which significantly did not appear to include Chinese.

So with the 'right eyes' a well-organized Malay society that confidently dealt with the outside world becomes clear, and it is one that does not need to be the large kingdom of Srivijaya that later 'fell' in the Western imperial style but of a hierarchical trading group with dispersed wealth and power. Yet glowing epics abound, of which Wolters says, *romance may have been introduced, but for a serious purpose, which it is the historian's duty to investigate*. And so he finds the objective on one major chronicler was to establish an impressive genealogy, to which events and facts were bent to suit. Thus two stories, one of the local ruler being a descendent of Alexander the Great and another of him being an incarnation of Avalokiteshvara are developed to serve not the purposes of history as we see it but creation of authority by having the right lineage. With the right eyes we can see then the link of power to agriculture blended with such stories and made interpretable by miscellaneous and non-mainstream accounts that occasionally pepper Chinese records of the time.

Comparing information with such non-historical objectives to incidental accounts from Chinese diaries and official records allows a more objective picture to emerge. It is from such accounts that we learn that the Srivijaya rulers' titles included *seed of the naga* in the sense that the naga was the *mistress of the soil and the source of agriculture*. Seen as the source of all wealth, the spirits of the soil were the obvious power and thus the most powerful person must be linked to those spirits. Hence kings assumed priestly roles in ensuring the soil's benefits for the group. As in Angkor where *mastery of the soil* defined kingship, so in Srivijaya the soil was revered and was a symbol of the kings' ipso facto power as was common across South East Asia. The holy feet of the king in their contact with the soil was a source of reverence from Champa to Cambodia, in the latter case indicated in fifth century footprints of Vishnu in constructed drainage lines, which in later times seems to shift to the feet of the divine local kings.

Vishnu is an appropriate origin of the belief as his three strides *gather all mankind in the dust of his feet* in the sense of fertility rather than conquering, for it was Vishnu who defeated the demon who held back the soil-fertilizing floods. Thus the role of the king was to ensure rain and crops as a king-priest who channeled the soil's energies for his people. Other expressions in Indianized South East Asia included the attribution of power to the water used for washing the royal feet, the symbolic placement of kingly feet on the limits of his kingdom in coronation ceremonies and even the contemporary veneration of royal footprints in Sumatra, not to mention the complexities of Buddha footprints across the region. It is for this reason that, in the Malay world, anklets were only to be worn by royalty.

As traders, the Malay kingdoms had succeeded by remaining flexible even while they developed elaborate court structures that supported authority. Thus the later arrival of Islam presented no difficulty – it was simply another innovation to absorb. With such a vigour, the Malays retained their perception of themselves as relying on the soil for life and for the products with which to trade for additional benefits. This seems a curious and somewhat conflicting echo of the modern Bhumiputra or 'son of the soil' policy in Malaysia, although I like to see it as a continuation of the conception of man as part of nature and in particular of the soil.

Man in Nature

In speaking at various fora when I was promoting my book 'Dharma as Man', I attempted to outline why I styled it as a novel. My explanation centred on a novel being potentially able to engage both emotions and intellect while a factual book engages mainly the intellect. Whether I have achieved my ambition remains unclear, but the sentiment has been confirmed to me in reading Knut Hamsun's "Growth of the Soil". Hamsun introduces a man who is symbolic of all men who work with nature and carve out a living. His is the agriculture of fitting in with nature through respect and hard work.

Ostensibly covering the life of Isak, Hamsun uses the pioneering spirit of the Norwegian highlands and the settlement of Iceland as a symbol of the earth and man's relationship to all nature. It is a worldview of which modern man has little inkling. Isak is presented as if

he is a growth of the soil itself – hence, I think, the novel's name. His qualities are contrasted with those of his elder son who after contact with the city and learning to write can never settle into anything, always wanting more and living off his father's diligence without improving his self-knowledge. He is without depth yet not evil – just nothing. A second son is more like his father, content with life and work and it is he that draws the comment from the ex-Sheriff, Geissler – who enters the story at critical times almost as a narrator – that eternal life is the constant passing of this life with nature from father to son.

It is this Geissler who as *the spirit moves him* in two single paragraphs soliloquies describes all of life and his role in it as *the fog* that floats about and is sometimes useful in place of rain. He has bought and sold a mountain containing low-grade copper and seen eager speculators come and go twice; he calls them lightening because they come in flashes and have no enduring substance. In speaking to Isak's younger son, now a grown man, he says, *I'm a humble agent in the workings of fate. It all began when your father picked up some bits of stone up in the hills, and gave you to play with when you were a child. That was how it started. I knew well enough those bits of stone were worth exactly as much as men would give for them, no more; well and good, I set a price on them myself, and bought them. Then the stones passed from hand to hand, and did no end of damage.*

Look, Nature's there, for you and yours to have and enjoy. Man and Nature don't bombard each other, but agree; they don't compete, race one against the other, but go together. He contrasts this rural idyll with the engineer at the copper mine as a symbol of employees in large enterprises informed only of their tiny part of the whole *keeping it all up with men and horses and money and machines and any amount of fuss; thought it was all right, knew no better. The more bits of stone he can turn into money, the better; he thinks he's doing something clever and deserving, bringing money to the place, to the country, and everything nearing disaster more and more, and he's none the wiser. 'Tis not money the country wants, there's more than enough of it already; 'tis men like your father there's not enough of.*

He calls them people who want a faster pace of life than does nature and consequently are constantly repairing nature's incursions on their plans and *raging against life*. And so the novel ends describing Isak the Margrave – the true nobleman of the border regions. He is now old and hairy and hardly cares what day it is, but he has added to his farm from his own efforts while others speculated on quick wealth. And the distant cow bells signal that evening is coming and all is well in the household despite all that we have shared in their lives, from infanticides, to imprisonment, to infidelities, to wantonness, to each remaining person gradually growing into this life with nature.

Hamsun captured life as it seems to be. While living much in the cities, I have always yearned for and maintained rural connections that I value. And now it seems that the division between those pioneering Norwegians and those with city values is a mirror of my own view. Perhaps it is romantic to revere the 'noble agronome' but in a world that

feeds on short-term gain caring not if it exploits others to the extreme of starvation, I cannot feel sympathy for those who suffer stock-market losses and the like.

If I translated Hamsun's work into the terminology that I have been using with my friend Charan in our entertaining work on Gross Domestic Happiness, it would revere the small farmer and disparage the greedy urbanite. As part of the same Parliament of Religions at which I introduced my own novel, I also spoke on a subject in which I have more expertise – food in the world. In that presentation, I sought to correct majority views of food security in poor countries by pointing out the inequities in misunderstood environmental protection and free market trade. Of course both have their virtues and their place, but application of such viewpoints requires knowledge not fear, or veiled avarice. The conclusion is the same – it is the Isaks of the world that are its salt, and unless the rest of us support this we are working against humans in nature. Yet the majority ethic with its attendant fears is now centred on an environmental apocalypse, for that is where an unreflective mindset always leads.

Courting the Apocalypse

From my disorienting teenage years when the church influenced my views of history and the world, as well as causing me to react against the boredom of middle class religion, I have been intrigued with a widespread fascination about our own destruction. I have written on it in my book 'Sustainability', which is really a variable collection of papers united by a tenuous thread and collated as therapy for some shattered delusions in my personal life. And I have examined the subject in detail in the book 'Religion and Agriculture' where I clearly – although apparently not for some well-insulated minds – identified apocalyptic thinking and its calls for changes in our behaviour as an expression of our universal fear of death. The apocalypse I referred to in these cases was our modern expression of fear – the decline of 'the environment'. Freom the outset I should declare my scepticism for such discussions when they place humans outside 'the environment'.

Scepticism is a critical basis for Western thinking. Maligned around polite dinner tables where consensus of values and views is practiced, it remains essential where contrary views are to be examined. It should prove more valuable than ever to rational discussion in a world inundated by social media opinions. Scepticism does not mean rejecting any knowledge, just examining propositions critically, which is how I approached Jared Diamond's 'Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Survive'.

I had long avoided the book – it is long and popular – but then I was called on to present the new overview of food and related issues in the world, and saw it as a means of expanding my knowledge of public opinion. So, when I noticed it in the library of the Oases Graduate School where we Councillors hold our meetings, I borrowed it. And I found it frustrating in its variable quality and verbosity. Diamond is better on his own subjects, such as Papua New Guinea than on his homeland's soil when he regurgitates the demise of the Maya and is simply weak on his 'second' home Australia where he repeats errors, invents 'evidence' and accepts populist views without challenge. I came to understand why my colocateur in the retired professors' office at the university, David

Smith, tilts as Diamond with quixotic vigour in an attempt to rectify the damage that such misinformation may lead to.

Notwithstanding such a judgement, the intent of Diamond's book is admirable and there is much to recommend it, there would be even more if a good editor had condensed it into half of its 530 pages. His thesis is that societies do not crumble from one factor alone but by a combination of mismanaged internal and catastrophic external events. The two event types both change the environment and societies that fail are those that did not adapt while societies that survived were flexible and environmentally sensitive within their knowledge. Such a thesis is useful as a basis for reconsidering history, and possibly for raising ethical issues today. But ultimately, the book may be summarized 'all actions have consequences', just as has been said by every wise person throughout history.

Diamond might join those wise observers if he had moved to consider human actions as natural and part of the environment, and to consider a world without humans. He can't do this because the whole point of his book is to blame humans for the environmental demise of the planet as a means of calling us all to act more righteously. The intent of the message may be fine, but I a general reliance on metaphor as fact to be a bit last century. They are often mainstreamed beliefs that demand atonement for society's sins in order to avoid the apocalypse that their environmental god has foretold. Or the message is used to foment revolution and to destabilize society. Both ideologies have caused more damage than good over the centuries and do not need new prophets from the learned classes from whence Diamond hails.

I am ageing, but Diamond is 15 years older. A global book-promotional tour brought him to Melbourne; Simone and I rushed back from Europe to catch it only to be disappointed by its dumbed-down popular approach. Yet he is learned – a product of the elite Roxbury Latin school in Boston, which I know from many discussions with his contemporary and my colleague and friend from consulting decades around Asia, Jerry Murray. By coincidence another classmate William Johnson moved to live in Melbourne after his retirement from the University of Massachusetts and was a source of encouragement for the publication of my book 'The Buddha's Gospel'. As did these two, Diamond went on to do great things in his field, which was more related to anthropology than environmental eschatology.

His anthropological work in PNG is fascinating and in this book is made even more practical. But one must ask whether the primitive persons he describes so respectfully are indeed the primitive thinkers, or whether the term should be applied to the majority in our society to whom we pander when we seek to sell books through major publishing houses.

We Primitives

I had sought out Henry Salt's autobiography, 'Seventy Years Among Savages', because the title tickled me – and also because Salt had founded the animal welfare movement, the vegetarian society and is the reason that Henry Thoreau is so well known today. He was a man well ahead of his time, and his 'savages' were of course his fellow 19th

century privileged Englishmen with whom he found much fault in their callous attitudes to fellow creatures and life. His autobiography disappointed me, but the question as to who are the savages or primitives today has remained with me since I read his memoir some 15 years before I made these notes, which now means more than 25 years ago.

So it was no surprise that it came to my thoughts in the 2000s when reading my friend Mike Heppell's 'Severed Heads and Sexual Selection' about his beloved Iban in Borneo. Apart from showcasing his extensive collection of preserved Iban artefacts which make his house and backyard the most interesting in Australia, his book details the power derived from spirits around those things that most define human life. Of course, those two things are sex and death – seeking sexual partners and dispelling the fear of death.

Women's skills in weaving have been ranked so highly that the skillful Iban woman can exercise choice over who shares her bed, while men displayed their prowess by bringing in enemies' heads accompanied by singing sweet love songs. To have arrived at a cultural balance that enshrines such practices in religion seems something other than primitive, as it anticipated the outcomes of psychology. Who is the primitive?

Heppell is one of a handful of informed persons I have been lucky enough to work with. A doctorate in anthropology and a qualified chartered accountant registration make his skills diverse and unusual, and his analytical approach easy to work with. Such experiences have conditioned me to expect more of others in the blessed society that is Australia. And like Salt, I am often disappointed. Sunshine, congenial work, surplus income, leisure time and free education do not create the ideal humans that philosophers once dreamed of, they seem to produce a comfortable laziness of mind or a protected and privileged intellegencia.

Has it always been thus across history? Wahtever the answer I wonder where a generation that eschews history and culture will lead its young. I voiced my despair in the explanatory notes of 'Dharma as Man' and find I have repeated the concern in subsequent years. My own education had gaps – I have deliberately added patches to over the decades to round out my understanding, as have many of my highr -education peers. However, if I with my nature and background am today's educated gentleman, what does it say of the rest of the society. The Iban evolved a culture that is now eroding as contact with versions of ours increases, but it was based on the basic way that humans act in society; we can learn from that for it could be viewed as a proxy for our forgotten past. From that perspective, our fancy innovations and art can be seen to be but manifestations of the same two driving forces. I keep asking, why don't we learn from the past?

Learning from the Past

It is easy to rely on such platitudes as 'the man who ignores the past is doomed to repeat it' as a justification for an interest in history - and I think it is largely true if somewhat trite. Of course the adage applies to all of life, not just the study of history and is part of the well-lived life – or the opposite of what was attributed to Socrates as – 'the unexamined life'. If we don't not pay attention to the conditions affecting us, and their

recurrent causes, we follow habitual behaviours in an everyday life. The same applies at tribal, societal, national and international levels.

I had dual cause to ponder this axiom when hospitalized with vestibular neuronitis; reflecting on previous periods of my life when I had been laid low I saw that these were periods of growth and understanding. For example, one such period in 2001 helped me see clearly that my projections to that time about another's actions were erroneous. This time my experience was the opposite; I learned of myself, my partner and life – all positively. This was the first cause for my pondering the lessons of experience, or history if you like.

The second cause for my pondering the benefit of experience and history was the wonderful experience of Simone reading me while I was in hospital. During the initial days of my illness I was unable to focus or read. And so Simone read to me from a novel sent by our Finnish friends Laura and Lasse, entitled 'The Egyptian' by Mika Waltari. I had already read a couple of chapters before succumbing to the illness and Simone had read the novel in French decades earlier. As she began reading the 500 page adventure book aloud in English I already knew it would be a wonderful and bonding time. The romance treats ancient Egyptian history in a first-person narrative that interweaves most of the known history of that period. Who cares if it is factual or not – the overall story is as true as life.

Sinuhe, the hero of the story, describes the greed and lust for power of man and the ultimate destructive force that this unleashes, even on a kingdom as great as ancient Egypt. The incidents come so fast and dramatically that it is difficult for me to relate any specific examples. But the constant lessons of the masterful novel is how one day's event leads to repercussions perhaps decades later – including both conscious and unconscious actions, and both idealistic and realistic motivations. The story is so well written and translated that the text should be seen as a classic for each generation.

I will relate just one example. Through the same period, I had been researching the state of food security in the world for the Asian Development Bank. I found that the situation was far worse than imagined by the current functionaries of government and international development institutions. According to my analysis, such bodies and persons had ignored the fundamentals of human nature, the most basic of which relate to survival by securing adequate food. Food for survival is different from other non-essential commodities and as such requires a different approach to its production, management, exchange, storage and international trade. To me this is a truth of life. But it seems I am somewhat of voice in the wilderness of modern economic theory.

So it rang true to me that the traders in 'The Egyptian' would on occasion manipulate trade to their benefit by increasing the price of food grains. They did this by limiting plantings and farm storage of grain while themselves accumulating huge supplies that they could sell later at inflated prices to a hungry populace. The situation paralleled that of 2008 when a phenomenon largely unnoticed by wealthy persons threatened national security - it continues to do so. Many think that I overreact – to which I respond, just

wait and see. For it was in 2008 that a drought in India and Australia reduced wheat production at the same time that the USA offered a subsidy to grow corn for bio-fuel production with the effect that land shifted from food grain to fuel grain production, contributing further to shortages.

India reacted by restricting exports of its other grains, in particular rice, which surprised its Middle Eastern customers who then rushed to procure Thai rice at an inflated price. Other buyers, such as the Philippines, then found themselves in a bidding war and paying up to three times as much as they had bargained for. Higher grain prices in uncontrolled domestic markets pushed hundreds of million additional persons into undernourishment, and even the World Food Program found it hard to meet its emergency grain needs. Naïve idealists in rich-countries imagined that our aid organisations would fill the gap through promises of increased resources for agriculture to 'secure the poor'. But then came the 2009 financial crisis which threatened the comfort of the rich and those promises to aid the starving were forgotten – in fact not just slipping from memory but in some cases evaporating in shifty double counting and so not actually 'incremental aid' despite the words being used freely. Worse still, some governments decided the real need was not food production and rural assistance but 'renewing' cities and so funds for food production were reallocated to urban areas, gender development and specifically defined democratic governance, none of which added a grain of rice to any larder.

Not much has changed since Egyptian times. We are still as tribal and self-centred, and still forgetful of the lessons of history. I find this bewildering. Much of my life I have felt uncomfortable with ill-considered majority views; sometimes I even felt that I was missing something that others understood, for that would have been an explanation for my feeling that much communal and government action was counterproductive. But I was not wrong – I was simply reflecting on the distorted image in a dim mirror. Now I see it face to face for what it is – delusion and ignorance. Yet to me history has offered these lessons time and again. I find that seductive, and certainly better than a short-term fix for an addiction to always pursue more; better to know what's enough – รู้จักพอ as Buddhadasa taught. And that leads to forgetting the most fundamental of necessities, like food.

The Seduction of History

Searching for context has been important in my intellectual approaches. I find it natural as a means of placing a discussion or thought. Hence my interest in the essence of religion as man's traditional search for context, and my interest in the utility of history. This explains my commitment to read E.H. Carr's refreshing 'What is History?' Seducing me early in his book by denouncing those who seek to define a 'fact' in order then to use it for comparative discussion, Carr echoed my preference to see historical facts as hypotheses in a manner akin to science, and to not get too attached to any hypothesis. To do otherwise is to fix history when it is actually dynamic, developing as more minds plough old fields.

We are all affected by our surroundings. So no historian can be an impartial observer – all are affected by their study and their own society. This is not to belittle the work of any historian for the same applies to the scientist and to all others – that is why the scientific method is so important to reduce the subtle influences of the scientist's mind and biases on his observations. Where this approach is possible, I am wary of conclusions arising from other 'reasoned' approaches. Acknowledgment of the inherent biases that we are made of is also a reason why my recent books contain some self-disclosure to provide the reader with an inkling of the forces that I can see in and on myself in relation to the book. Seen this way, no two books are written by the same author. Or as Marx said, *the educator himself has to be educated* and as Carr improved, *the brain of the brainwasher has itself been washed*. And that is why history need not repeat itself in the life of the historically-aware man, for he is aware of the causes and can thus be wary of them.

Reflecting on causes and conditions is an occupation of the wise. As Polybius said, *wherever it is possible to find out the cause of what is happening, one should not have recourse to the gods*. Call them gods or beliefs of whatever, the sentiment is the same, and the wise must always transcend the gods. Such is the essence of real science – and here I refer to science in its original meaning as knowledge. It is for this reason that Carr is at pains to place the discipline of history within science and reject the artificial separation between modern science and the humanities. He notes that the division arose when the humanities claimed to be the superior by concerning themselves with the more humane realm as defined by the ruling class while science described the knowhow required for servile technician skills. The separation is unfortunate and apparently more exaggerated in English. Taken as an axiom it has narrowed the minds of many of my scientific colleagues.

Carr bemoaned, in his unused notes for an update of his book, that *many present-day historians are dead* in the sense that they do not contextualize their thoughts in other disciplines. One might also say many present-day scientists are dead. I had to this point tried to refer to such persons as technicians or technologists rather than scientists, but now see that my definitions of words will not stick. The idea is the same. For example, if one is to consider food security as the most important contribution agricultural science makes to life, then it is impossible to ignore ethics, philosophy, history and so on. And so it tickles me to see the closing words quoted from Carr in this book are, *[what will] complete the downfall of capitalism will prove to be the revolt of the colonial peoples against capitalism in the guise of imperialism*. And that is just what I have struggled with today in trying to separate the interwoven interests of the West's recommendation that a world of free trade will equitably provide food to all. At the same time I see diverse forms of obstinacy among less developed countries striving to avoid the next noose being slipped about their necks.

History indeed has a seductive quality to it. It is probably due to its being a description of ourselves in society, and while we often deny that we act in the same way as our society, we are shaped by whatever company we keep. *If you lie down with dogs, you get up with fleas* as Richard Nixon once observed, presumably from experience. Without the benefits of history from a good high school followed by the company of Dr Wood as a mentor (I

am sure I have mentioned him elsewhere herein) and teacher each Sunday through my four undergraduate years, I would have the same appreciation of history as the suburban peers of my youth – a biased gloss on the British role in a world tinted with the nostalgia of pink on colonial maps. No! For me I prefer the diverse histories of the disciplined observers, and to relate this to the great human accomplishments, such as the great religions that have, for better or worse, interpreted and defined the societies of recent millennia. And it is such an interest that leads me to know that most of it originated in Persia, which incidentally makes Hitler's myths and symbolism more intelligible.

The Irony that is Iran

Propagranda manipulates public opinion in the West as elsewhere. Through these early years of the millennium, it is reflected in the way that we depict the Middle East. I know this from various experiences including my short time during the war Iraq in 2004. Of course, threats arise from the region, just as they do elsewhere. And of course Iran is in political transition again - it has been through worse across the millennia and survived. Its history is as noble as the West's and should be seen as part of it since it created or influenced most of the world's major continuing religions. How ironical that the common view today is of a country run by fanatics who ignore a people desirous of liberty. As the source of liberty in the codified terms that we call religion, Iran's past seems to have been forgotten along with the lessons that it offers – and if forgotten in Iran it has also been forgotten in the West.

Like so many intellectual wake-up calls, I had not assembled the miscellaneous information in my mind until it was presented to me in a cohesive form. That form was a delightful book given to me for my 59th birthday by Simone, 'Spirituality in the Land of the Noble: How Iran Shaped the World's Religions' by Richard Foltz. She had bought it when we visited the outstanding Museum of Islamic Art in Kuala Lumpur. Foltz traces the spiritual development and awareness of our species from pre-historical Indo-European searchings through Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity, Gnosticism, Islam, Baha'i and present-day political beliefs. And he shows us how new insights drift towards world centres, which in those times was Iran, or Persia as we might better call it. Persia's influence continues not only in our culture but also in those we call Arabic, European, Indian and Asian.

We should not be surprised when revival of elements from the proto-religions of pre-history arise today for those belief-systems evolved to address our fears of the unknown. Rituals, trance-inducement, psychedelic drugs, group chanting and auspicious-meanings found in natural phenomena continue to appeal. We may postulate that the ceremonies surrounding the mysterious plant Soma of the Rig Veda foreshadow the Eucharist, or that other similarities such as the number 7 suggest contact with other Mediterranean searchers of the day. That ancient period of the Rig Veda, the world's oldest scriptures, is today often classified as Indian when its insights are used to clarify confused beliefs of modern Westerners flocking to Buddhism, for example. But such grasping is often separated from an understanding the central ethic of creating true psychological

independence, as I opined in my 'Note to the Reader' at that back of 'Dharma and Man', and will not repeat it here.

Suffice to say here that ancient Iran offers us the insight that sacrifice has little to do with consciously and begrudgingly giving something up. It is more *making something sacred*. In this and other ways, Zoroastrianism may be appreciated for the huge step forward it represents in understanding human minds. In today's language, the approach may be seen as a step toward appreciating the individual – not the flock mentality of today's definition of an individual, but the person whose mind was freed of excessive social conditioning and selfishness. I can easily be accused of reading too much into such matters, for we really know so little; that is, unless we observe how successor religions borrowed from Zoroastrianism to developed further in diverse ways. Of course, if the insights in a religion are accepted as a belief, such thoughts are anathema, or perhaps heresy.

Dismissed as a pantheistic, Zoroastrianism also used the external environment to explain our internal life, sanctifying water and soil. I particularly liked Foltze's *sanctity of the soil* to describe one of the practices of the religion; the almost extinct practice of leaving corpses for vultures likewise appeals to me, albeit increasingly difficult in crowded cities as the Parsis find. I also find it curious that Mithraism – the religion of the Roman soldier which so influenced early European Christianity – came from an earlier Iranian/Persian belief that Zoroastrianism had attempted to suppress. I still recall my delight in strolling down the main street of Toulouse with Simone and realizing that it led from the great pilgrimage cathedral that housed a powerful sculpture of a bull to the seat of power – and was midway it was punctuated with a clearly mithraic shrine cum church. The road itself was named for the bull, the sacrificial blood ritually dripped down to bath the faithful Mithraists. Mithraism's final demise involved propaganda to later create a myth featuring its last follower as a Christian saint martyred by being pulled around and apart by a bull.

During its exile in Iran, Judaism picked up many of its refinements, such as apocalyptic ideas and the tendency to believe in a sole god – earlier, as in the Ten Commandments, there is a preference for one among many, as in *have no gods before me*. And Buddhism similarly exchanged ideas with Iran – archaeology has given us Mithra standing Buddha-like on a lotus; Iran has place names that originate from Buddhism, and labelled statues of Buddha Mazda – the unknowable Zoroastrian creator –have been found in Bactria. Buddhism seems to have benefitted from the silk-road merchandizing with temples used as warehouses and growing so rich as to attract the envy of other groups. The Christians likewise developed in Iran before they could expand towards Europe and so absorbed further ideas of Iran, while others such as Armenian Christians remain within that influence.

More than these influences from Iran, it the Gnostic traditions of Iran that have most challenged the Christianity of Rome. We know of it from St Augustine and his polemic against his former Manichaeism in the style of a reformed smoker criticizing his erstwhile peers. Mani had woven the rigid truth-saying and light symbolism of Zoroastrianism with non violence, reincarnation and merit accumulation from Buddhism with some misinterpreted Christian ideas to produce a syncretistic religion. To quote

Mani's Kephalaia, *The writings, wisdoms, apocalypses, parables and psalms of earlier churches are from all parts reunited in my church to the wisdom which I have revealed to you. As a river is joined to another river to form a powerful current, just so are the ancient books to my writings; and they form one great wisdom, such as has not existed in preceding generations.* And while the West's religion saw life as difficult and in need of improvement, Zoroastrianism taught the opposite.

Today we see Iran as Muslim, but it is an Islam that has absorbed much from its past. It has produced the esoteric Sufis and the poet Rumi. It has given us the garden metaphor for paradise and its universal motifs of birds and plants. Today it adheres to Shia Islam, which may perhaps morph into a more liberal form. But for the moment it represses other religions, even the recent Iran-spawned religion of Baha'i which itself can be seen as a protestant form of Islam tempered by the syncretism of Iran that produced so much of the world's religions. What a place it could be again, if the intent of Islam was followed, or Christianity, or Zoroastrianism, or maybe Mithraism or other religions – but it probably more productive to think of Iran in terms of what Muhammad might have meant!

Mulling Over Muhammad

The past days have included one of the periodic exchanges of emails with my old friend John Leake, this time about wisdom and understanding life. I have always like John's intelligent and unshackled mind by conventional education and agile enough to gather the tangents that my own thought processes introduce to esoteric matters. He seeks to understand how life works, which is not so far from my approach although I accept the idea that one can never understand it all and rely on some hope of distilling principles for its operation. Specifically, the principle that guides me is the effect of conditions on the formation of our minds and the way that conditions work in all circumstances. The same action of conditions works on all other things – and I cannot conceive of anyone being able to see all actions. Not Jesus, Buddha or John.

This, to me, is why the religions that use super-humans as role models can only be seen as useful to higher psychological development if the super-human is seen as an ideal rather than a real historical figure. I find this point a barrier in many discussions with Christians and even with many Buddhists who have succumbed to a belief-based approach despite that tradition's warnings of such error. This mental conditioning probably made me more receptive to the life of Muhammad.

In my books I have extolled Karen Armstrong's writing and do so again here. Her 'Muhammad: A Biography of the Prophet' is a sensitive and open consideration of the most ancient texts and traditions that have described his life and the founding of Islam. I had bought the book to read in Muslim lands as I had spent much of the previous year on visits to the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, southern Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia. So on a voyage around southern Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia, I read it interspersed with Buddhist readings and reflections while passing a few quiet birthday days at Borobudur. In this case, geography was one condition acting on my thought processes.

Armstrong says that she wrote her book in reply to the Western response to Muslim criticisms of Salman Rushdie's 'Satanic Verses'; she reissued the book with a revised preface after September 11. In both cases, her motivation seems to inform us of Islam in the face of unthoughtful and enculturated ignorance about the religion. And what a fine job she does! Without polemic she shows the context of decisions and actions in Muhammad's exceptional life as a social developer, political leader and prophet – but not super-human. Where an act or event seems violent, she is able to show a context that makes it normal for the time and place. Where an act seems misogynistic, she points out that the guidelines that have come down to us were major advances in their day and that it required twelve centuries for our own society to take similar steps. And in doing this, the thoughtful reader can only come to the conclusion that Islam is a fine social institution that has been more enduring than most politico-religious innovations, and that in this period of its modernization, it is being ill-served by ignorance in the West.

How are we so ignorant? In the first chapter, she charts the emergence European propaganda to vilify Islam though literature and fable that casts the Mohammedan as the villain in sexual, criminal or violent ways. It seems this tendency continued and was reinforced by the Crusades – themselves an unprovoked European attack on what had been a more advanced culture in the interests of gaining some peace at home and increasing the church's political control. She even goes so far as to imply that Rushdie's work is a reanimation of those old Western myths, which in a modernizing Islamic world led to public criticism.

Without delving into the vast mine of gems presented in her book, I pick an example of Islam being the latest revelation of the three great Semitic traditions and therefore being the most advanced in some ways. One way is its insistence that Judaism and Christianity be respected as different cultural approaches to the same end and therefore not targets for conversion since they have the revelation already. They are to be lived with in peace if they abide by their rules. The similarity of rules and the invocations to tolerance make this all seem theoretically possible and the history of the Middle East in earlier times, and of Spain under the Islamic powers, suggest its truth.

Another example is Armstrong's explication of the genius of Muhammad in introducing a new religion to the Arabs to meet their newly urbanized culture and to revise social and commercial laws at the same time. This is a truly amazing transition to be led by one man. And it produced a peace across a land that had been riven with tribal divisions and vendettas for centuries; that may well have been a viable system for marginalized desert societies where population growth itself was a risk, but times were changing. In comparing Muhammad's words to Jesus', Armstrong notes that Jesus lived in an unusual era when that world enjoyed the peace established by Rome; he therefore did not need to talk of war, battles, raids and reprisals. Muhammad had to, and the wisdom of his revelations make him a greater social reformer than Jesus. I call it genius, for I know of no other instance where one person has led a group from tribal to social consciousness. At the same time it gave a new and workable legal system and a religion that retained old

paths to spiritual insight and encouraged individual spiritual practice in an holostic approach to urbanized life.

Buddha focussed on personal transformation and ignored social reformation except in the form of criticism of exploitive social rules. Jesus railed against the Romans under whose protection he was able to develop his own code and practice it, but he did not have any social reformation function. Muhammad did the lot. And for this reason, I find we have much to learn from the story of his life and from Islam – not the Islam of the Western media, of the extremists or even the majority of believers who have too many other concerns in their lives to consider before they look to the deep spiritual insights of Islam. Those forms of Islam are as useless in this discussion as their equivalents in Christianity. Or – I might add as I sit in Thailand, as useless as the State Thai Buddhism that perpetuates violence on and from Thai Muslims in the south, unless one is considering the nation-building objective behind Thai actions.

With so much confusion surrounding religion, it is easy to say – as I have elsewhere – that the world would be well rid of it, if that was possible. It is not possible, of course, despite Dennett's attempt to "Break the Spell', which I consider in a later chapter. So we are left with making the best of it. And one of the best means of doing this is to test the truth of a teaching in one's own experience, as the Buddha is said to have taught. Those teachings that we find *conduce to reduced suffering* are the truth in this context. And so I find the teachings of Muhammad to contain truth – to be one of the paths that make up the Way.

On the Way

I have only met René Salm once. Our correspondance began after he read my book, 'The Buddha's Gospel' and we found a common experience in realizing the meaning behind such scriptures. René has written much and beautifully, and I was able to help his 'Buddhist-Christian Parallels' be initially published on the IID website and wrote a review for his books critiquing the church's promotion of Nazareth. He in turn read my works and offered valued comment. We spoke by phone once when I was passing through a Californian airport, and later while leading a single life went to visit him. He lived as an urban hermit in Eugene Oregon, teaching himself Sanskrit, Hebrew and Greek so that he could better understand early scriptures – and he insisted that I take the only bed in his simple house while he slept on the floor. Our communication continued for years and in it we referred to our searches as *the Way*, signing encouragement on our occasional long emails with *stay on the way*. I have learned much from René; a stone from nearby the hut he lived in on a pilgrimage to Sri Lanka sits on the lap of the marble Mandalay Buddha image at my cave.

The ideal of *being on the way* contextualizes much of my life – it is a meandering path that at times appears to head in wrong directions that later can be seen as lessons to better see the overall way. It is a guiding principle regardless of my excesses of emotions, thoughts and deeds. While that may all seem a strange introduction to what I want to summarize here, but it exaplains to me why when I read Cormac McCarthy's 'The Road',

it was natural that I should think of it as a spiritual metaphor. But perhaps for that reason, or perhaps because I had heard others rave about the book's ghastly contents, or perhaps even because I enjoyed other books by McCarthy, I seem to have expected too much. I found the book engrossing like most of McCarthy's works. But I did not find the metaphor compelling. Nor did I find the images confronting or even entirely believable. Why, I wondered, was this?

In case I had missed the metaphor completely I checked the web for reviews and critiques, and found only the naïve American metaphors of; roads to redemption, maintaining a moral approach leading to rewards in a 'heaven', and so on. My projections onto McCarthy demanded more than this! Of course, I saw that the pure innocence of the boy might have led to his having a calmer death or life, but actually his innocence was at times ignorance and his ignorant actions seemed to have no consequences – so the karmic message was confused.

And in terms of the depraved behaviour of desperate humans in that post apocalyptic world I found myself thinking that the behaviour was not shocking but predictable. Predictable that is, unless one held to the delusion that man is not an animal that seeks to survive and reproduce, and that if his life is threatened these will become the most powerful forces he knows. The cannibalism that it led to seems to be a greater taboo to some readers than it is to me. I recall having a similar reaction to Sabina Murray's 'The Caprices'. I also recall unpopularly introducing the idea to Buddhist discussions when the holier-than-thou attitude to vegetarianism raised its head as it often does in Western Buddhist circles.

McCarthy has pointers in his books about the Way, which is a sort of Christian existentialism. We all have our '-isms' by which we explain such insights and his are at least more intelligible than many. But I do feel that 'The Road' could have led to somewhere other than a fairy-tale ending, which by its very presence discounts the experience of the journey itself, which is the Way. But this is just how it struck me at this time; and just as the truth has many facets, so 'The Road' may be *the Way* for another reader. I hope it is.

Discovering that Truth has Many Facets

Distorted perceptions have long been seen by the wise to be the source of our misunderstandings of the world and ourselves. To me, it seems natural to consider the subject, but I have learned that this is not the preferred approach of either the majority of my scientist colleagues or the majority of my spiritually inclined or religious colleagues. This has long puzzled me – for years I assumed that most of those with whom I associated saw things as I did. My light-hearted comments were based on the ironies that appear to me with such insights. I now wonder, 'what did others make of my comments?'

It is a gift of great value that I have been given – to be born in a country with a wide perspective on the world and its opportunities, to be given access to good education and a curiosity to learn more, to having studied religions without being pressured into blind

belief, to have studied biological sciences to the level that interactions and interrelationships are my automatic assumption for all phenomena, and to have the security to be able to indulge in understanding more of life. But I know that I am not special in receiving this gift, for it was and is offered to millions daily. The additional gift given to me is that these things often came to me at times when I was receptive, and that is simply another reflection of the conditions being correct from the interrelationships of those and preceding times.

Such a worldview makes me open to ideas and to challenging my own unreliable mind and memory. Of course, I have blind spots and am subject to negative emotions that limit my functioning just – again I assume, like most of us. At times I struggle with illogical depressive moods that make me less sociable. These are moments when the conditions within me – physical conditions such as chemical interactions with both psychological and other causes – produce that reaction. But in other moments I enjoy the coincidence of ideas that occur in moments of insight. Not new ideas, just realizations of how things are. One such evolving coincidence is the parallel insights of the great religions. The more I study, the more I see the same essential and simple message in all spiritual traditions, and their quotidian relevance. By this I mean not religions as they are conceived by the bigoted or narrow-minded, but in the insights that underlie those religions.

So it was, that when I read Gruber and Kersten's 'The Original Jesus: The Buddhist Sources of Christianity' at the suggestion of Rene Salm, I gained more than I expected. Having read and not been impressed with Kersten's 'Jesus Lived in India' several years earlier, I did not expect much. But the ideas put forward by the collaboration with Gruber were so similar to some I had noticed myself and followed to a different end. My end or objective was simply my own insight into what our wiser forebears have left to help us discover more of ourselves. The German authors' objective seems to be to prove some theologians wrong.

The theologians may well be wrong. Their methodology leads them to risk error wherever belief, institutional rules and dogma exist, and their products are often treated with suspicion by learned academies. But why would one expect any of these things to be different? It is not possible to come to a conclusion that the truth has many facets from large areas of such study. So what! If such persons are really seeking the truth – that is, the truth that sets one free as they might call it – then if they find it they will also find that other ways of reaching that point also exist, and that the steps and beliefs they used to get there were not essential, just useful and in any event best discarded once the truth is seen. This is why so many Christian leaders do not believe in a personal god or heaven or hell, or angels, or even sin and evil as forces in themselves.

But because most people prefer to have a belief system, they are easily manipulated by the powerful – it works even in the mis-named secular society of Australia, where religion and belief are as entrenched as anywhere and take such forms as morality, democratic capitalism, individual rights and other absolutes. My understanding of society is thus aided by this knowledge that most people seek a belief, not an understanding, and that most do not seek anything beyond diversion unless a major trauma enters their life.

Within such a world, Gruber and Kersten's book can be important. It allows those who might just think it curious that the teachings and overlapping history and geography of Buddhism and Jesus could explain the very close similarities between these essential pre-church teachings. And if their curiosity is so piqued, they may find that the truth has many facets and they might even find themselves.

Finding Ourself

When T.S. Eliot wrote in 'Little Gidding', the last of his 'Four Quartets' –

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

he knew what we find out ourselves eventually, if we are lucky.

It is the same thing that the Jesuit Antonio de Mello includes in one of his stories in 'One Minute Nonsense' about an wise old man, probably a monk, who no longer had any desire to travel for he saw all the world in others' faces. And it is what Blake found in his *grain of sand* – and what most mystical poetry is showing us.

In his delightful little story 'le voyage d'Hector (ou la recherché du bonheur)', François Lelord captures the same theme as he traces this psychiatrist's understanding of life through a world trip and then back to his old patients, whom he sees with new eyes and helps more effectively while also improving his own life. Hector seeks the elements of happiness and identifies them in situations he observes and experiences. His near-final list totals some 19 *leçons*, viz:

A good way to spoil happiness is to make comparisons
Happiness often arrives unexpectedly
Many people see their happiness only in the future
Many people think that happiness is to be richer or more important
Sometimes happiness is not knowing what's going on
Happiness is a good walk among beautiful mountains that you don't know
The error about happiness is to believe that it is the goal
Happiness is to be among those we love
Unhappiness is to be separated from those we love
Happiness is when one's family lacks nothing
Happiness is to have an occupation that one likes
Happiness is to have a house and a garden
Happiness is more difficult in a country run by bad persons
Happiness is to feel useful for others
Happiness is to be liked for what one is (one is nicer to the child who smiles)
Happiness is to feel completely alive
Happiness is to celebrate, to feast together

Happiness is to think of the happiness of one you love
The sun and the sea make the everyone happy

When I place this list alongside the items that arise from thinking with my Thai friend Charan about 'gross domestic happiness', I note its relative shallowness. This may be a key to the difference between the popular psychology that aims to help Western society and the wisdom of sages who see that grasping after anything at all, even virtue, leads to unhappiness. Perhaps this is why the *leçon* that Lelord placed in the mouth of the wise old Chinese monk concerns understanding oneself. To me, this is central and can be reconciled with the popular items on the list by simply talking of contentment. Happiness is usually defiled into a excessive emotion that is inevitably weighed against unhappiness. Contentment, in the way I suggest it be conceived, is acceptance of states, moods and misadventures.

Understanding oneself is thus a key to contentment, and with that comes understanding of all things in terms of their origins and eventualities, which is the theme of other authors such as McCarthy, who examines actions and consequences in everyday lives.

Actions and Consequences

The Coen brothers makes some fine movies. For me, 'No Country for Old Men' held a wealth of images of the way we think and act, even if we pretend that we are more sophisticated than the characters portrayed in the movie. Ever attentive Simone, on seeing that the film impressed me after I unprecedentedly went to the cinema a second time, bought the DVD for me. The film continues to impress.

I therefore read the book, which reinforced my opinions. And these actions caused me to purchase other works by the same author, Cormac McCarthy in the form of 'The Border Trilogy'. These three separate but related stories follow the same theme of actions and consequences and use the same south-western borderland characters to illustrate life's eternal lessons. And in case we do not see the lesson from the stories themselves, McCarthy offers stories within the main story to emphasize his points.

In the first story, 'All the Pretty Horses', the consequences of a poor upbringing leads an untrusting boy to his death using the moral uprightness of folks working in a largely lawless environment as his executioners. It also uses the negative aspects of clinging to a supposed love figure that we know as lust to illustrate the delusion that governs everyday life, and even engulfs the usually alert and aware hero of the story.

In 'The Crossing' a long and sad sequence about a boy taking a wolf back to Mexico is used to illustrate compassion and obsession, and then later serves as a metaphor for his sensitive brother's demise in the same area. In this story the hero sees the commonality of causes of the two tragedies ???? in himself and, as for the hero of the first story, returns to a life he knows and settles into living according to the values he thinks he has evolved.

The two heroes ???are working companions and friends by the time of the third story, 'Cities of the Plain'. We find they have in fact not learnt from their devastating experiences, for the hero of the first book repeats his error of projecting his virtue onto another and imagining his own ability to influence others. As in all of the stories, there is much blood and violence but nothing that seems untoward in the circumstances. It is a rough part of the world and populated by amazingly noble men, and a few unknowable women.

In case we miss the lessons, McCarthy adds prompts, such as a complex tale told by an old man living among the symbolic ruins of the religion he had seen for its ultimate emptiness. It has tales within tales but they are all explained by the almost hidden line, *rightly heard, all tales are one*. This struck me forcefully, for it was what I had been trying to say in my concurrent project in so many more words in my rendition of the Christian gospels into Buddhist words and times. The priest who forms part of McCarthy's story within a story is described in the words *as with all priests his mind had become clouded by the illusion of his proximity to God* – a simple way of including all the uselessness that such figures exude in the name of their self-perpetuation and false comfort. Such priests can be every priest who must wear outer robes to show his station in case he has lost his inner vocation.

McCarthy emphasizes this insight in the words of the dying old man to the priest. *Ultimately every man's path is every other's. There are no separate journeys for there are no separate men to take them. All men are one and there is no other tale to tell. But the priest only took his telling for confession …* So far as I recall the story, the priest was so affected that he became the old man who told the story living among the ruins of a disused church – but it matters little whether my recollection is accurate or not.

In another section of the same book, 'The Crossing', a blind man is used to tell us the deeper truths when he is given this wonderful line. *He said that most men were in their lives like the carpenter whose work went so slowly for the dullness of his tools that he had not time to sharpen them.* Such words evoke a deep understanding of life and remind me of the central value of life, which is developing our own selves and understanding.

The story is powerful, be it in the form of the four I mention here all sourced to McCarthy, or be it in the universal storytelling of the insightful teachers. And each story, since they are all the same, is answering a question. The question may be 'how should I live?' or 'what should I do' or 'what purpose has life?' – but they are all the same question, just as the tale is one. Or as McCarthy has a traveller tell Billy, *where all is known no narrative is possible*. That is why the wise say little, and when they do it is not a tale but a means of opening our eyes to reality, of breaking down the narrowmindedness of our intellects when they are fuelled only by rational knowledge, facts and information without the balance of experiential insight.

Narrowmindedness

‘The more I know, the more I know that I know little.’ It seems to be the intellectual conclusion of so many of us as we age. It is a form of wisdom perhaps, for it acknowledges that our firmly held views of the past were erroneous or partial. From that perspective it is an insight and one that is to be cultivated. But it doesn’t just relate to opinions of our own apparent formation, but to the collective consciousness as well, for so much that is in our minds is placed there by our associations with our colleagues and families.

Our minds are not our own – *until we make them thine* seems the next line for my Wesleyan trained mind, illustrating the point without me having to add anything! It is not a misplaced sequitur either, because if we see the implication of a divinity of Charles Wesley’s words as really referring to self-understanding and wisdom, it can mean that our minds are not our own in any sense unless we see our mind as part of all things, infinitely connected to and affected by all else. We have no original thoughts. We do not solve problems except in mechanical senses, like clever monkeys.

But we don’t want to believe such demeaning conclusions of the wise, so we continue to act as if we are thinking independently and originating new ideas and concepts. Of course, new ideas do come along – but not within one mind, for no mind is independent of its external environment. Some seemingly new ideas arise from reviewing all known information on a subject, but that is building on the material reviewed – such as Charles Mann has done in his ‘1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus’.

Mann’s ‘new’ knowledge came from his observation that textbook histories of the Americas and their natives didn’t add up. So he talked to experts in a range of fields on the subject and conducted his own investigations to find that most accepted ideas about the American Indians and the country were wrong. Wrong ideas range from natives impact on the environment, their literacy to their governance systems. In fact, he goes so far as to suggest that new world values of equity and democracy derive from the natives who had evolved a governance system that aimed to remove violence and embrace outsiders as long as they obeyed certain generous rules. He presents support for his idea in the form of five once-competitive tribes evolving a system of women deciding which men could be the day-to-day decision-makers of government as long as they acted responsibly. But of course it is not his idea alone, it encompasses inputs from many anthropologists who studied these north-eastern US Indians, and many historians who dug out the old correspondence of settlers that indicated the attractiveness of the Indian society compared to the imported European version, and so on.

Elsewhere, different Indian groups built the pyramids of Central and South America, established sea to alps trading and transportation systems, created a stylized writing using pictograms, established huge city complexes along coasts and developed corn into what became today the third most important foodstuff in the world through sophisticated breeding techniques. All very far from the primitives shown in textbooks.

Mann feigns anger at such errors but it is really no different from any other field. We accept what is taught because we surely cannot challenge everything. And if we do

challenge some things, we always find that it makes us less socially acceptable, for the when we are part of the masses we can prefer facts, even wrong facts, to thinking, especially if the wrong facts support the false worldview that arises from majority lifestyles.

It matters little whether pre-Columbian Indians were more advanced than Europeans of the time or not. It alters our own preferred history and its unsubtle glorying in our tribes' superiority, but that is not a big problem. What it does show is the need for us to be aware of our own sponge-like minds and their grasping qualities for any favourable and flattering stories. This applies to all knowledge and supports the intellectual's valuing of time for thinking and reflection – and for challenging dogma. It also supports the spiritual practitioner's approach of not accepting things like religious belief or a guru's word, but testing things personally. In many ways one might say that one should be catholic in one's thinking!

Catholic Tastes

In religious matters I am indeed catholic. I am comofortable with a universal and general approach in the manner of Huxley's 'The Perennial Philosophy', which he could well have called 'The Universal Philosophy'. He could even have called it 'The Catholic Philosophy' were it not for the Church's prior assumption of that word. I like Webster's definition of catholic as being *not narrow-minded, partial, or bigoted; liberal* for this seems to be one essential precursor to spiritual enquiry. It was in that spirit that I read the book that my old friend from consulting days, Jerry Murray, kindly gave to me as a 58th birthday gift – Pope Benedict XV1's 'Jesus of Nazareth'.

This is indeed a valuable book. Firstly it places the Pope (Benedict XVI) as a scholar in the exegetical style. He uses Protestant theologians as much as Catholic and boldly invokes arguments that are risky for a lay audience. He does this also while presenting a form of Christianity, or at least a form of Jesus, that varies from the traditionally worshiped forms. In these ways it is a brave book.

I was drawn to many aspects of it, such as: the acknowledgement of the church's excessive use of numerology; Judas Iscariot possibly being a Zealot, which explains much in the story; the implications of Jesus in his story gradually understanding more of his own nature (expressed as God in Benedict's book, of course); the apparent choices made by Jesus in the story to use the Passover as an event to demonstrate his message; the spiritual message behind each parable (as I was attempting to draw out at this same time in my book that became 'Dharma as Man'); that Barabbas was possibly a Messianic figure also but in the revolutionary style and hence the choice offered the masses by Pilate alludes to a choice between worldly or spiritual improvement; that the term 'evangelism' for Jesus' words is probably a deliberate appropriation of the term for the Roman Emperor's edits to emphasize their importance; that there is no apocalyptic intent in Jesus' words; that the parables are all about self-transcendence albeit described in theological words; that the book uses Jewish and other authors generously and deferentially; that Benedict is at pains to mention the inclusivity of Jesus' teachings for

women; that the prodigal son parable uses the Greek words *squandered his essence* rather than *property* in a clearer exposition of the intent of the emptiness of the worldly life; and that he uses a nature god of the time to illustrate a *prefiguring* of Jesus.

All this suggests a generous spirit and a great mind. And compared to many theological works translated from German, it is very readable. So what do I not like about it? Clearly some of my dislikes are just biases – such as a mistrust of theological logic when it slips between dogma and scriptures. I mistrust it because it means we must somehow accept an 'I know better' argument for reasons of belief rather than greater knowledge. I do not refer to greater experience but to greater knowledge, for much theology seems separate from spiritual experience. But to be fair, there is not much of this type of tricky logic in the book.

To me, the book seemed to have two styles. The first was scholarly, which I liked. The second was sermonizing and I liked that also, but for different reasons. The scholarly work is nicely presented and argued. It leaves one wanting to delve into the references for further edification – the sign of a good book or review article. The sermonizing sections appealed to me as they are so Protestant – perhaps, as I heard at dinner last night, 'this Pope is a secret Lutheran'! But it is better than the Lutheran sermons I have heard, and more in the style of the now-defunct Methodist (at least in Australia) tradition with the detailed scriptural references and linkages that may at first glance seem unrelated and beyond assimilation on one hearing. I could hear some of Benedict's sections as sermons, especially in the chapter of John's gospel where I heard Dr Wood's voice, for his best sermons were always on his beloved Gospel of John.

I read the book with my catholic eyes and included many of the thoughts that it gave me in my work of the time on a story of Jesus in Buddhist terms. I am sure the ideas that Benedict inspired will improve it. It is a blessing to glimpse insight in these ways, the same truth that appears in all traditions according to my catholic view, and is so often glimpsed then missed.

Insight Glimpsed then Missed

It has taken me 50-odd years to realize that the moon at which all wise men's fingers point is the one moon. I recall being infatuated with the Bible as a teenager, reading it daily and covering its contents many times. But outside such reading, the religion was little more than a social institution that supported otherwise mundane lifestyles. For me it even included a phase of proselytizing to 'share the good news'. But university opened an alternative social and intellectual domain around science, which informed my continuing studies to qualify to preach in the church and progressively open my eyes to see dogma for what it was. Curiously, I did not feel that I should argue with my past friends and so I accepted their beliefs as lack of interest or ignorance supportive of their own peace of mind. Such an approach prepared me well for the searches that I was to embark on consciously and unconsciously over the subsequent decades.

At this point – at about 58 years – having experienced diverse aspects of life uncommon to my youthful suburban cohort and to most of my domestic friends, and having maintained an interest in what religions really say, I found myself in contact with those who shared similar interests derived from following their own paths. Hence my writings attract comments and criticism that stimulate my further understanding and experience of myself. My writings are often naïve, being in one sense diaries of my mind's work in progress, and as such are readily criticisable. I now see that this is one of the benefits from publishing them. Writing draws experiences into my consciousness, and sharing with others promotes my deeper reflection. Of course, the common response to anything another considers heretical is approbation, but even then, critics often stimulate insight.

So it was, after sending a draft of my rendition of the gospel story into Buddhist language, concepts and time, that I re-read a book published from a 1950s Ph.D. from the University of Edinburgh. The book had been sent to me by its Sri Lankan re-publisher in return for the gift of my earlier publication, 'The Buddha's Gospel'. My note on the book suggested that it might be useful for further Buddhist-Christian comparisons, and so I started re-reading it with the expectation of the charm of the old world English that has been preserved by our sub-continental peers. At first I was not disappointed.

The book 'Man in Buddhism and Christianity' by Bryan de Kretser starts well, full of good intention and leads the interested reader into some unusual thinking. But then it seems as if the author either releases himself from vigorous restraint in his mentioning of Buddhism, or has undergone a 'born again' Christian experience that shifts his early sympathetic comparisons to belief-based illogicalities. Perhaps the Ph.D. was conducted through a theological college rather than the university.

In any case, the argument uses some sound bases, such as placing Buddhism into its historical and Hindu context, rather than considering it as a revelation from the Buddha out of the blue, as some do such as those who spurn their own culture's traditions and invest the Buddha with a god-like quality. But the book has an underlying brief that I initially overlooked; I should have noticed that de Kretser saw Buddhism and Christianity as *radical alternative views of life*. Both can be wrong, but both cannot be right, he says! I would prefer to see them as the same as each other in insight and intent.

Noting the advance from Hinduism that effectively defines Buddhism as being the denial of any permanent self or soul, de Kretser is well able to introduce the developmental nature of Buddhist practices and teachings. But then he falls into the Western view common to his time, that somehow Buddhism is life denying and pessimistic. To me it can only be seen to be so if one has an optimism based on deluded hope contained in the belief-based Christianity of his book. This is a pity, for the work contains much valuable thought for its time.

Understanding that all is *conditioned by causes* in the Buddhist worldview, provides a basis for de Kretser to conclude that we must choose between a world in the hands of God or in the hands of Yama (a Buddhist appropriation of animist representation of the usual dark side of life and our natures). Naïve as it sounds, the choice is informative for it

illustrates what de Kretser and many of his believing fellows overlook, which is the logical possibility that one is choosing between two fictitious figures – the only difference is that the Buddhist figure is seen as just a means of illustrating the point not as a god or God.

The book then points out that Buddhism is unconcerned with history as its central insight of pattica samuppada concerns change rather than origins or creation. Christianity on the other hand, as de Kretser notes, is historically contextualized by creation and by Jesus entering our temporal realm. I see this historical fascination as integral to our culture, and that is why we frame our religion in that way. Then he moves to psychology noting the Buddhist understanding of our minds as swinging from idea to idea like a monkey grasping new vines as it swings from tree to tree, and the impossibility of their being any permanent self, or soul as he prefers to call it. He notes that the Bible is silent on psychology, although he doesn't link this to that religions reliance on belief to reach understanding rather than the scary approach of facing our existential angst alone. De Kretser seems to prefer the myriad problems thrown up by an erroneous explanation of reality in his particular Christianity. Such riddles of human life seem to be solved for believers through fantasies that have arisen to solve the riddle; but when faced with reality, the individual must choose between understanding and acceptance on the one hand and allocation of the task to another fantasy, a god-man, on the other. De Kretser openly chooses the latter.

The book deteriorates into Christian apologetics that describe karma as a poor cousin of an explanation of sin – of course sin is better explained in the religion that invented it as a means of patching over illogicalities. I admit to loosing the thread of sin when it is implied that Christianity preaches a corporate social sin. But by him missing the vital link that sin is missing God's will, which is a metaphor for acting against the natural flow of things, the gap between the two religions is widened – could this be deliberate, I wondered? Likewise for justice and forgiveness, the simple explanation is ignored in favour of the complex contortions of theology. It would have been easier for him to present conditionality within universal integrity revealing justice as the opposite of sin and forgiveness a natural response because all actions and thoughts are conditioned by other conditions, and so are both impermanent and understandable under the circumstances. This is why the 'fruits of the spirit' are the same in both traditions – the wise or enlightened one sees things as they are.

Going on to misinterpret the meaning of love, sangha and so on, de Kretser happily promotes his version of Christianity, which he earlier claims is a Protestant version – but it must be one omitted from the courses that I studied! He concludes that 'the Buddhist scheme of salvation is possible, only because man himself disappears in the process' – almost true if we take man to mean delusions of a permanent self, but this is not what he means. He means that the error of Buddhism is to deny man's dependence on God. Such a conclusion seem correct and would conform with what he seems to seek. But that independence of mind is only possible without belief in something created by the mind that obscures further development. As I observed elsewhere, the Christian mystics usually leave the details of God out of their descriptions, some even noting it as a concept

to be transcended. But then, that is why the mystics have been labelled heretics and only rehabilitated long after their deaths. Compared to this subjective Ph.D. thesis, I much prefer the honest secular approaches to understanding life and it therefore pleases me to see that now science may be said to be searching for man's (redefined) soul.

Secular Science Searches for Soul

In our arrogant self-created world, we are constantly pushing back the 'forces of hell and darkness' by ever-new distractions that comprise our materialistic heaven. Life has never been so good; we live longer, are healthier, have more personal resources and our technologies can generally avert what would once have been devastations. But this heaven seem to be unsatistfying. As the Thai monk Buddhadasa said, *all that it has done is fill up the psychiatric hospitals*. Surely our pervasive angst is widely enough appreciated for us to manage ourselves better – but in truth, we probably don't want to address that angst for we know that it will require changing our minds on so many things. So why not just try another diversion instead of thinking about it!

Am I being unfair to the society in which I live – not just here in Melbourne where I am writing this – but when I am in Thailand or France or any other of the many countries I frequent? No, I don't think I am being unfair. Or am I possibly just addressing my own angst? In any case, it was for such reasons that I was pleased to receive Simone's Christmas gift of a book derived from a conference – 'The Psychology of Awakening: Buddhism, Science and Our Day-to-Day Lives'. I think she chose it for a particular paper by Susan Blackmore whose book on the concept of memes we had recently read, and I found the whole book more engrossing than those usually assembled from conference papers. The book assists an understanding of the congruence between the searches of psychology, spiritual traditions and biological science.

Of course, I was pleased to learn that, among his millions of words, Freud apparently wrote that *all our provisional ideas in psychology will presumably some day be based on organic substructure*. I cannot fathom those who maintain that psychology can be divorced from biological interpretations of behaviour and thinking; I see it more as a product of our separated academic disciples. In fact the two extremes are approaches to the same understanding, and where approaches are complementary they must communicate. I can also accept the argument being taken further to include our spiritual natures although this is an even more extreme view it seems.

The book includes some marginal opinions and practices mixed in with gems, such as a reference to a pet dog as an inspiration for living in the moment and being mindful – *since that is all he can be* and the experience calling up Wei Wun Wei's lines about his dog, *He is a better dog that I am a man, and sometimes, a better man also. I do not pat him, I bow to him. I called him my dog, now I wonder if I am not his man?* It is such simplicity that cuts through the confused complexity that we manufacture in our deluded minds as we struggle to align new information to our erroneous worldviews. This is the source of the suffering of angst until we can rationalize it into the shape we demand of it – only to suffer again when reality forces us to confront our erroneous worldviews. I see

it in myself, as we all must do from time to time, and I see it in the religious who want to blindly attach to a belief or practice. This extends to evangelistic environmentalists and self-righteous advocates of newly invented rights. It also includes Buddhist friends who become attached to ordination, robes or lifestyles rather than maintaining awareness to forestall attachment. This prompts me ask of the appropriate use of seclusion as a permanent practice in a tradition that espouses compassion for others, as an outdated section from the Dalai Lama notes, *there are four billion people of the planet, one billion are Buddhists but four billion are suffering*. Paul explained this well in the New Testament for all traditions when he wrote that the wise man should *be in the world, not of the world*. As Buddhism becomes more adapted to Western culture, it will do well to build on such Christian lines, for whether we know consciously or not, they are embedded deep inside our modern secular heads.

Similar insights are evident in such secular lines as Joyce's about his character in his 'Dubliners', which I have not read, whom he described in the terms, *Mr Duffy lived a short distance from his body*. What an apt description of our normal unintegrated self in every-day life. We can go further with Kabat-Zinn's chapter in 'The Psychology of Awakening' book and quote from Pascal's 'Pensées' in which he says something like, *all of man's difficulties are caused by his inability to sit quietly in a room by himself*. Kabat-Zinn also then mentions Thoreau's adventure 'On Waldon Pond', which for me recalls a pilgrimage I once made to modern-day Concord where the context of Thoreau became forever linked to Emerson in my comprehension. These men were Christians despite their searchings and writings and today such men have morphed into the religion of secularism that offers its own understanding of our souls. Yet secularism suffers from two drawbacks. First it is inextricably linked to the diversionary lifestyles for most moderns, and second it can only bring us so far towards ourselves, then we must go inwards into ourselves by ourselves. Perhaps this is what Jung meant when he noted that Eastern 'methods' and 'doctrines' *put all Western attempts along these lines into the shade.* And isn't it curious that the modern individualistic Westerner takes meditation as the main practice of Buddhism often in isolation from its essential practice of conscious ethics and awareness and the developmental origins of meditation practice itself ('bhavana'). It is a means of mental development, and a slow development at that. But then we excuse this by returning to our own prophets such as Goethe when he said, *whatever you can do, or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power and magic in it*, and in so doing we possibly misunderstand him to mean something like a Nike advertisement to *just do it* when he could actually have meant something more like, *you can developed a higher level of living if you simply apply yourself*.

From the papers in the collation 'Psychology of Awakening' I derived a sense of psychology educating the West about our inner selves. Not just for the 'quick fix' of modern treatments, but in understanding the functioning of our minds. The generosity of spirit that allows such practitioners to learn from millennia-old techniques is refreshing. The therapist learning the role of the guru – not as a superior but as a guide for a person to conduct their own development – is a clear example, and the book contains so many others.

For me, with a background in biological science and an understanding of life enhanced by some theological education in my own culture and the insights of Buddhism, the best chapter in the book must be the co-editor Claxton's, which he subtitles 'Buddhism, Cognitive Science and Mystical Experience'. I think I recall talking and being impressed with him at a Buddhist Summer School at the University of Melbourne in the 1990s. Bringing together science, Buddhism and psychology he shows some commonalities and emphasizes that science itself helps us to examine things in a manner that removes or at least reduces our inherent unconscious biases. This axiom clarifies the critical role science in our era to see beyond gossip, popular opinion and superstitions. And this leads some inquirers to the deeper self-investigation that Claxton sees as the realm of psychology and deeper still of Buddhism. I find such a conclusion adequate but not complete. I say this because psychology is but part of the process of science and to separate it from the biological science is to belittle both. The separation seems to be a result of its recent academic founders seeking to carve a niche for themselves among the existing disciplines and to then preach the need for continued separation to their young recruits selected from the less scientific literate. But in truth, psychology is not different from any other 'discipline', so just as all other disciplines are artificially separated and in today's age derive huge benefits by communicating with other disciplines, so psychology will.

So if that is true, what of Buddhism in Claxton's conclusion? The answer as usual is simple – as William of Ockham said, the simple answer is probably correct. Buddhism only exists as a name for a series of practices aimed at training one's mind to be one with reality and to give up the usual elaborate mental formations of a deluded worldview. And those practices are simply the expression of the insight that all things are co-dependent – which explains how we can analyse things scientifically. It also informs how this co-production can be used to dehabitualize our mind from its delusion. In our delusion, we concoct all sorts of erroneous concepts to explain things, the most pervasive and damaging two of these being our insistence that we are separate individuals not reliant on others or other things, and our insistence on stability as a virtue, expressed as sustainability, security and even military peace. And for many believers such errors are compounded by the mistake of creating God to explain the illogicalities that our deluded views require. It could even be said that these psychological errors are the errors of God.

Errors of God

It seems natural to me to discuss God as a concept that may be helpful to some people but ultimately prove to be a distraction from understanding life. Yet it surprises some who read my writings. They seem to harbour entrenched barriers to thought and reflection on experience, and twist science into pointless discussions about the 'God Spot' in the human brain and the human brain being 'hard-wired' to believe in a god. Science does not focus on such popular notions – they are more the teasers interpolated by a new breed of public communicators. This would matter little except that in such sloppy use of language, God remains not only unchallenged as a notion, but the notion is actually discussed as a reality. Perhaps it is – how could I know? – but I find life is made richer by diluting delusion.

This is one reason why I can accept the merit of those who expose religion and God as fueling negative social factors and, less commonly, discuss these as unhelpful to most personal searches for understanding. Elsewhere I mention Dennett's 'Breaking the Spell' observation that today's West exaggerates respect of another's religion by allowing sillinesses to pervade under the guise of respect for religion. Phillip Adams in his 'Adams vs. God: The Rematch' presents a series of newspaper articles charting his concerns. We agree on much, which should not be surprising considering our similar origins. One of the first things we agree on is the erroneous use of the idea of faith in religions; he uses Donald Duck running off a cliff into thin air, hovering there trying to imagine he is standing on firm ground which it works until he peeks down, and then reality begins his fall. Belief-based religions delude us to stand on thin air until glimpses of reality draw us down into a psychological *slough of despond*. And lest I am accused of being out of touch with the secular society of today, let me be clear that I include in my criticism the promises made by the gods of materialism, democracy, environmentalism, gaia and so on.

All gods are false gods. It was not God who said *you shall have no other gods before me*, it was reality, life, the natural flow of existence that said, *there are no gods*. I have been accused of making science a god, but I have not done that; I have presented science as an insightful methodology that reduces our pervasive delusion and bias to arrive at probable conclusions under specific circumstances. In a so-called scientific age, it is anomalous that science in that sense is less generally understood than it could be. The relative reduction in science appreciation that has happened in my lifetime has led to reduced trust in the scientist's knowledge of difficult science and an increased delusion that science is intelligible from popular magazines. And when scientists are quoted as being tentative about a new discovery it is taken as an indication that they are not up to the task of delivering results. This public view that scientific research produces utilitarian products generates a faith in science that is better called scientism. And scientism periodically burns its high priests for their uncertainty of results and for having informed opinions that are politically incorrect. Like a religion, scientism infuses society with a false confidence in control of the fearsome devils. But just as belief-based religions fail to satisfy yearnings for psychological development, so scientism will not answer on demand. A society dependent on this view of science, yet not understanding or respecting it is like a society dependent on food yet neglects to preserve the skills for production – and today food is only able to be produced through continuous scientific research. Misuse of science in journalism, entertainment and the like may be fine in the intellectual world of literary freedom, but I am now seeing that we have too many variables in this un-replicated experiment of our modern lifestyles.

So I am asked, if I advocate better understanding of science yet argue against belief in science, what do I advocate belief in? The very question reveals the problem of which I speak; I am not advocating belief. It is such an ingrained part of ourselves that we do well to practice being aware to notice and rectify our thinking whenever we notice a lapse into believing in any notion, be it advocated by others or by scripture.

This view is presented eloquently in 'If This Is Faith, The Gods Must Be Crazy' – an article that could well have been a great Protestant sermon except that its content is the opposite of those delivered in that marvellous rhetorical tradition. In that article, Adams describes the extreme costs of religion and faith in terms of war, ignorance, oppression and hatred. He included mystics, which I am less inclined to do, for I do not see the cave hermits leading armies and churches, but more as persons whose insights help them to seelife as it is. But so many of them seem to have been socially inept and hence are mistakenly remembered for their foibles rather than their message.

All these errors are God's, and thus ours for having created God. Having created him in our own image – competitive, grasping and devious – we have also made him one who is out of touch with reality. And since 'being in touch with reality' is what insightful persons across the millennia seem to have meant when they talked about being in heaven or paradise as being at one with the natural flow of life. Perhaps it could be said that God is in fact in his heaven if we see that as another way of expressing natural flows.

Adams highlights the misuse of the variant of *all religions are the same – we all worship the same God* – to gather allies to defeat some other party, usually religiously aligned. But it is easy to see diverse scriptures as saying the same thing – this is different from claiming religions that purport to own such scriptures are the same. This essence cannot be owned by an institution and relies on no gods or priests or gurus, or even by self-created Luthers. But just as it is hard to describe colours to a blind man, so it is virtually impossible to describe unity to deluded minds. And the delusions are not overt, they masquerade in such forms as facts and knowledge, and beliefs that we in control of our own destinies. Beneath such delusion, we remain afraid of change, of death. The most balanced people I have known across my life were at ease with their mortality, were not conventionally religious and saw the implications of actions more clearly than their peers. They were wise in the sense of seeing things as they are. Such wise men, unperturbed by the details of the theologians and the pious, can claim to see the teachings of all traditions to be the same as each other.

One's the Same as the Other

My perspectives of the positives and negatives of religions may be a minority view. Some critics feel this is my central error. Be that as it may, I understand that a minority view based on experience should generally be preferred to that of an undiscerning majority. So, when I say that one religion is much the same as another, I am not simply expressing a politically-correct opinion. And when I find ready agreement to my proposition among quarters that seek to mollify the excesses of religion but who do not wish to know much about it, I am surprised. Why? Because I assume that religion or belief is an acknowledged part of all lives. I also find agreement from odd souls around the world who go out of their way to contact me and engage in long-lasting conversations – but these do not fit with the majorities of their own cultures either.

Some of these interlocutors emerged after I published 'The Buddha's Gospel'. I was amazed by its response, which might be said to have reinforced changes in my life. The

response encouraged me to continue self-examination, to continue my idiosyncratic spiritual search and to avoid the cults and clubs of religions. This last measure was particularly important as my pursuit of deeper understanding came at a time of other in my life that could have tempted me into the clutches of a welcoming cult. But my experience guided me around such pitfalls and led me toward further comparisons of the insights of the great men of the world's spiritual history. And by a circuitous route, this led to me being invited, a decade later, to be part of the panel to examine a PhD thesis completed in the UK by a Thai Christian about Buddhist-Christian dialogue in Thailand.

I considered the invitation an honour, and as it was consistence with my interests I saw it as an opportunity to ensure fair play for a candidate who could easily have been crucified by the Christian theologians of the system in which he was studying. In essence, the thesis chronicled the generous attempts by Thai Buddhist scholars, in particular Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, to present Buddhism in the conceptual language of Christians, using such terms as 'heaven' and 'God'. But from the Christian side, there was little evidence of reciprocal action, even though theologians like Paul Tillich and Don Cupitt have represented the intent of Christianity in non-theological terms. Why this reticence? I think it is because Thai Christians have inherited the assumptions of their Western teachers and prefer to engage on neutral topics such as environmental and social issues.

Christianity can seem arrogant as a result of its association with what has been the world's dominant culture. If I was writing this in the heyday of the Roman Empire, perhaps Mithraism might similarly have suffered in the same way. Christian terms have been appropriated in the West's insistence on its version of free-trade, environmental control and human-rights. Such was the problem of dialogue that this PhD candidate wrestled with. In the so-called Buddhist nation of Thailand, where nation, monarch and religion are promoted in a powerful myth, Buddhism exists as both folk and State versions. Christianity in Thailand may hold the world-record for the lowest levels of conversions, even to a folk version promulgated by Thailand-based Protestant missionaries. A dialogue between Thai folk Buddhism and this foreign version of folk Christianity might be interesting but hardly constructive in the matters that matter most; both are usefully animistic. Without a strong Christian theological tradition in Thailand, the Ph.D. candidate relied on Western works in comparision with the essential Buddhist works revived by Buddhadasa Bhikkhu.

I knew of Buddhadasa from my own investigations; I had translated one of his lectures, written of his insights as applied to nature and agriculture, and had stayed at the temple he founded. So it was a joy to receive, at the same time as examining the thesis, a book from a Thai researcher at Cornell University – Kamala Tiyavanich – whom I had met and with whom I had maintained a correspondence. Her book 'Sons of the Buddha' traced in endearing language the childhoods of three notable Thai monks from the south of Thailand. One of these was Buddhadasa, who had initiated the dialogue that he saw as essential to human development in Thailand.

Kamala's book showed some of the conditions, in the Buddhist sense of the word, that had formed the man who became Buddhadasa. And in his adult life, he argued against the

folk as much as the State Buddhism of Thailand as being unrelated to the real message of Buddhism. In many ways, his works parallel expositions of the West's misunderstanding of the message of Christianity.

When the Thai State sought to remove the superstition of folk Buddhism and replace it with scientism and patriotic notions, it became as corrupted as any institutionalized religion. But in his Buddhist-Christian dialogue, Buddhadasa chose not to highlight that fact, preferring to indicate the spiritual intent of Buddhism to his fellow Thais. When asked to relate it to Christianity, he elicited thought-provoking parallels for mutual understanding. And his generosity of spirit seems to have been underrated by Christians – with the exception of the brave author of the thesis mentioned above, Rev. Bantoon Boon-It. My conclusion from some intense experiences had shown me that, as Buddhadasa might have said, if we ignore the parallels between the spiritual intent of religions and fail to acknowledge our culture's manipulations of religion, we compromise our own contentment.

It is a clear yet difficult message. Except that it is not so difficult to start and perseverance is rewarded as the parts that looked difficult drop away. This is a spiritual path, which is documented in every religion usually with a strong cultural colouration that has allowed it to be communicated to one's fellows. But we live in a strange period of history in which the exotic is readily available, which makes it possible for some to think they follow Buddhism by chanting florid mantras and take pride in lotus postures. But unless the message is understood to mean that we should find a discipline suited to our natures, the whole point of Buddhism and Christianity can be missed. This is not the type of discipline that produces the 'orders' of these and other religions; they are better seen as human institutions that may help the minority suited to such modes of living. No, it is the self-discipline to continue on our own path chosen wisely not just from religious prescriptions or blind faith. In fact, it seems to me that today's enlightened heroes include both those who live simple lives and others who live seemingly chaotic lives; both types find their way to develop spiritually while enjoying life. They live with self-discipline rather than religious discipline.

Finding One's Way Amidst Excessive Order

To be self-disciplined is so easily mistaken for having to follow others' prescriptions for order and tidiness. In their book 'A Perfect Mess', Eric Abrahamson and David Freedman consider this phenomenon and describe the penalties that accrue to indiscriminate tidiness and order. They note that the physical 'law' of entropy – that everything declines and order can never be maintained. Entropy is physics' insight into impermanence although it is not usually used in introspective reflections; I think this is what the French biochemist-Tibetan monk Matthieu Ricard meant when he said that science makes *major contributions to minor human needs*. So, as in Abrahamson and Freedman's book, orderliness is portrayed as part of a futile desire to be in control.

The book was given to Simone. I read it and being engaged in expaining the futility of sustainability in one of my books at the time, inserted my own interpretations into the

book. Thus I saw that our unacknowledged fear of death dominates our unconscious efforts to forestall change within the rubric of sustainability. We prefer stability for it does not remind us of our inevitable decline, and so we laud order as a means of knowing that all is under control, tidy.

And tidy cultures produce tidy religions, such that Christians have adopted from earlier belief systems where God created order out of nothing. The theme is picked up in the New Testament with Paul preferring order in the message emanating from the new church he was creating. All religions do this. But it looks like we have lost much in our frenetic attempts to organize according to the book, such as with the focus of the Attention Deficit Disorder sufferer who drove a school bus to support himself so he could write poetry. Focussing on poems forming in his head, he missed routine stops. Yet orderliness drives us to make all humans the same and to label such aberrations as disorders. So guilt and illness arise in some who cannot meet others' demand for tidiness.

But perhaps the best example is from Bach, who it seems, improvised rather than composed and found prescribed score anathema – yet today we have ordered Bach into approved boxes so that symphonies have approved popular interpretations. While Abrahamson's book is simple and popularly eclectic, it reminded me of my natural dilettantism and its disorder and the strenuous conscious hoops I make myself jump through to instill order where it is necessary to join with some element of society. I know I can appear orderly, but that is a self-management tool that has become habitual. My thinking has never been orderly – one reason I write is to arrive at some integration of disparate thoughts and these only feel right when they arrive at a common simplicity. But that may be another form of order.

Such creative writing can be as important to an author as scripture. This sounds pompous but can be made less so by considering that scripture is not really sacred and above challenge, but a creative insight into humanness. That is why prescriptive practices must be examined in context, which leads to them being seen as examples from wise men who sought to assist others in understanding life. And this in turn is what scriptures state – that we much each find our own way. In that sense, we each make our own scriptures.

Making a Scripture

It is liberating mental exercise to ponder the making of scriptures. Not the writing of them as such, but the consensus that leads to some texts above others becoming scriptures. Of course, there is always as 'authorized version' laid down by powerful institutions, of which through most of history ordinary people only heard sections. But some writings became scriptures because of a consensus of their creative presentation of spiritual messages. And such documents usually are based on metaphor and multiple layers of meaning or poetry.

In her outline of one sacred book, 'On the Bible', Karen Armstrong emphasizes that unlike we moderns, historicity was unimportant to the early Jews or Buddhists. All saw that the point of a scripture was to convey a deeper message and not to focus on

chronology. Of course, some will argue that the Jews had an historical orientation in any case, but assuming that's true it leads to the question of why the particular events included were chosen above others, and why academic historic research suggests a different version.

Similarly, the two gods of the Torah, El of the Canaan peoples and Yahweh of those further north offer a glimpse of what the scriptures may be saying, for the Torah reveals a merger of the two gods. This seems to me to a simple lesson in the psychological integration of our individual devleopment. Of course, Yahweh dominated and as military conquests spread the message overlaying the extant agricultural and fertility gods and relegating the society through a litany of rules. Deviation from this militant god was likened to the infidelity of prostitution by the prophet Hosea, probably motivated by his own anxiety about about his wife serving in ritual temple prostitute role. That role declined with time, as did child sacrifice, which was replaced by animals; today we see both changes as ethical advances.

We know that insertions were made later in many scriptures to ensure they remained useful. This doesn't mean that modern sensitivities are comfortable with literal interpretations of scriptures, but in general insertions and modifications led to such changes as; strangers being welcome regardless of their religion in contrast to earlier exclusions, and the holy land being a metaphor for the haven of peace that living a spiritual life offered. Seen this way, a thread – a sutra – can be seen linking stories in scriptures and that thread can be lost if scriptures are misused. How is the thread lost?

The thread is more easily lost in literality. For example, the altar icons and their like of the Jews that were outlawed by their priests were replaced by the temple as an image of a metaphorical heaven, just as in other Asian conceptions. But having chosen a war-like God, they invited constant aggression and destruction of this iconic image of heaven. Without the temple, the written word became much more important, and it is that tradition that the Christians continued and enhanced by adding imperial authority to the contents of the words in the books and rituals.

It is comforting to see Christianity as a continuation of Judaism, but in my view that is incomplete. Of course it is a continuation in ways that make most of the Western world share much with the traditional Jewish mind. But in another way, Christianity is a circumcised Judaism combined with a truncated Greek mythology that was used as a tool of power by institutions that have encouraged superstitions. The result may be seen in majority Christian countries where prosperity leads to the meaning-seeking of youth who are dissatisfied with institutions and scriptures. And to say that evangelical churches provide this function is to misunderstand both my meaning and the spiritual nature of man.

While Christianity become an agent of government, Judaism continued to develop as was necessary since each new temple was knocked down by a new enemy. Hence the continuing evolution of scripture of that tradition has created a more vibrant spiritual documentation than the closed book of the Christian Bible. Rabbinical exegesis includes

insights that continue the developments of the Old Testament and in some cases shedding such psychological crutches as heaven, the Greek-influenced idea of hell and indeed God himself. However, as with all peoples this related to only a few Jews and so may not in itself seem a justification of the benefits of scripture. Yet to me scripture remains useful for its underlying spiritual intent, which is why I have intrepretted small parts of it into modern terms using Buddhist and fictional devices. The genius of scriptures is in their apparent simplicity and meeting censors' requirements while including multilayered insights.

So while Karen Armstrong's reverent documentation about the Bible is useful and enjoyable to read, the real essence of what makes a scripture is its enduring clarity of message. This is what I sought to do in my 'Dharma as Man', and to an extent also in 'Reaching the Top?'. It takes effort to study the context of ancient scriptures, and this is rewarded in itself, but that path is not open to all and so interpretations such as mine that offer a different context for the same ancient meaning assist my understanding, and seem to have also assist others.

The opposite of understanding scriptures in this broad manner may be seen as the equivalent of what the New Testament calls sin. This means that sin is simply acting out of ignorance of the way things are. Acting out of accord with the natural way of our being includes such things as literal indoctrination of and unsuspecting public from childhood. Literal interpretations, from virgin births to resurrections to promised lands to post-death heavens and hells are all sin if they are foisted on others. This is not a qualified statement, it is absolute, and it explains why some of our best minds and most ethical persons consider reflective agnosticism a higher state that any belief. In fact, belief is want poisons religion.

Religion as Poison

It seems that we could label our times as 'religious' if only because we fill our minds with notions about what religions are, usually with little factual base. For the sun shines on our worldview – it is clear, we are wealthier and globalization has been interpreted until very recently as a Westernization of all corners of the planet. And where we see religions opposed to our views, we are confident that this is evidence of the religion's inferiority. It is very similar to the Protestant work ethic as preached in the UK and the New World, that wealth was reward from God.

In fact, I can agree with the intent of that statement but not in the common sense of linking religion, culture and wealth, but in the sense that acting in accord with the nature of things leads to an ease of life, which in a monetized system may allow wiser action and financial decisions. The old Protestant ethic is not remote as it may seem, for it was once linked to a responsibility to live simply and to use wealth wisely for social benefit. It is a sound approach to religion supporting society – but we have deviated far from this second component of wealth while retaining the idea that our culture is superior.

Then there is the 'problem of religion' today, which refers to Islam as we interpret it in the West. Sure, it is a mess in Iraq and Iran and sure, Saudi Arabia is rich, strict and hypocritical, but the religion has merits and drawbacks the same as Christianity. The two share much with each other and the third and older Semitic religion. We need to look at religion objectively to know if it is useful to humanity in general, whether it is outmoded, whether it is superseded by new belief structures that we do not call religion but in fact are, and whether we are in fact predisposed to religion and its practices by our evolutionary history.

This is what Daniel Dennett has begun in his remarkable thesis, 'Breaking the Spell: Religion and Natural Phenomenon'. Whether religiosity is built into us or is learned it is certainly pervasive. Today we have various tools of science to study social and biological phenomena associated with religion, so why not use them? Dennett spends much time arguing that we should do this before he actually does it – he delays his entry to the subject because of the unique case of the USA and its religiosity, which we who live elsewhere can easily underestimate. Yes, science should be used as a technique to study religion, our psychological whims and attachments and spiritual experience.

To do this one must ask, as Dennett does, '*who benefits?*' In the case of religion, it may be society, the individual or the species – classic categories for any discussion of evolutionary biology. But could it also be that ideas develop their own lives so to speak – this is meme theory, a subject conceptually simple yet often misunderstood, and religion as a powerful meme has a life of its own. It could be like music, which some say is of no practical benefit to the species' survival yet is enjoyable and creates an environment of social harmony when it works. It could represent the psychological immaturity of the masses who seek to remain in a paternally protected environment rather than leave the nest. It could be a source of moral social behaviour, but it seems the religious people are no more honest than others, and possibly more likely to hold strong views in favour of such violent acts as capital punishment and making war on others. It could even be that religion was useful for tribal unity, and that we have not really outgrown such social need.

So does examination of religion shed any light on it at all? To me it certainly does. But my response is also a disagreement with Dennett insofar as he dismisses spirituality simply because it cannot be described objectively enough for him. I would rather that he broke down the word – surely belief in magic powers and such can be useful even though they are false beliefs. If we look at the traditions of mind development we find that they are largely free of the main components of religion – ritual, belief, hierarchy and god(s). This may explain the evil of religion that Dennett seeks when his objectivity occasionally slips, and with this approach we may see that the benefits of religion have been the transmission of these spiritual practices.

However, transmission of spiritual practices has not been the main objective of the institutionalized religions; rather it has been perpetuating their influence, power and wealth. The ones that remain today are superb at this – I see the Roman church as man's most successful institution, certainly the most sustainable to use a now religious

adjective. Spiritual practice is separable from religion because its practices and experiences are similar across traditions despite religious and cultural differences, and many occur separate from religion. I speak of meditative reflection, ethical practice, acting in the best human manner to create habits that become a new person, and so on.

We could readily conclude that if religion is not necessary for spiritual development and that spiritual development is the principle benefit from what many think of as religion, then we can dispense with religion. Dispense with it because its main beneficial outcome is able to be separated from it, and because its other outcomes are sometimes unhelpful. From this perspective, in a rational world we would wean ourselves from religion – unless a large benefit can be found. It may be found one day, but we haven't found it yet. Strange? No it isn't because it has only been looked for recently.

Just as the seeds of balance and utility in the Protestant work ethic have been lost, so religion may yet harbour some benefit that I cannot see. I would like to give it the benefit of doubt. But if religion is just power and wealth separated from an ethic behind it, then it is on a collision path with our notion of individual psyches and interdependence with all things in the universe. Meanwhile, it seems the world is set to continue with its belief in economic progress so that wars can be reduced by people's attachment to their possessions and comfort. This is a new religion where wealth is a major moral virtue.

Wealth and Morality

I heard a Polish saying that 'money can't buy happiness, but it makes poverty more bearable'. Probably not meant to be profound, it nevertheless stimulates the thought that poverty occurs amidst wealth and is thus not its opposite. Likewise, Adam Smith's 'Wealth of Nations' offers a balanced view of wealth and morality. Indeed, as P.J. O'Rourke says in his commentary on Smith's work, all that Smith wrote assumed a frugal and responsible moral attitude by individuals and government. And even when advocating allocation by market forces he was not averse to interference if immorality crept in from unscrupulous persons.

Smith's references to 'the invisible hand' of the market and other things has become mixed with references to market forces being sufficient to maintain social equity. We live in a world that demonstrates that this is fallacious, and this is not what Smith meant. His invisible hand in fact reflected his advanced Protestant understanding of life and divine actions. That is, if those in responsible positions are educated and follow their understanding, then they will be working within the natural order of things – the invisible hand. But the idea is hard to apply today where selfish interest may be greater than in Smith's day, and regulations are seen as just another challenge to get around. A far cry from the world the Smith's vision. O'Rourke's book is a good read, but Adam Smith's two great works – 'Wealth of Nations' and 'Moral Sentiments' – are better and are freely accessible online.

It is a sad reflection on us that we have created a problem from wealth when Smith saw it as normal, moral and useful. We have denied our indivudal responsibility to use our

talents wisely, to live simply and help others. I wonder if it is in some way linked to our denial of myth in our society and our own lives.

The Mythic Dimension to Life

Modern life might seem rational but we privately delight in irrational thoughts as if they are necessary to balance to our luxuriously ordered lives. Yet we cast aside myths as outdated irrationalities. It is similar to my comments being cast aside when I insensitively comment of the problems luxuries can cause, and am misinterpreted to mean that we would be better off without them. It is not so black and white and I experience has shown me that a one-sided life is unsatisfactory.

As our society lauds science, or at least a public perception of it, things that are not rational are sometimes assumed to be inferior. Thus are myths and legends further marginalised. And before this time, one culture dominating another downgraded the loser's myths in favour of the conqueror's. Today's public view of science may just be the dominant culture of the moment. It may be that the public view of science is a new form of myth for it is often erroneously magical. But that does not substitute for the absence of foundation myths to underpin our worldviews. Perhaps we are becoming a dangerously mythless society.

Joseph Campbell in his 'The Hero with a Thousand Faces' addresses the collected myths of the world and finds them to be all saying the same thing. It sounds remarkable at first, but on investigation, it only seems natural that an essence of humanness is expressed in similar ways by separated peoples. As he quotes from the Vedas, *Truth is one, the sages speak of it by many names*. And when suppressed, as in today's city societies, dreams become the more important ground for private irrational stories about the missing essence. Jung noted *archetypal images* in this role, while Indian philosophies called it 'viveka' or discrimination. Dreams can thus fulfil the same function as Ariadne's thread – I wonder if in Sanskrit it could be called 'Ariadne's Sutra' – to find one's way out of the labyrinth of the subconscious back to everyday life. Such myths and dreams fulfil a purpose of scriptures in guiding us bumblingly toward understanding of reality, which is that higher plane of existence of which each of them teach. And when we recall that no scripture detail a mundane way to heaven, enlightenment, peace and so on, but only offers practices and stories that may assist one to develop understanding, we may see myths as fulfilling this same function.

In fact, religions have been a major user of myth in the form of the life stories of their central figures such as Buddha or Jesus, and in parables as Jataka stories and church-invented fables. Often religions usurp extant myths of cultures they convert to make make the new teachings more acceptable; this is what we are left with today in religions. But it seems that few wish to consider old stories when new diversions are available on demand.

So what is this one message from myth? It is simply that of the personal journey of comprehending reality, which is the only useful goal of life after survival and the element

that ultimately makes us different from other animals. We can reject the journey in favour of distractions easily in modern society, but the consequences are also part of the mythical stories. For example, the book of Proverbs (1:24-27) tells of the confusion that accompanies such rejection; the story is told in all cultures in different ways. Today it is an effort to study myths. In the past, societies that based their lives and festivals around myths, rites of passage and psychological growth were stable. It is not illogical to suggest that we have lost this to our cost and have found that the gap cannot be filled by fun, money, romance or anything else, for they are all impermanent. And this is not a new revelation!

The alternative is accepting the role of self-development as told in the myths. This is the path toward the ideal of unity of all things that has variously called enlightenment or heaven or so forth, and was apparently described by Joyce as *in the economy of heaven … there are no more marriages, glorified man, an androgenous angel, being a wife unto himself*. Is it possible that the majority are subject to a widespread malady expressed in psychoses, which psychotherapy may address when it is more than tricks to cope with the fears and anxieties. A quick fix does not seem helpful for what is really a life-long quest.

Myths also allow the communication of deep truths in an engaging manner including humour that recognizes that gods are inventions for the telling of the story and as they are invented by people, gods share the same foibles. Perhaps this is a yardstick for the utility of religions – whether humour is present and whether the god or central figure in stories uses humour to instruct. Campbell puts it another way when he says, *wherever the poetry of myth is interpreted as biography, history, or science, it is killed*.

To understand that myths are critical to life is a step on the path to understanding. To follow the intent of myth is to begin to understand ourselves. This is a strange message to relate today, yet it is as relevant as ever. We have not changed with the invention of technological widgets. But it is difficult to translate myths into our everyday lives as individuals because no society reveres its myths as much as it did in the past. This means that, with the message of the myths – the monomyth if you like – is to live adventurously. But we are not alone in this adventure for the less opaque religions have a remnant of core practices that assist us to open our minds as part of everyday life.

Everyday Life

Traditions of self-development can be confusing when the explanations include denial of an essential self. But confusion diminishes with perseverence that reveals the semantic limitations of modern language for translating ancient texts. The more I reflect on such teachings, the more two things seem clearer: 1) it all makes sense if one's mind is open, which is only sometimes, and 2) it is not complex to understand, although it may seem complex if viewed only in intellectual terms.

In his book 'The Diamond Cutter', the US-born Tibetan-Buddhist Geshe Roche describes his understanding of such teachings to the diamond business in which he worked. The book begins with frustrating inaccuracies, which become inconsequential as its lessons

deal with such matters as creations the world we inhabit. Thus the book details means of taking time for meditation and reflection each morning, taking time-out through each day to re-centre, setting aside a day per week for non-routine activities that contribute to spiritual development, and periodic breaks as retreats. The argument is compelling, even if one is left with the question 'why the diamond industry' – it seems easier to beg that question as it is not the essence of his argument, just a means of illustrating how one's own actions can change situations dramatically.

The approach may be simple divided into ethics, meditation and cultivation of understanding – as in all Buddhist teachings. Geshe's willingness to accept other traditions is welcome in a field where Westerner adherents are sometimes prone to be exclusive in their allegiances and denigrate other traditions, especially Christianity and its siblings. He has opened a university for spiritual development, which I see as a worthy function in a civilization that understands discipline in learning and may be able to apply this to the higher human aspiration of insight.

Geshe seems an ordinary type of person, but his lesson in the application of enduring wisdom to everyday life is a version of the most valuable contribution anyone can make. In following the Tibetan tradition, he has his own gurus, and history has repeatedly shown that we best progress in our understanding when we have an ideal before us as an example.

The Benefit of an Ideal

We all create ideals to strive towards, whether they are political ideals, respected persons, our own notions or some other thing. This human phenomenon has been well used in spiritual teachings, notwithstanding their folk and institutional versions focussing on literal beliefs about the life stories Jesus, the Buddha and others. The actual reason for such life-stories is as instructional metaphors for personal development.

I can no little value in arguing whether these idealized persons once existed; we may as well assume they did. In any case, their life-stories is not biographical and should not be taken as such. Karen Armstrong in her book 'Buddha' describes wonderfully the life of a man that has been idealised as a description of the human condition and release from it, and an expression of the practices that lead him to enlightenment and of the fruits of his enlightenment. The former is the metaphorical intent of the Buddha's early life in the palace spent in sensual pleasures protected from all unpleasantness. It is a lifestyle rooted in delusion as it is only sustainable for the shortest of times and relies on an unseen outside management to support the delusion, rather like the film 'The Truman Show'.

In the Buddha's story, he saw old age, sickness, death and so on, which resolved him to seek a solution. It is the same awakening that many of us experience, at least fleetingly, when we realize the unsatisfactoriness of life based on owning, controling and identify with things, people and our self-image. The metaphorical insight also dispenses with irrational discussions about biographical details that offend modern sensitivities, from acceptance of gods through to misogenistic attitudes.

Perhaps it is harder to escape the literal meanings of a theistic religion, for God is key to the whole package. Yet we know that we can read the Jewish scriptures up until the date of the destruction of the second temple (really the third but for some reason, Zerubabel's is not counted) as a description of the evolving understanding of man's self by a literate tribe. The idea is continued in some Christian traditions where mystics and some orders talk of transcending God. But such approaches are not encouraged by the church. Here lies the nub of the issue; institutionalised religions aim at the masses and would not be sustainable in their present forms if the majority turned to spiritual development. For such development is a personal practice in which the support of fellow practitioners and seekers is valuable but not controllable by an organisation.

Thus we live with literal beliefs in the life of Jesus, and perhaps to a lesser extent of the Buddha. Yet the details inserted into their biographies are so similar as to force any thinking person to ask, 'why are they the same when the institutions of the these religions seem so different?' And the answer is that the tradition of great men, from so-called primitive religions to the so-called great religions, is the same. Preconceived traits are posthumously ascribed. Thus Buddha and Jesus share: pure births (Jesus from a virgin according to the church even though scriptures do not support it, and Buddha from his mother's side at heart level); examples of brilliance in childhood; suffering that leads to insight; ability to perform miracles, and so on. That the Buddha lives to his 80s while Jesus only lived to around 30 in these stories may not be as important as Buddhists might claim, as many of the copious teachings of the Buddha are dated after his death, and the main teachings are alternative presentations of one central insight and practices.

To limit understanding to the literal lives of these figures is to be mired in a slough of dualism; dualism between right and wrong, saved and lost, moral and immoral and so on – concepts which both Jesus and the Buddha would have seen as insubstantial. Nevertheless, we are stuck with dualistic thinking and may as well use it as a step towards increased awareness.

Dualistic Limitations

We have self-selected over countless generations for dualistic thinking for everyday conversation. It is employed usefully, for example, in the 'significant difference' required between two scientifically compared treatments, an approach that recognizes of tdour unreliable minds. Is there another mode of thinking than dualism?. Even that question illustrates the routine 'either-or' nature of thought. So, with it so embedded and having produced the material comforts it has brought us, how could we think differently, and why should we? An answer to 'why' is offered by the sages who related durable insights from unified thinking. And 'how' is suggested even with our dualistic pattern by some curious fictional and metaphorical presentations of natural occurrences from a non-human viewpoint. Perhaps this is illustrated by such examples as seeing genes as agents in place of species in evolution as Dawkins uses in his 'The Selfish Gene', and even better in Pollan's 'The Botany of Desire'.

In Pollan's book, we can see that interdependence is understood in man's breeding of plants such as apples, which in the form we know today can only be produced by human control of their reproduction. But such attachment to a certain product necessarily reduces biodiversity, which our society now sees as a threat to survival. It even goes further when we invent stories such as that of Chapman ('Johnny Apple-Seed') in the USA. Pollan reveals Chapman as a canny real estate speculator who widely planted inedible apples in order to claim land, yet his story transformed him into a Dionysian environmentalist and health giver. These seeded apples were only suited establishing land ownership and the cider for which they were eventually used – and the cider was protected from prohibition because of its association with the succeeding wealthy land owners. Eating apples later from grafted trees became the world's most popular fruit through the efforts of countless boosters, entrepreneurs and orchardists and scientists, and leaves us with a fertile ground for considerations about ethics.

If ethical behaviour is simply seen as that of the enlightened person, some might argue that apple breeding was unwise because it was conducted under the guise of being the masters of nature. That rather silly example is an example of dualistic reasoning being applied to virtue. An integrated view would see that we adjust to our environment by such adaptations as plant breeding just like orchids shaped like spiders to attract spiders that inadvertently transfer pollen from one orchid to another. On the other hand, tulip breeding stimulated avaricious tulipomania during which time tulips were treated with more respect than people. And to add complexity to such understanding, it seems that the colour variations of the valuable tulips were associated with a virus that also benefited the tulip's popularity – until commercialization purged the virus and produced the predictable colours of today's tulips.

Such interdependent evolution produced the agriculture on which we rely today. True, there is a reliance on greed for the commercial agriculture of today, just as there has been for popular crops throughout history from apples to tulips to cannabis. It is especially so with mood altering foods and drinks for which humans have modified their behaviour to accommodate desired experiences from the mild to the excessive. And it becomes more interesting when we acknowledge that religions arose is association with such intoxicants from soma, wine, coffee, fungi and cactus. Perhaps as Pollan quips, Marx's religion as the opiate should be expressed as the reverse.

We tend to view everything with us at the centre. The same dualism can be applied to any thing, such as a plants, and if we allow the plants-view of us as its agents, we see that we are ignorant of the interrelationships that are around and in us. Following that thought experiement, we could think that a plant-view might see that it is organising us to perpetuate itself in place of competitors! But humans are different, and for us these fancies all mean that our behaviour is a product of our intentions and the interactions that affect us, even if we are ignorant of their action. This is what we do, we breed plants and call it artificial selection but it actually part of nature, for as Darwin's said – *man does not actually produce variability.* If we praise diversity we should at the same time praise human ingenuity in agriculture that feeds billions even though it narrows diversity.

We continue to narrow our food base – 80 percent of food staples now come from six crops between which we now swap genes, which potentially can narrow variability further. But awareness of that risk also allows the same tools to widen variability, to adapt to changing environments and so on. As Pollan notes, the monoculture of agriculture spreads to human mono-culture through standardisation of tastes and products. An example is fast foods such as appetizing fries. Johnny Apple-Seed eschewed the grafted apple trees that are ultimately a source of all our apples today and by so doing he widened the genetic base of apples at that time, but he surely did not know all that he was doing. As for all things, intention is behind ethics and since ignorance is a kind of opposite, it is unlikely to lead to ethical outcomes. So I see that the ideal of wisdom is key, and that knowledge can be part of that if it is accompanied by an awareness of interactions, which is the value of considering the interface between science and religion.

Wisdom in Science and Religion

Casting around among the disprate themes on which I will one day write, I began collating outlines for books that I had collected in a folder over a few years and sought to tease out their interrelationships into a seamless argument. The process soon showed itself to be less a success in literary planning than it in congealing my thoughts, and as that is one main reason why I write, I pursued the approach. I sought to use spiritual themes to once again link science and religion, beginning with a description of how we think that we work in terms of conscious brains responding to primitive brain reactions.

This magnum opus that I had once conceived was to be divided into distinct sections (each one having been originally conceived as a book in the first place – thus from here on I refer to sections and books interchangeably) that I would try to relate to each other, but which could also stand alone. The first section was to be based on the observation that we feel that "life can be manipulated to maintain positive stimulation e.g. consuming – 'new', religious belief, shopping, ideas, 'good causes', etc'. Recognizing that this is not an original thought and that our minds are unreliable, I was to use the theme of Susan Blackmore's 'meme' book in parallel with the neuroscience book of 'Negative Emotions' as starting points. I wondered if the power of scientific research in building on behavioural observations to pinpoint parts of brain to stimulate specific reactions – positive or negative – might be reveal some similarities to ideas of the 1960s' LSD era.

If internal biochemical changes induced by meditiation, for example, are similar to the chemical interactions of mood-altering drugs, one must ask if perhaps the latter could be a short cut to mental peace. I can see some similarity between the boffin who works diligently on integrating everything within a detailed focus and the wise man who sees an integrated whole of life. Is it that they see the whole of what they look at – the small world of the boffin and the unworldly realm of the sage? Is it that neither are distracted by TV, the News or social 'games'? Or is it that they are ever discovering more of nature and with that understanding, feeling ever more at ease within it? Aware of the limitations of black-and-white thinking, I wondered if I could look at both approaches

But approaches to what? Life as it is simply lived, or life as an unquestioned pursuit of progress? I was to address this question by referring to an article I had written for the Sustainability Newsletter of CSIRO summarizing my book, 'Religion and Agriculture'. It could be our approach to the basics of life since we have been evolutionary selected to seek food, shelter, warmth and medicines and thereafter to come to grips with other fears including death. I was to take this argument further by considering both superstitions and spiritual development with some references to Dawkin's 'The God Delusion' without getting into detail about his problems with religion, to which I intended to return later.

Continuing with the theme of basic needs, I considered food production and often neglected alternatives to traditional food sources; that found its way into a section of another book. Observing that we know how to cloth ourselves, how to shelter from cold, heat, UV, wild animals and even perhaps social degeneration, and how to care for ourselves medically, I posed the question 'what next?' and referred to a verse from one of my poems – *Clothed, well fed now introspective/Good health portent of long life/Of nature now I am protective/While I ignore the human strife.* I had quoted myself in a Graduation Address at the University in the 1990s to emphasize the excessiveness of our lifestyles – but my understanding of my own words went deeper to also include our neglect of the need to die well and our usual living of animal lives without fulfilling our potential for something 'higher'.

Such internal intellectual debate revived another earlier book idea about 'Dying Well', which I had proposed structuring around literature research and a survey of knowledgeable and respected persons for main points and anecdotes and a Delphi-type second survey of others. This would have required two lists: one of persons of the highest levels of insight and another of genuinely concerned and wise practitioners. I was then to consider a survey of religious and spiritual teachings on the subject as to use the question 'the survivors – is it for them?' to consider what the teachings were aimed at. Separately I wanted to consider the dying and their wants, which in my mind was related to Bloom's poetry examples and a chapter in my little book 'Reaching the Top?'

Continuing into different cultural attitudes to death and dying, as well as such concepts as the aging stages of Hinduism, services for funerals, I reasoned that the idea of a 'healthy life must include a healthy death'. I recalled my neurologist friend Siladasa commenting about reactions to terminal illness diagnoses ranging from some people adjusting and organising themselves, to outright rebellion that disrupts everyone and everything. In concluding that one should live well now, I wanted to note that psychological health underpins health as much other factors such as diet and exercise before moving into quotations that I had collected from my readings, such as that from John Calvin's second sermon on Job, viz; *even the pagans have said that death alone shows the littleness of men. Why? For we have a gulf of covetousness, that we would wish to gobble up all the earth; if a man has many riches, vines, meadows, and possessions, it is not enough; God would have to create new worlds if He wished to satisfy us.*

That quote aligned my theme of interrelatedness more than Montiagne's more practical *if you don't know how to die, don't worry; Nature will tell you what to do on the spot, fully and adequately. She will do this job perfectly for you; don't bother your head about it.*

But it seems that I was more impressed by Bloom's and Johnson's words, which I had confused in my notes and my mind. I think it was Johnson grieving for his mother, and all lost friends, when he wrote *Nothing is more evident than that the decays of age terminate in death; yet there is no man, says Tully, who does not believe that he may live another year; and there is none who does not, upon the same principle, hope another year for his parent or his friend, but the fallacy will in time be detected; the last year, the last day must come. It has come and is past. The life which made my own life pleasant is at an end, and the gates of death are shut upon my prospects. … Every inhabitant of the earth must walk downward to the grave alone and unregarded, without any partner of his joy or grief, without any interested witness of his misfortunes or success.* The work continues in the same vein to conclude with a Christian consolation of an afterlife and its non-sequitur of religious hope, where it seems I was to state that 'death is a final confrontation with the delusions and attachments that have conditioned our life. There is no point saying this is to be overcome – it is the way we are and we do much better to look further into the modes of handling the pains of separation from such 'attachments' as the wise of all ages have said. Then I was to discuss the insights of my friend Suntraporn on the death of his son Saam and the utility of the Thai Buddhist approach to grief as a period amenable to teaching insight into life.

The next section of the book was then to return to the theme 'Is religion useful?' and to Dawkins' book, and somehow I sought to link this to yet another idea of a book to 'translate' the whole New Testament into secular or Buddhistic language under the rubric of 'An Open Interpretation of the New Testament'. Noting that 'if I was Muslim or Jewish, I would use the Koran or the Talmud, but as I was brought up in the Christian tradition, I must use that'. I intended to use the 'same style as the main 'interpretation' section of my little book 'The Buddha's Gospel' for the whole New Testament with the original words presented in parallel on each opposing page.'

My plan was to be implemented by downloading the whole New Testament from the web for the opposite pages and to format and enter my interpretation using 'Buddha's Gospel' words for relevant sections. Noting that I should 'check other's similar efforts', I jotted down for myself that I should also 'develop some guidelines and state them upfront, such as the message is of self-transcendence; god words are used because that was the language of the cultures being talked to; layers of truth reveal themselves and these are but some of the layers; literal directions are in most cases anathema to spiritual practices'. Such thoughts led onto my saying that 'God is not necessary to Christianity!' and that 'we have to decide if it is the church or if it is Jesus that is the basis'.

Once again, I referred to Bloom who noted that *the Jesus of the churches is founded on the literary character Jesus, as composed by Mark* as part of a general trend *that the Western worship of God – Judaic, Christian, Islamic – is the worship not only of a literary character, but of the wrong literary character, the God of Ezra the Redactor*

rather than the uncanny Yahweh of the J writer. If the Jesus of the Gospel of Thomas is also to be regarded as a literary character, then at least he too will be the right literary character, like the Davidic-Solomonic Yahweh. Then I had collected the quote from Brown in his 'Augustine of Hippo' about a pre-modern church understanding of Jesus. *Above all, the Christianity of the fourth century would have been presented to such a boy (who would one day become Saint Augustine) as a form of "True Wisdom". The Christ of the popular imagination was not a suffering Saviour. There are no crucifixes in the fourth century. He was, rather, "the Great Word of God, the Wisdom of God". One the sarcophagi of the age, He is always shown as a Teacher, teaching His Wisdom to a coterie of budding philosophers. For a cultivated man, the essence of Christianity consisted in just this. Christ, as the "Wisdom of God", had established a monopoly in Wisdom: the clear Christian revelation had trumped and replaced the conflicting opinions of the pagan philosophers.*

Yet I acknowledge that overall it seems too hard to shift a persistent meme and thus conclude that religion is not useful in anything but a social context and even then leads to massive costs and deaths. An impractical conclusion.

In the next section I was to turn to the question 'Is science useful?' by addressing neurological states of mind in prayer and meditation and in other calm and balanced states. Noting that, if science can say how to reproduce such states then it is a method like the various spiritual practices are methods. And if so, it seems similar to both the scientific method to isolate extraneous effects and the teachings of conditionality in Buddhism. Espousing the view that if we see reality any method is OK, I noted that the science of food for example is based on control of conditions, just as is cultivation of higher mental states – therefore the correct way of seeking to control food production may even be a path to enlightenment in the same manner as any other worthwhile activity.

With such confidence, the next section was to conclude that science and religion are both useful if conducted in a wise manner, but neither lead to wisdom except if pursued with great self-discipline and 'this is not always the case for employed scientists these days, or for religion as offered by churches or other institutions' and this was to be tied back to the opening section of the overall book.

In the matter of wisdom as opposed to knowledge, I noted that I should think more along the lines … 'as for food for life and enjoyment vs excessive consumption, indulgence and jaded appreciation of natural tastes, fashion in clothes and houses vs actual needs, guaranteed 'good' health and cures vs living with the variations of biology'. Knowledge only tells us how to get more; by contrast, wisdom is contentment and feeling what is enough. This chicken-and-egg situation might produce states of contentment and changes in volitions and understanding that is real compassion, but the proof is only in ourselves and our own inner transformation. 'It is not the 'getting of wisdom' but growing into wisdom'.

Moving to consider wisdom, I had used a series of quotations once again as jumping off points; these included Bloom who contrasted two Socrates, the first who sees himself as *the Good*, the model for all others, who only taught what his disciples were capable of grasping. The second another Socrates perhaps created by Plato as *his Supreme Fiction* to be a *heroic precursor* in the mode of Nietzsche's assertion that if *one hadn't a good father, it was necessary to invent one*. Bloom also noted that 'worldly wisdom is rarely wise, or even prudential.'

I had also quotes from Montaigne which cryptically noted that *It is an absolute perfection and virtually divine to know how to enjoy our being rightfully. We seek other conditions because we do not understand the use of our own, and go outside of ourselves because we do not know what it is like inside. Yet there is no use our mounting on stilts, for on stilts we must still walk on our own legs. And on the loftiest throne in the world we are still sitting only on our own rump.* In enumerating *four classes of Idols which beset men's minds*; the Idols of the Tribe, the Cave, the Market Place and the Theatre, Montaigne stated that *to point them out is of great use, for the doctrine of Idols is to the Interpretation of Nature what the doctrine of the refutation of Sophisms is to common logic.* Idols of the Tribe included the falsity of human senses including the mind, while Idols of the Cave refers to the individual psychological level deriving from experiences, individual natures and education. Idols of the Market Place flow from social discussion of opinions and the ability of words to obstruct understanding. Idols of the Theatre derive from the *dogmas of philosophies* and other received matters including ancient philosophies and modern science. In so doing, it seems to me that Montaigne was presenting the same wisdom contained in Buddhism – not trusting in the senses, our own objectivity, other's advice or what is taught by the elders or the elite, and by – and Montainge does not go quite this far – testing each thing in one's own experience.

Emerson's *as men's prayers are a disease of the will, so are their creeds a disease of the intellect* appealed to me as did another from Bloom who accepts poverty as *imaginative lack or need* for which *self-knowledge only is the remedy*. In his discussion of the Gospel of Thomas, Bloom presents the essential spiritual message of Jesus as for all wisdom teachers that *we dwell in poverty, and we are that poverty, for our imaginative need has become greater than our imaginations can fulfil*. The Jesus of the Gospel of Thomas passes through life content with seeing its workings and commenting that others may too see the truth, urging that we, in Bloom's words *cease hastening to the temporal death of business and busyness that the world miscalls life*. It is the busy world of 'death-in-life' that we are freed from in this Gospel, for there is no *apocalyptic intensity* in this Jesus, just a realisation of what time is – a revaluation.

As Bloom observes, *to read well (which for Augustine meant absorbing the wisdom of Christ) is the authentic imitation of God and the angels*, to which I wanted to add 'to read, reflect and perhaps write to engage more of oneself in the process is to become divine'. Of course, it depends what we read and how we read it, as Bloom again explains, *reading alone will not save us or make us wise, but without it we will lapse into the death-in-life of the dumbing down in which America now leads the world, as in all other matters.*

I had then noted that when William James said something like *wisdom is learning what to overlook*, he spoke to me, for it is the generalities that contain revelations for me. For others it may be the detail, as in the laboratory scientist who comes to an understanding of nature and himself through a microscope or a poet who sees a microcosm of all worlds in a single natural act in a spring meadow. But James meant that wisdom is knowing what to overlook may often refer to that which cannot be explained and is inconsistent with other thought.

The final section of this idea for an eclectic collection in a book was to collate similarities into a conclusion, which reminded me of the Leonard Cohen poem 'The Flood', which goes like this: *The flood it is gathering/Soon it will move/Across every shoreline/Against every roof/The body will drown/And the soul will shake loose/I write all this down/But I don't have the proof*. I had noted in the words, 'but don't believe in it!', by which I meant, I think, that belief itself is the problem and I wished to shy away from believing any of this unless I had tested it myself. I had done this for the link between science and spirituality and between religion and spirituality and now I was seeking a sangha in which to grow further – but it seemed hard to find persons with such bizarre and unlikely experience and background in their spiritual lives as me.

What a project! I am glad that I did not attempt it in this form, and my setting it out here is really an acknowledgement to myself that the product would be too hard to grasp and too long for nearly all readers. We have become schooled into 250 page books with neat cohesive arguments; we reject direct translations of Asian wandering thoughts in favour of individual Westerner's straight-line interpretations of them, and we generally do not want books to lead into us into thinking but to educate or entertain us. But even though I have not written this book of books, I have put the thoughts down here and they remain in my mind and will no doubt find expression in other forms. In many ways the spiritual theme is one of considering alternatives as a door to initial understanding – for an agricultural scientist, one such door is obviously the alternative to agriculture that I mentioned earlier.

Alternatives to Agricultural Food

After completing the book 'Religion and Agriculture' I found several nagging questions behind the comments of readers. The central thesis of the book – that neither Buddhism nor Christianity was more 'green' than the other – was largely accepted by the secular readers who did not really care anyway. Sustainability remained a modern ethical ping-pong but religion was irrelevant to it according to those readers. The religio-literate in most cases seemed to agree and like the argument, while the religious beleivers of course objected to whatever criticism they found of their own religion and in some cases to the spiritual descriptions of the other religion. But such matters did not concern me as much as the ignorance surrounding food production in general – not just the public separation from food productions systems but also some agricultural scientists' blindness to alternatives to soil-based agriculture. So, I outlined a book to set the record straight.

The book will probably never be written by me, but I know from experience that my feelings on such matters are sometimes symptomatic of omissions in both our society and our science and will eventually attract the focus of a new discovery that is claimed as revolutionary. My experience is based on the role of draught animals in agriculture remaining important and yet absent from international agricultural programs, a subject on which I wrote in the 1970s and which become popular through the late '80s. This resurgence was not only a result of my naive book – 'Introduction to Working Animals' – but also because the omission was by then obvious to those who thought beyond their culture. My experience is also based on my other idea at that time that research in many cases, and particularly in the third-world, needed to look at optimizing family security, free-time and maintaining traditions rather than financial or even Western-assumed socio-economic factors. I didn't write that book but the idea is gaining credibility albeit associated with some weird ideas that I do not subscribe to. On these subjects, some critics see these ideas as marginal, while other kinder critics migh say that I am ahead of my time. So it seems I may be doing something useful when I link religions to each other and to agriculture as I have in some other books. And so it may also be with the consideration of alternative forms of food production.

The thesis in this case is simple: arguments about water use, sustainability, trade and global food availability are only valid when alternative means of producing food are considered. Such 'artificial' food may be said to be unpalatable but in reality may be no more so than recycled water, and if it is nutritious is clearly an option for those who promote grave environmental and food deficiency futures. My outline of the book began with the note 'ask JEL', referring to friend and colleague John Leake whose tangential thought processes and omnifarious reading would be sure to stimulate links between my as yet unsorted ideas. It then included reference to a 'Tasmanian ATSE woman and her paper', which referred to June Olley, an aging agricultural scientist and academician who had written on fermentation and waste-product derived foods, and who had sought me out in letters for a correspondence about wisdom, food and equity in the world. From such notes flowed the order of chapters, which in themselves present the argument that I felt was always missing from the self-serving presentations of leaders trapped in technological group-think.

In the book, beginning with chapter 1, 'Facts about Food', I would discuss 'where it comes from and is consumed, environment etc, what we need to survive (quantity) nutrition' and then say 'but it doesn't need to be agricultural'. I thought I should also consider whether 'we could produce our own food in backyards', to include the simpler reader, similar to a comment from one of my ABC radio monologues to which I tried to reply sympathically. Calculations relevant to Australian backyards might then form the basis for chapter 2, which would also cover 'mixed urban-rural food production, hydroponics, organics, gluttony, sensuousness and fertilizers'. Chapter 3 would then introduce the 'NASA diets and their production systems' to clearly show the outcomes of wonderful alternative food research for space travel over extended periods. This would then be enhanced in chapter 4 in the form of other alternatives 'e.g. yeast and fermentation products, by-products and artificial foods'.

In chapter 5, I would consider ‘what our close relatives eat: chimps, pigs etc’, dismiss obsessive vegetarianism and show that ‘meat is not bad, cannibalism is not bad although both carry certain disease risks (e.g. mad cow prions) when eating one’s own species or those close to one’. A note then tells me to ‘check the proximity of humans to such species in DNA profiles’. That chapter was to conclude with the point that ‘we have evolved to handle’ a certain varied diet, but that ‘maybe there is no conclusion as we live so much longer than our forebears’.

Chapter 6 was to cover ‘a better concept of food, nutrition, waste products and ‘contamination’ (e.g. yogurt, cheese, yeast, alcohol, vinegar) and to thereby show the interrelationships of beings, from us with bacteria being 10% of our weight (or whatever) with microflora being essential to digestion, to the way food grows i.e. each crop is not a sterile single production but an interaction from rhizobia to bees to the bacteria that make, for example, meat tender enough to command a high price’.

Then as in most of my books, I would consider the poor in the poor countries and to link this in chapter 7 by to considering: ‘if we simply shared our wealth across the globe, we might all live the lifestyle of the average Bangladeshi (World Bank VP, Ismael Serageldin said this once and he usually checked his statements – in any case, re-caclulate from World Bank charts – and determine ‘what does the average Bangladeshi or his wealth-peers eat, how long do they live, what are their health problems, are they diet related?’ This was to then lead into the usual ‘population and food supply argument’ using ‘UN scales to show that there is no problem of supply implied and that the population density of Holland is more than would be that of the USA if the whole world population was put in it’ with a note to check this statement from David Gosling in Cambridge. In any case as we are ‘becoming more urban the issue is not food but what type of food’ and it seems I then intended to postulate a ‘scenario of a major event that isolates an urban state that has the technical resources to produce alternative food products e.g. yeasts, which I then linked to the thought that ‘perhaps this is same as earlier culinary innovations that are attributed to great cuisines of the world such as the Chinese and French in such forms as mosses and snails – things that may not have been readily accepted by agricultural societies except in adverse circumstances and which became the focus of innovative use of spices and cooking methods to produce dishes that are today considered ‘typical’ or luxuries.’

In Chapter 8, I would remind that ‘food is essential to life – axiomatic’ and note that there are ‘many folk sayings about food in all cultures’ but ‘some other things are also essential and these have long been recognized’ and I would then recall the ‘wisdom that has been offered down the ages about the essentials of life’ in the form of the four ‘essentials’. After these the ‘next essential is psychological calm or insightful acceptance or whatever term different cultural expressions use.’ I would then emphasize as I have in my important papers that such ‘food is essential not a luxury’ and note that ‘it doesn’t mean a boring diet, but it does mean healthy and not excessive; and it does mean not making a sensuous indulgence out of it – and the same applies to excessive luxury in housing, clothing and medical care.’

Chapter 9 was to be a summary of the high points of each chapter with a cohesive argument all made in one chapter as in some of my other books. It had no notes beyond a quotation from Bloom (2004 – Where Shall Wisdom be Found? Riverhead Books, New York. Pp304. Page 74), viz *In the Iliad, the world of peace is essentially a war between humans and nature, in which farmers rip out the grain and fruit as so many spoils of battle. This helps explain why the Iliad need not bother to praise war, since reality is a constant contest anyway, in which nothing of value can be attained without despoiling or ruining someone or something else.* I hope that I placed this here to indicate that the confrontational model of agriculture against nature is a modern Western misunderstanding that reflects an aggressive culture, and hence explains why we omit consideration of non-land based alternative to food production – for often agriculture and the environment are used as proxies in a competition for outcomes other than food, such as dominance. But that thought took me onto another imagined treatise …

In any case, my reliance on the wise more than the elite indicates to me that I had absorbed much from my reading and reflection over past decade before I jotted such notes down and that this in turn had allowed me to contextualize much from my earlier conditioning in the church and around the world. The basics of life, such as food, are a focus of those great writings, which recognize that basics need to be secure before the special attributes of humans can be developed. With an increasing openness I had gradually seen that much of the intellectual resistance I felt to my suburban peers derived from a competing need for acceptance in a group. As the group at that time was the church, this required hypocritical adherence to an ineffectual God – and back then I already felt a need for joy more than a God.

Joyful Godlessness

When ideologies confront each other as in the present era, the role of religion assumes renewed importance. Aggression between and Semitic religions including Christianity has stimulated modern thinkers to consider religion in a manner that their ideologies thought was passé. Thus books such as ‘The God Delusion’ and ‘The Atheist Maifesto’ arose arrived on the popular bookshelves.

The latter book by Michel Onfray is a litany of hypocrisy, misused power and wrongs committed by the three Semitic religions. Or so he claims. So I ask ‘do they really create the problems?’ And I must answer, yes – from the viewpoint of such authors who see religion and God as instruments that the powerful can use to mobilize the masses. Reliance on intellectuals’ viewpoints can easily make a case for abandoning these religions. For someone such as me, who has no problem conceiving the concept of God as a useful steppingstone described in many cultures, this propostion to abaondon religion could seem almost acceptable. Except that the religions do much more than what such critics acknowledge, for they combine the myths and history of those remnants of past peoples that have formed our worldviews, civilization and even shaped our brains.

Onfray sees overriding aggression in the Koran, the Torah and the Bible. So do I, but that’s how it was in the times being used in the allegorical, metaphocal and quasi-

historical stories; I also see great beauty in the stories. The context of aggression and aggression itself are not the message and are not taught that way by their religions when they best serve their adherents. The message of joy and love that is used by the religions to cover the aggression and imperialism of reality is absent from the 'concluding recommendations' of such books as Onfray's. Perhaps Onfray could be persuaded to see that the aggression ethic served expansion and survival of the tribe while the love/caritas/compassion/kindness ethic easily expands to bringing others into the tribe and reduce aggression.

Regardless of God, joy and loveingkindness are the keys to spirituality, even if one argumentively wants to exclude them from religion. Cultivating the joy of contentment and love for reality is not reliant on God or religion. Poetry offers a glimpse of this part of our minds when it is more than love or cathartic release. Nevertheless, there is merit is substituting God with poetry as the mystics have do when they rise above the more mundane metaphors of love.

The Metaphor of Love

The love poetry of India contains wonderful metaphors for spiritual yearning. Uncensored physical yearnings mixed with psychologically insightful descriptions of feelings and states of mind are captured in verse and painting, with the anguish of separation from a lover being a metaphor for the unsettled soul seeking the divine. The power of the poetry presented by Dallapiccola in 'Indian Love Poetry' is enhanced when we realize that the works arose in a mixed religious tradition and seem to have been shared across Hindu and Muslim barriers and time, with the Sufis in particular developing the theme of the lonely life being a pining for the Divine. Whether the God is Krishna as in the Hindu works, some other God or just one's real self, the feelings are conveyed in a form that survives translation. In 'Chinese Love Poetry', Portal describes how Chinese poets were content to capture a moment or a feeling rather than seeking to place it in a universal setting as romantic Western poetry tended to. Thus we can gain insights into yearnings, actions and thoughts surrounding desire and natural behaviour, albeit extremely subtle in any references to sex. The feelings covered by the Chinese poetry rendered into English may seem deeper and more personal to a reader. When it is considered that they apparently do not seek to discuss transcendence, it might suggest that our basic understanding of ourselves may begin with analysis of feelings of love, before we can use the general concept of such feelings as a metaphor for a spiritual yearning. An then there is a third book in this series from The British Museum, 'Classical Love Poetry' by Williams and Cheeseman in which we can see the origins of much English language poetry, and an obsession with deifying love without expecting to understand the gods or one's self further. A delight to wallow in, the poetry of love is also a lesson in the power of this emotion and its instructiveness about our attachments.

Blinded by love we seek only our beloved. While in this state, little else can affect us. Yet the feelings and their various expressions provide the world's uniform metaphor for the attachments that stand in the way of our desire for unity with the world and all things. I wonder if the Indians are not more developed in their insights of human nature including

spirituality, for it is they that allow the metaphor in a manner that is found in the Old Testament and not the New. What a deficiency of the West, that the 'new covenant' that distinguishes Christians from their spiritual forebears, the Temple Jews, eschews humanness as a metaphor for union with God, except for Jesus and Mary under specific guideines. It would not surprise me to learn that some Christian theologians have sought at various times to delete such books as Song of Solomon from the Bible! And that is why I one day will tackle interpretating this wonderful love poem. [note: written a published subsequently]

The veneration of lust, as opposed to acknowledgement of its power and naturalness also shows a missed opportunity for Christianity to promote its self-transcendent message. Is this related to the excesses of lust-promotion in today's West? Perhaps. In any case, it is hard to talk about metaphor in the face of distracting media. That observation redeems New Testament Christianity in Paul's advice to *be in the world not of the world*.

In fact we have commoditized love to the extent that it is a 'right' clainmed by the young, is somehow related to sexual union. The emotions of both lust and love are real. But they are separate, and there is a need for both – lust as a driver of procreation as for other animals, and love in terms of living integrated with all things in a relationship shared with a like-minded partner. Seeing lust as a natural basic need allows us avoid being dominated by it, and to understand other real needs.

Real Needs

To live we must eat – food is a real need. It comes with shelter, warmth and medical car before all others once we are born and able to survive. As I find myself increasingly drawn to a broader view of my profession of agricultural science that encompasses understanding of life and mankind, I find that I gain new insights. This is to be expected I suppose as it is a language and viewpoint that has been a large part of my conditioning. I suppose some might use the metaphor of insights pushing through this conditioned view of the world, while others might see it as really understanding agriculture more deeply. Of course, it is the latter as both agriculture and science are important parts of what humans do. Preliterate and pre-agricultural societies would have had equivalents that we can too easily dismiss.

It is often assumed that the transition from hunting and gathering to agriculture was smooth and continuous. We now think that this is probably wrong as some groups seem to have oscillated between the two more than once, and we also know that settled agriculture made societies vulnerable to the hunter-raiders, diseases and even starvation, and required much more work. But it gradually came to dominate life such that today no one seriously thinks of any alternative being viable. At the same time, we have created a wall between production of food and its purchase and consumption. In this way it is akin to death – we hide ourselves from both death and food production so that we can be closer to an ever-evasive manmade utopia. Apart from the psychological weight we carry from acting in this way, we also have produced some real risks and problems in the world.

From the viewpoint of agriculture, we have fed ourselves and seem to have the knowledge to keep doing so for quite a while, yet we have radically changed parts of nature in doing so. Now we are suggesting that we should reduce the area cultivated for food in favour of nature, which seems quite possible while still producing more than enough food. While writing this, the same argument is being used by some 'pro-environment' power-bases to use such land to produce oil-replacement field crops. It is not hard to see through the arguments, but apathy is halding back exposure of this naked emperor.

In his book, 'Feeding People is Easy', Colin Trudge presents such arguments lucidly for a popular audience. It shames me to realise how distant my own writing must be from the general reader when I see the care he takes in making each point clear to the uneducated reader. From the hardships caused in poor agricultural countries by subsidies in rich countries to the need for treating food as a special field, he presents similar arguments to me in an accessible manner. And he points out the need for maintaining food self-reliance in developing nations as far as possible, with trading limited to necessity and efficiency, and conducted at fair prices. Naïve? Yes, but still possible.

Expressed in different terms this means considering agriculture to be two separate endeavours, one that serves to feed immediate families and neighbours, and another that is business. Policies to reflect this are not hard to imagine. It would free us from our current implication in the crime of squeezing poor country farmers, sometimes to the point of starvation as Amrita Sen has shown. The policy would produce a world that has a majority of farmers who are respected and seen as custodians of the rural environment. A far cry from the lowest possible number of farmers as encouraged by those who see food just as one more commodity. If it is a new TV or sufficient food for one's child, the choice is clear – so why treat an infinitely elastic product such as food as if it is a market choice like a TV? Of course, luxury consumption is the normal basis of our daily eating – choices of cheeses, breads, qualities of rice and so on – but below this level of choice is one that we should not force anyone to make; that is the choice of who gets basic nutrition each day and season. Yet we do this daily; our latest vehicle is to treat obesity in non-traditional societies as a food problem rather than one of ignorance on the one hand and a psychological problem on the other. We are now diverting science's attention to changing foods to suit the 'obesity problem' and because 80 percent of the active agricultural scientists are oriented to the affluent nations' needs, we are effectively diverting our resources away from the most needy in poor countries.

Yet when I read books such as Trudge's and recall my own writings, I am consoled by the insight that this is probably the only way things could be. We have been heading for this eventuality for a long time even if we could not see it – and even today most cannot see it and argue strenuously that the science and the food policies are correct. They are correct in a narrow sense if we agree that we wish to protect our own societies and keep others under control for the time being – until the immigration that must be coming overwhelms wealthy nations. There is a general ignorance of the basic need of food. Nevertheless, I do not feel there is any benefit in advocating social transformation, for it

is our selves that we must first change, so that we can see what is really going on in our own parts of the world and our own life, for only then can we expect to know enough to act with some wisdom.

Self- or Social-Transformation?

Our various attempts at transforming social order over the millennia have yielded experience that informs today's civilizations. Checks and balances to align privilege with responsibility with power produced the system of 800 BCE China where social, security, environmental or nutritional decline led to the king accepting responsibility and confessing his faults in government, offering sacrifices and presumably purging his system of corrupt officials and so forth. Such a system seems to have worked for a few centuries, eventually declining with the codification and rote indulgence of what were originally ceremonies and rites that evoked a shift in mental states. But of course such systems rely on the king being the representative of 'heaven', much as was the case in other systems until monarchs proved to be the same as everyone else.

Yet, as Karen Armstrong points out in her book, 'The Great Transformation: The World in the Times of Buddha, Socrates, Confucius and Jeremiah', such social attempts at understanding our minds and needs form part of the historic quest for self-transformation. In India at about the same time, it may well have been that marauding warriors and cattle rustlers offered a model of a disciplined character to those making personal inner conquests and leaving the settled busyness of agriculture and its towns to take up a nomadic life. Perhaps one small bridge between the Chinese and Indian models in metaphorical terms was the Greek system under Solon who integrated secular philosophy with governance on the basis that nature followed certain laws so humans should too, and so, among other interrelationships, a balance between agricultural and city needs must be maintained. It was not unlike Confucius' statement that *Heaven does not speak yet the four seasons run their course by the command of Heaven*. But the similarities in social transformations that capture our attention are of much less significance than the similarities in discoveries of self-transformation.

That such development of understanding was apparently going on across the world at around the same period is exciting to discover, but even more so when it is realised that the association between personal understanding and good governance was seldom successful. And this seems to derive from the simple logic that these are not in the same sphere – to understand the spiritual or personal mental development is to practice it, while to understand social matters may be a matter of logic – and logic is one aspect of existing mental capacity rather than development to enhance that capacity. The depth of perception of such personal development in China are illustrated in Xunzi's explanation of a wise person as; *He who has such enlightenment may sit in his room and view the entire areas within the four seas, may dwell in the present and yet discourse on distant ages. He has a penetrating insight into all beings and understands their true nature, studies the ages of order and disorder and comprehends the principle behind them. He surveys all Heaven and Earth, governs all beings, and masters the great principle and all that is in the universe*. In this way, deep understanding of reality allows clarity about the

inevitable collapse and strife associated with all unenlightened activity, which of course is our usual type of human activity.

Modern day Buddhists like to claim that the 'Buddhist' king Ashoka governed by the principle of ahimsa (not hurting any being), but this was after he had expanded his empire by force. Even if he underwent a conversion to ahimsa as a result of revulsion at the waste of war, his supposedly-sagacious social system did not survive him. Today the social acknowledgement of ahimsa has became ritualised. So I wondered if wisdom and social improvement are mutually exclusive?

Clear as this may seem sometimes, most people prefer to strive for perfection in social order, often tolerating or even creating social suffering as a short term product of actions aimed at some never-before-attained social goal. But all such adventures must end in tears. Today's tears carries such labels as democracy, consumerism and terrorism, tomorrow's will be something else, perhaps, guided-citizenship, participatory local action and global government – who knows? What we can know is that clarity is accessible to all at all times, is not associated with any particular culture or religion, and remains indescribable to us in our usual deluded mental states – indescribable in the manner like that of descriptions of the difference between red and green to a red-green colour-blind person.

But the insights Armstrong speak of are of three millennia ago. Why then? Why not now? One possible response is that agriculture had by that time become widespread and had allowed cities to develop reliably – cities that were vulnerable to attack by expansionist tribes. Tribes expanded to avoid being taken over by others, and associations formed in which ranges of compromises were accepted in the name of stability and security. But attacks always came and the era in different regions of world was everywhere marked by violence. And violence provided the stimulus to consider alternative ways of being. Curiously, it is the social equivalent of the Buddhist explanation of life and us – that is, suffering exists and is the starting point to look deeper into life and by so doing gain confidence that the practices of mental development and ethical action will effect gradual changes in oneself. The changes are in oneself not society and this is where confusions can arise, as they have over the centuries; mistaking the social context of individual suffering and its sometime product of self-development as a basis of social development.

We continue to live in a world of violence, both in the same old terms as the past and in terms of our increased and widespread understanding of the violence we do through selfish actions on the environment and other nations' residents. Perhaps this is a reason for an apparent rise in spiritual seekers in the West – feeling the angst and suffering stimulating the seeking of a solution, as in that Axial Age that Karen Armstrong describes so lucidly. For those of us who see things this way, it is clear and useful to look back at the peak of our civilisations for spiritual lessons. In this case, we cannot look to the Greeks for we cannot be sure that they ever quite made the separation, but parts of our Western culture derive more from the Hebrews than the Greeks, and in their unique Hebrew way of writing insights in historical narrative we may find some guidelines. But it is the Indians that offer the clearest lessons, for they engaged in such matters more

widely and deeply it seems. Our culture is based on or strongly influenced by India and Middle East in terms of our languages, thought concepts, mathematics and culture. So when we reflect on the insights of ancient Indian sages, we can actually feel what they mean, for they are part of our culture, and speak to us of the true culture.

Culturing the True Culture

Is the adopted culture of the Western world is an artefact? If it is, it need not be of consequence because all cultures may be seen in this way. But it can be a difficulty for a culture that prizes its heritage and aims at continuous expansion. The culture, based on fragments of what occurred on the European lands in Greek times, declined in Europe until parts were reintroduced with learned Arabs and modified Jewish belief systems. Both points can rankle yet must be acknowledged according to the teachings of our culture. If the decline in personal spiritual interest in our culture is associated with increased personal anxiety, we do well to consider the teachings of other cultures in seeking to devine the meaning of our own, and in this role a major source is India.

Such writings as 'Gems from the Tantra (Kulanarva)' by M.L. Pandit, sent to me one Christmas by son Leslie, would probably be labelled by many as Hinduism. Yet it reveals truths about life that can readily fit into the culture(s) of the West. Consider when the Tantras say that the objective of a man's life is to *grow into the full figure of perfection that is designed for him by a kindly Providence*, and one can see that the use of 'Providence' may be the same as 'God' – unless it is blindly believed that 'God' is more than just a concept. And such understanding derives from the suggestion that *all sciences are a fraud*, which far from deriding real science helps us to realise that rational knowledge must not be divorced from experience and wisdom. The point is worth labouring for it describes and explains our confusion over knowledge unrelated to lived philosophy. The Indians expressed this long ago in the words, *not knowing the truth within himself, the deluded one gets lost in treatises.*

Consider that insightful observation with the statement that *there is no greater happiness than knowledge*. Worldly interpretations mistake the two subjects of the phrase, for the 'happiness' referred to is not the transient opposite of unhappiness but more like contentment, and 'knowledge' means what is known by confirming its efficacy in one's understanding of reality through spiritual experience. It is not mere book learning or the teaching of gurus for *verbal knowledge is not adequate to destroy the delusions of the worldly rounds. By mere talk the lamp of darkness does not recede.*

He who applies himself (to use the language of discipline) or he who opens himself (to use the language of reception) is the 'yogin' of the Kulanarva – the one who understands at least part of reality and can live within it without most pains of loss that arise from attachment. For *the yogin accepts the things of the world not by desire but for the good of the world; showering grace on all, he sports on the earth*. And such 'sporting' means that he is not guided by social rules, or even manners, but by what really matters in the larger scheme of things. Of course, not causing pain to others may often mean observing important social mores, but nought is gained by using the right fork at table compared to

the description of the yogin as those who *do not cut off even a blade of grass uselessly*. That phase echoes with one that has been with me for decades from the wise Albert Schweitzer, *The farmer who has mowed down a thousand flowers in his meadow in order to feed his cows must be careful on his way home not to strike the head off a single flower by the side of the road in idle amusement, for he thereby infringes on the law of life without being under the pressure of necessity.* So our culture contains this realization but it can easily be confused by worldly benefits defended by aggression and distraction from through consumption. Such is my view at present. I know some will mock such an analysis of our culture, for we have all been well schooled to revere its accomplishments as our heritage.

Our Cultural Heritage

Separating heritage from propaganda may seem difficult, but in fact successful propaganda readily becomes heritage itself over time. More significantly, we have the wherewithal to discover our real cultural heritage in ancient writings. This is not a rediscovery of Celtic rituals or unearthing what the Angle tribes really believed, it is acknowledging what has always been part of us. Every generation has had its seekers who found that we are the source of our own discontent and suffering. Our culture has had the means of understanding reality but has obscured it by promoting widespread distractions that have allowed a cultural ignorance to grow.

We cannot expect others to agree with our opinions and some matters are of greater import than opinion. The greatest – once we are fed, clothed, healthy and comfortable – is our psychological development. We may call it by other names such as spiritual wellbeing, but whatever it is called it is a solitary and the noble purpose of a fulfilled life. And it has all been experienced and communicated as far as is possible in the clumsy communication of everyday words across eons.

When we seek it in written form, we find institutions that serve the masses have confusing references that support their hierarchies. But when such approaches are set aside on great occasions, we find that the individual opinion remains as a concern of penetrating the masses. For example, the Preface to the 1662 revision of the Book of Common Prayer, includes that words: *And having thus endeavoured to discharge our duties in this weighty affair, as in the sight of God, and to approve our sincerity therein (so far as lay in us) to the consciences of all men; although we know it impossible (in such variety of apprehensions, humour and interests, as are in the world) to please all; nor can expect that men of fractious, peevish, and perverse spirits should be satisfied with any thing that can be done in this kind by any other than themselves …'*

Has such peevishness clouded our own culture's understanding of itself and contributed to the disengaged feeling common in richer societies? I answer 'yes' if it means that we have built on a false image with feet of clay that are crumbling, and we seek to support the image with ever new props. Yet it keeps crumbling and falling. One of our false images is our heritage being solely from classical cultures. Of course these were great ages for man, and of course they continue to be instructive especially in their

metaphysical insights, but they are re-importations rather than a continuous heritage. It might be argued that our formational Celtic, Germanic and other cultures have been more greatly influenced by the continuing culture of the Hebrews and their early genius for seeing reality.

The Hebrew genius of understanding the spiritual nature of man contained elements that may not be obvious in popular forms of its major sect, Christianity. The early conception of multiple Gods under the generic name of Elohim was refined into the single God Yahweh, whose presence in the scriptures declines with rising recognition of such matters being the mind's understanding or reality. As Akenson notes in his 'Surpassing Wonder: The Invention of the Bible and the Talmuds' – a Christmas present I bought for my brother to give to me – Yahweh was *whatever controls the lives of individual human beings, it is not consistently nice, benevolent, predictable, or even understandable. Yahweh personifies that ultimate reality exactly. Life is bounteous, so too in Yahweh; life is unfair, so too is Yahweh (just ask Job). Yahweh is the name for reality invented by Hebrew religious geniuses who paid attention to the way the world works.* And so the covenant between Yahweh and the Israelites was a description of living within reality, in the same manner as all spiritual insights for all cultures. From conceiving God as one and a metaphor for reality, the most recent of the books of the Hebrew scriptures, Daniel, indicates that was a small step for the tribe being punished by Yahweh when it strayed from the natural order. The individual was responsible for his own accord with reality; accord produced bliss, ignoring reality led to suffering in 'Sheol' – in the present, not as some post-death experience.

This insight is essential to our Western heritage. We can claim the same revelations in such stories as King Arthur and Avalon, but in fact these are no longer embedded within our culture. Likewise, reliance on the classical period as the foundation of our culture obscures the continuous presence of the Hebrew scriptures as the basis of education of our culture's great minds even though the Dark Ages when the classics were largely lost. As we united tribe by tribe under kings, warlords, emperors, popes and governments, we gained further insight into the ancient metaphor of one God. Many have moved on from the metaphor, but its political link to power has allowed God to become a tool in the hands of powerful groups to quell the masses – this is Marx's 'opiate of the people'. With apologies to Dorethea Parker, its obvious success may be summed up across all times as *you can lead the hoards to the 'living water' but you can't make them think*.

Why does this seem foreign to so many who take their religion seriously? One reason is, I think, that the information they receive is so filtered and their brain's available receptors have been habitually desensitized such that interpretations of the great insights are manipulated for non-spiritual purposes. Such purposes include political power by requiring codes for the faithful and so being able to influence their minds and actions, sometimes against 'unbelievers'. Even theologians can be pressed into this service by limiting their studies to their own scirptures to the exclusion of other insights. As Akenson puts it, such persons *are not playing with the same scholarly deck that has been issued to the rest of us*.

The scholar is critical to our understanding, but not when he becomes a specialist who knows not where his specialty sits within the whole. As José Ortega y Gasset observed, the specialist *even proclaims it as a virtue that he takes no cognizance of what lies outside the territory specially cultivated by himself, and gives the name 'dilettantism' to any curiosity of the general scheme of knowledge.*

It is not dilettantism to know that it is from the Hebrew Mishnah that we derive the practical elements of our modern Semitic religions, nor is it dilettantism to know that they are very similar to Indian and other Eastern teachings. Our Christian culture, even though it is the product of this great process, has produced a society that encourages therapy to sort out mental problems on the assumption that once today's headache is solved, all else in life will improve. But the deeper insights of our heritage show us that ethical behaviour precedes having a correct heart and mind. Again we must note the congruence of our tradition with Buddhism and other Eastern codifications – if we will but check our broad heritage and its real teachings. And it is probably not a coincidence that the language of such insight has always transcended cultures as wisdom with its own lineage that needs neither gurus nor priests although sometimes relying on scriptures as one of the languages of wisdom.

The Language of Wisdom

Sir William Jones spoke to the Asiatic Society in Calcutta on February 2nd, 1786 and said that *the Sanskrit language whatever be its antiquity, is of a wonderful structure; more perfect than the Greek, more copious than the Latin, and more exquisitely refined than either, yet bearing to both of them a stronger affinity, both in the roots of verbs and in the forms of grammar, than could possibly have been produced by accident; so strong, indeed, that no philosopher could examine all three, without believing them to have sprung from some common source, which, perhaps, no longer exists.*

In saying this, I feel that he negated fundamentalism and literalism and augmented our understanding of ourselves, for the noble language of which he spoke was used for the highest purpose of mankind – self-understanding. As the religious language of India, Sanskrit delved deep into our psyches and communicated techniques for cultivating wisdom as well as descriptions of that state.

While it is academically interesting to pursue the links from Sanskrit to Latin and Greek, even if we retain Jones' sentiment of the relative poverty of those two admittedly rich derivatives, we too easily miss the point of what is worthy of communication. There does not seem to be a person who, with calm reflection and wisdom, has not concluded that the main purpose of life after survival is to understand ourselves. We may develop such self-understanding by ourselves as it seems to be unrelated to material wealth or even learned knowledge, although the matter may well lead some thinkers to the reflection that welcomes wisdom.

Science as a Path to Wisdom

Reflection is part of being a scientist. Yet busyness and a focus on technology has forced some scientists a narrowness unconnected to other knowledge. It was not ever thus. Werner Heisenberg (1901-1976) said in his 'Physics and Philosophy' that *natural science does not simply describe and explain nature; it is a part of the interplay between nature and ourselves; it describes nature as exposed to our method of questioning.*

The interrelationships inherent to this statement are lost on some of my scientific colleagues, yet a surprising number understand it implicitly even though they feel they must conform with the political environment in order to receive research support. And so they 'discover' things as if they are historic events. But as Arthur Eddington said in 1920, *events do not happen: they are just there, and we come across them [as] the observer on his voyage of exploration*.

It takes wisdom to see that events were inevitable – inevitable because of the conditions that cause them to arise. The alternative, which has ever been with us, is to rely on fear of the unknown to motivate us. It may in fact be this simple, so I will say it again: in effect we make the choice as to whether to seek wisdom and to see ourselves and everything as it is, or to be afraid and so seek to protect ourselves from what we fear. Sages are often interpreted to be calling the latter response 'ignorant', meaning they lacking of insight. So unless our actions in science are based on wisdom they rely on fear, and this may be why we are confronted with unreflective technological solutions to ever-new 'crises' from climate change to pollution to disease outbreaks. The 'crisis' may be less the issue than our fear about our survival, which is built into us through our evolution and expressed in the false apocalypses of history. It drives unreflective science and fuels unreflective religion, neither of which are edifying aspects of our capacity.

Eugen Weber in 'Apocalypses: Prophecies, Cults, and Millennial Beliefs through the Ages' has written that *adversity is good for faith, and adversity is ever present. Ages of decadence always suggest an end; few ages have not struck their contemporaries by their decadence .... We suffer and suffering is catastrophic, sometimes unbearable, sometimes final.... We yearn for some explosive, extraordinary escape from the inescapable and, none forthcoming, we put our faith in an apocalyptic rupture whereby the inevitable is solved by the unbelievable; grasshoppers, plagues, composite monsters, angels, blood in industrial quantities, and, in the end, salvation from sin and evil – meaning anxiety, travail and pain. By defining human suffering in cosmic terms, as part of a cosmic order that contains an issue, catastrophe is dignified, endowed with meaning, and hence made bearable*.

Science is much more than solving a problem. Yet that view of it seems suitably concise and suited to our wants as a choice to atone for our consumer culture by recycling garbage and donating to good causes. The knowledge to live differently is within our culture yet it is not common knowledge in the sense of being front of mind. Furthermore there may not be a contiuum between knowledge and wisdom, though that seems to be case for some. Genuises, if they survive to older age, seem to integrate their earlier insights into a form of wisdom. The same seems true of most of us if we release ourselves from the cage we have built around ourselves. This has been noted in Tibetan Buddhism,

as Chogyal Namkai Norbu writes in 'Dzogchen: The Self-Perfected State'; *Duality is the real root of our suffering and of all our conflicts. All our concepts and beliefs, no matter how profound they may seem, are like nets which trap us in dualism. When we discover our limits we have to try to overcome them, untying ourselves from whatever type of religious, political, or social conviction may condition us. We have to abandon such concepts as "enlightenment," "the nature of the mind," and so on, until we no longer neglect to integrate our knowledge with our actual existence*.

But isn't this remarkably like Heisenberg's definition above of what natural science is? We can debate indulgently at length about whether science and wisdom are concepts rather than reality. But we can alternatively plant that seed of wisdom into our hermitic minds and reflect on the wisdom of the past and perhaps it will grow into a unity of understanding. Such wisdom has been with us in so many forms, from the so-called primitive religions to their codified power-bases as pan-national religions – and even in religions seen as restrictive wise groups have persisted, in a Sufi instance curiously under the name of 'idiots'.

Sufficiently Sufi

In 'The Wisdom of the Idiots', Idries Shah presents stories of Islamic cultures so different from most Christian interpretations. For the 'idiots' of this collection are self-labelled on the grounds that the vast majority of their countrymen see and act differently and thus the minority must be in error – idiots. Of course they are not, and in their apparent idiocy is wisdom. In one story, a master is challenged as to why he no longer debates with academics and replies that defeating their 'empty pot' arguments is monotonous and the academics *continue to wrangle long after their positions have been demolished*, which distracts the students from the lesson of the master.

Comparing those who seek to understand the Path but deny Sufism and those who say they know what it is yet reject some aspects, the 'idiots' see the former group as better since they are deluded by others as we all can be whereas the latter group are deluding themselves. As they say *no scholar can decide who is and who is not a Sufi*. One story about Amjal Hussein and The Scholars demonstrates true scholarship by exposing academic scholars as interested in defending their own opinions more than seeking the truth. It is they who, when a wise man is found *torment him. When he dies they become experts on his works. The real motive ... is to vie with one another and to oppose anyone outside their own ranks*. And this is reemphasized elsewhere when it is said *scholars are seldom wise, being only unaltered people stuffed with thoughts and books*, so therefore *guard yourself, my child. Too many slips from the Path of Supreme Attainment – and you may become a scholar*. I wonder if Cornford had something like this in mind when he satirically noted that *a 'sound scholar' is a term of praise applied to one another by learned men who have no reputation outside the University, and a rather queer one inside it. If you should write a book (you had better not), be sure that it is unreadable; otherwise you will be called 'brilliant' and forfeit all respect.*

In terms of the truth being found in all religions, a Sufi story of a traitorous vizier of the Court of Baghdad seeking and being denied recompense from the Mongol conqueror to whom he had betrayed his master illustrates the nature of those who reject their own culture's paths to wisdom. A further story about the Path being found in all religions relates the complaints of people whose wheat fields were planted to barley when conditions so dictated until they realized that both wheat and barley could sustain them.

By such stories, our minds expand as if the story-telling genre is a means of tricking the logical mind, for we can rely too much on rationality and intellect.

Mindless Contemplation

By inclination I seek to understand life through a mix of intellectual processes and contemplation. I have observed the effect that ritual and belief have on some people and can see how it is the correct path for some, but it is less so for me. I know that great church music and hymns inspire me. But logic also suits my disposition, often mixed with a sense of the ridiculous and leavened by a fragile sense of my ultimate unimportance. Relying on logic is however, quite illogical in the face of observation about how we function. We can rationally understand something and yet 'rationalize' to ourselves actions contrary to logic and even expect to escape the logical consequences of that action. For such reasons, our minds must be seen as unreliable since they can be fooled by both internal and external conditions.

Our own minds are so very hard to know. As Douglas Adams has Zaphod say, *I only know as much about myself as my mind can work out under its current conditions. And its current conditions are not good*. A fine summary of our usual state and the opportunity we always have to change that state – by changing the conditions, both internal and external. Internally by practices that change our mental state such as lovingkindness meditations and externally by removing ourselves to calm and natural environments and associating with calm persons.

In his 'Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy', Adams tells of the unawareness that is bad poetry to which we are all capable of sinking at times, be it in the poetry of words or of life. *Vogon poetry is of course, the third worst in the universe. The second worst is that of the Azgoths of Kria. During a recitation by their poet master Grunthos the Flatulent of his poem "Ode to a Small Lump of Green Putty I Found in My Armpit One Midsummer Morning" four of his audience died of internal haemorrhaging and the president of the Mid-Galactic Arts Nobbling Council survived by gnawing one of his own legs off. Grunthos was reported to have been "disappointed" by the poem's reception, and was about to embark on a reading of his 12-book epic entitled "My Favourite Bathtime Gurgles" when his own major intestine, in a desperate attempt to save humanity, leapt straight up through his neck and throttled his brain. The very worst poetry of all perished along with its creator, Paula Neil Milne Johnstone of Redbridge, in the destruction of the planet Earth. Vogon poetry is mild by comparison.* The example of Vogon poetry being *Oh freddled gruntbuggly/Thy micturations are to me/As plurdled gabbleblotchits/On a lurgid bee. / Groop, I implore thee, my foonting turlingdromes/And hooptiously drangle*

me/With crinkly bindlewurdles/Or I will rend thee in the gobberwarts with my blurglecruncheon/See if I don't!

As such, the book offers insights, sometimes even through cultural norms such as the religious associations made by the oracle called Deep Throat the greatest computer ever made, which in John the Baptist style calls itself only 'the second greatest' because *I speak of none but the computer that is to come after me*. This was the same Deep Throat that was set for seven-and-a-half million years to determine the answer to the meaning of life – to 'what's it all about' – and finally produced and checked its answer – 42. And when challenged about the apparent insignificance of that answer patiently pointed out that perhaps we have never known what the question is. But metaphor idea becomes even deeper when another character in a later book further explains that *the Question and the Answer are mutually exclusive. Knowledge of one logically precludes the other. It is impossible that both can ever be known on the same universe*. And thus we may see, whether Adams meant this or not, that our feeble logic is not the only way of knowing things and that we cannot know everything in the world we usually live in. To seek the answer in organised religion is about as useful as seeking it in rock music, some might even say that the cult of rock music is the more benign than that of religion, especially where they are based on a privileged hierarchy.

The Sin of Organised Religion

'Perhaps this title overstates the matter' – that's what I feel sometimes, usually after I realize how many of the people I respect have a commitment to religion. But then I recall that their association is a part of a cultural belonging more than a specific commitment to the detailed teachings of religion. And that thought leads me to realize that the majority of my closer friends have separated themselves from organised religion, some to be part of small groups like 'Buddhists' and others to approach their atheism without such organised groups. For me, 'Atheists' are part of the tedium of religions for they have a belief. This is not an argument for saying one doesn't know about God or not – for that style of agnosticism is akin to the fatuous 'Intelligent Design' arguments of the US, which is based on leading discussions back to the 'truth' as defined by organised religion.

Organised religion can rest complacently in its own dreams of salvation by belief and offer this to those people who do not want to think about it. As Bertrand Russell aptly put it *Many people would sooner die than think. In fact they do*. That is how we can muster men for wars or 'anti-terrorist' acts or even 'terrorist acts' themselves. Voltaire's view was that *those who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities*. And we see this every day, and back through history. By contrast the teachings ascribed to the Buddha require the serious searcher of self and truth to *examine everything from his own experience rather than believe teachers, elders or even scriptures*.

Sacrilegious? I don't think so, as it seems to be what is in all the teachings of what I have read of the various religions. But their teachings may follow other routes. For example, consider the great Christian Hymn writer, Isaac Watt's words *Lord, I ascribe it to Thy Grace,/And not to chance, as others do,/That I was born of Christian Race/And not a*

Heathen or a Jew. Amazing that it can be sung today, but equally amazing that it was a general moral view until recently – if it wasn't it would not have made it into hymn books so regularly. In modern terminology we may observe that organised religion has preceded the secular world's enchantment with 'sustainability' having sustained itself above all else. This has a social cost, as Richard Dawkins aggressively argues in his book, 'The God Delusion'.

But it is the personal costs of religious delusion that are the more tragic, for they deny the benefits of understanding oneself as parts of all things, of 'seeing the light'. Of course, for some persons, belief can be a step to questioning and awareness but it is seldom so – for to question is to not adhere to the club's ethos. In this sense, the 'sin' of religion is made worse when we consider that it actually denies rather that assists the individual's spiritual development. This is how questioning and seeking to live within the flow of things is part of treading the path to 'enlightenment', 'heaven' or whatever one likes to call that state in which the wise often dwell.

Treading the Path

Whatever metaphor we use for our lifespan and the feeling that it must have some purpose, the terms that occur frequently include the 'journey', the 'path', the 'way' and so on. In fact, the weight of writings on this subject, to which I suppose I am adding, could be said to confuse more than assist the seeker. What is it all about? No-one can provide an answer, but some come close. For me, the best answer is from what we call Buddhist scriptures but which are in fact the writings of the wise. In some cases, they have then been appropriated by those who want to promote or 'believe' in a folk or authorized religion. Better to use such insights as intended, and in doing this we come to understand that our minds are capable of all that we need to feel content, but that we thwart this when we train our minds to seek diversions that necessarily end or disappoint.

Most cultures seem to share the idea that our 'journey' through life is one of development, marked with some pain that can be transcended. Our culture approaches it as a problem to which alternative solutions have been posited, from belief-based salvation through to psychological therapy. But both are temporary solutions unless they are seen as a stage that leads to other stages in a journey. They can seen as steps on the way if they teach us that disappointments are fertile sources for reflection and learning.

In his 'The Story of the Other Wise Man', Henry Van Dyke writes of himself, *You have not solved the problems that perplexed you. You have not reached the goal that you aimed at. You have not accomplished the great task that you set for yourself. You are still on the way; and perhaps your journey must end now – nowhere – in the dark*. What an honest statement! I might express it differently – in terms of not understanding the practical workings of my mind – but it is that same thing. And from his deliberations, Van Dyke concludes, *And now that [the Other Wise Man's] story is told, what does it mean? How can I tell? What does life mean? If the meaning could be put into a sentence there would be of need of telling the story*.

His wise man misses the birth of Christ due to helping whoever needed his help on the way to Bethlehem. He, like the other wise men, knew that *the enlightened are never idolaters. They lift the veil of the form and go into the shrine of the reality, and new light and truth are coming to them continually through the old symbols*. And so the symbol became not the Christ-child, for Van Dyke writes from well within the Christian cosmos, but the wise man's own motivations, actions and openness.

Such wisdom sees idols for what they are – emptiness mistaken for power. We may see our own active idolatry in our belief in our ability to control the environment, and in our belief in such social systems as democracy. Yet those idols always let us down, and when they do we see how much of our life has been 'unthoughtful' in the sense used by Socrates in his description of the life not worth living. It is that unthoughtful life that produces life as a series of suffering, from children and lovers disappointing us through to the life-shattering experiences of our physical, financial and psychological security being threatened.

Life as Constant Delusion-Shattering

Noam Chomsky in his 'Hegemony or Survival' concludes, after a litany of evidence of US policies for world dominance taking precedence over democratic governance or even domestic needs, that our worldviews formed from propaganda are baseless. He talks of *the serious erosion of a democratic culture under dedicated multipronged assaults* which *Americans are hardly less able to confront ... than landless workers in Brazil, Haitian peasants, and many others today: today Iraqis. There is no need to linger on what is at stake as Americans confront the severe democratic deficit in the world's most powerful state*. One must wonder whether any other situation has ever existed. Perhaps the utopian historical interpretations, from those of Buddhists and others when they speak of the great King Ashoka to our own culture's romantic views of the ancient Greeks, are also propaganda that aimed to feed our higher ideals. If so, they seem to have morphed into unchallenged facts for the unthinking masses of the semi-educated graduates of massified universities. Perhaps too, this is one more part of the delusions by which we live our lives and which may be the cause of our psychological angst. If we are programmed by our consciousness to seek a higher plain of existence, which I can accept as possible, then we strive for facsimiles of something higher, be it democracy for all or surrounding ourselves with more and more luxuries. But these must disappoint. So we seek solace in psychology and commodify it also as a 'personal growth strategy' and so miss even its assistance to help us rise above our delusions.

Sickness in Health

We may say that *psychoanalysis itself is the mental illness (or spiritual disease) of which it purports to be the cure* – as Karl Kraus once satirically observed – when we arrogantly think the only conditions that can make us content are those that are in us and we control. Yet such conditions have been formed by so many external as well as internal conditions – psychological, and others. Of course, the psychological conditions that have formed us are of importance, but modern society's belief in their fathomability, manipulation and

reprogramming is a sign of our separation from the reality of life as a constant inter-relational activity. I assume that this field as with all others will advance by coming closer to the way in which nature operates, rather than our perceptions of it.

It might be concluded from the above that when we think we need to be 'cured' we are showing that we are deluded. Deluded into believing that we do or can control everything, from ourselves right through to the universe. And when we decide that we will control something, we deem it moral to do so, for it is aimed at the common good. The same argument can apply to the radical engineering proposals to modify climate. But without wisdom, good intentions can produce poor outcomes and their codification into ethics and morality become just rote-learnt rules.

Ethics and Morality

In the popular arguments of what is unethical and what is immoral, we are daily faced with the deficiencies of the world's richest language. And rather than look for cultural deficiencies in such circumstances or subtle differences in Greek and Latin meanings, we might do better to look behind the received knowledge to see who we are receiving it from. When ethics becomes a list of acceptable behaviours for a profession, it is surely time to ask oneself if those ethics are serving society, the profession or the individual. Even our laws become matters requiring diligent discrimination.

What is legal and indeed culturally preferred can quickly change to illegal. Harold Bloom in his 'Where Shall Wisdom be Found?' pithily explains that *plagiarism is a relatively modern legalism*, as Burchfield in his 'The Genealogy of Dictionaries' previously noted: *Medieval European authors took it as axiomatic that their main purpose was to "translate" or adapt the great works of their predecessors. The word plagiarism with guilt and furtiveness came rather later.* And of course, it was not only European authors, for the sages of the East were mostly unconcerned with individual recognition and in fact saw building on insights as a means of deepening instruction. Their analogy was sometimes the master craftsmen who faithfully reproduced exquisite aesthetics for a deeper understanding of beauty. Imagine a world in which modern copies of the exquisite shape of a perfect Greek vase sold though a home décor shop were illegal!

Of course, legalists will argue that the vase like the ancient Greek scriptures are *out of copyright*, yet the point is not only the copying but also the very concept of revering mastery and preserving it through reverential copying and perhaps, occasionally, enhancing it. I recall my incredulance of the usual copyright statement in virtually all modern books when I learned that the majority of authors make little gain from their publications. That is why when my early book 'The Buddha's Gospel' was published, I considered the copyright legislation should assert my right to allow widespread copying with attribution in the words *This publication may be copied in full or substantial part in any form provided the use is consistent with furthering understanding of the Dharma.*

But even this did not go far enough for I know that nothing in that book or in anything that I write is new. All is derived and all is copying in at least one sense. It is a corruption

of our minds to accept legalisms as somehow related to morals, especially when the mode of interpretation is rendered into a list of ethics. Legalism like corruption is in the mind of the beholder, and it is our role to remain aware of what is going into our minds, for that determines what and who we are. Such is the beginning of wisdom, discrimination and knowing when to change one's mind, and when the mind is corrupted by unnatural law.

Corrupting the Mind

Is changing one's mind somehow a sign of poor thought processes, of inferior intellectual power, of a mind that is easily corrupted by new ideas, stimulation and persuasion? Or is a sign of an independent person? I have often paraphrased Ghandi who humorously replied to his frustrated followers who had asked him why he one day said something quite different from the previous day. *Ah*, he answered, *I have learned something since yesterday*. It is wise to change one's mind in the face of new understanding – but new understanding is not just new information, opinion or collective advice.

It was eminently quotable Emerson who wrote that *a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds*. Without claiming wisdom, I can see that I have changed my youthful view of many things over the passage of time. For example, what many call corruption in less-developed countries may be inconsistent with the values of developed nations, but it is not necessarily a corruption of 'the system' but a continuation of a past socially-condoned practice. Of course, the word 'corruption' by definition suggests it is unnatural, but that is our word used to describe a practice that sometimes is socially beneficial. This is not suggest that corruption in our own society can be condoned as it is not necessary. Without labouring the point, I simply want to point out that a fixed view from one circumstance can be wrong in another, depending on the prior conditions. For we act according to the conditions that form us and at a basic level one of these is a competitive instinct for survival.

To survive today, we need no more than we ever did – but we only realize that in our more insightful moments when we rest from consuming bigger houses, fancier clothes, sensuous food and instant access to medicines, even for headaches. It is a headache to change our minds on these basic matters, just as it is on such socially-charged opinion as corruption in government and corporations. We might think we have set new records for such corruption in this just past decade of the 1980s. But no, closer examination reveals that we are well within the norms of historical behaviour when we consider the closing century of the Roman and various Chinese Empires, for example. It may be wise to simply view corruption as a parasite, and according to conventional definitions, a successful parasite does not drain it host so much that it cannot survice and continue to nourish the parasite.

In nature the situation has been likened to trees. It is again Emerson who observed this. *We prosper with such vigor, that, like thrifty trees, which grow in spite of ice, lice, mice and borers, so we do suffer from the profligate swarms that fatten on the national treasury. The huge animals nourish huge parasites, and the rancor of the disease attests to the strength of the constitution*. With characteristic imagery, he has indicated that the

problem is not what we think – perhaps it is equity, or wrong incentives, or promotion of competition when in fact it is a recognition of the interrelationships between all things. Yet in our foolishness, we repeat a blanket mantra against corruption while ignoring our own hypocrisy in seeking ever-improving lifestyles without considering the poor of poor countries that provide underwrite our luxury. It is as if our value system is inverted in such actions. Just as it may well be in our assigning greatness to celebrity or extreme wealth. Popularity is not greatness. For the elements of greatness are contained within a person, not in their PR.

Elements of Greatness

I have met some impressive people in my professional life and travels. Not Prime Ministers and Presidents, some of whom have elements of greatness but are not truly great; often its more a function of their position than their own selves. No, the great people are those who know their own exceptional abilities and use these to best effect. Most are unconventional, many do not have routine employment and some do not want to live among normal society. I see it as being great at being fully human – not in some unthoughtful mode of patronisingly dispensed charity, but in just living life in the manner right for them.

To live in a manner right for us we must first know ourselves. Do we have a high social need? If so why? Many of us will answer that we have a high need, but when we examine it we may find that it is a need for diversion from self-awareness – for we may well be uncomfortable with being alone with ourselves. If this is the case, then we have yet to begin. From this description it is self-evident that one cannot make a plan to be great, for greatness is accompanied by humility and compassion.

To be humble and to act compassionately has, similar to greatness, been misrepresented in popular parlance. Humility is not silent acquiescence and low-self assertion, it is an unselfishness in actions to help others, a total lack of need to advance one's own image, and a calmness in the face of brashness and uncorrectable error. Likewise, compassion is not pity, but a feeling with another in pain accompanied by the wisdom to know how to respond, and knowing when not to act. Where pity may evoke a consistent reaction to comfort and help remove a symptom, compassion may allow one to know that victims has caused their own problems and cannot see the connection, and might be better served by being left to find that connection and hence potentially help themselves. Wisdom might also dictate that the victim would benefit from being roundly and socially-incorrectly advised of his folly. And such a socially-incorrect person may well be a great person.

A great person may act in an unconventional manner and be ostracized for it. But that is no measure of anything of importance. Such persons may live a life that seems aimless to those caught up in social standing, status objects or important high-profile charity work. They may live in unconventional relationships, but the relationship will be correct and not simply a popular or selfish trend. They may choose to work yet live simply when their erstwhile peers tell her them that they should retire or take a long vacation. Or they

may choose not to work at all and to live very quietly. These great people are among us but we don't know them when we are caught up in our worldly perceptions. Yet such lifestyles seem pointless in terms of real greatness. Those who are not driven to achieve status or influence or wealth are not aimless.

Aimless but not Pointless

Aimless but not pointless are so many of our activities when we live near the top of the hierarchy. Such 'aimlessness' produced what we revere as man's greatest art, insights and inventions, which by definition cannot be purposeless. And so it is today in a more populated world that we can profitably fill an afternoon or a day wandering around aimlessly in a good museum of prehistory mingled with approved historical interpretations according to the society of the museum and curator.

Hauntingly familiar pre-historical icons thus merge with forms of other continents and ages, in that aimless state make associations that have invariably occurred to others but often been dismissed because no popular link between the two is made. But if we allow ourselves to be one of the few who can regard the official interpretations as just one source of suggestions, then our minds may rove more freely across fields that the contented have often trod. For the contentment of seeing continuations where they are logical is that of knowing a part of a divine mystery. Rather than detracting from a religious belief or fuelling the insecurity of not knowing what is true, such open-mindedness allows a self-tested confidence in the impossibility of absolute truth informing the limited and relative truths of everyday existence.

Such an event, the foundations of which were laid for me a decade ago in reading and looking at images in books on art across civilizations, developed itself as a perpetual search for a real icon of Isis suckling the infant Horus in the same pose as Mary and Jesus as in the photo. As the central icon of Christianity, Mary holding the infant Jesus is represented in the same form as the exquisite icons of Isis in ancient Egypt. Does it reduce Christianity to make this discovery? Of course not, in fact it enhances it – because Christianity is a work of genius, blending spiritual pedagogy with the accoutrements of power. And Isis and Mary represent both, just as Christianity assumed its sacramental rites from Mithraism and the arguments for monotheism from the later Hebrews, supplemented by attractive Greek and Persian ideals. So, to discover perfect original icons of the nursing Isis in the Lyon Museé des Beaux Arts engaged thoughts of a decade that had aimlessly been assembling themselves in my mind.

The idea was not new, the existence of such images was well known, but the coming together of knowledge with a real image substantiates and deepens understanding and fuels contentment – a contentment that lasts and cannot be destroyed by vested-interests

and cultural norms. And so there is always time for aimless pursuits that allow the mind to expand.

There is Always Time

Time to read, to think, to write, to get to know another person – this is within the grasp of most of us. Yet we are programmed to assume that things are in short supply. There would appear to be a sound evolutionary explanation for this instinct since, for most of human history, the essential means of survival have often been threatened. And when they appeared to be adaequate, manmade disasters such as war reintroduced shortages. However, across the ages there have been those who have seen that the essentials of life are few, and that our innate tendency to accumulate material things should be tempered with our gift of consciousness, and so balance instinct with reason. The idea becomes foreign when we voluntarily subject ourselves to advertising that promotes continual acquisitiveness. Lulled into a security by our fellows behaving in the same manner, we easily accept such advertising as a source of information.

Trusting advertising as a source of information is like trusting a lion's invitation to enter its cage. It inevitably changes our behaviour in the way predicted by psychologists that inform advertisers. On the other hand, if we separate ourselves from this world and spend time reading, thinking, writing and sharing with one another, we find that we have time for other things.

Why blame advertising? It is a product of our own lifestyles as much as it is a cause. If we had questioned how much is enough in our own lives, we would have curtailed our 'needs', voted for governments that did not sell economic growth as a necessity for security and acted as independent thinkers. But so few of us did this that it makes no difference.

Those who have acted differently know the benefits of questioning themselves and their lives. They also know the loneliness that it can bring at first, but then they become accustomed to the lifestyle just as they may once have been accustomed to a consumption-based lifestyle. We are adaptable animals that are formed by our conditions and can therefore adjust to changed conditions.

We may change our conditions deliberately by travel. But not the travel hyped in agents' windows, on television shows of destinations or even advocated over dinner tables by those that have recently 'done' a destination. Travel is said to broaden the mind – a statement that implies an increased tolerance of difference in cultures, of ways of thinking and of beauty in nature, architecture and art. But in fact, this is not the main benefit of travel, for if the mind is fundamentally deepened in understanding of self and life through travel it is also broadened in tolerance as an incidental benefit.

Deepening, not Broadening, the Mind through Travel

Travel can promote reflection of one's inherited biases and beliefs. This is not diversionary travel but an extention of the 'examined life' of Socrates. It is a form of wise travel that allows moments of revelation that see through the prattle of touristic infmration. I include in this much of the pilgrimage travel of the past and today.

What would be a pilgrimage to some and a church tour to others could be something deeper than reverence of a relic with fellow pilgrims of tour group. An example mentioned elsewhere is the fiction of the Christian martyr St Saturnin in Toulouse. Wandering along rue de Taur, I commented on the coincidence of a second century Roman Saint being associated with a street named for Taurus, the symbol of Mithra n the religion favoured by Roman soldiers. Mithraism included sacrifice of a bull in rites that were later incorporated into the Christian Eucharist after Mithraism had been suppressed. Thus I surmised that St Saturnin could have been a Mithric figure.

Before Constantine and centrally controlled Christianity, planetary names like Saturnin accorded with Mithraism. Was it possible then, I thought, that the myths of St Saturnin mask his real role as a Mithric priest who perhaps tried to tidy up lax practices in relaxed Toulouse and was done away with by the hostile masses? The myth has St Saturnin roped to a bull until the rope broke. A corruption of Mithraism, or an early Christian means of punishing the local Mithraic priest? For what sect was he martyred? Perhaps he was a Mithraic matyr that Christianity appropriated a century later.

And if this was an example of the dominant religion rewriting the myths, how much better to relegate discarded rites into a popular form of entertainment, such as bull fighting and running with the bulls. Both modern remnants successfully purge the ritual of Mythric rites and trivializing it. Thus one religion is replaced by another in the constant quest to control the worldly realm. I wonder if today the decline of central control of religion and of religion's hold over many in Western society is allowing the rise of other belief systems fuelled with new dogmas. The search for personal peace that is the essence of religious teachings is easily usurped for mass consumption into a search for worldly peace. One such variant of a new religion is our fraught relationship to the natural environment – a subject that has assumed the mantra-like acceptance of a belief system to seek peace with ouselves in the world.

Can there be Environmental Peace?

How can we improve our 'relationship with the environment' and how can move toward 'peace'? As a species we have built our habits and oriented our consciousness to a separate role for ourselves from the envirnomental relationship. Rather than realizing this as the nature of our species, which has produced civilization and many of its wonders, it now seems that we think this is a problem. Another view, one that is clearer to me, is that realization of our nature and capacity is part of the solution, if there indeed is a problem. As with the peace we seek, we transform a primal fear into one for which we seek to atone. So we fear environmental and conflictual catastrophes, which in time-honoured fashion we seek to avert through a religion.

As a substitute for traditional religions, environmentalism has great appeal. I assume most people agree that it is only moral to reduce pollution that changes climate, to dismantle risky nuclear weapons and to integrate biological knowledge so that we may continue to minimize our food's reliance on pesticides and so on. But is it that simple? We don't really understand the mechanisms of climate change, or the dynamic balances of the earth that counter our imposts, but we trust the correlations of accelerated of atmospheric changes with industiralization. We cannot conceive why nuclear weapons are or ever have been needed, but we know that our history suggests they will continue to increase and be refined to ever more accuracy and capacity. And we know that we can produce enough food for the projected future peak in world population from existing technologies, yet we insist that low-cost, high-quality and free-traded food products be delivered daily in and out of season to our cities. Knowledge alone does not curb such hypocritical habits.

Knowledge has been variously called science, *setr*, *sart*, natural history and more. Today it extends to understanding the cycles of nature, and when we internalize such knowledge it can contribute to the type of wisdom that Bertrand Russell exhibited when he unwittingly addressed our relationship with nature in the context of peace. He said: *After ages during which the earth produced harmless trilobites and butterflies, evolution progressed to the point at which it has generated Neros, Genghis Khans and Hitlers. This, however, I believe is a passing nightmare; in time the earth will become again incapable of supporting life, and peace will return*.' Deep ecologists love this sort of statement and will no doubt use it once they come across it in Russell's extensive writings – and deep ecology is a practical and intellectual view of life. But it is not what the majority want to think, and hence sustainability has become a mantra of the popular environmental religion. My own effort to explain this paradoxical thinking resulted in my recent book 'Religion and Agriculture'. We are far more attracted to petty actions of recycling more than the inconvenience of less packaging, to branded drink formulae than to water and home-made brews, and to overpowered cars than to efficient modes of transport. And we follow each other in such behaviours as well as in tch-tching about the environment. This personal duplicity seems a recipe for psychological angst, so why do we do this?

Why Follow One-another?

Why do most of us follow another? Is it instinctual, or have we been socially conditioned? Of course we are social animals and have inbuilt instincts that favour our survival in the environments from which we have evolved. Perhaps, incidentally, that is why we can so readily accept competitive models for social and other service. But social conditioning implies something beyond evolution. When it takes the form of socially correct actions or morality it may well be something reinforced by messages crafted to appeal to us from our cots to our coffins. Such reinforcement effectively defines our worldviews. So a population can be brought to 'believe' in 'democracy' and 'capitalism', preferably as a package that is the best means of governing all societies. But if it is a belief in the same manner as the Church once promoted the concept of hell to create fear

and enhance clerical power, then it may not be the best for all of us. And in that case, I must ask myself at least, where have our beliefs led us?

In his book 'Hegemony or Survival', which quotes from authoritative documents that are claimed to confirm the central aim of a controlling elite of the USA to dominate the globe and space, Noam Chomsky argues that what we are conditioned to believe is a falsity. He states that *what remains of democracy is largely the right to choose among commodities. Business leaders have long explained the need to impose of the USA on the population a "philosophy of futility" and "lack of purpose in life", to "concentrate human attention on the more superficial things that comprise much of fashionable consumption." Deluged by such propaganda from infancy, people may then accept their meaningless and subordinate lives and forget ridiculous ideas about managing their own affairs. They may abandon their fate to corporate managers and the PR industry and, in the political realm, to the self-described "intelligent minorities" who serve and administer power.* This would clearly be an offensive proposition if it was put to us as a choice over the beliefs we have been fed, yet it is clearly more correct than the belief that we live in a free world in which free trade is somehow going to all, including the poor nations. So if we find it so offensive, what can we do?

If the World Offends

If the world offends, how can we accept the crumbs it throws our way unless we have no choice? If we have a choice and do not make the correct choice we are supporting the status quo. But choice may be a fiction created by our consciousness rearranging facts to make a story that bolsters our separateness from other things. It may also be the only means of recognizing how we are insipiently affected by our environment. If we can move out of one environment into another we are removing ourselves from the old influences. But it may be those old influences that make us move as they are the conditions surrounding us at the time of the move. So it is the 'world' that makes us move to a better life in this way. And it is the 'world' acting as it must from the conditions that act on each of us up to the level of nations and corporations and beyond. It is not that the 'world' that is bad or evil, but rather that attachment to sustaining it the way it is by rejecting natural changes. Rejecting change as it occurs or wanting change to suit ourselves can in this way be a rejection of nature and thus of self-understanding.

But what does it mean when the world in which we live is based on aggressiveness to maintain the power that allows our comfort? Should we continue to enjoy the benefits it affords us? Should we remove ourselves to some remote place where we are as separate and independent of the state as possible? Or should we look at how we live our lives and ensure that we are not contributing to the baseness of power structures? Or should we try to modify or at least mollify the negative aspects of the system from within? The previous paragraph guides us toward an answer – the system itself including its aggressive power-seeking is natural. And if natural, we cannot avoid them.

If we cannot avoid the negativeness of our societies we could seek to mollify their effects, but few of us are gifted with the necessary talents. We can minimize our

dependence of the state in financial, psychological and other terms and so be less of a co-perpetrator of the havoc that states reek in their quest to sustain themselves. We cannot go somewhere away from it all physically but we can mentally, by being independent and objective about all our decisions. The cost may well be ostracization; other words for it are excommunication and shunning.

How can one really do this when there are mortgages, cars, kids etc? "Easily" is my answer, for the mortgage is a psychological bond not a financial one, just like the car and the kids. How so? 'The mortgage' – the very lack of a further noun tells us that the house has assumed a monstrous presence in the mind of the modern man and woman. We must recognize the need for nesting mainly in women, and a man's need to feel he can provide and protect. But neither of these add up to four-bedroomed 450m^2 underused facilities with large mortgages. Large houses that separate family members may well conflict with social instincts. In the same mindset, the car easily morphs from a means of transport into is an image that is somehow meant to palliate the mortgage-driven angst arising from distant employment and unnecessarily long work hours. And kids? Why should kids cost much money? In fact they don't, but the image and status that accompanies them requires much money for private schools, music and tennis lessons, indulgent rewards for performing adequately and so reflecting well on parents. I claim some authority in these delusions having once indulged in multiple mortgages, prestigious cars and private schools for children. But even in my most deluded days, I would seek own the familiy house outright and not risk it, borrow only against businesses including rental properties and as soon as the real costs of prestige cars became apparent, abandoning the folly. Private schools do not differ much from public schools for students with interested parents. So it is with that hindsight that I claim that it is easy to escape the world that offends, and in so doing lead a better life and produce a better environment for children. But it doesn't mean that that we ignore society, we simply live in it as individuals unswayed by the fashions of the unthinking masses and the propagandists that are part of government, religions and advertising houses. As the Pauline letter connotes, this means *being in not of the world*. We can make our own decisions.

Deciding to be an Individual

I was flattered to be asked to make the graduation address to thousands of graduands and parents for the international graduation ceremony when I was Dean at Melbourne. IN those days, such events were less frequent and more significant. I investigated the genre since I had an appreciation of oratory instilled from my days in theological training with Dr Wood. For the occasion I decided on something conservative; a video of the whole speech exists so here I want only to note one element that I feel is perennially true.

In issuing the challenge to new graduates, I quoted from Lowell's great poem inspired by slavery and conflict that later was made into a Protestant hymn …
Once to every man and nation comes the moment to decide,
In the strife of Truth with Falsehood, for the good or evil side,
New occasions teach new duties; Time makes ancient good uncouth;
They must upward still, and onward, who would keep abreast of Truth.

I omitted the rest, even the other section that I like …
Some great cause, God`s new Messiah, offering each the bloom or blight,
Parts the goats upon the left hand, and the sheep upon the right,
And the choice goes by forever `twixt that darkness and that light.
… mainly because the reference to God was out of place in a university, conceived as it was to guard against dogmas that crept in with theological positions.

The whole idea that social mores can instruct on moral duty is challenged by the poem – *time makes ancient good uncouth*. Awareness of the role of the individual is emphasized in the line about *new occasions teach new duties* in order to *keep abreast of Truth*. This was an era when the US seemed the only power in the world, a phase that began to be doubted in some sectors by the end of the 20th century. Great poets such as Lowell define their countries.

That is why I wanted to read Goethe's 'Faust'. I first began reading about him as part of understanding more of that corner of Europe, and their pride of a tribe in their poets to the exclusion of others, even when Goethe himself lauded his peers in other lands as his superiors. But that is as it is. The poet was the intellectuals' leader – a genius if the eulogies are to be believed, and he offered such pearls as …
And stand abashed, when you at last must say,
The good man, howsoever dark his striving,
Is ever mindful of the better way.

Predating the Lowell poem, my smattering of Goethe allowed me to identify the individual I seek in this essay. He is open-minded and aware in Lowell's poem. And in Faust, he is flawed in the eyes of the society – *howsoever dark his striving* for he is unfathomable to the common understanding yet he is *ever mindful of the better way*. Without claiming any elements of genius, I sometimes feel the isolation that comes with being an individual. It has meant that my lifestyle and moral code has at times offended or at least seemed incongruous to ordinary bods, both those close to me and those with whom I have worked. Yet there was mostly a purpose, a learning, a striving beyond any immediate social ideal – though sometimes my motivations were simple selfishness or rationalised instinctual acts.

As I have aged, I have had the inestimable boon of enough trauma to open my mind to reality and to the realization that I am likely to live and die a comfortable life compared to the vast majority. And that freedom has released me from the bonds of working to create a large pension and so forth as I have written eslewhere. My material overheads are low, being just a roof, food, laptop, travel and some funds for printers. And writing has consolidated my understanding; I hope it has also helped others – many tell me it has, and I derive more mudita-like joy from that than from the accolades or income.

But when working on my books, I find I cannot talk about them lucidly. As I perform other tasks, even when quite focussed, formulation of my readings and writing continues in the back of my mind. Sometimes it dominates my mind when I am involved in routine

social obligations. But I cannot fully explain a current project when asked, except in general terms. And once again I find Goethe's words are better than mine, perhaps aided by Thomas Mann's translation in 'Goethe's Career as a Man of Letters', when he says …
It went against my grain to talk of any of my projects. I carried them about with me in silence; as a rule nobody knew anything about them until they were finished.

He went on to say later that …
Only the author is in a position to know the interest he will be able to impart to a subject, and therefore when an author has something in mind to be written, he should ask nobody.

And usually I do not ask anybody, excepting those who are part of my research processes. And this form of individualism that I practice creates a certain separateness, which in biographies of Goethe I found arrogant. Perhaps I am the same, for I find I agree also with him when he says in 'Wilhelm Meister' …
The human mob, fears nothing more than reason; it ought to fear stupidity if it understood what really is frightful; but the other is too uncomfortable, it must be brushed aside; whereas stupidity is merely fatal, and that will keep.

Adding this section in a later year, I can say that in honour of Geoethe becoming a sort of muse among others, I can recount that I took Simone on a short walk to visit Goethe's bronze image outide the University of Strasbourg. Apparently more handsome than he actually was and replete with walking cane and wenches, I revealed that I had also written a poor poem about Strasbourg mentioning Goethe and the overlooking café named in honour of the satirical poet Sebastien Brant.

This rambling essay reminds me that we continue on our animal-realm doing what evolution equipped us for until we realize that we have a higher facility to understand ourselves. In some moments I see it this facility as the superfluous evolutionary accident of consciousness. It condemns me to think, reflect and see – yet I enjoy it and find release tinged only with sadness for those who cannot see their self-made cages and pain. I too am caged when less self-aware and forget that there is an alternative to the instinctually-bound animal life.

Worshipping the Animal in Us, or Animism?

The 'animal in us' that I speak of is not the same as that in Animism. In fact Animism is a step towards understanding the interrelations of all things by ascribing them their own animus or spirit. The etymological coincidence offers more than this obvious confusion, as became clearer to me in our visit to Egypt. Simone had been to the country before and wanted to show me some of its historical treasures, and according to our respective interests we determined that we might avoid the usual tourist routes and delve deeper into the history and life of Egyptians of the past. And in doing this the mystery of Egypt exposed itself as another means of projecting modern fears of death onto ancient

Egyptians. Today's version is a glossy tourist fairy story of Pharaohnic beliefs in an after life.

But other messages were also afforded us. For example, in the locked and hidden agricultural history museum, which we were privileged to enjoy alone, the agricultural base and feminine deities common to such societies were evident. Even the transition between these deities and human god-kings was suggested in terms of rebirth – not in an afterlife but possibly in this life. Tut-ankh-amen's head emerging from a lotus flower as a symbol of rebirth added a further link to the wider emergence of irrigated agriculture and hence cities and learning in other regions, not just the usually quoted Mesopotamian region but also the Indus valley. And so the symbols of rebirth of the much later Hinduism and Buddhism do not need to be a Persian invention alone but could suggest interaction across the settled agrarian societies in prehistory.

Of course, once stable in food production, such communities are attractive to the marauding nomads and hunters who soon dominate and blend their animistic beliefs with the rebirth ideas of agrarian female deities. How much of the excessive display was a belief and how much a ritual of power? What did the learned nobles and scribes really believe compared to what they wrote down? We can never know! But we can guess that, as in every human society there were some who saw beyond the symbols and understood life in its full, and they may well have been speaking through these symbols to whoever would open their mind while the literal-minded blind believers were content to have these symbols repeatly explained in simple terms. They may well contain deeper symbolism, such as rebirth from a lotus flower.

My view of an agricultural origin to the ancient sculpture and architecture was not understood in the tourist circles of guides and guidebooks, and a feeling of déjà vu descended on me. It took me back ten years to research for my book on 'Thai Agriculture' with my friend Charan when we sought the animistic agricultural origins of irrigated agriculture for the huge religious complexes of the Khmer Angkor kingdom. In that case, we had felt vindicated in that earlier case after interpreting information from those who had preceded us and having found the animistic protective shrine at the forest source of the water for the main complex, just as for all of the region's irrigating tribes. What became lakes and moats gracing temples began as the irrigation source for agriculture – and, as I developed in other writings, overuse of the resource for such ostentious purposes led to a crisis in food production. Such insights led me to look for something similar in Egypt.

I found it in the book that Simone had given to me for the trip – 'The Egyptians' by the UK academic Morkot, who noted that the *characteristics of Egyptian art* emerged before the dynastic times with Horus in his earliest iteration now residing in Oxford depicted as performing an irrigation ritual. Thus Horus moved from a god associated with agriculture and food and hence cycles of life to being a symbol of assistance in afterlives for god-king Pharoahs who led the dominant elite ruling and waring class. I couldn't help wondering if the Pharoah Akenaten's brief and often expunged historical flirtation with a single god of the sun as the source of power was derived from the feminine food gods of

the agriculturists merging with the powerful gods of the ruling class. From teenage years, when my mother bought a discount book called ‘Comparative Religions’ for me that began with a chapter on the ‘first monotheist’ Akenaken, I had wondered why the idea of monotheism was so important – now I saw it was not important as an end but as a step to unifying multiple deities before moving futher to recognise them all as our mental creations. Of course, monotheism is important to the Church and to literalistic Christians and so our history books are written that way. But history might well have been written as if Akenaten was evolving a deeper insight from the literalism of the official elite and the Animism of the peasants. In any case, his ideas were quickly suppressed and any orientation to personal spiritual development seems to have been lost in the desert sands, leaving only architectural artifcats for ogling tourists.

We also visited the late dynastic city of Tanis, which seems to have been the city of the story of Moses. It is no longer on a distributary of the Nile, presumably as a function of successive major irrigation drainage works dating from the delta barrages to the Roman canals that connected the Red Sea to the Mediterranean via a Nile distributary and in the process changing local ecologies forever. The dig site was unspectacular with the usual large sculptures and obelisks toppled about in the pleasant calm of the dry winter. Collecting a fragment of the granite ‘Moses stone’ for my friend and doctor Andrew Blecher who becomes more Jewish with each passing decade, I wondered more of the Semitic religions of the region – and from my memory and readings formed the view that the origins of Christianity were here too. For the desert fathers were in Egypt and they followed the approaches that were later defined as heretical and/or Coptic; and it does seem that the word Coptic evolved around that time as a version of the word Egypt after it had passed through Greek and other tongues. But in fact there were others apart from the Copts with their wide authentic Christianity and voluminous New Testament, for there were also Gnostics – and they were very present in my mind because through this time I was completing and editing my book ‘Dharma as Man’, a treatment of the story of Jesus in Buddhist concepts and times.

The Gnostics seemed to me to be, at least geographically, the successors of the originators of images of Horus observing the irrigation rite, of the insights of Akenaten, and of the sculptors of Tut-ankh-amen emerging from a lotus flower, for they were practicing to experience the unknown. They were practicing to develop insight, just as do the formulaic approaches of essential Buddhism.

The great Animism that Egypt offers us, while interpreted simplistically and through lenses coloured by unchallenged Greek, Roman and European romantic notions and by biased Biblical filters, may be viewed as a symbol of our constant quest to understand ourselves. When we fail, through ignorance, poor guidance or distraction, it may be seen as a symbol of the folly of blind belief in such fictions as life after death and other things we cannot ever expect to know about. From the first leisured classes created by agriculture to today, we see that our insecurity caused by our fear of death in the same manner as our lust to reproduce rules our actions and our minds if we do not use our powers of discernment.

Enculturing Insecurity

Driven by our basic motivation of fear of death we engage in irrational behaviours that mock our civilized values. Yet so much of those values are based on unchallenged belief that it may not be such a bad thing that we cannot stay on the straight and narrow. At the same time, the great rewards that accrue to those who by being flexible rise to the higher ranks of society encourage them to go to great lengths to enforce social conformity in the masses. The most consistently effective method has been to manipulate man's fear of death, in diverse forms – from banishment to penury to demotion to emphasizing suffering. An effective use of this last approach has been the Jewish culture as it developed in Europe, and then the new world.

Paul Kriwaczek in his 'Yiddish Civilization: The Rise and Fall of a Forgotten Nation' traces the development of a culture among the Jews of Germanic and Slavic Europe cut-off from much of their heritage for centuries, and their reconnection via the Arab occupation of Spain with its tolerance of the Sephardic Jews. It is generous book, precisely because it simply accepts the recurrent theme of suffering without undue comment. Kriwaczek does this simply: when there is some random aggression on a Jew or a Jewish group he provides the context, which often illustrates that there was general aggression against many or all groups. Nevertheless, his story also belies the idea of the society as innocent victims, for to insist on being different when policies favour social integration comes at a cost; as for Jews in Europe so today for others today. Kriwaczek states that the Yiddish culture sowed the seeds of own destruction in its penchant for status, which at least partially fueled a fundamentalism that favoured replacement of Yiddish, the great lingua franca of European trade, with Hebrew. This set the scene for the demise of the language that had defined northern European Jewry for centuries.

Such commentary is the opposite of anti-Semitism. In case someone should read this and mistake comment for bias, let him read Kriwaczek's erudite and lovingly presented text. From him, I learned that the great Maimonides that *everyone who converts ... everyone who worships that name of God only ... is a pupil of Abraham ... and if you are related to Abraham ... you are related to him who created the world.* What an embracing understanding of humanness! It is indeed unfortunate that this has not been the overriding practical ethic of any of the Semitic religions. Such generosity of spirit seems to have pervaded the Jews of northern Europe for centuries. Even through repeated pogroms and persecutions that produced a level of periodic and some say constant insecurity, it seems that the benefits of non-conformity with the majority culture outweighed such costs. But the balance was reversed when northern Jewry abandoned its own glue of the Yiddish language. And non-conformity in Hebrew or Yiddish allowed Europe's largest witchhunt under Hitler's direction. The cost became too high and emigration was the fortunate option for some.

But before that time, we read of Josel of Rosheim in Alsace who acted as a diplomat to temper the frequent and excessive imposts placed on Jews by rulers acting under pressure from jealous competitors. We also read of: the affinities with the Protestants, and Luther's initial support for and then later attacks on the Jews, and Luther's friends'

rejection of his later intolerance; of messiahs who would deliver Jews from these European persecutions and the continuation of at least one such sect in the ritual-bound Hassids; of the initial rejection of the Rabbis of philosophy and science and their later acceptance of it. This last correction gave us Einstein's explanations alongside the insight that scripture and science can both be correct even when appearing to differ. And there is much else in Kriwaczek's book.

Overall all, Kriwaczek talks of a rich culture that is totally undervalued in today's Europe, probably because it is absent to the eyes of today's writers. Its demise was such an embarrassment to those who lived through WWII that it has been sanitized in local textbooks and banished from family discourse. To me, Kriwaczek confirmed the missing soul of Europe of which I have written elsewhere. At times I have been prepared to explain this feeling as the ignorance of my over-expectation as a child of the new world. But having the latterday gift of learning more about Europe from activities with my cherished Simone, I have become more accepting of my feeling. The hardest part in explaining the feeling is that the European generations of today cannot appreciate what they have not experienced, which means that when they do accept the idea it is mostly an intellectual exercise. Ironically, it is the children of the new world who have grown up with Jewish friends and who have at least an inkling of the cultural values that are so essential to the capitalist democracy that has emerged from the Christian state.

Yet, despite all this – or in the eyes of the Jewish culture – because of it all, separateness is maintained as a value, and it is this that leads to being a ready scapegoat when one is sought. I fear the world is preparing itself to need a scapegoat. Beware, my friends! In this way, the culture breeds its own insecurity while also providing a wonderful motivator. It feeds on the fear of death and the need for survival and so represents a distilled form of the driving force of Western culture. I exclude reference to the country of Israel as I am here focussing on the culture that derives from the heart of the heartland of Europe. [*addendum:* in reading this for a final time in 2015-6, I note that a recent month in Poland introduced me to a book that coincideintally used the same terminology in its title – Norman Davies' 'Heart of Europe'.]

My old doctor and friend Andrew Belcher recommended 'The Yiddhish Civilization' to me. He recommends many books and I reject those that sound anti-Arab or too narrow. The first I read was an exceptional book – 'God: A Biography' by Jack Miles, which traced the emergence of human understanding of the functioning of our minds in the Hebrew tradition by considering the books of the Old Testament in the order in which they are placed in the Jewish scriptures. Written by an ex-Jesuit, his book is critical reading for any educated persons who strive to contextualize their learning within their culture. Kriwaczek's book is Andrew's most recent recommendation and I must commend him – it is devoid of the concern on which Andrew increasingly obsesses, which is Arab dominance. He described it as an 'excellent book, better than any I have read, except for works in Hungarian of course!'.

I had once assumed that Judaism had continued to develop while Christianity stagnated. But in fact, as for all religions that refers to the minority. The majority of religious Jews

seem as ignorant as the Christians and others. Better that I note that most Jews I know are educated and motivated but not overly religious, and that may be why I don't see them as different from me.

Seeking a Different Man

We have always sought different personalities within our socities. We use them to define our normality by their difference. And they may come from any social group. They are a source of our fantasies and our ideals. Many are semi-mythological figures such as Buddha and Jesus, while more mundane examples close to our own era are presented as models for overcoming obstacles. Goethe fits this latter category, of providing an inspirational model needed at that time to fill a cultural need for a German hero. Is it just a coincidence that his myth arises at the time of the rise of a particularly bad time for the Jews of Germany? There were surely great Jews who could have been models if the hero-need was not so tribally based. In some ways, Goethe is like a German Samuel Pepys – someone whose voluminously detailed writings about their own life makes them representative of their era – but Pepys is not in the Goethe image that at least one of my German friends, Chris Bonte-Frieheim, would favour.

Goethe intrigued more me after Simone entered my life, for he is part of Strasbourg and its diverse, illustrious and ultimately sad history. Goethe stands in bronze outside the university there, and framed one of my rough poems from inside Café Brant across from his statue. So when events combined to introduce a new book about Goethe to me by a University of Melbourne academic, I took it with me to Strasbourg to read on site. And so began the next stage of demystifying the romantic image of 'old' Europe.

John Armstrong's 'Love, Life, Goethe: How to be Happy in an Imperfect World' is a long book that fades at the end, thereby highlighting a weakness in its message that a full and happy life is lived by embracing all that life offers. Before considering some details, I first want to point out that such a message may be derived from the myths that have haunted Goethe's image as the archetypal German – as the last man who knew all the world's knowledge. He must have been gifted, but it is difficult to accept him as the most balanced German, or even the best informed. Yet Goethe's ghost haunts romantic German heritage, probably because that emerging state needed heroes that were a contrast to their declining cultural dominators, in this case the frilly French court manners and the French logicians of the Enlightenment.

But his fame may also derive from his being a real person who maintained both a professional career and sensual indulgence as means of developing self-awareness. His writings seem to have come to him easily, thereby belying the difficult birth of great creativity – although Armstrong's book can be read to imply that writing sometimes anguished Goethe. His dalliance with religion seems to have honed his skills of seduction, and at the same time helped him appreciate understanding beyond logic. His early works apparently illustrate the common conflict between this developmental path and worldly success. He also suggested that thinking men are more prone to melancholy than the normal person – an idea that resonates well with me.

Goethe accepted superstitions as serving the common man by his assumption that he himself was not common. As a superior person, he felt duty bound to overcome fears that prevented his full enjoyment of life. Armstrong's uses the oft-quoted example of Goethe conquering his fear of heights by forcing himself to climb the tower of the Strasbourg cathedral. He then suggests that this leads to understanding Goethe as developing himself into *particular kind of person*. Goethe's combination of experience, art and research to define his writing's characters and their motivations in terms that assume that art and culture calm hysteria about looming catastrophe. I wonder how he would address climate change and looming pandemics today!

Goethe is labelled a philosopher and I can see him in that guise when he assumes that 'freedom' and 'rights' are unrelated to personal happiness. Being content and secure in ourselves reduces our need of others to prop us up. This reasoning led to him satisfying his own needs for a comfortable home base and companionship from which he could sally forth on developmental adventures. This quest for wholeness is what Goethe offers us, according to his intimate friend Schiller. Whether his life really does offer lessons in wholeness or not remains open so far as I am concerned; nevertheless, his insistence on experience informing wisdom has a ring of accuracy. But such experience had been well documented 2,000 years before Goethe. Armstrong puts it nicely, *wisdom falls flat – appears to be a set of truisms or platitudes – unless grounded in experience*. And one key experience that he imparts is that we commonly envy more than we can use or need and so fail to appreciate the good things we have. One of the good things assumed in all this is civilization, and hence it follows that able and well-rounded men should accept wealth and social responsibility to maintain civilization, lest *the coarse philistines ... get the lot*.

He dabbled in the science of the day and his conclusions were contested by the budding science establishment. This grieved him while also informing his understanding of nature in de-emotionalized terms. In fact, his defining of the primary 'Ur' experience as a basis for interpreting life in scientific terms, while at odds with scientific approaches then and now, in not inconsistent with ideas of relativity. Nor is it at odds with the balancing of scientific with sapiential knowledge that I have described in 'Sustainability: Elusive or Illusory'. Goethe thus reasoned that material and spiritual needs can be mutually supportive rather than antagonistic.

This approach informed Part 1 of Faust in which the question of whether mankind is a mistake of creation serves to introduce discussion about *why we can do evil* and *how we can be saved*. Recognizing the influence of the intellectual framework of Goethe's times, I can see his essentially Christian approach even in his willingness to test the extremes of morality and thought in other fields. But Faust Part 1 ends with unexplained salvation, perhaps to compensate for the story's observation that our nature leads us to hurt the psychological props on which we rely. Perhaps this may be read as a natural developmental process, but that is not the way Armstrong presents his Goethe, and with good reason, for he sees Faust's ultimate salvation in his love of life with all its suffering, and does not see it as pointless and unsatisfying as Mephistopheles does.

It is in this context that Goethe can say at the end of his life that his was *a mission to healthy people*. He embraced life and developed himself through it; in that way he is a role model. I feel there is even more to life than what Goethe revealed, but at least he lived a better life than most people, and one that acknowledged that a degree of comfort and wealth makes these things easier. His personality demanded an audience it seems to me, but he craved for that the audience to understand him though they seldom did. He claimed to get through obligatory dinners by imagining that he was sharing intelligent conversation and fine food and wine with appreciative guests – somewhat reminiscent of Bernard Shaw's supposed response to his cocktail party hostess' solicitous remark, *I do hope you are enjoying yourself Mr Shaw* to which he responded, *madam, that is the only person I am enjoying*.

If Goethe is a model for a life, as Armstrong argues in his book and stated more clearly in his public lecture at the University of Melbourne, it may be for the middle class and tenured university academic. For others, he is a partial man – a great writer apparently, a bon vivant, a flamboyant and charismatic personality – but not a whole man in the sense of one who has understood life's mysteries and is comfortable no matter what his circumstances. As a role model, he may well suit the insulated and educated middle class today, but they would have been the same ones that he had to accept at dinner and tolerate by imagining that he was elsewhere. Am I too harsh? Maybe, but one indication of my conclusion is in the extreme fear with which Goethe approached his own death. I am not convinced that this is a sign of a man who enjoys life so much that he hates to leave it – that smacks of self-justification in a commentator. To me it is not the sign of a man who understood life. So while we seek different men to revere and place on the ever-vacant pedestals, we probably rely on partial role models. Better to work on our own selves being more complete persons, and that is a solitary task for when we rely on institutions for our own development, we become but followers.

From Goetheanum to Steinerism

Followers of great men seek to document the every detail of their idol's lives. Armstrong comments on this in his book about Goethe whose every meal seems to be have been documented by some acolyte. This explains Gary Lachman's book on Rudolph Steiner – the architect of the Goetheanum near Basel in Switzerland, and of so many other writings on the revolutionary ideas of Steiner that continue to attract followers today.

The Steiner book came to me coincidentally after reading about Goethe. The link between the two made the events of this phase of Austrian and German history more intriguing. Bob White had mentioned the Steiner book over lunch at the university a month earlier and on visiting his house he lent it to me, primarily as a consequence of my having quoted another Steiner work in my 'Religion and Agriculture'. We had discussed a few snippets of Steiner's strange agricultural ideas and acknowledged that some seemed prescient. And so I read Lachman's book about Steiner's life and found it both instructive and bewildering.

I found it bewildering because the interpretations that Steiner appears to have placed on his own experiences are necessarily conditioned by his previous experience – and despite his genius and his experience was limited. I refer to his basic Christian conception of the cosmos and ready acceptance that divine beings exist outside of his mind. This led him to explanations that appeal to a certain type of follower, one who trusts another before thinking for himself or trusting his own experience. At the same time, it tends to repel the majority, as it did in Steiner's age when science was rising in popularity.

Yet his ideas on ways of living a full life contain a certain ring of truth, and his ideas on specific subjects have found supporters including those who have implemented his ideas in applied fields while remaining ignorant of his religious ideas. For example, Steiner schools are popular with many parents who know little if anything of Steiner's own beliefs. For this reason, I felt that I should re-read Steiner's 'Eight Lectures on Agricultural Science'. I had been impressed by their general thrust when I first read them a few years earlier, and expected that I would now understand more of them. It is always easier to judge a comprehensive thinker's qualities by a field one knows than from other fields.

I concluded that Steiner was born later than his time. Many of his fellow religious free-thinkers in Europe had emigrated to the USA in earlier decades and centuries. They could perhaps have been a balancing force for his esoteric ideas and spurred him to deeper insights that aligned science and psychology. However, Steiner's age destined him to be compromised by a combination of German nationalism including Goethe's long shadow, a decline in religious interest, and a scepticism in scientific circles about all non-material subjects. The latter's errors are have been corrected in part since Steiner's time although judging from feedback from my own written considerations of aspects of Steiner, I am not sure that we are yet at the time for objective reconsideration of Steiner's ideas by the informed scientific community. As usual, I discount the half-informed enthusiasts who don't know what they don't know. Steiner's legacy remains thanks to this half-informed group, and much of it centres on his advanced engineering vision that is the Goetheanum, where I purchased a reprinted version of his agricultural science lectures to re-read. Their value today is mainly to widen one's viewpoint rather than to advance science; I am unconvinced that false premises, which exist in his works, can provide a reliable foundation for spiritual or psychological development. Ultimately, the innovative and huge concrete Goetheanum bunker is also a testimony to the teleological delusion that our species progresses, evolves, or if you like, develops.

The Delusion of Psychological Evolution

Why do we think that humans are progressing? The question has its roots in our very being, and shows how the concept of progress is one that we shed with great difficulty. I cannot see it in ancient writings, except in the form of mental development of an individual, and this relates to the few who practice to understand themselves deeply. That must still be the case. For the rest, progress today is probably just an expression of hope that things are getting better. They certainly have become better in material terms for almost everyone in the world. This is a triumph, but it is one we overlook when we

measure poverty by the inadequate yardstick of relative material wealth without consideration of differences from a generation or more ago. Why do I feel that it is a delusion of progress? Because it seems likely that our basic nature has changed markedly since pre-agricultural times.

Our pre-agricultural lives required instincts to be integral to intelligence; today we suppress our instincts in the interests of social harmony, or personal advantage. One result may well be stress-related illnesses. Our two powerful instincts are, as with other animals, to survive and reproduce. Success means to survive as a species in a world where species disappear frequently. These two instincts, expressed in so many sexual ways, from fashion-wear to competitions, and in so many coded caring platitudes and institutions from health and insurance, continue to dominate us no matter how sophisticated we pretend to be.

This is one reason why Coetzee's book 'Disgrace' appealed to me as being faithful to reality. I had seen the film and enjoyed it and then read the book, which explained so much that the film failed to bring out. Here is an uncommon anti-hero who follows his principles. He is true to himself. True in his attitude to sex and women and in his university teaching so far as it remains possible in the barbarization of that system. Yet most readers and viewers will see him as unlikeable and antisocial.

This schizophrenic life of the modern world leads us to condemn the man who acts in the manner of the book's hero, while at the same time to revere Socrates and other semi-mythical philosophers who lived according to their own principles. Socrates was sentenced to death for upsetting social norms, Coetzee's hero was sentenced to exile, poverty and humiliation that we feel may be just the tonic that can produce an even better man. I am not condoning the protagonist's actions, but can see his viewpoint. And the mental view given to him by Coetzee makes him moral according to his own code. One can identify with parts of his exasperation, such as when he describes his university students in terms that echo my plaintive cries for an educated young person. My concern arises from the books I write being misunderstood by those who are interested in the subjects but miunderstand them because they are poorly informed about their own culture.

Coetzee describes the students in his *emasculated institution of learning* where he teaches *Communication* because *Classics and Modern Languages were closed down* as *post-Christian, post-historical, post-literate*. This is a crystallization of how many in good unviersities feel, and it leads me to regret that our society, by neglecting its myths must falter and then wonder why it was so unfairly treated. I sound like an old man repenting lost youth, but the truth is that I have long felt this way. Why was I so fortunate to have religion taught to me in a parallel course while undertaking my undergraduate agriculture degree? One answer is that I enjoyed it and could not see the point of the alternative time-filling social functions of the day. But this doesn't explain why I also read extensively on other religions and history. Perhaps I am arrogant when I suggest that if I could do that, so can the majority.

Coetzee's hero follows his conscience and then learns that the world has changed so much that his principles –principles which he sees in the ancient and true philosophers – can lead one to destruction. It seems many readers and viewers see his demise as some sort of justice, while I see it as a poetic ending for a sheltered man of learning in a changing world. I would guess that Coetzee might see it more my way, but also wants us to glimpse his metaphor of the domineering man representing white South Africa being raped by the those who have benefitted from the very philosophies of the whites' culture. Of course, the culture of the whites had already been long lost from the white politics, universities and the myths that once sustained society. Why do we not learn about ourselves?

We think we have learned so much that we can know ourselves through science, or psychology, or religion, or philosophy. But we have not. We can see it in our so-called 'disabled' kin, such as in Haddon's 'The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time'. Haddon's protagonist is an autistic boy who functions well so long as he is not faced with things he cannot process, such as lies. His brain allows him to be logical in a manner that most of us do not experience because we overlay interpretations with emotions and then lay these down as erroneous memories that are in turn used to interpret new events. Logic is thus subordinated to emotions, or at least filtered by them.

If we integrate this information from Haddon's delightful novel with that of Coetzee's masterful work, we can see that the ordinary person who tries to live by his knowledge of life or some ethical principles, is faced with the dilemma of discernment – is this situation exactly as I perceive it or am I interpreting it according to my emotions? Thus we see emotions as including prejudices, received values and so forth. So the only answer that I can see is to cultivate awareness of oneself and nature. It is not that our species has evolved or even developed new knowledge about itself, but that through special individuals we are occasionally given glimpses of our higher potential. It is not progress at all – just an alternative way of living and one that is better it seems. But it is not what most people want – they prefer an ideal, they love a theory of progress.

Love of [the Theory of] Wisdom

The 'love of wisdom' is the usual translation of the playground that is today called 'philosophy' by self-ordained philosophers and the reading public. But it seems that much of it, indeed most, is less a love of wisdom than an infatuation with the idea – the theory – of wisdom. Why else would we read and not act on the knowledge of a philosopher with whom we agree? Why does our age indulge endless discussion about past philosophers by modern-day 'philosophers' who do not practice their subject's or their own advice.

Alain de Botton's 'The Consolations of Philosophy' offers a readable update of a few philosophers in a practical manner, and one has the impression that he may even follow some of their dictums, for he selects those that most suit our age and issues. Having put off reading this popular text, I must thank the new $9.99 Penguin edition for spurring me to action, for it is a worthy book for the traveller's pocket. It begins appealingly – for me

and, I think, our age – with Socrates' reliance on logic in the face of opposing popular opinion. The author is quick to point out that it is equally dubious to believe that unpopularity indicates truth as it is to believe the opposite. But I find it curious that such a teaching is popular today in a society that illogically reacts to manipulated mass fears – hence my reference to the love of the theory of wisdom.

After Socrates, Epicurus also appeals to our era, especially when it returns to his principles of wise austerity rather than the excessive luxury with which modern advertising has labelled him. When he says something like, *I cannot conceive the good without the pleasures of taste, sex, hearing and visual beauty*, he appeals to modern excesses when in fact he meant it in wise moderation. In this guise he may not really appeal widely, for his philosophy decries unnecessary luxuries on the basis that life's essentials contain all the pleasures one needs. And he acted on this, living his life according his philosophy – which I would include as part of the definition of a real philosopher. To live one's philosophy is to expect a superior life, as Epicurus apparently said in words that echo the Buddha's, *just as medicine confers no benefit if it does not drive away physical illness, so philosophy is useless if it does not drive away the suffering of the mind.*

The Buddhist parallels go further in such statements that *there is nothing dreadful in life for the man who has truly comprehended that there is nothing terrible in not living*. But such important parallels are not my current theme, and are better discussed in my friend Rene Salm's 'Buddhist-Christian Parallels' and my 'The Budddha's Gospel' and 'Dharma as Man'. Today, many laud Epicurus and his followers for fine values, and perhaps even for their prescient use of slogans and advertising to shake us out of our malaise, but few act on the Epicurean ethic. It tickles me that the Epicurean Diogenes built a wall at the market place for his slogans to be presented to the populace because *if only one or a few persons were in a bad way, I should tell them personally, but as the majority suffer from a common disease as in a plague ... I advertise publically this salve (message)*. The sentiment harks forward to my introductory words of this collation.

But then as now, the majority prefer superstition to logic and excess possessions to sufficiency, and thereby increase their worries even before their fortunes change. And fortune is always changing. It seems that Fortune herself began life as a fertility goddess venerated by farmers and would-be mothers, and that her role was then expanded to all forms of material desires, such that she was depicted as carrying a cornucopia and a rudder, indicating her ability to provide plenty and to turn events rapidly. Roman coins enshrined this image of her. And it was the philosopher Seneca who invoked her as means of communicating his stoic logic that one should practice awareness of what can occur, not what one wants to occur or even what is expected to occur. He explained this in the deepest terms we know – death.

Advising a mother who was grieving for her dead son, the Stoic reasoned that *so many funerals pass our doors, yet we never dwell on death ... so many deaths are untimely, yet we make plans for our own infants*. But such a philosophy did not preclude Seneca from enjoying his wealth – *if it is there, enjoy it* seemed to be his attitude, but more

significantly, he noted that *the wise man can lose nothing; he has everything invested in himself – he is self-sufficient.* The wise man bows to necessity rather than fighting against the flow of events. With this approach he can enjoy life even if in general he feels life is suffering, and this provides the context for his statement, *what need is there to weep over parts of life, when the whole of it calls for tears?*

Botton's book deals with such insights from ancient Greece and then jumps to France of a couple of centuries ago to discuss Montaigne who sought to align philosophy to his life. Montaigne noted that we define barbarity by what we are not accustomed to, and spoke for many authors including me when he said that *many things I would not care to tell any individual I tell the public, and for knowledge of my secret thoughts, I refer my most loyal friends to a bookseller's stall*. But he knew that a wise man judges the value of something by its appropriateness to his life, and that the unwise man can be easily fooled by obfuscatory words that he reveres as wise only because they are opaque. The next philosopher in Botton's book is the great pessimist Schopenhauer, yet what has been called his pessimism is often realism, for it is he who embodies the essence of my own comments set down in a letter to myself about life's best and worst being less than the world thinks they are. Of the wise man, Schopenhauer said, *in the course of his own life and in its misfortunes, he will looks less at his own individual lot than at the lot of mankind … and accordingly will conduct himself … more as a knower than as a sufferer*.

The same sentiment is picked out of Nietzsche's diverse ramblings to suggest that *good and ill are of one substance with our life*, which Botton uses in his final summary as *not everything which makes us feel better is good for us; not everything which hurts may be bad*. Trite but true. And so it seems that we love such triteness and that we even know that it is true – but we treat it as one more form of intellectual entertainment. To act on such knowledge in a manner that is appropriate to our own life would reflect a love of wisdom rather than just a love of the theory about it.

Love of Wisdom, or Boring Platitudes?

Of course all of the Western philosophers have something useful to add – but it is not an addition to the world's experience and knowledge as much as it is an addition to what other philosophers have said. If we see it this way, it is much easier to understand – for when a statement is a refutation of an assertion of an earlier thinker it is surely easier to comprehend the refutation if the assertion is mentioned. Alas it often isn't, and we are left with the same belief basis to philosophy that is the bane of religion.

If we read the religious mystics such as the Christian Eckhart and Buddhist hermits, we find a similarity that can appear wise but requires tempereing by an understanding of where they have come from. For all wisdom points us to the effect of prior influences. This means that a man no matter how wise presents his insights in terms of his conditioning – his language, his era and his experience. That might be why, when I read Suzuki's discourse on Eckhart and Zen Buddhist insights in his 'Mysticism: Christian and Buddhist' kindly lent to me by Rosemary Moore through my friend Siladasa, I can see the same integrity that Suzuki seeks to highlight, but also a lot of unnecessarily drawn

long-bows. Whether God is one or three is not explained in Zen thought as far as I am concerned, simply because Zen didn't start with that conditioning. And whether heaven is the same as the Japanese Buddhist's *pure land* is not because it has similar descriptions but because human minds work in similar ways.

Of course, these criticisms can be levelled at my simple attempts to show congruence across the cultural divides of religious traditions in my 'Dharma as Man' and other writings. But the difference in my thought is that I am not seeking to convince anyone of the sameness per se, but that there is a sameness in these teachings for me. I have a special respect for Suzuki for he was one of the writers who helped me the consolidate insights of my fourth and fifth decades, thanks to the eclectic library of the Siam Society and the opening of my mind by the Buddhism of Thailand. This does mean that I can accept all he says in his little book – strange and engaging as it is.

But I am now wondering whether a new phase is overtaking me in which I should read less and think more. This has to me happened before, and it has led to insights when I distil waves of ideas into writing. It is then communicable to me in an iterative dialogue that is more rational than the cyclic game that otherwise can distract me inside my head. It also allows communication with others, when I am fortunate enough to engage some who are in a similar state of mind and experience. I have been blessed with so many such persons – friends who one might never have guessed had a spiritual dimension until the opportunity is opened for a friendship to expand to that level. It is from such interactions that I learn where to place philosophy.

Philosophy often fails its etymology. Few who call themselves philosophers live 'their philosophy' preferring to treat it as a sterile debating position. But if it exists at all, it is as a way of life – just as the best of religion is only a way of life. This is why I see religious mysticism as the identical twin of secular mysticism. My old friend from the 1970s, in with the hill tribes of northern Thailand Trevor Gibson, is currently engaged in studying basic philosophy at university, notwithstanding his Doctor of Philosophy in another field. Today's Ph.D. terminology is in this way a poignant example of our system's mistaking knowledge for wisdom.

Trevor shared with me an essay from one of his philosophy classes. It highlighted the turgidity of definitions and old accepted 'truths' rather than any attempt at wisdom. The best one could hope for from such an educational experience might be a better understanding of what philosophers meant when they commented on each other's points. But it is not a place where wisdom is central. One could become an expert on long and empty words and even become so elevated that one could bore others with one's mesoteric – well below esoteric – knowledge. I admire Trevor's perseverance in his studies, but do not envy the tasteless fare of stale ingredients that some university hacks dish up today and present as a menu of boring platitudes. Its very conservatism stifles social development, for who among us today has an historical model in his head apart from that of our adopted culture. Adopted? Yes, for I have met only one or two persons in my life whose ancestors have always spoken English, or whose ancestors were not victims of some kingdoms expansion or whose religion has not been acquired in recent

millennia. One would think this would stimulate a continuous love affair with wisdom as new experiences and cultures are encountered, but that doesn't seem to be the way that our culture is reacting to the reentry of Islam into our cultural consciousness.

Redeeming Ourselves Through Islam

Islam is commonly presented as a problem in the modern West. It may be less so in this remote corner of the world that is Australia with its comfortable lifestyle and open attitudes, but Islam also suffers here. Is this simple bigotry, or fear? We have primed ourselves to fear so much and use it as a defining feature of our culture. We allow governments to manage us through fear, we raise our children to fear intangible forces in the same way as our forebears did in so called primitive periods. And our fears can be traced to the same origins, our fear of death – today called by such names as unemployment, cancer, divorce, retirement, losing face and so on. With this superstitious belief that secularism has aided, we link such unexamined fears to guilt on the one hand and blame on the other. We can't win! It is either our fault for something we did wrong – that's why our religion invented the complex concept of original sin, or someone else's for taking away our happiness. Islam has become a conventient target to blame for threatening our happiness.

Blame like guilt is based on ignorance. Ignorance of the nature of existence and ignorance of other ways of seeing the world. The strange thing about our fear of Islam is that we have such ready means of dispersing the clouds of ignorance because the religion is so similar to Judaism and Christianity. Indeed it sees itself as growing from these earlier belief systems and enforcing respect for them. But instead we revive medieval lies invented for ignoble purposes by imperialistic popes and princes, from a part of our history that we strive in other ways to not repeat. It is that history that led us to separate state from church. But rather than recall that reason we seem to blindly accept the separation as absolute for all religions and governance, regardless of worldview. It is such blind spots that Waleed Aly points out in his polemical 'People Like Us: How to Arrogance is Dividing Islam and the West'.

Aly's sound education and broad enculturation into Australian society provides him with a unique position to see why Muslims and Westerners so often talk past each other when the think they are debating a social matter. We have a surfeit of 'experts' on the 'problem', almost all self-seeded since 2001 and mostly ignorant of the religion of Islam and its multiple cultural expressions. Without such arrogance how could we use such terms as 'the Muslim world' as an all-embracing term when we never refer to 'the Christian world' as including Koreans, Latinos and Africans.

I found Aly's diagnosis of our blind spots poignant, highlighting some of my own blindspots. He does what no journalist does – gives the conditions leading up to newsworthy events, such as the Danish cartoons. Excesses by non-Muslims produced sensitivity to the offensive cartoons. But in fact the cartoons were poor quality, not humorous and totally unnewsworthy for several months. They were called for in a competition after skilled cartoonists had rejected depicting the Prophet even for a

childrens' book illustration as it served no purpose and was known to be against the precepts of the many Danish citizens that practice Islam. How did it become an issue? Aly shows how the heightened sensitivity after the killing of the filmmaker by an offended and deranged Muslim was deliberately used to fuel the issue by a newspaper seeking improved circulation. The excuse for printing the cartoons was 'free speech'. Aly points out the nonsense of 'free speech' by many other examples of self-censorship as part of social responsibility across the Western world. But still the reaction only become significant when a Muslim stirrer showed other, more offensive, drawings as examples of what might be done in Western countries, and this fuelled the ire of those in Muslim nations that knew little about Western culture. And so the issue became international news.

With such a 'debate' going on in the West and newspapers used as a source of information, it is little wonder that ignorance has proliferated more than knowledge. Aly examines the meaning of 'moderate' when applied by a Westerner to a Muslim as being one who is not serious about his religion. The term is not used for Christians so why use it with Muslims? Because it is a political term and that is how the matter is discussed. Likewise, he dissects the term 'fundamentalists' to show its 1920s origin for Christians returning to fundamental principles in a manner that was largely positive. As the meaning of the term morphed into extreme exclusivist belief without thought it became synonymous with 'literalist' and so defined a fringe group in Christianity. As an antonym to 'moderate', it gives serious Muslims no workable definition in English – one is either a fundamentalist or a moderate.

Ali goes on to point out that our secular guise can be a useful guard against a return to the excesses that can occur when religion has political power. But as critical as this is to the Western experience, it is irrelevant to a religion that is not associated with politics. Where it is, problems follow, such as in Iran today. His book contains much that illustrates similar themes, perhaps the most telling of which is the historical arrogance that assumes we have answers for other cultures to follow. So we call al-Qaida 'medieval' because that was our dark period – but for Islam and Islamic Europe, this period was enlightened with a tolerance that Europe had never before approached. And by using the term 'medieval' we do not have to consider that in fact terrorists are modern in their selective use of the Koran for their own purposes and in the technologies and psychology they employ. We ignore nuances in the changes in our own language and then seek to concretize definitions when we apply it to something we know little about.

It is the same arrogance of certainty of our own culture's superiority that leads to the absurd suggestion that Islam needs to go undergo reformation and renaissance, just because our culture did. Aly leads us to see that the excesses of some Muslim groups are a reformation like that of the Protestants. But it is too hard to find parallels for all the words we use. Surely it would be better to understand the real nature of Islam and its potential benefits. In my tiny sphere with my imperfect knowledge, the unsavoury aspects of our culture have already caused me to investigate Islamic banking as a more responsible system for money management and social responsibility, and to join an

Islamic investment that takes a responsible attitude to animal management, philanthropy and business.

This is why Aly has titled his book 'People Like Us'. It is up to us who are educated, informed and openminded to clarify the debate. If not people like us, then who will do it? Islam is a great religion that embodied reason in faith centuries ago and yet Christianity has struggled to do so, that transformed a society in its early formation and allowed the emergence of some of the world's great scholars. Many of these scholars educated the endarkened mind of Europe, including reintroducing introducing Hebrew to northern European Jews from the Spainish Islamic state's support of all religions and in which Jews and Christians were near-equal citizens with Muslims. Far from being a threat to the West, and as I have written elsewhere, it could possibly be like Buddhism in revealing a rock for a more secure foundation than the sand on which our modern Western lifestyle is based. To know what is sufficient for life and to thereafter help the common good and enjoy life without restricting others would be a noble outcome from the inevitable Islamic influence on Western lives. It might even be called a 'redemption'.

Redeeming Ourselves

The very concept of redemption that we have inherited through the Abrahamic religions is a poorly expressed means of developing our psychological security. To 'buy' ourselves back – as if we are slaves purchasing our freedom – is exactly the feeling it is meant to evoke, and this typifies many of our social arrangements. Just as some pre-colonial slaves of old probably went willingly into slavery for the security it offered, so we maintain our society by 'educating' ourselves to conform to enforced work under conditions that affect all whom we meet. Thus we live believing it is normal and even good – certainly better than the supposed alternative of being cast out of the society into poverty and homelessness. But that is not the only alternative; in fact it is misunderstanding the real alternative.

To redeem ourselves from the negative aspects of the life we are conditioned into by our education and society in general, we do not need to buy ourselves out of slavery but rather we need to stop enslaving ourselves. It is our mentally constructed chains that hold us. So the word redeem becomes a symptom of the problem, binding our thoughts to the model of enslavement that our religions once fostered in our child-like minds. Elsewhere I have dealt with the benefits that Buddhism offers to our understanding of ourselves, but even the majority of Buddhists seek some mental enslavement rather than *testing one's own experience* as its scriptures clearly advocate. There is not need to call such ideas Buddhism for the ideas themselves may well become more influential as we seek to re-create a code to live by and modify our culture's beliefs to serve both social ethics and personal development.

Personal development is the subject of Padmasiri de Silva's 'An Introduction to Mindfulness-Based Counselling', which links Buddhist teachings about the psyche with practical aspects of the branches of modern psychotherapy. It is a simple book, and so may be passed over too easily by the learned and belief-based psychological

theoreticians. But it seems to me that simplicity is key to the subject, and in his book, Padmasiri wisely links the often opposing schools of psychology as different expressions of the same approach, and so makes whole what specialists delight in keeping apart – as if their sect holds the real truth. Whether it is simple coping with an intrusive neurosis or seeking to understand the underlying motivations from one's past conditioning, the personal development involved is mostly useful to the individual and society.

In engaging in such personal development, I see a practical expression of redeeming ourselves. The terminology has some residual value as it contrasts with the Protestant Christian proxy of redemption through belief, which is a delusion that can arrest psychological development. But beyond that utility, the word 'redemption' has little application today at the personal level. That is, unless one views the material goods of modern Western life as essential. In that case, a giving up of the TV, car, holiday house, expensive holidays and so on, might be seen as the price of living at ease with oneself – the price of redemption. But that seems to me to be a wrong view.

The words of religion that lead to such thoughts, even if the thinkers believe they are not religious, are cast in terms of ignorance of our personal development processes. Thus spiritual seekers are said to renounce home life or material things, which in that worldview is seen as the 'price that must be paid' for redemption. However, from the worldview of the spiritual person nothing has been given up or paid, those forsaken things are simply no longer of interest. In this sense, we redeem ourselves. And when we do, we realise that the price we paid in the past for the unredeemed life was extremely high.

I write this entry in my 50s when I find a small but rising number of persons who are interested to discuss such matters and are aware of the delusions by which most lives are led. Trauma and age contribute to such awakening, and draw us to the insights of great sages. This contrasts with working for an extra unneeded dollar, jogging an extra mile on worn joints, and crumbling in the face of change – characteristics of an 'unredeemed' deluded life. For those who seek reality, it becomes a joy yto understand life, and also its end.

Sagely Ageing

The ages of humans can advance unnoticed until one day they awake near death. My own dalliances with such thoughts produced the pamphlet 'an open letter to Lindsay and 60: Five Cycles of Lindsay' in which I tried to offer an objective analysis of my life to date. It suffered in terms of objectivity as all autobiographical efforts must but it enhanced my view of the effects of actions and other conditions on my self and psyche. I chose the 12-year cycles, I think, because my Thai friends talk in such terms, and because 12 years seems to suit the watersheds in my life thus far; at least more than the 4 stages of conventional Hinduism and of Yeats, the seven of Shakespeare and Steiner, the four of Ptolemy and the various other divisions of psychologists from Freud to Erikson. Nevertheless, it is curious that most of these systems arrive at sometime around age 60

being a major turning point in life. Coetzee treats the subject in a literary manner in his 'Slow Man.'

Coetzee's slow man is Paul Raiment whose physical demise is highlighted by an accident requiring amputation of a leg, which narrows his already constricted world and causes him to focus on the life he has missed by his immature psychological development. He is presented as a special case, yet he is everyman, and we can empathise with his struggles to grow into something more than the pathetic yet comfortable middle-class Australian whose charitable tendencies come to the fore when he feels vulnerable. Coetzee is the slow man, I suspect, and he knows what we all really know but easily deny, that we limit our lives to serve an absent god of normality. The book ends with him having learned enough to perhaps improve his quality of life when observers would say that quality must decline with his physical limitations, but the reader cannot be sure that he will accept the challenge completely or that his rejection of greater emotional engagement is in his best interests. He is not the man of 60 in the Asian cyclic conceptions, nor is he the man of 60 that I think I am.

My decision to mark the rite of turning 60 focused my mind. The 'open letter' was part of that exercise, although it may also trace its roots to the memoir-impulse that seems to arrive with many around this time. A rising consciousness of this transition also seems to influence other actions, such as browsing my bookshelves and finding an unremembered book – a novel, and deciding to read it apparently because it won a major prize. But in fact the book is about a single old man and his last days – how did I not know this before starting it? Surely I did at one level.

Anita Brookner's 'Making Things Better' is tedious yet interesting in its descriptions of thoughts of an aging man. Aided by making the character a Jewish exile of WWII living in London as the last surviving member of an unloving family, his vicarious enjoyments and delusional plans come to nothing until his spineless desire to be polite and helpful is finally overcome to meet a cousin he once desired. He drops dead at the airport en route to their rendezvous. It is not a sad book, although I am aware that what I find true to life is said to be sad by some others. It is more a description of all of us who do not question social mores and viewpoints, and consequently accept an artifice of life. Such books are a warning rather than a comfort, for if there is a sadness in the story it is that the central character never acted independently yet at the same time he never accomplished what others wanted of him – why? Because those others were self-centred people who, being even more ignorant than he was, only saw him as a tool to their ends. The sadness of the character is his unredeemed and unconnected life; his is the Socratic unreflective life that is not worth living.

Living Connected

It is axiomatic that everything is interconnected. Or so it seems to me. But when I think back, I see that I have learned this gradually and that there is a large part of my life where this would not have been central to my worldview. Not that I held a strong belief that there were discrete entities, just that I behaved in that way as I copied those around me. I

now see that copying itself as an indication of interconnectedness, for those with whom we associate ultimately affect our worldview. As Richard Nixon may have said, *if you lie down with dogs, you get up with fleas*.

I have variously maintained that I have been fortunate to have had a good cultural education in which theological learning became coupled with scientific education. In an open culture that rewarded curiosity, travel and experimentation this has equipped me to benefit fromopportunities that may have passed others by. This does mean that sitting at home cannot bring insight – I have met wise persons who never travel. But it probably does mean that sitting by the TV, reading romances and continuing in meaningless employment in order to pay a mortgage can preclude many of those opportunities.

The adventures of life may be intellectual, religious, geographical or in any other parts of life. That is one reason why adventure books appeal – not only because they are the equivalent of a romance, but because they can build one's confidence to go out in search of oneself. Captain Cook may have been one such adventurer – he was certainly one who aligned his interests, capabilities and employment, and I do not expect that he would have watched commercial TV even if his ships had been so equipped!

Geoffrey Blainey has considered the elements that create a man who can focus on a quest in his story of Captain Cook in 'Sea of Dangers'. The determination, diligence and discipline of such men allowed extraordinary accomplishments. Compassion, leadership, a sense of history and other attributes are clear in the diaries of these literate men, not the least of whom was the gentleman scientist Joseph Banks. Men prepared to face their own deaths without the refuge of religion provide a fitting foundation for the country that grew from their voyage and lobbying. With the freedoms of today's Australia still embodying vestiges of the spirit and values of Cook and Banks, it should provide the environment for self-realization and transformation for whomever seeks it. But that spirit is dying, and a generation of rejecting our myths is producing a citizen little different from other once-great societies. Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge and the knowledge we have lost in information? Where is the science we have lost in technology and the arts that we have lost in the great divorce of science from the arts?

Yes, I am indeed fortunate. When my old doctor Andrew Blecher gave me Richard Dawkins' 'The Blind Watchmaker' for my 60th birthday, I was reminded of the experience of having earlier read Dawkins' excellent 'Selfish Gene' – and then witnessed how uneducated minds mistook the metaphor for the message and would not believe that their own ignorance was blinding their understanding. I had also read his 'God Delusion', which was also good, although it is plagued by his anger which suggests to me that Dawkins has yet more to write as personal therapy for whatever had so poisoned his mind. His arguments are mostly sound, but his invective must be off-putting to religious persons. I found it humorous at times and childish at others. So I opened the 'Blind Watchmaker' with some trepidation.

It is a good book although it contained little that was new to me, and much that I consider common knowledge among the educated of the world today was laboriously explained as

if the book was aimed at rather ignorant audience. But labouring through, I found that Dawkins was seeking to counter continuing misunderstandings about evolution. As I noted earlier, the benefits of a religious and scientific education in an open culture breeds receptivity to new ideas and a confidence to challenge them. So perhaps I am not his target audience.

But when Dawkins challenges those who criticize reductionism, I read carefully – for the philosophy of my higher doctorate based on 30 years of my life's work proposed that reductionist science had not served agricultural science in the third world as well as it could have. But overall I must say that he is right, and I shall recall his arguments when I publish a readable version of that 3,000 page collation of my vocation as 'Recultivating Agricultural Science'. And Dawkins is ruthless in his science – he accepts what we must, that the human brain is 'a ruthless analogizer', seeking and finding patterns and reasons from observations on the basis of experience and instinct – which often leads to erroneous conclusions. To me, this is as axiomatic as interconnectedness, and it explains the scientific method as the huge advance that it is. But it seems that the majority do not know it. And that must be why some otherwise intelligent people can insist that a God or someone influenced evolution as a means of blending unfounded belief with reason as if the two can cohabit happily for long.

Dawkins quoted Darwin himself as saying *I would give nothing for the theory of Natural Selection, if it requires miraculous additions at any one stage of descent*. Such rigour allows Dawkins to highlight the arbitrariness of our categories – plant and animal, human and other animals and so on – by the example of a zoo manager being able to put down a sick chimp but not a sick employee. A chimp is so much closer to humans than other animals in the zoo yet the human response to a similar situation differs. I can think of two answers – social rules that have stood the test of time, and maintenance of the status quo. Both are acceptable reasons for not putting down the sick employee. Yet it does not negate the fact that all things are related and our DNA is so closely related to the chimps that we may be said to be a continuum.

But then we may say that all life is on a continuum, and having said that we can see that all inanimate objects in the universe are part of the same continuum – rocks on the moon decompose and become essential parts of our bodies and so on. But that is just today – it has been going on for eons and that is how life began and thus where evolution began.

Dawkins ends his book by dismissing continuing arguments against evolution and notes that, as Stephen Gould said of Koestler, that they *campaign against their own misunderstanding of Darwinism*. No refutation has ever survived, and I suppose none will although some will serve to further clarify our understanding of this mechanism of life and of the universe. A universe where everything is interconnected – where our minds can never be able to comprehend all of the myriad interactions that constantly occur over time scales so short and long that we cannot even imagine them. That is just the way things are. We live connected whether we believe in it or not, whether we are vegans or carnivours, whether we are metrosexuals or peasants, so why not live with that knowledge, which when internalized begets wisdom.

Eating and Being Eaten

If we are all interconnected, and if we are all from the same origins then we are eating each other. It's that simple. It may be offensive to those who have absolute views on cannibalism or vegetarianism, but then all absolute views lead to offending and being offended. For such views, which are better called beliefs, are an example of how we cling to abstract ideas and ideals just as we cling to relationships and material objects as if they are permanent. Why not own up for how things are? So let me say it again – we are animals along with all the other fauna and we eat each other – and then reflect on how we can best live within that holistic understanding.

Of course I am not recommending cannibalism, although I can see that it is the right decision in some circumstances. Otherwise it is selfish, an abuse of power and socially disruptive. For the same and additional reasons I am not recommending vegetarianism, even though it is clear that modern diets include excess animal protein. In writing this, I am simply trying to come to grips with the tightly held views of friends and colleagues. Fortunately, few of them as rabid as the Coetsee's fictitious 'Elizabeth Costello' whom he uses to deliver his feisty anti-meat lectures to astounded audiences. She likens Nazi efficiencies in killing millions of humans to that of slaughterhouses, and claims that Hitler's designers for Nazi processing plants learned from Chicago slaughterhouse techniques. It may all be true, but it doesn't mean that meat eating is bad; it may mean that the slaughterhouses are, but one can't be sure from the rhetoric. The logic is confused by emotion.

Yes slaughterhouses can be inhumane when they treat animals and humans as things. As Temple Granden, the autistic animal scientist of the Ohio State University observes in her direct manner, *one second they're alive and the next they're meat*. The slaughterhouse aims at such efficiency and our science is used to minimize pain of the act of killing, for that is the most humane approach we can think of for bulk meat production, which salves our consciences. But if the salve really worked, we would not hide slaughterhouses from public eyes. As we employ more robotic functions in place of humans and so reduce the dehumanizing aspect of working in such places, we introduce a new challenge to remain aware of the animals' welfare.

It seems more realistic to me to view the treatment of meat animals across the whole duration of their lives, not just the final minutes. In a slaughterhouse this includes the design of the slaughterhouse from the stockyards to the killing machines to make the animals feel at ease. Before this is a farming system that should be oriented to the welfare of the animals. Its not that farmers do not respect their animals – they do, more realistically than emotion-driven 'liberators'. But we persist in some old habits that we now know are inadequate, and these are compounded by extreme financial pressures that can be traced back to consumers. Respect at all stages is needed, and such a task cannot be outsourced by the public.

‘Primitive’ societies maintain respect for the animals that they eat, especially hunters and livestock raisers, and their religions include rituals that accompany killing. These ceremonies are touchingly emotional and conducive to maintaining human sensitivity. Even agricultural societies exhibit respect when they kill animals that have been their companions working in the fields and been playmates of the children. It is too easy to label these rites as primitive – for they have beneficial psychological outcomes in those societies. Likewise, it is too easy to label them unsuited to modern cities because of the huge numbers of animals concerned; cities of the past insisted on rituals that involved the public in sacrifices that ultimately fed the populace. Furthermore, it is too easy to say that Islam’s rites are inferior to our efficient ‘retained bolt’ bullets that some euphemistically refer to as ‘stunning’. The Muslim ritual ensured respect for every animal and its comfort before slaughter in a manner that has been more humane than European systems for hundreds of years. It can be argued that, done well, it remains humane today when the relationship with the animal is considered.

I have no answer that is universally practical. But I do have an answer that might mediate the angst I see expressed in city attitudes to blood, slaughter and death. The answer incidentally answers the mental disorders of those who find that reality imposes on their delusions and undermines their worldviews on so many other things. It is this: if you want to eat meat, kill the animal yourself preferably after having raised it. It is version of self-sufficiency that brings the eater closer to his food. Obviously it is impractical in a large urban scales, but a consciousness of what we eat and its origins seems a first step in self-awareness for those who seek to resolve their dilemmas about meat.

Whoever reflects on this approach and the biological cycles of life will also come to a realization that the distinctions between animal and human become blurred, just as do the distinctions between plants and animals. All life is related, all are individuals are parts of others. With that knowledge internalized, eating or being eaten can be understood – for in the long run, we are all destined to be eaten by small or large life-forms no matter how hot the incinerator and how sealed the coffin. This seems a realtic and honest way to live life.

Life is Lived in Many Ways

We have our own ideals for life and some of us live according to them and may even attain what we think is ideal. In doing so we may even develop an appreciation of others’ choices about life – we call them ‘choices’ in our idealistic assumptions of individual choice and action. Anyone who has tried – as I have at times – to convince a comfortable Westernized person that he has not really made choices will have experienced the types of retort that were once reserved for heretics and blasphemers. And as for views about life and death, and meat eating and being eaten and so on, one can find it a a lonely path when socializing with others who unthinkingly adhere to received worldviews.

Uncommon views may be accepted with a form of tongue-biting tolerance, so long as they do not affect anything or threaten beliefs. But is this really tolerance? Can tolerance arise from ignorance? To answer such questions it is not difficult to find everyday

instances. Take ‘the homeless’ for example. Rather than really being tolerant of marginalized persons in the society, it is assumed that they can be rehabilitated to be part of society. And under the guise of rehabilitation and kindness, it becomes quite acceptable to remove these ‘unfortunates’ from our view, by relocating them to poorer suburbs, other towns and so on, ‘for their own good’. Problem solved – for the problem was having to tolerate them!

Of course life constantly throws up challenges to our worldviews, which is what apocryphally led Socrates to comment that *the unconsidered life is not worth living*. Until we understand ourselves and life as completely integrated with other life and our environment we will remain confronted by undesirable sights and smells from our fellow homeless persons. They have always been there, and have always been marginalized – the beggar has ever sat at the rich man’s gate. And that is the great value of Cormac McCarthy’s ‘Suttree’, a long novel about the lives of destitutes in Knoxfield, USA. The book is a masterpiece of sustained description of those matters not commonly dwelt on in print. It is unrelentingly powerful.

Loosely following a few years in the life of Suttree, we learn of mutual support, camaraderie and love between persons who make satisfactory lives in abject poverty. They want as little to do with the insulated middle-class as it wants to do with them. The book’s descriptions are dense and evocative – the reader can feel the grime and hopelessness at times. It is real life.

I read most of the book while at the luxury Rockefeller centre at Bellagio on Lake Como. The height of beauty with every support for thinking, reflecting and writing was productive, and this was enhanced by the story of Suttree. A fellow resident told me that McCarthy’s works were all dystopic yet I found them also realistic, and a balance to the unreality of the Villa Serbelloni. Why? Because, I knew the comfortable experience from having been there before, and knew that to live that life fully I needed grounding in the reality of the world – especially since I was reflecting and writing on rich country exploitation of poor countries to the extent of causing starvation abroad in order to maintain comfort at home. Thus Suttree paralleled my thoughts and fuelled my creative mood – and the product, my book ‘Small Farmers Secure Food’ has its own polemical tone, perhaps influenced by McCarthy’s art.

My life is different from my peers. I often slip into thinking the difference is my choice, especially when I am in the same mindset as my peers. Then, when I am away from them as I have been regularly, I regain the clarity that allows me to see that if it ever was a choice, it is certainly not these days. The reason is that for decades I have built conditions that govern my life today, as does everyone. My life is lived in a way that I hope is influenced by the best of what humans have learned and in that way is a rejection of what the masses think and do. That is a hope, and is often not achieved as the many divergences along my life testify. Suttree did it by eschewing money and status – I mostly do it by living within a budget and maintaining intellectual and spiritual engagement. Perhaps the only choice I have found is to avoid unworthy influences and actively cultivate worthy ones and so allow new habits to arise.

If life is lived in many ways, then death comes in the same way for all. Suttree sees his own death, maggots and all, and moves on. How many of his comfortable contemporaries enjoyed that same blessing? Few I think. He lived his life – for the years we know him – conscious of the comfortable lifestyle that he had rejected, and helping fellow paupers when he could. When in luck, he shared his boon. One wonders if a better person existed. At times, his life parallels events in the fable of Jesus' life.

The book is said to be autobiographical of McCarthy's own rejection of society, periods of impoverishment and his multiple marriages. True or not, such information is not essential to gaining an insight into ourselves from his brilliant writing. To live as Suttree may be seen by the majority as being subversive to society, but as he made no demands on society, such feelings might better be called by their true name of insecurity. Such insecurity arises from one's life being based on a false premis, of being tolerant, generous, kind and caring while denying that such attitudes are only supportable in a lifestyle that rides on others' deprivation. It may just be that the subversives inherit the earth, for their beatitude confers not wealth in place of poverty but understanding of life. They know that life, and indeed good lives, are lived in many ways.

Vita Bene Usata

Good lives are indeed lived in many ways. A life put to good use – *vita bene usata* – was a phrase that Leonardo da Vinci used to describe the Roman Emperor Vespasian – a common man who rose to heights and returned Rome to a sound socio-economic footing. Yet like many great men of humble birth Vespasian has often been overlooked histories based on royal lineages. Rough genuises may be admitted to the higher ranks when needed, but only a few manage to stay their when times improve.

Barbara Levick in her 'Vespasian' brings together a world of information and speculation about the short yet influential Flavian dynasty that Vespasian began. He was succeeded by his two sons before the dynasty ended, but the governance and fiscal innovations that they introduced were carried on – for it was Vespasian that rescued Rome from its own decadence, re-established its past grandeur and allowed the next century to be one of the Empire's finest. He did it by personal attention, autocratic yet relatively fair governance and knowledge of what made people tick.

What made people tick then, as ever, was food; I say that it still is and not in the form of sensual cooking discourse, but in the forms we see when famine occurs. Rome was a city that relied on imported grain, and security over its granaries was not constant. His predecessors had not always been able to maintain surety of supply of grain from Egypt and North Africa. But as a practical man who had worked his way up through the ranks, he had served time in the African provinces and learned how the people thought and acted. He used this knowledge, along with his military brilliance, to oust other pretenders to the throne in the succession that followed Nero's suicide. Four self-proclaimed Caesars in one year with hunger looming over Rome was all that he needed to act, and so he

tweaked the food supply to gain a military advantage. Thus he established himself as Emperor. Then the real battle began to gain credibility and authority.

Vespasian's self-confidence allowed him to accept personal jibes, and so he permitted criticism of himself as Emperor when it had previously been treasonable. He rose early, worked hard, enjoyed ordinary women and in so doing alienated some of the privileged senators. In today's world he would be the intelligent and accomplished person who could manage people well and gain respect, but who never learned to dance well, who liked pubs, did not play golf or ski and while understanding the attraction of mass spectator sports but did not revel in them. He continued military expansion in order secure the Empire's borders and so began a great peace for most of that world. After his father's long rein, his son Titus carried on much in the same vein for a couple of years until his death brought the other son Domitian into power for more than a decade.

The greatness of the dynasty belongs to Vespasian for he rose to it from nothing while his sons had a right of lineage and the power to go with their roles. Thus we learn the Domitian was probably more autocratic and less personable and so ran into difficulty and could not succeed in all his initiatives. The clash of interests was clear when Domitian sought to reduce olive and vine plantings in favour of grain for food while the Senators and other privileged persons refused to give up their oil and wine lands. There are parallels today, as I observed in the early part of 'Small Farmers Secure Food'. Domitian lost that battle, yet it appears that he was seeking to secure Rome's food from Italian grain sources – a wise policy.

That story comes to us from two interestingly disparate sources. One is the historians of various hues from the copious written records to senators such as Pliny the Younger – he of Bellagio fame on whose beautiful lakeside slopes I twice had the chance to think and write on world food supplies. It also comes to us from the Bible, for in the Book of Revelations the third man of the apocalypse is famine, and is heralded by a voice crying *a measure of wheat for a day's pay, and three measures of barley for a day's pay, and take care not to damage the oil and the wine!* The congruence of message at the same time in history is eloquent. And it expresses my continual concern with the blindness of some of my privileged peers.

We are the educated elite – much like Vespasian – have come to our roles in a manner that was not available to our parents and may become less open to our children. Money alone does not compensate for the opportunities of the golden post-war era my generation has enjoyed. Purchase of education by wealthy but less educated parents today is only part of the equation when compared to children educated from early life by informed parents when all must learn to thrive in a society that encourages diverting pastimes more than study. It was much the same for Vespasian; his sons were not as great as his had been, and political interests in the diversions of olive groves and vineyards usurped sound governance. His surviving son Domitian left no heir as if to consolidate the end of a dynasty even though a long tradition of adoption was accepted for promising successors.

Levick's balanced treatment of Vespasian is a full account that cannot be read without acknowledging his greatness, despite her reticence to say such a thing. He lived his life to the full, even deifying himself for the sake of the masses for he knew they must be fed and entertained in the basic manner to which they were accustomed. He enjoyed the basic things of life as well as some of the finer things, was not subject to the fashions of taste and opinion of the civilized senators and so was often in opposition to them. Without harbouring delusions of such greatness, I identified with much that I read about him. Even his limitations over the power of the Senate rings true, for the privileged class first favours itself in policy. In all this I can see why Vespasian was considered, at least in the Renaissance, a life put to good use. But ultimately, it all seems a delusion to claim that one controls one's own life. We are all products of our conditions in all their various forms including the few absolute choices we have. The life used well may thus be seen as one lived in greater awareness than is usual, which means that unproductive conditions can be avoided more often. Perhaps this is what is called by others, destiny.

Destiny

If as has been suggested, we in wealthier nations are more selfish than past generations it should not be surprising that many feel they deserve a good destiny. Ancient writers might have called it a good fate, with the personified fates aligning to oversee a smooth life. But just as delusions of controlling one's destiny neglect the incomprehensible dynamics of life, so do conclusions that one has a particular fate. Of course, inherent limitations may fate one to not be a great sportsman or physicist, and being born in many countries fates one to unavoidably harsh living conditions. But those are not the same as the fate of 'always having bad luck' and other similar laments. Having the self-awareness to discern which are real fates – those that are unchangeable – and which are caused by our own attitudes is the beginning of realizing that a good life is possible.

Peter Cary in his 'Parrot and Olivier in America' compares old and new world values and relationships while showing how difficult it is to change one's position in life. Parrot, despite success and pride in himself for making a change, automatically reverts to his servile self when Olivier, his supposed better, appears. And likewise, Olivier despite his desires at times to become American, can never accept the shallowness of new world attractions. A rollicking yarn, Cary provides a window on Europe and the USA – which could equally have been Australia.

Fate is more specifically the subject of Kiran Desai's superior novel, 'The Inheritance of Loss'. Set in India, it seems every character and even the country itself is fated to lose something. Perhaps this fate is inherited from previous actions, as its Indian setting implies. Or perhaps the fates of each character are a result of conditioning to self-destruct. Everyone wants more from life than they have. The theme should find support in the Western readers to which I suppose it is addressed. Some characters experience regret but do not seem to translate this into their subsequent lives, while most continue resenting change and the loss of past benefits.

The Judge whose family organised his study in Cambridge and his marriage and who rose quickly in the post-colonial period and came to hate his wife, became a bitter and lonely old man. A familiar image. His cook who scrimped to send his only son to America to work where he was exploited as an illegal alien was eventually reconciled to him on his penniless return. The Judge's unknown and orphaned granddaughter who fell for her Nepali immigrant tutor, who in turn spurned her for a political cause; later when sought a means for reconciliation he had not yet arrived back to her before the book ended. And then the powerful descriptions of Kalimpong and a decaying and overpopulated India add the same theme. The theme is that destiny is predetermined.

Desai's novel is a delight, but her treatment of life could have been more rounded, a curious outcome for a novel set in India and written by an Indian. But perhaps she is not from the India she writes of, not from the new upwardly mobile types but in fact a product of successful past upward mobility, through caste or the expatriate Indian world. Her's seems an inheritance of gain, not loss. It doesn't matter to the novel, for she has written a work of beauty more than truth and among the pulp of modern libraries, beauty is enough to shine. Truth is another matter, and more difficult to write and find.

Truth about destiny awaits those who open themselves to life. Not in the puerile sense of self-help books, but in the sense of practicing reflection, calm and awareness. This produces the wise observation of life that is called by some, wisdom. Wise men have explained to all who will understand that destiny is, for those things that can be different, an uninformed description of our unconscious reactions. For those things that cannot be different, destiny is an understanding of the external factors that define our lives from genetics to governance. The wise have explained that understanding those circumstances properly leads to acceptance. It is at this point that it becomes even more difficult to explain that social inaction is sometimes to be preferred above action – for action should only be initiated with care and awareness.

Take Care of Yourself!

'Take care of yourself', said as a goodbye can be as superficial as 'how are you'. Yet as a means of engaging in communication it has benefits. But so often, care for oneself is interpreted as a caring of physical health, when in fact it is the spiritual more than the physical that is in need of care – for if the spiritual is well nurtured, the physical has less ills. This what Thomas Moore says in other words in his delightful book, 'Care of the Soul'.

I had read 'Care of the Soul' a few years earlier and kept it in the bookcase at my cave retreat – an indication that I thought it worth re-reading sometime. I found more in it on the second reading, probably because I am more settled and open than I was during earlier reading at a time of personal upheaval. And it is revealing how some sections that I had marked the first time I read it later seemed trite while others remained insightful. Perhaps in the end all becomes trite.

Moore has done a service in fostering the soul to become part of useful discourse in a manner that does not rely of religious afterlives. He opens his book *the great malady of [our times ...] is the loss of soul*. His use of the word 'soul' encompasses the French 'l'âme' and extends to beauty, emotion balancing rationality, and acceptance of change including mental states. Thus depression is not a malaise to be cured but a process to engage in. I admit being particularly drawn to his references from the past to understand our nature, for surely we have not changed much at all across the ages. Thus the Saturn Bower in Renaissance gardens darkened by shade and quietness was for quiet reflection during periods of depression. I imagine its presence in a garden signalled to others about one's mental state and so possibly made the wider environment more supportive. But the most curious aspect of his book is that I find many of the innovations that Moore revives had already found themselves into my life and practice.

How? I think the answer lies in my exposure to Asia, and the openness that it has engendered in me. It has taught me that conflicting concepts may be simultaneously be held to be possible. And that wanting something has a cost, as has gaining it – and that the cost easily exceeds the benefit when compared to accepting what is already available. How could we 'really want' a new car, house, clothes, TV when what we have is already quite adequate?

Care of the soul relies on our selves. Moore is a therapist but his book tells us to look after ourselves, for that is all that we can do. To outsource one's mental state under most conditions seems irrational; it may differ if one is locked into debilitative behaviour. Today, most of us can care for ourselves better, yet we live in a society that preduces angst. There is little point is seeking to tell those within that mode of the peaceful alternative that is there all the time. But suggesting that each individual can care for themselves better may touch a chord. So care for one's own soul becomes the purpose of life in Moore's conception, which is simply an updating of cultural images to address modern ills. As the sage Qoheleth said, there is nothing new under the sun; ancient insights still stand – as does a propensity for insights to be distorted by power-seeking persons and institutions.

Insights of the Shamans

Long before the great bundles of teachings we today describe as religious texts came into being, insights that had been codified into diverse cultures displayed many similarities to each other. This similarity may reflect an inherent human element, especially when interpreted as a precursor to modern religions such as Christianity. This is the project of René Salm my spiritual fellow-traveller on the Way, as we call the path to understanding life and living in harmony in our exchanges. The first 'chaplet' of his forthcoming book is a self-published pamphlet on 'Pre-rational Religion', which beautifully links paleolithic expressions of religion to shamanism to the transcendent insights of cave mystics and their symbols of serpents, chimeric figures and 'light beings', to the figure of Jesus as portrayed in the gospels.

His approach will no doubt be criticized by entrenched believers and institutions, yet its logic, its feeling of verity and its generous spirit offers a perception of our religious origins that is veiled from persons approaching the subject through a belief structure. That in itself is a valuable service. In addition, René's approach provides glimpses of our own psychological evolution as the reader considers the way that his forebears' minds conceived the world and interactions with it via analogue signals from imperfect human sense organs. I am reminded of the words in Darwin's conclusion of his seminal work, *there is grandeur in this view*. There is liberation too, for it allows our religious or spiritual tendencies to be seen as normal, useful and having a multi-millennial lineage that can assist our self-understanding – from shamans to modern philosophy.

East-West Philosophy

Within the simple attraction of the exotic that leads many spiritually starved Westerners to Eastern religions are some instructive lessons about ourselves. The exotica usually loses its attraction to followers of fashion, but some persevere to seek what they feel is not offered within their own culture. For example, Western culture derives from an ascription of creative power to God with man as His pinnacle creation, while Asian religions retain more animistic inclusions that accord with environmental including animal care. This less distinct line between man and other life forms allows such matters as abortion and infanticide to be accepted, and hence they can be debated more rationally in Asia than in the West.

The same spirit flows into genetic manipulation discussions also. 'The Meaning of Life in the 21st Century: Tensions Among Science, Religion and Experience' published by the Yoko Civilization Research Institute addresses issues related to medical science and religion and sheds light on attitudes to science and culture. So while the sanctity of life precludes genetic manipulation for medicine or agriculture for many, others place a specially high value on the human species above others. While some arguments may be understood as part of the precautionary principle of science in the terms of not engaging in developments that place human survival at risk, they may also be taken to mean that man has the ability to understand the implications of all his actions and to control outcomes relative to his survival. This is not true. Survival is a central driver in the theory of evolution, be it promulgated at the level of species or genes, and the full roles of mutation, adaptation and unpredictability will remain beyond human ken for the foreseeable future. The problem that philosophies share with literal discussions in religions is an unspoken assumption that we have both the ability to comprehend and control nature. I find that an arrogant assumption. It ignores our millennia-long history of living within nature as handed down by traditional knowledge.

To understand the relevance of traditional knowledge to science is part of understanding science. Too often science is assumed to be the invention of technological novelties rather than understanding of nature including us and our whims. From this perspective, much technological science today is a cut-down version of knowledge generation, while traditional knowledge can be seen as a repository of experimentation with and in nature and observation of consequences over millennia. By speeding up the process as we do in

modern science, we cannot expect to know the consequences of immediately applied novelties that themselves are rapidly overlaid with even newer products. So with this understanding, how can we know where genetic modification leads us?

Genetic manipulation of food to increase yields from existing agricultural areas and to adapt food crops to areas previously unsuitable to agriculture or where climate is changing is promoted as part of the solution to world food needs. We may argue about this, but it is the way the world is going. Rather than argue against it, we do better to understand the factors that create this enormous demand for food, which include: megacities, population, trade and uneven application of science. The subject is fraught with opinion, lobby groups, misinformation and outdated knowledge, even within international agencies, governments and NGOs charged with alleviating the problems. The whole field is fueled with misguided passion. I discuss some aspects of the subject in my recently published 'Small Farmers Secure Food: Survival Food Security, the World's Kitchen & the Crucial Role of Small Farmers', which argues against both moves that marginalize small farmers in poor countries and food security policies that rely on free trade theory. Food is one of the very few real essentials of life. However, not just these aspects of basic human rights but other more difficult issues such as responsible population policy and responsible application of health measures must be addressed by any antagonist of genetic manipulation of food. But the winds of human civilization are not blowing in that direction.

New Winds Blown from an Old World

The new world differs little from the old. Yet it was and is new and contains some old world seeds that seem to never find the right conditions to germinate in the old soil. Such a mixture of old and new is made clear in Henry James' Washington Square' through a rigid 18th century widower doctor in a nascent New York and his relations with his daughter. James, like his brother William, seems to take an interest in motivation and expression of emotion, and by using the novel rather than the esoteric cum factual approach of his brother, Henry can relay cultural images as shorthand for otherwise verbose interchanges. Delightfully descriptive and hardly dated, the novel belittles many modern forms and illustrates the benefit of the sound education, from which both the James boys benefited. That sound education included not only the classics and the sciences but also deep understanding of their culture's explanations of itself through religion. Ignorance of such cultural heritage undermines the foundations of much modern popular writing in my view. Just as every action of James' fictional father has an effect on and in the daughter, so it is for the meddling and self-dishonest aunt. This is no mere soap opera, but a description of conditioned co-production.

Conditioned co-production, or the influence of events, actions and thoughts on subsequent and coincident events, is a central insight of Buddhism. It explains the universe, human nature, and at another level all things. My own realization of its essential clarity – unlike anything else in philosophy, religion or science – continues to amaze me. Beginning with an intellectual understanding, enhaced realization continues to pervade insightful moments. So, just as Henry James demonstrates its action in a fictitious family

dynamic, so Chloe Hooper in her 'The Tall Man' does in shameful real life events of racial prejudice of northern Australia. But it not fair to leave the impression that this is a north-south divide of morality.

I know and like the north though I choose to live in the south. The reasons are simple – the quality of life that is important to me is higher in the south, in terms of intellectual life, thought-provoking entertainment and developed facilities and infrastructure. But I have lived here mainly in the sense of using it as a home base. I like the north for its frontier attitude and as a young man I indulged in its freedoms in ways that no longer exist. Yet it is today that Chloe Hooper writes about, when she traces the death of an aboriginal man in the hands of a white policeman. She unmasks a tribal code in the police force, an inherent bias in the legal system and prejudice in government. She thus renders the tragedy of aboriginal Australia clear.

The book does not venture into the self-image of Australians, but to anyone who has grown up here, who has experienced both the north and south and who has a reasonable moral education, the book conforms to the evident denial that characterizes the Australian psych. To live in a country where the original inhabitants have been exterminated in living memory yet to deny that memory is to risk one's sanity. Yet that is the national more. The denial is endemic from south to north – in some ways the northern frankness is more honest than the southern political-correctness that espouses cultural values yet imposes uniformity on traditional communities, that grants lands for traditional use and then allows mining companies to bribe their residents, that overfunds aboriginals and then treats them as infantile.

The white settlers of Australia created this situation. Whether it is seen as the outcomes of unenlightened actions, or as some cumulative effect of successive benign decisions as in a Cohen Brothers' movie – the result is the same. And today's Australians are imbued with the consequences despite their denial, since the same motivations that led to those earlier actions remain in today's culture, both in the south and the north. We cannot escape our formative forces. Therein lies the future of a country that is lucky in so many other ways – a constitution that is sensible, a democracy that functions, a new world ethic of development and self-reliance, and a land rich in minerals and agricultural potential. All that is needed is a maturation of the mind and spirit of its inhabitants, which is hardly encouraged by entrenched interests, naïve do-gooders, or the entertainment industry. Nevertheless, it may be occurring, with education being the vehicle of social advancement for migrants as it always has been, and migrants now coming from such diverse backgrounds that old stereotyped prejudices of others are either no longer acceptable, or are simply irrelevant.

That is the outcome of the new world experiment. It is far easier to imagine than the reinvention of the old world from its under-acknowledged atrocities and ritualized denials. But perhaps nothing has changed in human nature and this is why we remain fascinated with the ancient Greek and Roman worlds.

The Classical World

In his ‘The Classical World’, Robin Lane Fox conflates ancient Greek and Roman history into a thick single volume spanning diverse matters in an engaging format. While he is concerned with the evolution of power and politics, he gives us glimpses of the role or food production and supply in underpinning both development and stability.

Greek settlements around the Mediterranean *flourished famously* wherever rich soils met reliable rivers, such as at Acragas – today’s Agrigento in Sicily, which in 420BCE was celebrated for the luxury made possible by a reliable food supply. Its centrality was emphasized as in all historic cultures, by the rituals and ceremonies that linked gods to good harvests. To the polytheistic Greeks this was centred around fertility with offerings including cakes in the shape of sexual organs, libations of honey and wine, and animal sacrifices. Blood of sacrifices soaked into the soil for gods below the earth and the remaining carcass was burned, the ritual providing the word holcaust from the Greek ‘holos’ (meaning whole) and ‘kaustos’ (from the verb to burn). Rituals varied between cities and states, each having specific guidelines linked to stories of the gods.

The gods remained in power even as new technologies changed aspects of lifestyles because they were introduced through an official system. For example, Fox quotes the Edfou Papyrus number 8 c. 250BCE whose author describes his water-pump and seeks travelling expenses to demonstrate his invention in time of need. *To King Ptolemy: greetings from Philotas son of Pysous, holder of a military allotment in the great town of Apollo. As there are frequent droughts on the land, now and utterly so, I want, king, to inform you of a machine from which you will sustain no harm, but the land will be saved. For three years the river (Nile) has not risen, so the drought will bring such a famine … But within fifty days of sowing there will immediately follow a plentiful year’s harvest throughout the whole Thebaid*.

The water-lifting device was not alone. Technologies developed for milling grain, pressing olives, breeding domestic animals, selecting new fruit types, grafting, twice-yearly rose flowerings and so on were developed in the Greek era. With the emergence of Roman power, leaders were initially associated with agriculture and simple living. Cincinnatus was dictator but spent much of his time at the plough, and Curius Dentatus lived in a simple cottage even though he was Consul four times. As the empire expanded new ideas were absorbed, such as from Carthage in Sicily, which had developed an educated elite one of whom wrote a long and useful document on agriculture that was eventually translated from Punic into Latin for wider Roman use. Learning from the Greeks became a fascination of the Romans, as in Cato’s ‘On Agriculture’, which drew heavily on Greek sources.

As for the Greeks, the Roman philosophers identified the enemy of power as luxury. By 167 BCE, Cato is warning that things can only get worse when *good-looking boys were being sold for more than the price of fields*. By 125 BCE Gaius reorganized the administrative structures and introduced a monthly grain ration at a fixed price for all the people of Rome. By 57 BCE, Clodius’ edict that had made the grain free had induced a shortage that led to Caesar commissioning Pompey with powers greater than governors of

the provinces to secure the grain supply. So when Pompey later came to challenge Caesar whose base was Rome, he knew the right foreign nobles who could withhold grain supplies. The tactic continued into the next generation around 41 BCE when Anthony opposed the Octavian Caesar and found an ally in Sextus the son of Pompey who used his naval supremacy to limit grain supplies from Egypt to Rome. The whole matter was settled after 25 years of civil war in 30 BCE when Octavius won and gained control over Egypt and its grain. Through this period, Fox notes that the main concern of the people of Rome *was that somebody would feed them and attend to their security*. This led to the people backing Augustus, for example, by begging him to settle the food question. But buying favour by granting free grain – to the extent that some 250,000 persons had such an entitlement – required its own Prefect and even then was difficult to sustain.

By AD 7 Rome was again in famine while the army was concentrated on the northern frontier. By now the power of the Emperor was reliant in part on the Prefect of the Praetorian Guard and the Prefect of the Corn Supply. But all this coincided with senators expanding their vine growing and wine production to service the increased wine consumption of the populace. By the AD 70s grain from Egypt was exacted as a tax on that province, skilfully manipulated by Vespasian in his ascension as noted in the introduction of my book, 'Small Farmers Secure Food'. Increasingly it was noted – as for Trajan in the AD 100s – that the means of keeping the people under control was the trinity of grain, blood-sports and baths.

The centrality of reliable food supply to civilized life is so obvious that it seems to be overlooked by those who should know better. Ancient Rome demonstrated it repeatedly, and today, when we maintain the outdated comparisons on national bases we miss the point just as the Romans periodically did. Today rich countries have secure grain bases, but they are threatened by starving poor countries in many ways. What can one do? Write about it? It is a small contribution unless one has power – and who seeks power with such knowledge? Again Fox's book offers the same solace that Cicero enjoyed in his rural villas when out of favour; at such times he was reduced to writing on such diverse themes as 'On Friendship' in place of the great and momentous occasions that he preferred where he could write himself into politics. But he does inform us today, just as serious writing continues to inform today; it goes in cycles. Perhaps the tradition is continued in the writings of scientific historians.

Cycles within cycles

Boussingault, an underrated personage in agricultural science, conducted the world's first agricultural experimental station and made a series of discoveries that contributed to the foundation of the modern agriculture. In his workmanlike book 'Boussingault', McCosh presents the life of a largely forgotten yet important scientist in the lineage of those who feed us today.

Boussingault established the first Agricultural Experiment Station on his wife's property in Pechelbronn in Alsace, some 60 km north of Strasbourg in 1836. Rothamsted in the UK, generally considered the longest continuous experimental station was started some

seven years later in 1843, and the German equivalent in Moeckern in 1852. As he was a chemist, which was at that time a rapidly expanding field, and as the application of such science to agriculture was overdue, it is logical that many of Boussingault's contributions from his work related to soil chemical and plant nutritional knowledge.

His experimental station did not survive him, or rather could not withstand the vacillations of the 1870 Franco-Prussian war despite the respect for his intellectual works by some Germans, as recorded in WWII anecdotes. Boussingault's discoveries were built on by others, including his better known contemporary Liebeg, who loudly acknowledged Boussingault as the pioneer and discover of many advances in soil and plant chemistry.

The site of the world's first agricultural experimental station, is today an Alsatian grange and outbuilding complex in need of restoration. No plaque marks the site, although an explanatory panel claiming to be the site has been erected at in a more convenient spot in the town of Pechelbronn where he maintained a house. The confusion is understandable as the history of the area is dominated by the petroleum technologies developed in that industry, and to which Boussingault contributed as part of his employment in the region. The shadow cast over his work by this more popular subject has led to his status being neglected beyond a cadre of informed scientists and scientific historians.

In terms of scientific discoveries, Boussingault is credited with the following main discoveries related to agriculture, as well as others in fields of petroleum and metallurgy. In agriculture, his discoveries or re-discoveries include:

- the first modern analysis of crops in a rotation
- the increase in soil nitrogen from legume crops
- the theory (later confirmed by Persoz) that the carbohydrate fraction of a ration is metabolized to fat in herbivores
- plant growth is proportional to the amount of available assimilatory nitrogen, which in practical terms allows greater plant growth from simultaneous application of phosphorus and nitrogen
- definition of the photosynthetic quotient.

The Petroleum Museum of Pechelbronn contains only two little notes about Boussingault, but among its volunteers is a knowledgeable researcher who maintains archives of available information about Boussingault. McCosh's book remains the most comprehensive source in English, while Aulie's Ph.D. thesis from Yale University is the most authoritative on the subject of Boussingault's nitrogen cycle.

Such great scientists are seldom remembered for the right things. In the case of Boussingault, most popular literature lists him as a contributor to the petroleum development of Alsace, and as one of the few outsiders marrying into the industrialist Le Bel family.

However, it is today possible to place Boussingault in a context befitting his contributions to our knowledge of ecological cycles. For it was his early conjectures, while working on

both petroleum and farming problems, that led to a modern understanding of the critical role of nitrogen in plant growth. This discovery provided the necessary fillip to agricultural production that has forestalled major food shortages up to the present day. It therefore seems fitting that the harnessing of essential nitrogen from the atmosphere into a chemical form accessible to plants is today a major product of the petroleum industry through the Haber-Bosch process. From a petroleum researcher came essential knowledge for agriculture, which today is supported by a nitrogen fertilizer product unforeseeable in Boussingault's day – urea and its ammonium relatives derived from the petroleum industry. We eat today from the science that has built on the theoretical insights and experimentation of Boussingault. Perhaps he is somewhat overlooked because the oil industry is more exciting than agriculture, but it may also be because he worked in Alsace, which suffers from its confused history as borderlands oscillating between France and Germany through history into recent times leading to Boussingault being a prophet with little honour in his own country.

Strasbourg and Alsace

The changes of Simone's home region over the centuries have shaped its people and its records in history. Just as Boussingault is not remembered as the hero he would otherwise be elsewhere in France, so others such as Albert Schweitzer are better known outside France. Schweitzer is doubly interesting in this respect as he is said to represent a German period of Alsace, yet he wrote in French first and considered himself French.

The region is confused in its identity at both historical and individual levels. Historically it relies on either French or German views – yet both of those take nationalistic perspectives. Its own language is poorly appreciated with the consequence that it disappears, and in individual terms a feeling of not sticking one's head up seems to pervade. And that refers to Alsace. Outside France, the world seems to group it with Lorraine as Alsace-Lorraine as if there is a common culture and history. Yet this too is a confusion, for the Kings of Lorraine (Lothringe) had their own distinguished history that largely excludes Alsace. The grouping of the two regions together is a product of the ignorance of our schooling that treats them only from their post-war perspectives, as both were territories of Germanic origins that have been annexed by Germany and France at different times. Today they rest in the hands of France.

Perhaps even worse is the case of Alsace is the sacrifice of its principle city, Strasbourg, to the level of other regional cities of France despite its noble history. Far from being just a city of a region, it was one of the few free cities of Europe and developed a sophisticated governance system that endured until the rise of nations. Franklin Ford in his 'Strasbourg in Transition' describes a complex and rich city between the years 1648 and 1789. That is, the period of French annexation of the city up until the French revolution. He traces an independent city run by elected leaders with its own currency, taxes and powers and withstanding successive pressures to become a part of France.

Today, the Strasbourgoise – or Strasbourgers as Ford calls them – take pride in vestigial legal differences from the rest of France, and with good historical reason. But it seems

the reasons are forgotten along with the losses of other distinguishing features of the old Strasbourg. It is also likely that modern locals will mix this distinguished history of Strasbourg with that of Alsace, for the distinction between the two is now little different from that of a major city in any other region.

Ford presents a Strasbourg that managed itself well internally and defended itself externally until dominated and taxed by France. And by 1789, the revolution was welcomed as a vehicle for resolving continuing disputes with the French court over powers – and the outcome was the firm inclusion of the region including the city as part of France without any special status for Strasbourg. Matters of distinction such as Protestantism, land titling, holidays and practice of law became Alsatian differences not Strasbourg's. Such nuances are the mechanisms of integration and domination.

It is useful to have an observer who studies such a transition from neither a German nor French viewpoint and who writes in a neutral language. But the very virtues of Ford's approach almost guarantee that he will not be read in the region or those two countries, for they each have their own biases and preferred versions of history. With the biases of history reinforced by schooling, the complex outcomes of WWI&II atrocities on, among and by the population find no outlet within subsequent nationalistic myths. One might expect a higher proportion of philosophers and spiritual seekers than in a more comfortable region, but it appears that the habitual diligence of these people may have substituted work for reflection; I cannot know. An unrecorded number of great Alsacians migrated and paid little homage to their homeland. Many were Jews, many were not – but the spirit of adventure was also mixed with that of desperation and so not recorded in the annals of the colonial Empires and their explorers.

An Explorer: Stanley

Of the great explorers of new terrains for the Europeans, Stanley stands out. For the whole continent of Africa he is without peer in his accomplishment. His flawed personality resulting from a terrible childhood was undoubtedly essential to his outputs, and yet he was harshly judged by those who stayed at home and did not wish to tested their own values.

In his engrossing tome 'Stanley: Dark Genius of African Exploration', Frank McLynn traces Stanley's life in detail through events and interactions with a psychological eye for explanations. It is a triumph of analysis woven into a boys-own adventure. He begins with the obfuscation that defined Stanley's representation of himself, which resulted from him being a pathological liar that sought to continually reinvent himself in others' eyes. Even his name was assumed, his date of birth fudged – as well as his nationality for long periods. And his autobiography, as if insufficiently encumbered by such vaguaries, was sanitized by his widow in her attempt to maintain the image of her 'hero'.

And yet he was a great man. Great because of accomplishments in exploration – finding Livingstone in an unknown continent, trekking through some of the world's most uninhabitable areas from one side of Africa to the other, and then back the other way a

couple of years later. Years at such tasks, led him to feel that he could only be himself in Africa engaged in such seemingly impossible tasks. And when back in his own culture he wrote about it at a rate of 8,000 words a day while corresponding widely at the same time. But his life in the Europe and America that yearned for such new feats of exploration was mostly a misery, as the criticisms of armchair moralists coupled with cheap parodies by mass entertainers and emergent sensationalism in journalism created and then destroyed his image.

Perhaps he overreached himself – but then to do less was to not be Stanley and to not accomplish what he did. Overreaching is a kind way to interpret his association with King Leopold of Belgium and the creation of what later became the Belgian Congo. Leopold was as duplicitous as Stanley but more ruthless and rich, and used Stanley as his agent to procure the country. And Leopold owned it personally, not Belgium – that came later when he sold it to the government in what seems just one more fantastic instance of European blindness to anything beyond its own shores. The excesses of violence and exploitation of Leopold's Congo are difficult to exaggerate.

Stanley set a ball rolling that Europe has forgotten to its own cost. Africa is joined to Europe in every way and cannot be ignored. In Britain, Lord Salsbury noted that, *When I left the Foreign Office in 1880, nobody thought about Africa. When I returned in 1885, the nations of Europe were almost quarrelling with each other as to the various portions which they could obtain*. The difference during those five years was Stanley's exploration. And while quarrelling has ceased, Africa continues to weigh heavily on the dark side of European responsibility.

Stanley also gives us insights into ourselves through his diaries. When starving, with many in his team dead, Stanley noted that *prayer precedes meat but praise comes after*, which accorded with his confused religiousity. Yet I wonder if he was that much different from many today when threatened and perspectives change from the tedious miscellany of everyday things to those that which really matter.

McLynn captures the plight of the man who has chosen to leave his tribe when he negotiates with Emin Pasha whom he has been sent to relieve – a European who has adopted an Arabic name and who lives as a local princeling while following his naturalist hobbies. When Stanley asked, before almost forceably removing him, about returning to Europe he replied, according to Stanley. *I don't wish to return to Europe, I remember its restrictions, its tiresome etiquette, and the pettiness of its bye-laws. I could not breathe in an over-ruled atmosphere after the freedom of Africa. Oh yes, I know what the return to Cairo means, I should have plenty of sugared phrases for a short time and then be relegated to the corner of a coffee house, and soon forgotten*. What a statement! It captures the lament of all who have known adventure and life in other cultures, and who have tried to return home. Stanley was one who returned and found Europe unwelcoming yet he lived out his life there – less contented than he could have been yet aware that physically African exploration required an outstandingly special and young physical strength.

These and many other things may be learned from the life of Stanley – a man who today would be certified as psychopathic and locked away. If ever the dictum that *progress was never made by a contented man* was true, it was in men like Stanley. Combining traits of leadership, persistence and ruthlessness in the pursuit of an objective, he would be praised by a certain competitive part of the modern society. But his reputation is doomed to languish as someone who failed to meet the artificial standards of an unreflective society that wanted what he did for them but did not want to know the methods by which their gains were procured. Rather like today's meat eaters who do not like the idea of abattoirs. Stanley, even with his warped worldview, understood the need for unsavoury means to produce the comfortable ends on which the Western world already had come to rely. In his retirement, he enjoyed a uniting engagement with the trees and gardens in Europe, the US as well as Africa.

Of Trees and Spirit

There are countless books on plants for the ordinary person, many of them paeans to the calm that gardens and arbours afford. They are revered as appropriate places for contemplation in ancient Buddhism, both metaphorically and geographically. They are lauded as places for restoring the spirit after bereavement or pain, and they are noted as places of numinous experiences by many. And I am well aware that my decades old idea hatched among the thousands of trees around my retreat cave has also occurred to others – indeed probably to countless numbers of others.

The bare eroding overgrazed pastureland atop the hills that made up the reject land on which I had 50,000 or so trees planted is today a forest. And through these years it has become a source of inspiration, relaxation and insight. The trees make an environment that easily becomes part of one, or is it vice versa – that one becomes part of the trees. As trees mature and die seedlings spring up in new life and remind me of the idea I had of one day being buried under a tree so that its roots might imbibe my nutrients to nourish wood that might one day become a table for future folk to eat from.

But that idea is also similar to that had by others, as I found when Roger Short and I made contact when I was writing the biography of Derek Tribe. Roger had even made a video – 'Touch Wood' – of how he wants to *become a tree*. He is 80 and thinking of such things more than younger men do. And he also leant me a wonderful book by Michael Pembroke – 'Trees of History and Romance', which is made up of short chapters about trees in Pembroke's arboretum in New South Wales. It is a warm book – he loves trees and their place in memory in both historic and romantic terms. For each tree he presents a miscellany of historical references, a note on his own specimen and a selected poem on the species. It is for reading when relaxed in mind and spirit.

An example of Pembroke's style is that for the Linden tree (*Tillia x europaea*), which is one possible association with my given name Lindsay as meaning *of the Linden grove*. But it has a much more distinguished and equally coincidental lineage thanks to the father of taxonomy Linnaeus. It is not named for him but rather him from it. In his time in Sweden, he would have had the surname *son of Ingemar*, for Ingemar was his father. But

when registering for university, rather than use that surname, he used a reference to a tree at the family's property, a Linden tree – in Latin *Linnaeus*. He became the man that Rousseau and Goethe lauded, perhaps because his taxonomical system is based on sexual classification of plants with Latin order names meaning such things as one husband, two husbands, polygamous etc and *all sorts of scandalous ménages* that led to attacks from the church. *The notoriety probably delighted Linnaeus, who was an unabashed extrovert* as Pembroke observes.

Pembroke's book revived in me a spirit for trees. It is one of life's delusions I know, yet such projections have their efficacy, such as in a poem I wrote a decade ago about a eucalyptus tree entitled *Slow Enchantment:*
My silent symbol of a languid land
lighthouse-like you solitary stand,
Rugged outward visage sets you apart
hiding your strong and durable heart,
Your sloughing skin unattractive to all
but the farflung few whom you yet enthral,
Others seeing you as grey, gnarled, unkempt
Thus only true lovers you tempt

You feel most at home in this bleached, leached earth
which scarce sustenance has slow bulged your girth,
This home is sparse, harsh, drink scant, and fare poor
You love life here and do not ask for more,
And while your offspring thrive on foreign soil
fast and tall in succulence royal,
I defy all to compare your physiques
You're harder, that is the mystique

For you've learned to stand the relentless light
by turning away not facing that fight,
The oils of your skin and your open pores
stop life-blood being sapped, your secret cause,
This harsh life breeds but survivors strong
who on those perished, dwell not long,
For this environment you're well equipped
You - the Australian eucalypt.

I started writing the biography of Derek as a tribute to a man who had helped me professionally. I expected it to open up some interesting dialogue with persons older than me – it worked, and Roger Short is one example. I might never have stumbled on Pembroke's book or revisited these thoughts had I not embarked on my work about Derek.

Such a peaceful book as Pembroke's is possible in a Western setting because it excludes the problems of the world from our everyday life. That's fine for we have always lived

this way, but for me, I also expect that we remain aware of the costs we impose to maintain our privilege. However, unlike many others, such awareness of our privileged life does not spoil enjoyment of it for me. For example, we train young men and women for war. We choose ordinary soldiers from the less well-off classes, and we give them an education through the military service. But when it comes to real fighting they must engage in the awful acts that most 'good' citizens prefer to ignore. That is what George Orwell means when he said, *Englishmen sleep soundly in their beds at night only because of rough men who are ready to do violence on their behalf.* Ignorance of such facts in a society of great privilege inhibits awareness.

Training to Kill and Maim

Grossman's intriguing book 'On Killing' deals with the innate human unwillingness to kill. Drawing from military history and psychology with case studies, he shows how more than 80 percent of personal arms up to and including the World Wars were not fired or at least not fired at any humans, including the enemy. The discovery, from retrieved guns being unused, or muskets loaded multiple times without shooting in the American Civil War, is somehow comforting. The majority of people have great difficulty killing others – even when ordered to do so.

The discovery led to two logical conclusions in the military. The first was to recognize the small percentage of people that could kill without thought or issues, and the second was to devise training methods to convert non-killers into killers. The first category turned out to be only around two percent of the population, and they were trained as assassins and executors. The second category led to a rise to 50 percent of men shooting in the Korean War and then to 95 percent in Vietnam. But the psychological cost was high – men trained to ignore their instincts eventually faced personal trauma. Particularly in the case of the Vietnam war the lack of a welcome on returning home or of acceptance by their community made it worse with the result that a large proportion of 'vets' never led full lives.

So what – war is like that, one might say. But Grossman also points out that the techniques developed to train men and women to shoot at other men, women and children are the same as used in video games. And he relates this to a rise in violent crime and psychosis in US society. He also notes that the two percent of sociopaths, who in wartime might be used as snipers and close-quarter killers, make significant contributions to society as ruthless captains of industry. And it seems that, in general, the majority of us want such persons in charge because we feel that such people can handle the tough decisions that we do not want to make themselves.

These two conclusions are what makes Grossman's book engrossing. The very persons we might fear for their sociopathic tendencies seem useful perhaps even necessary to society, and they are small in number. But the majority of the population with instincts against violence and killing are encouraged as undirected teenagers to hone their killing skills on computer and arcade games. They are then, if dissatisfied with society, made angry at a dangerous age with skills in violence. And we wonder why 'curry bashings'

and train violence occurs! We have in effect trained our young people to kill and maim and this will haunt them later. We can improve our management of the environment that young men grow up in and we can channel the small proportion of true sociopaths into useful leadership roles. But to assume all humans are naturally peace loving is denial – so rather than see this as some failure from a golden Eden we do better to acknowledge that such is the nature of humans – as can be seen in the Book of Genesis.

In the Beginning

Sweeping aside fundamentalist and literalist beliefs about creation, the first book of the Bible nevertheless provides some accurate and enduring descriptions of our nature. Much could be made of these psychological observations and Karen Armstrong in her book, 'In the Beginning: A New Interpretation of Genesis', provides a start. In fact, it may not be a new interpretation but rather an insightful reading that has occurred to many spiritual readers.

Part of her approach is common to that of Jack Miles in his fine book, 'God: A Biography', which shows the evolution of humans' understanding of their spiritual nature from a belief in a plethora of competing gods, to one who directs humankind, to one who is unseen but can cause difficulties if disobeyed, to one who is shown to be unfair according to his own (humanmade) rules, to one who is clearly brought closer to reality by uniting with man to make him whole. Karen Armstrong doesn't refer to Miles' book but does cite the German theologians who were the great interpreters of such work into our cultures. (Note: I must soon read Thomas Mann's 'Joseph and His Brothers' as both Andrew Blecher and Michael Olly have suggested).

Karen Armstrong's short book implies the beginning of that evolution, but more particularly indicates that God is not fair and never claimed to be universally fair, and that human happiness does not come from the trappings of wealth or even power. It comes as a blessing to those who understand the way that life works, and from that understanding, wealth and power may accrue and should then be used wisely. But wealth and power may also be gained by hard work and constant vigilance that can be accompanied by fear of loss.

So she describes unhappy families – all of them from Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob to Joseph. Within their families, Abraham and Joseph seem blessed but their lives had traumas. And she seems to imply that happy families are an anomaly – and perhaps do not exist. Likewise, she says that the spiritual seeker is less concerned about his family than would be considered responsible in today's age. Of course, today's reader can dismiss a text written by a small desert tribe more than two millennia ago as irrelevant to today's relationships, but I am less sure. The wise of all generations have preserved such literature – often at great cost – for they know it represents one of the great leaps forward in our understanding of ourselves. Human nature doesn't change markedly; we may think it does, but that is only the outward aspects affected by environment. At base, our spiritual natures guide us and determine our relative comfort with ourselves and life. Living in accord with our own natures might therefore be a definition of wisdom.

Wisdom

In an age of science our insights also come to us through that means, just as in a romantic age fictions were a guide to those with leisure sufficient to pursue their own understanding. Stephen Hall in his book, 'Wisdom: The Philosophy of Neuroscience' uses this introduction to present his interesting collection of behavioural and neurological research findings in his quest to understand wisdom. In some ways this accords with Heraclitus' advice that *applicants for wisdom should inquire within*. But such humour can distract us from a common and dubious assumption that wisdom can be understood in terms of knowledge.

The term wisdom is variously defined, and indeed Hall's definition seems to wander in the course of his thesis. Neverthelss, the book is absorbing and useful. One confounding issue is the assumption that wisdom increases with age – not meaning that all the old are wise, but that there is a chance that one might grow wiser with age. But is that simply the decline in functional neurons that accompany aging? Or is a rising tolerance of frustration allowing a general comfort as we age? The Confucian statement encourages we moderns to believe that minimal disruption is a goal. *When I was thirty I began my life; at forty I was self-assured; at fifty I understood my place in the vast scheme of things; at sixty I learned to give up arguing; and now at seventy I can do whatever I like without disrupting my life.* But Confucius lived in disrupted times. And it was he who, it is said, defined a wise man as one who knew what he didn't know. That too is but a partial definition.

We may approach the quest for wisdom from myths also, and in those on which our culture was founded we find Hall referring to Alter's revisionary translation of Genesis in which what has conventionally been referred to as 'original sin' becomes 'original wisdom' from the eating of the fruit of the tree of knowledge. Here is an important clue to the possible social benefits of religion overriding the personal benefits of spiritual growth, for uniform teachings of sin have been the powerbase of institutionalized Christianity. One possible conclusion from such an observation could be that the church has kept wisdom from the people, but that would assume that the ordinary people had time and resources to pursue greater insight. Now in an age where educated seekers have wide access and are not constrained by institutional censorship, a revolutionary time may be upon us, such as in the Axial Age. That is, if anyone reads the equivalent of scriptures and commentaries these days.

The fruits of wisdom are considered in Hall's book as eight chapters that share some similarity with spiritual traditions. Thus patience and other virtues are seen as emotional regulation, which in additional to learning seems to be a product of age. In evolutionary terms, genes that produced grandparents knowledgeable and balanced enough to help grandchildren attain reproductive age would have gained dominance. So perhaps we are such products, with the usual distribution around a norm. Again it seems to be part learning and part inheritance.

But learning is again too easily confused with wisdom in an age of so-called 'education' and access to 'knowledge'. As Montaigne observed, *even if we could become learned with other men's learning, at least wise we cannot be except by our own wisdom*. The learning component of wisdom is thus seen to be learning awareness of our minds, not learning facts, ideas and theories. That is what the learning from a long life offers, though that offering is not always accepted. It is as Winston Churchill quipped, *the young sow wild oats; the old grow sage*. But their wisdom may not be heeded as the French proverb relates that *the advice of the old is like the winter sun: it sheds light but it does not warm us*. It is always up to individuals to practice to development their own wisdom. Yet as postulated by Revel, the French philosopher made more famous by his son Mattieu Ricard's Buddhism, the allocation of ethics to politics removes it from personal life and so hampers the personal quest for wisdom.

Perhaps this is why wisdom seems rare despite burgeoning populations. Distractions abound and fill every moment so that cultivating self-awareness and reflection are sometimes reduced to consumable commodities to be sampled not lived. But living in times unconducive to wisdom has also produced those that we revere such as Confucius who advised *when the Way prevails under heaven, show yourself; when it does not, hide*. Montaigne went a step further when he said *the wise man should withdraw his soul within, out of the crowd, and keep it in freedom and power to judge things freely.*

So wisdom is an ideal to which one can usefully aspire, just like the ideal of enlightenment. Perhaps it is the same thing viewed through a different lens. In any case, striving for an ideal that is understood to be an ideal rather than an achievable reality means that one never attains that ideal. Does this mean that while ideals exist in that sense, a person who is continually enlightened is as non-existent as a constantly wise one? One does not have to be very wise to see that such pragmatics are not a reason for giving up, but an explanation of our minds. And in our age of information building on an ongoing boom in thought, it is inevitable that the path that has led us to this point will be a critical study – since it is that path that has conditioned our minds and possibly our genetics insofar as certain traits have not been favoured in reproduction, like sensitivity to the plague or uncivilized behaviours. Such reflections lead us to consider the past's link to the present, which explains why history, is a part of the path to wisdom.

Wise History

To question how we came to be as we are is to seek to understand our minds and place in nature. Some basic appreciation of it is a hallmark of a potentially wise and sometimes enlightened person. The statement sounds like hyperbole until we think about those learned persons who embody the traits of wisdom and see the simple truth that may be contained in that previous sentence. Of course, not all students of science or history are in this category. And in any case, those who do not live the civilized life of cities and libraries may also be wise without the distractions of detailed knowledge. Each type of wise person helps spread wisdom to different types of person.

Wise persons must have occurred across history, but there does appear to be a concentration of some who have been remembered from a unique period in history. Karl Jaspers in his book, 'The Goal and Origins of History', names the period that gave rise to the spiritual insights of what became the great religions as the Axial Period. The arising of similar insights across apparently unconnected continents – from Zoroaster in Persia, to Confucius in China, Buddha in India, the first Greek philosophers and the Hebrew Prophets – led to a huge advance in humans' understanding of themselves and the world. Those insights rank above those giants that define our era in the form Copernicus, Darwin and Freud. And it is interesting that of these it is the Indian and Chinese that have the greatest continuity in their original regions, but I cannot suggest what this means

Our own culture likes to take the Egyptians - a non-continuing culture – as its roots. It then traces it via the Greeks and Romans – a partially continuing culture – to the Renaissance and science. But the invented genius that is Christianity and its myths adopted in place of our earlier Western cultures' religions that was so embedded it into our consciousness now seems to be being rejected. Yet myths are critical to self-understanding and social cohesion. Some replace this with 'science' but as Jaspers points out, real science requires hard work and few are naturally able to do it or understand it. Yet with the majority who have no idea of science itself may still invent a belief in it, which is really a superstition that ultimately leads to contempt when the belief is belied by new knowledge, as science must always be.

Published in 1949, Jaspers' Jewish wife led to both being penalized as he inevitably deals with the history of Germany and Europe in his time. He concludes that history can be done many ways but is useful to society when it recalls that human are part of nature and that history is the foundation of consciousness. All these seem to be logical thoughts today – yet I note that, following the demise of philosophy in universities, history is now being scaled down to make it useful to applied fields. This is the opposite of what Jaspers distils from his insightful analysis, and a step further away from the lost insights of the Axial Period. Our technological developments have been applied to command the largest market, and so our cultural icons and communicators across generations are ever more diluted by practical considerations measured in monies. Where is the insight of the ages? Where does consciousness develop from without history and without insight?

Insight and History

Some folk take history as fact and memorize facts in the expectation that they understand the history of a period. But as Zhang Dai notes in his writings, such people are just 'walking bookcases' – they do not know the meaning of what is in their minds.

What are facts in history? Umberto Eco provides us with a telling concoction of what today – mislabelled in a different way – would be called anti-Semitism. And he does it cunningly in the form of a novel. And the people described in 'The Prague Cemetery' are monsters at times and endearing scoundrels at others; most seem so like fictional figures that is hard to believe that they really existed and the history was so distorted for so long. Indeed apparently it continues today for much of the mischief committed by the

'historians' who distorted the facts remains in vogue today. Eco himself has given us the marvellous statement that all of the characters in his novel, excepting the protagonist and some composite minor roles, *actually existed, and said and did what they are described as saying and doing in this novel ... But on reflection, even Simone Simonini [the protagonist], although in effect a collage, a character to whom events have been attributed which were actually done by others, did in some sense exist. Indeed, to be frank, he is still among us*.

This is concerning. To be sure we know that anti-Semitism or other forms of racism are ever present and rise up from time to time when civilization frays. That may be a major part of Eco message, but more compelling is his revelation that documentation of history – both recent and more distant past – is such a powerful tool that is worth forging. That is the heart of the story, of Dreyfus' story, of the Book of the Elders of Zion story, and so forth. So does history provide facts? Perhaps it is of most value if untied from emotions and unnecessary detail. That way it matters less whether the Dreyfus evidence was forged or not; the historical point is that persons like Dreyfus were being harassed, and that was the mood that reflected the trend of European society. As I have wondered aloud elsewhere, this has possibly created the mood of Europe itself.

I do not mean to be unkind to Europe. To offer balance, let me investigate myself. I feel that I, like my fellow Australians, lack the type of maturity once evident in Europe. This is not a great wonder for we are a young culture, only partially formed and still inventing our myths and values. But can they ever mature if they do not acknowledge their darker past realistically. By this I do not mean some modern utopian idea of parallel aboriginal and white-immigrant societies, or even beliefs that the mainstream aboriginal culture of 300 years ago has some deep continuity with today's marginalized aboriginal groups. Our history is biased, for example books about aboriginals such as John Strehlow's 'The Tale of Frieda Keyster' are reviewed but not read, and some like his grandfather Carl's 'The Aranda and Loritja Tribes of Central Australia' have not even translated into English from their original German. The facts that are not included in the history books are nevertheless reflected in the trends seen in such books as token speeches, excessive generosity of monies in place of sincere self-analysis, and forcing any action to come through the white political processes that remove individual responsibility to reflect. This view of Australia is realistic; so is that expressed above that the self-revered post-Renaissance house of Europe committed parricide when it purged its intelligentia in the 20th century. This is an example of what I mean in saying that insight in history assists insight into ourselves.

In the case of China in the 1600s, Jonathan Spence in his 'Return to Dragon Mountain: Memoires of a Late Ming Man' describes Zhang Dai outlining the a lack of learning from history, and incidentally the underpinning need for food security before any other refinement can be securely contemplated. For example, *... bandits came from a wide mix of occupations: there were unemployed soldiers and clerks, laid-off couriers, miners, landless laborers driven out of the desiccated farms, refugees from the Manchu-dominated areas north of the Great wall, Muslim and other traders who had lost the money as the Silk Road trade faltered. Initially restricted more to the northwest or to*

parts of Shandong province, the unrest spread into the centrally located and strategically crucial province of Henan by 1631 and was exacerbated by fiercely cold weather that froze the Yellow River solid in 1634. ... the government lacked the foresight to open the state granaries to feed the starving commoners. Had they done so, it would not have been hard to persuade the rebels 'to doff their armor and return to their farms, to sell their swords and to buy a calf.' But the sheer numbers of rebel groups proved unmanageable: 'Our central provinces became a wasteland. The buds and shoots were not trimmed so they extended wildly. The skin disease became a lesion.'

This poetic Chinese writing shows the same theme of history's trends and moods. And in the case of Zhang Dai, it was a means of self-understanding. Spence summarized his life as initially being one of an *expansive sense of progress that permeated that culture* of the late Ming with reformist schools of Buddhism, philanthropy, education of women, pursuit of science, medicine, the arts and music. Then the Ming dynasty fell to the Qing and Zhang Dai escaped to live a very precarious existence from shallow hillside soils without farming skills. The trauma of change was eased by his continuous self-imposed task to continue his writing of history. As Spence observes *as he toiled, Zhang began with patience and absolute concentration, to rebuild his mind and in words the world that he had lost. This work of mental reconstruction occupied him for close to forty years, until he was almost ninety. And when it was done, he died*.

Zhang Dai's life is thus another answer to my first introductory question of 'Why Write?'. What a wonderful tribute to a man who wrote of the lives of so many of his own time and times before him, and yet had no biographer, no eulogist – until Spence. And what a wonderful tribute to the insight that may be gained from history – reflecting on it, writing on it, not simply reading it for diversion or facts.

History as Life

Reading history such as Spence's adds dimensions to our own self-understanding from our own history and cultural formation. Our Western culture has proved to be one of the great cultures of history – albeit still young and under threat from its excesses. And whether most Westerners want to accept it or not, Christianity is one part of the heart of the Western culture.

Geoffery Blainey's 'History of Christianity' in one volume unifies disparate threads in what has been a remarkable phenomenon of civilization. It describes indirectly the force of conceptual thinking that pervades Western society and those many other societies that it has influenced before and since the colonial era. And it serves to confirm my concern about the ignorance of so many in the West today about their cultural origins. I have long seen that such ignorance both weakens the resilience in our societies and impoverishes the lives of those who remain unschooled in the origins of their worldviews. Worse even is a rise in views of individuality and free-choice without acknowledgement of precursor events and actions in one's mind.

One does not have to laud the accomplishments of Christianity in social terms – although Blainey provides many worthy examples – for it has been an integral part of the rise of a powerful culture. The overall product of a cohesive social system based on rule-of-law modified by Anglo-Celtic-Germanic values in the West and perhaps Latino-American and African values elsewhere has produced the variants of democracy with which we continue to proselytize the rest of the world.

It almost seems as if such a power-oriented value system was essential to Christianity's expansion. More open is the question as to the source of the genius that grafted new stories and beliefs onto an established Hebrew written and oral tradition. This extends to how concepts and myths from Greek and non-Hebrew Middle-Eastern cultures were integrated to form a cohesive whole that offers the same lessons of transcendence as other great religions yet inspires society to cohesion. Why would we, or any society, let such an essential asset slip from our grasp? It could only happen through complacency – a shift that downgrades where we have come from matter in favour of where we are going. The generation that does not know where it came from in these terms has also dropped study of history from its bedtime reading. And it is history that points to the decline of cultures that neglect their essential assets. Some might even go further and relate this to the demise of financial power and the rise of fanaticism in religion.

Dogmatic religion once served to manage uneducated masses. Today, the less educated may not even know themselves to be such when they are provided with comfortable lives and influence in society. A minor, yet telling indicator of the effect might be found in Robin Hood stories of anarchical behaviour defining the hero when power and religion are misused. Such myths were part of the overall story of the society – but without the context of Christianity and knowledge of one's history, such stories serve to licence vengeful behaviour in the minds of the ignorant.

Misused Anti-Heroes

The Australian Robin Hood is Ned Kelly. His story was once known to every young Australian and served to indicate the pointlessness of obstinate rebellion. The society, even if corrupt represents the norm, and that norm will change with time. The norm of rough police approaches in the Kelly story soon gave way to a stable and fair rule of law, which was the state under which young readers absorbed this romantic story.

Peter Carey embellished the myth in his romance 'The True History of the Kelly Gang' – 'true' referring to the book's mechanism of imagining detailed notes left by Kelly and discovered in a library. Reading this work, written in the style of a poorly educated Australian-born Irishman, creates a world of imagined slights and revenge justified in the eyes of fellow settlers who had also been subject to the abuses of authority and the Church. But revenge is such a poor tool that it turns back on the avenger, and in Ned Kelly's case leads to his end.

Carey leads the reader through hardships of ill-equipped land-hungry Irish settlers still living a battle against English authority in Ireland. Selecting poor lands, sometimes

because better lands were taken by informed Englishmen, each hardship in dealing with the new environment seems somehow linked to an abuse of police or the 'English' and an attack on the Catholics. In presenting it all from the viewpoint of the Kelly's – Ned in particular – Cary ensures that we live Ned's prejudices and limited education. And we can see how he saw himself as serving his fellow poor settlers by helping them when in need by sharing funds stolen from others; and we can see how he feels justified in fighting the police and legal system.

In some ways the Kelly story is similar to 'Dirt Music' and 'Cloudstreet' by Tim Winton, with their dysfunctional characters made by the author to masquerade as ordinary people; fun to read and follow but superficial in many parts – which ultimately detracts from the sound emotional parts. I find my reaction curious since I usually respond to romantic male worlds in the novels of Cormac MacCarthy and Coen Brothers' movies, and must conclude that while I am attracted to the Australianness and settings of Cary and Winton's novels, I find them lacking consistency and believable emotions. 'Dirt Music' reminded me of McCarthy's 'Suttree', but failed to engage me as much even though McCarthy's setting was less familiar to me. Coetzee can capture Australia well.

Cary and Winton assume the rule of law as context, which can make their protagonists seem antisocial, and those of the powerful seem to be bigoted manipulators of such persons as Kelly. Novels that capture the essence of males in modern society are important for societies that have not experienced war or economic depression for a more than a generation. Similarly, biogrpahies or books outlining life lessons from learned men can help younger men and women work together. In this category are some interesting life stories in science.

Science and Self-understanding

Great scientists often develop an understanding of life and themselves; not all but many of them. In this respect it is interesting to read the autobiography of my colleague Peter Doherty, the only Nobel Prize laureate that I am ever likely to know. His book, 'A Beginner's Guide to Winning the Nobel Prize' offers a clear explanation of the public's confusion over what science is, and therefore probably explains why so much information put before an unprepared public can be misused in advertising. But that is not his point. From a personal viewpoint, he notes that accolades draw top scientists away from their research, usually because they are drawn to explaining the value of science to society and deeply believe in the continuing need to attract funding. This seems true in Peter's case for, after I heard his oration to our CGIAR meeting in the World Bank's headquarters in the 90s, I immediately asked him to speak in my Dean's Lecture series at Melbourne. His book was a later response to many questions from an interested public.

While acknowledging Archimedes great contributions to science – *if he were around today, he might have won several Nobel Prizes* – Doherty notes that the common story omits the key elements of Archimedes story. The problem to which he apocryphally shouted *eureka* was one of comparing masses of gold and silver by water displacement – hence his bathtub shout. More importantly, he had determined a repeatable empirical

method. And so inductive reasoning – that which is *empirically rooted in the natural world* as expressed by Francis Bacon – has remained the basis of science. First observe in a repeatable process, then develop a theory that can be challenged by other verifiable observations, rather than deducing from a general theory thought up without empirical proof. This is a different from the public's understanding of what makes a scientific theory. And this is why teaching or talking about science is important, for to present scientific theories as facts is as boringly misleading as treating history as dates. For the bright mind, the fact that theories are ever challenged and ever changing offers an intellectual life that can ultimately explain life.

Recognizing the nature of science and of the general public presents politicians with a problem in science funding and is at its best when, in Doherty's words, *the carrot of R&D funding and the stick of regulatory requirements ... leads the innovation donkey to water*. But today's reliance on mathematical modeling also confuses politicians if they are not scientifically literate and similarly the public seeks an firm answer rather than a probability. Models are based on available empirical data from scientists complemented by estimates for other values, both of which may change. Kindly describing such theoreticians as *an amiable bunch [who] tend to drink a lot of coffee and beer, wave their hands around and white equations on white boards [producing outputs that] sometimes it is even possible to grasp ...* , Peter emphasizes the need for empirical testing and written papers. In this last respect he quotes Karl Popper's *only the written word is valid in science*, meaning peer reviewed publications.

Science is a common path for bright persons from ordinary backgrounds since it relies on merit. It does not mean that one has shone through the mind-numbing years of equalizing schooling. Peter himself notes that his only prizes until he started winning international research prizes were for Methodist Sunday School attendance. His chapter on religion and science, written mainly for Americans, notes that the Buddhist approach to scientific understanding of meditation for example, provides the open-mindedness that science can work with, unlike the 'belief' of religious fundamentalists. To paraphrase and perhaps embellish his words, whether its God for those so inclined or human survival or equity for those humanistically inclined, the response is the same – understand nature and work within it. A see it, this is the responsibility of all with the ability and opportunity. To abrogate the responsibility to think and understand how nature works and hence how we therefore work is to be subject to others dictates, as in dogmatic religion and dictator-driven societies, of which one example is depicted with uncomfortable graphicness in Orwell's '1984' for those 'professionals' who just did their work without understanding and were manipulated by the 'Party'.

Shirking Responsibility

George Orwell's '1984' depicts a controlled society with a large service sector in which employees believe they are doing something useful without really thinking about it. The novel predicted much of the path of modern technological society. Written in 1944, the novel follows a character who works professionally and is thus a member of the Outer Party. He works in the Ministry of Truth, meaning propaganda, continuously revising

archived newspapers and documents in order to accord with current events and as dictated by unknown parts of the Inner Party. His impulse to think outside the prescribed limits and to engage in risky behaviours lead to his reprogramming and ultimately being rendered as unthinking as the colleagues he once despised for their unquestioning worship of 'Big Brother'. Orwell's is a widely read and known story that has produced many sayings and thoughts that are part of our everyday conversation and worldviews.

Having read the book as a young man, I reread it decades later simply because I began to notice so many consistencies in press releases with the words that I though were in the novel. It was revealing to read it again, and to see that not only was my feeling of life imitating the novel correct, but also to notice that an element of personal existential search was also dealt with – to a different outcome than is fashionable today. But first I comment about the parallels in the role of science in today's society.

The scientism of today is dealt with, in the words of the novel: *In Oceania [one of three national agglomerations that follow the same principles – the others being Eurasia and Eastasia] as the present day, Science, in the old sense, has almost ceased to exist. In Newspeak [the language that was being imposed on all in the country] there is no word for 'Science'. The empirical method of thought, on which all the scientific achievements of the past were founded, is opposed to the most fundamental principles of Ingsoc [the political system of the novel – derived from 'English Socialism']. And even technological progress only happens when its products can in some way be used for the diminution of human liberty. In all the useful arts the world is either standing still or going backwards. The fields are cultivated with horse-ploughs while books are written by machinery. But in matters of vital importance – meaning, in effect, war and police espionage – the empirical approach is still encouraged, or at least tolerated. The two aims of the Party are to conquer the whole surface of the earth and to extinguish once and for all the possibility of independent thought. There are therefore two great problems which the Party is concerned to solve. One is how to discover, against his will, what another human being is thinking, and the other is how to kill several hundred million people in a few seconds without giving warning beforehand. In so far as scientific research still continues, this is its subject matter. The scientist of today is either a mixture of psychologist and inquisitor, studying with real ordinary minuteness the meaning of facial expressions, gestures, and tones of voice, and testing the truth-producing effects of drugs, shock therapy, hypnosis, and physical torture; or he is chemist, physicist, or biologist concerned only with such branches of his special subject as are relevant to the taking of life. In the vast laboratories of the Ministry of Peace [War], and in the experimental stations hidden in the Brazilian forests, or in the Australian desert, or on lost islands of the Antarctic, the teams of experts are indefatigably at work. Some are concerned simply with planning the logistics of future wars; others devise larger and larger rocket bombs, more and more powerful explosives, and more and more impenetrable armour-plating; others search for new and deadlier gases, or for soluble poisons capable of being produced in such quantities as to destroy the vegetation of whole continents, or for breeds of disease germs immunized against all possible antibodies; others strive to produce a vehicle that shall bore its way under the soil like a submarine under the water, or an aeroplane as independent of its base as a sailing-ship; others explore even remoter*

possibilities such as focusing the sun's rays through lenses suspended thousands of kilometres away in space, or producing artificial earthquakes and tidal waves by tapping the heat at the earth's centre.

In such a society, intellectual freedom is paradoxically defined in terms of conformity; *They could only become dangerous if the advance of industrial technique made it necessary to educate them more highly; but, since military and commercial rivalry are no longer important, the level of popular education is actually declining. What opinions the masses hold, or do not hold, is looked on as a matter of indifference. They can be granted intellectual liberty because they have no intellect*. One might say today that a policy to have 40 percent of the population enter university, as is current as I write, is the equivalent of reducing the intellectual rigour by 4,000 percent today, since enrolments are already 26 times higher today than in the 1960s, and the nation is not yet close to that 40 percent ideal. It is a great idea to educate as widely as possible, but that should include an individual unsuited to such learning being forced into it. Am I becoming an old fogey? Perhaps, for I cringe when I hear a half-educated person, often from the USA, who has completed a community college degree contining the word 'science' making a public statement 'as a scientist … '. It is coming to Australian as I write!

Now I return to the existential crisis of Orwell's central character after he is imprisoned for flaunting his disregard for rules. The three ministries of Oceania are Truth, Love and Peace. He works for the Ministry of Truth, which falsifies everything that does not suit the highest levels of the Party, and his punishment after arrest is conducted by the Ministry of Love (MiniLuv in the Newspeak of Oceania), which deals in brainwashing and torture. The other Ministry is that of Peace (Minipax), which wages continuous war to utilize and destroy the outputs of production – a parody of how the consumer society can be an end in itself. The system works by creating an aura of peace with fear from continuous war, of truth by realigning past facts to current needs and of love by brainwashing everyone into love for Big Brother as the ultimate protector and oracle. After his brainwashing and torture based on his innermost fears, he realises that *he had won the victory over himself; he loved Big Brother*.'

I read this final line with disappointment and sadness, as I had imagined that he would breakdown and understand himself and the system more completely, and then be unconcerned about it all. But Orwell has him completely reprogrammed to emphasize the extreme power of the system over the individual. There is no salvation, no enlightenment, no paradise here. Such is the society that arises from individuals with ability and opportunity choosing the wide road and the easy path of non-thinking and non-questioning. A parable for our times?

So, by way of contrast, I mention George Orwell's essay 'The Lion and the Unicorn' here. In it he observes that his [British] society is a *civilization in which children grow up with an intimate knowledge of magnetoes and in complete ignorance of the Bible. To that civilization belong the people who are most at home in and most definitely of the modern world*. He means technicians, skilled operators and in general the types that I see as in the same category as those super technologists and from whom I distinguish real

scientists who contextualize their life, thoughts and work in philosophy. Orwell's cleverness shines through in following his first reference to the Bible as not just a religious text but as a foundation of our culture. He uses a Biblical expression of the philosophy that guides the examined life by making *in not of the world* into it opposite *in and definitively of ...* . Loss of this common basis of the foundations of our society, which has given rise to great institutions including the older universities, allows the erosion of society's integrity. 'Updating' institutions, like thoughts and knowledge, does not mean abandoning the past, but retaining its proven essence, and part of that is to learn that just as there is a *time for every purpose*, rapid change is seldom beneficial unless the external environment has first changed rapidly.

Failing to Shore-up Our Foundations

As Orwell painted the demise of society and moral values under a culture of fear in his '1984', so Donald Meyer has described what he sees as the demise of the Australian university over the past decades in his 'Australian Univerities: A Portrait of Decline'. His e-book is based on his own experience as one who has worked in the professional sector and universities. Much of his criticism is drawn from his experiences at the Sunshine Coast University although he has a good appreciation of the overall sector and the forces under which it labours. I know something of which he writes from personal experience in a university operating at the other end of the spectrum to SCU, and can relate to much of what he complains about, including some actions I took myself.

Regardless of self-defensive reactions, I imagine that more than half of the senior academics and especially those in academic management posts will identify with the critique in general. And they will feel as powerless to change certain matters as I ultimately did – having made major changes while fresh, unjaded and in a honeymoon period and later having tired of the obstacles and devious actions inherent in the culture. Beginning as reasonable intelligent individuals, academics can morph with exposure to what is euphemistically called 'administration' into automatons who adopt the system's Newspeak and thought processes and become thought police. In so doing they fail to acknowledge the stress they placed non-believers under. This is a cynical way of describing what I consider caused several breakdowns, divorces and a death of persons who strived to maintain some sense in the face of naïve policies and demanding administrative nonsense. My own story is told elsewhere, but hardly differs from other Canutes who tried to hold back some tide or other among the senior ranks.

Meyers has struck a nerve. He will no doubt attract many readers even though he has been refused an academic publisher. While he deserves to be read, there is also a need for a more comprehensive book. His notoriety will be short-lived as universities are resistant to criticism and in political terms they 'own' time – they have often outwaited opponents. In this case the opponent is not Meyer and his followers or me but is the iniquitous system of which Meyer's complains. I have more faith than he in human nature – I see that we seldom truly excel and that universities work best when they realize that they provide the environment for potential excellence. Yes, universities should be elite; they should select carefully on the basis of intelligence, grounding and motivation. Current

expectations that 40 percent of the 18-24 year old cohort should be in universities is unlikely to last long – the only way it can is to change the definition of university and to charge real fees. And as this occurs, some serious universities will separate themselves from the pack. At the same time, some smart students will study abroad, including in Asia where some universities are already better than any in Australia.

The culture of fear that pervades current universities allows the growth of unnecessary administrative staff and functions as well as dumbing down programs. Fear is expressed in such forms as fear of being retrenched as well as the fear that excellence may lead to penalties when rewards are linked to popularist values. But it is made worse by considering that many who enter the vocation and commit themselves to the highest levels of achievement in their fields are unusual personalities that find the gregarious talkfest atmosphere of committees stressful. They are also often persons who do not seek help for their concerns and so go unnoticed until they collapse.

It is a far cry from the independence and efficiency of the university that I recall and of which I have read. It reminds me of a wonderful line I heard from Oxford's Wilfred Beckerman about the plethora of committees growing with as the tentacles of bureaucracy extended, viz: *Few bureaucrats are likely to dispute the necessity for such a group since for many people committees are places where conversation is a substitute for the boredom of work and loneliness of thought, so that the opportunity to sit on a new committee is always welcome*. A *substitute for the boredom of work and loneliness of thought* captures the new age approach to tertiary education. My hope is that the general curriculum being introduced by the University of Melbourne will arrest some of the decline and nonsense, but then it is easier at Melbourne as it is wealthy and already attracts the brightest students with the most consistent education ethic.

Meyer provides a service in highlighting the drivers that are causing the current reductions in standards. It might help the inevitable evolution to a new era for that segment of society that can benefit from a good university education. Whatever eventuates is likely to be as good as it ever was, yet different as it must operate in a world of exponentially increasing information. It is almost a parallel with Malthus's fear that geometric growth of population would outstrip arithmetic growth in food production and result in disaster; some today might say the information in increasing exponentially and knowledge is increasing arithmetically. But I think that forgets the ways in which we assimilating new information. Older minds may be having difficulty keeping up with such thoughts.

So I remain optimistic that learning and elite education will continue. It is a drive in those with natural ability that will only be satisfied by seeking such learning. In this way, the outcome is the opposite of that in Orwells's 1984 – rather than us all being cowed and untimately believing in a compromised system, we can see the changes in society as being something that does not necessarily include us as we age. Rather than assume that age brings wisdom we might say that what is called wisdom is simply recognizing the way things are and the direction of changes. In fact that is one way of interpreting ancient

scriptures, such as those of Buddhism. It also seems to me to be the essence of Islam when it is described as submission.

An Islamic Experience

If Islam is poorly understood in the West, the current polarization of 'cultures' is not likely to help. This is just one of the reason why I was delighted to agree to Nick Hughes' request to write an introduction to his book about his personal experience as a Muslim on Hajj. That preface reads:

Rare are works that combine personal revelations with explanations of Islam in language to which other Westerners can relate. In publishing his book, 'My Account of The Hajj: The Pilgrimage To Mecca And Medina As Witnessed By A "White Anglo–Saxon" Australian [Muslim]'(- the final word being my suggested addition in editing the text for publication through our IID offices), Nick Hughes has done a great service to his countrymen – both Australian and Indonesians – as well as to Islam. His generous descriptions of observances as a pilgrim to Mecca may seem to some readers to be like those thousands flocking through Europe on El Camino de Santiago. Among those who tread that Way of St. James, there are some who may share such a spiritual experience. But the Hajj is different: all are pilgrims more than tourists, and they come from every continent in their millions to one centre at one time to practice rites replete with instructive symbolism.

In his presentation, Nick has viewed his Hajj experience through his cultural lens of a Christian upbringing and education enhanced by living in an Islamic manner for several decades. As an international agricultural scientist for decades he has had broad exposure to diverse cultures, and so is a keen and sympathetic observer of the wider aspects of life. Such cultural background allows him to present occasional Biblical references to explain Islamic practices without comment of the different interpretations that have resulted in the transmission of old stories. It is another example of the overwhelming similarities between traditions.

Divided into three sections – a personal Preface that introduces the reader to the author, a diary that makes up the main text, and a glossary and bibliography – the work is a wonderful introduction to Islam for the uninformed.

As a diary, the work animates the quotidian life of the Hajj in an engaging style reminiscent of writings from an earlier period of exploration. Occasional repetition itself pays homage to the Quran and its invocation to recite. By refining the text over nearly two decades, the intent of pilgrimage is also made clearer to the reader; for that the Hajj is both a specific voyage to Mecca and a recommitment to a lifelong spiritual journey. And that is the source of the serene contentment seen in the faces of many Hajjis.

Throughout the diary, terms like 'meditate' and 'reflect' alert to personal experiences unembarrassingly to reader and author alike. When he says that 'the Hajj inspires a deep

sense of serenity, humility and affinity with the Almighty', Nick is not just invoking one of the 99 Islamic names of God, he is expressing a personal revelation.

At the same time, Islam's special focus on integrating social ethics with spiritual dimensions is interwoven through such contextual examples as animal welfare and support for the poor. Such writings are rare in general, and rarer still among educated persons from Nick's part of the world.

In admitting that 'the Hajj did change my life', the explication continues in the language of Islam. Non-Muslims will have their own words to explain the same transitional experience. The beauty of having it expressed in this way is that a boy from an Australian farm, with a sound education in a country imbued with Christian principles who became a man with a lifetime of international exposure, can relate in a straightforward and comprehendible manner what are to many, foreign practices.

May his book be read widely.

These words introduce the nature of spiritual searches following traditional Mulsim practices, and offer – I have observed – much more than the attenuated alleys of popular quests, even those that enter through the door of morality.

Morality, a Luxury of Good Times

Morality and ethics is one of the key paths to understanding in Buddhism, which of the great religions seems to appeal to our rational age, and for me to augment the essnce of Christianity. It refers to one's personal ethics as an instructive devise to hone habits into behaviour that is conducive to a state of continuous contentment. In other religions, it serves the same function, and in all it is easily confused with social conformity and cohesion. Fine outcomes as these may be in themselves, they are not the aspirations of the spritual traditions.

In a secular world, where the modern religion may be a mix of such beliefs and other -isms as democracy, ecological concern, multiculturalism, global harmony, popular philosophy and so on, we find such fine ideals as treating animals as if they have rights. I agree, but not only for the reasons offered by most advocates, but also because of the effect it has on us as individuals as per the deeper spiritual teachings. And I note also that spiritual traditions often warn not to mistake the special nature of humans.

It is easy to forget that we are necessarily superior in an environmental sense, especially in the case of some rudderless modern philosophies unattached to spiritual understanding or quests. Thus, as Dixon examines in 'Animals: Emotion and Morality', we have countless literary, 'scientistic' and other well-meaning works that project emotions and morality onto animals. The book, while boring in its US college-style prose, nevertheless provides a clear response to the question as to whether animals should be ascribed morals. The answer is 'no', not in the sense that matters to humans in their development or in their social interaction. The answer is not quite as definitive as I represent here, but

the book does note that the difference between humans and animals is important. It need not mean superiority, and it does not undermine the evolutionary continuity on which our worldviews are based.

This is not a great insight. It is of interest mainly because such a large proportion of literate Western society seems to imagine that these matters are being determined for the first time today. How much better to recall that the accumulated wisdom of the ages contained in experience and knowledge is available if one applies oneself. Thus animal welfare, a subject which I continue to advocate and orient funding towards, is a necessary subject – not just for animals' sake, or for the increased agricultural productivity that it allows, but because it affects our own inner peace.

Such matters are more readily and logically considered under a framework of personal ethics and spiritual practice. To seek answers through applied philosophy may seem to lead to a similar answer when times are comfortable and one feels 'safe' in a rich Western culture, but it can be shed as unnoticeably as a snake sloughing its skin off when times change, such as in war when ethics assume a highly specific meaning that deviates from philosophy and rules.

Western Society Stripped Bare

Whether it is comfortable ethics concerning animal rights or idealistic conventions during wartime, both are lost when real war begins. And even worse perhaps than the war itself is the collusion of all sides to misrepresent the events and actions of the war, and the aftermath during which worse excesses may take place. Such is the environment detailed in Keith Lowe's depressingly vivid 'Savage Continent' in which he describes the immediate post WWII years of 1944-49 in Europe. Upon reading it, I felt foolish not to have believed the war somehow ended on a certain date, as had been taught in my remote corner of the world, where the civilian population was so relatively untouched by those events or even most in the Pacific. In saying this I am conscious of today creation of national myths about the period that aim to fill a need in the identity of a young nation.

The reality of the barbarism of WWII – wreaked by European upon European – gave licence to persecute those who were different after the truce had been sounded. Thus Lowe details in relentless sadness the details of massacres, torture and deprivation imposed by enemies upon one another until everyone was an enemy, had an enemy and was complicit in the atrocities. The 'victorius' Allies must be also included it seems, since young men in an ungoverned land easily revert to primitive ways. Heart-warming stories of compassion that are completely dominated by widespread enmity. As the children of a generation of peace, such incomprehensible violence makes it a great wonder that Europe was able to reinvent itself so quickly. One ongoing price of such a reestablishment is suppression of what had been done, with consequent ongoing psychological traumas. After considering Lowe's work, official histories can seem to be more lies than myths. As fabrications are pulled apart by a generation removed from personal involvement in the events, I cannot see anything but a further period of bewilderment and depression for Europe. But it seems I am far from the majority,

especially when I suggest that the traumas of the unifiying project of the Euro, for example, is more than a monetary crisis and may be an expression of an existential malaise that defines Europe. And it is again folly to suggest such ideas to those caught up in past glories and faddish following of European lifestyles and 'culture' to fill the boredom of 'retirement'.

This is why Lowe's book is so important. He claims it is the only one on the subject because all others have a political purpose of distorting events to protect a nation, one group or another, or to obscure matters that could lead to resurgence of old enmities. I can understand that, but the nature of intelligent research means that further analyses will now be conducted – and that is what the book serves to inform. To set the scene for we privileged moderns, Lowe asks us to *imagine a world without institutions* and goes on to explain a world with no borders, disappeared communities and towns, no governments at national or even local levels, *no schools or universities, no libraries or archives, no access to information*, occasional radio but mainly in foreign toungues, no news, no railways – or cars, telephones, telegrams, post offices, banks, money with value, shops, factories … or law and order. It made me think of Mccarthy's 'The Road' in its apocalyptic emptiness, or like the warscapes I have seen in Indochina and Iraq. But this is set in a European climate and peopled by those who effect a cultural superiority. Lowe is not describing the legacy of war but also the environment in which the worst so-called peacetime atrocities that I have heard about occurred.

In many ways, it seems that the excesses of Nazism won out, for having undergone dreadful treatment under that regime, survivors seemed to assume a licence to act in the same way afterwards. So *ethnic tensions become worse. Jews continued to be victimized* and *aftermath of the war also saw the logical conclusion of all the Nazi's efforts to categorize and segregate different races*. Thus *tens of millions we expelled from their countries in some of the biggest acts of ethnic cleansing the world has ever seen*. The license to remove the constraints of civilization defines the Europe that grew into what we know today, and to me explains far more than assumptions that modern Greeks are related to the ancient Greeks, that Italians once accepted the discipline of the Roman Empire – or even that the idle rich fantasies of 19th century Tuscany or Provence are somehow related to the residents of today. Harsh as it seems, it allows a fresh appreciation of Europe and defines its difference from the New World. This makes Europe a place to learn about our natures.

Lowe provides an explication of the possible reasons for the unmitigated violence against fellow residents throughout Europe. While it is one thing to say that the Nazi's let loose the dogs and reigning them in took decades and deep compromises, the book also allows the reader to understand that the German war was *only one ingredient in this vast soup of different conflicts*. Their defeat did not mean an end to the violence that had been allowed to vent and was fueled by longstanding hatreds. Thus conflicts continued for years after the German surrender, such as the Ukrainian and Lithuanian partisan movements that fought into the mid 1950s. WWII *was like a vast supertanker, ploughing through the waters of Europe: it had such momentum that, while the engines might have been*

reversed in May 1945, its turbulent course was not finally brought to a halt until several years later.

In concluding that the Old Continent was destroyed by WWII, Lowe notes that a new Europe grew out of the mess complete with *hopes, aspirations, prejudices and resentments*. *Anyone who truly wants to understand Europe as it is today must first have an understanding of what occurred here during this crucial formative period. There is no value in shying away from difficult or sensitive themes, since these are the very building blocks upon which the modern Europe has been built*.

Europe showed how humans behave. We may claim that Europeans are warlike races and that this is how they became great, and if that's true we are all equally complicit in the excesses. Or we may say that the process of civilization is punctuated by war and that each civilization eventually crumbles under its own unresolved internal conflicts, which in turn allows another civilization to rise. It is a biological model – one that treats a social culture like a petri-dish culture that declines when it overuses its recyclable resources – and it seems to suit a simplistic view of history. But it also means that we who luxuriate in heretofore unknown wealth have only one way to go as a civilization if we wish to maintain our values. To me that way is shown by the New World experiment of absorbing new cultures, peoples and ideas while avoiding bewilderingly obtuse philosophies. It means allowing our culture to change and governing in a manner that manages that change. Thus, just as tribal animist cultures once defined Europe, the future of our culture may be to develop a browner or yellower face and wider worldview than was once thought to be European.

That European Indian Summer

The lessons of WWII remain. They are closer than previous wars in more than time for communications ensure we relive and revise such events continuously. We are still learning about them – in fact it may well be true that today's generation has the opportunity to know far more about those wars than the generation that participated. So much was suppressed, and as yesterday's methods of suppression now seem rather quaint earnest seekers can now discover previously withheld information. And once we do learn more it colours our understanding of other matters we thought we knew, and new things that we read and learn. Such was the case when I carefully read Goethe's 'Faust'.

A new translation by David Constantine is easy to read, poetic apparently in the same manner as the original German and contemporary in its use of words. No longer is it necessary to tone down explicit details that were more acceptable in Goethe's intellectual circles than among his later English readers. In relating Goethe's work to the previous discussion about WWII I am not alluding to the 'superman' that Nietzsche embellished and the Nazis misused. That longbow does not span the credibility gap for me. Rather I note that Goethe wrote eclectically and blended unrelated themes and segments by some clumsy bridging sections reminiscent of my own writings. And in such writing, he exhibits the breadth of his reading and scholarship in a manner that must inevitably have separated the intellectual class from both the majority of society, and from reality. That is

not meant to mean that the masses know best or contain more of the 'salt of the earth' any more than any other class, but it is a way of saying that Goethe's thoughts were not for the common man. Yet German friends claim they were, or at least are today. If that is true, then Germany should be better off than Australia and without any hint of nationalism I must say soon to tell, but it doesn't look that way so far.

To understand Goethe's 'Faust', I feel that one needs two foundations – a German reader might say three. The two are: a sound religious education, mainly Christian but also exposed to eastern worldviews, and some knowledge of the original ideas that lead into Faust and their representation in various other forms and languages. The third foundation, which I do not have is a knowledge of Goethe's times and current issues, and of course language. Constantine in his notes helps the ignorant English reader on this last point and allows us to see some of Goethe's motivations. But the link I see with the post-Goethe developments in Germany and Europe until today is shared with the rest of the Western world; that is the loss of education about religion, cultural and historical matters that form the foundation of Western society. At least in the past so-called 'peasant classes' had their versions of religion in their stories, folk tales and lifestyles. Today's equivalent of the 'peasant class' might be described as educated yet not engaged intellectually; in the migration-based country of Australia it is curiously embarassing to find Asian migrants who know more of Western culture than European decendants whose families have lived here for generations. This is a risk for any society in my view; just as the separation of Goethe from the masses turned out to be, so it may well be again for us.

As Goethe has Mephisto say:
Sister you are out of touch. Things have moved on.
You trade in what has been and gone.
Get into novelties instead,
If it's not novel no one's interested.

In Part II Geothe become more novel in his treatment of Greek and other stories. The introductory sections of Part II give his view of the reader – one that I can identify with in an age when draft readers' and publishers' always ask what is the audience for a work. Goethe once said in a conversation with Eckermann that *The audience is no concern of mine. The main thing is that it is written. People must do there best with it and make whatever use of it they can*. And we can make much of it, for he addresses his own fears and dreams in such a way that it can speak to most readers who take the time to accept it as poetry, and have a semblance of education.

Mestipho again gets the best lines, such as in Act One when he observes of the common person,
The fools discern no link between
Happiness and earning it.
They might own the philosopher's stone
And yet of all philosophy – not one bit.
Thus ordinary life goes on, today as a product of the era Goethe was ushering in for Western society, and it is happiness itself that has become a right, not its pursuit. This

renders all the philosophy of ancient sages into aphorisms and recipes for happiness. It is a long time since I heard someone acknowledge that it was the pursuit of happiness that gave them the feeling they most associated with happiness, rather than the attainment.

But that is not the main theme of Faust. The theme is, so far as I discern it, that life is here and now and not part of a post-death continuity. The idea is easy to accept today but was perhaps more radical in Goethe's time, and hence Faust is an important challenge to the romance of heaven or the palliative in place of thinking that was offered to many. I can only imagine that plays made of Goethe's Faust would vary from each other in the diverse interpretations that each director could bring to a story from his own background and experience of life. And for those brave interpreters who see Goethe as part of a prelude to the excesses of the Germans in World Wars I and II, the pride in the superiority of the 'race' and enchantment with Wagner might be seen as a fillip to Nietzsche's malappropriated 'superman' and its direct links into those excesses. Thus a glorious period of German creativity in so many fields blossomed in this Indian summer before that Great Storm, from which none of Germany, Europe or Western society has yet recovered. Notwithstanding this insight, I sometimes delude myself into thinking that the New World has emerged from this shadow.

New World Now Old

The new world benefits from its youth and being unconstrained by the weight of history, such as the continuous wars that have characterized Europe until this generation. As a child of the new world, I am often surprised by our stability compared to others with whom I work, socialize and otherwise meet in diverse nations. I feel completely Australian; I know the culture is infused with British origins but feel no special affinity with that nation beyond the shared cultural aspects. To myself I define what being Australian means: I value its principles of fairness and compromise, and the degree of choice about engaging in militant patriotism and unnecessary myths. It is easy to imagine that Australia might be better freed from the burdens of European history including Britain's, but while I think this might be true for some matters, it is not for all matters some of which are very important. However, new worlders can also make disastrous mistakes as I will soon mention.

Potential is indicated by the proportion of Australians in significant international roles, as Simone has brought home to me. This is not some claim to superiority, and in fact throughout much of our history we have labeled ourselves inferior having in large part originated from peasants, convicts and mendicants. But in fact each of these in their own way stimulated opportunism and perhaps that is a defining origin. But more than this, I see that the freedom, indeed the necessity in many cases, to do things oneself – 'to have a go' – has created a tolerance of failure if one had tried and then tries something else without giving up. And this incidentally highlights a possible rising issue in today's Australia where acting the victim or relying on someone else's grandess has been uncritically rewarded. Apart from that rising issue, the willingness 'to have a go' produced a confident, realistic and reliable person, the demise of which is evident when

wordly awareness is not practiced, which always ends in tears – as has been the case of the Australian wool industry.

Charles Massy in his 'Breaking the Sheep's Back' describes in detail the largest corporate/business collapse in Australia's history, one that led to the demise of a once dominant industry and caused extreme hardship, poverty and suicides in Australia and around the world. His book is absorbing in the disfunctional style of a Coen brothers' movie, for as I read the detail of a story I knew in general, the details left me with the feeling that no one could have been so consistently stupid and could not see how each little stupidity was compounded on earlier ones. To take the nation's leading industry that produced most of the nation's wealth and to encourage substitute products to be developed while degrading the quality of the Australian wool when it represented 80 percent of the world's wool supply seems negligent in retrospect. In corporate terms, some might say it was criminal. Today it would probably be considered that way, just as it was for the Australian Wheat Board when it was caught paying bribes – a less serious crime in many ways. But I am talking about the wool industry, and the debacle that it is only two decades ago, some of the culprits of which continue to have influence.

Of course it is easy to criticize by hindsight. Nevertheless, it does provide a counter example to the introduction to this piece, and shows how new worlders can fool themselves en mass. Wool's 150 years of dominance and wealth was washed away by pride and ignorance, even in the face of being advised of the foolishness of trying to control markets, of continuing to sell just a bulk commodity rather than segregate by quality, and to stockpile wool across years. Having set the price at four times that which the market could pay and degrading the global industry, development of competing fibres proceeded apace producing such fallout that government was eventually forced to end the folly. But far from being the hero, government had actually helped create the debacle by being complicit with old-world type landowners who claimed the right to continue, as we were taught in school about our nation's economy, to 'ride on the sheep's back' by just substituting the sheep's back with the government's back. It provides another lesson in the role of government – it is not there to interfere in functioning markets except for major changes that could impact the whole society. The excesses were a product of the new world, for while worse silliness has occurred in other free market nations through history, such as the Dutch with tulips, others have learned from such mistakes. Perhaps young nations like young men must learn from their own mistakes. I hope so.

We are all subject to the same human weaknesses, and the very independence that Australia breeds may well produce a blindness of our own limitations. But a global industry that universally tells the Australians that it is acting wrongly should be heeded. What a debacle; what hubris; what incompetence; what a shame. I have always felt privileged to have been born here, to grow up with the openness to experience and to the education that the nation affords. I know it is not perfect in many ways, but the lesson that this remote new world island offers opportunities long-forsaken in the old world should be reinforced to the next generation. Massy's book incidentally confirmed my unsubstantiated opinion that my successor as Dean at the University of Melbourne was stressed into a premature death by the complex pressures of the University. Why do I

think this? Because before becoming Dean he was a senior voice against this folly within the wool body that produced this awful bungle; as an economist he opposed the status quo. He could withstand that tough environment and its recriminations, and eventually oversaw the dispersal of the huge wool stockpile. The University proved an even harsher master and a strong-minded man succumbed. But then older universities retain many Old World practices …

I suppose that the new world is really no better than the old. Perhaps our pervasive modern idea of progress disrupts our vision of history. Maybe excesses recycle as memories fade and human behaviour stays the same, as is often said in Asia.

Progress and Regress in Lao History

Western historical views of the country of Laos contain romantic notions of traditions and poverty mixed with a desire to retain elements of these while modernizing. But perhaps our notions of development and progress are dependant on our values, and perhaps both progressive and regressive periods can be seen as segments of a cycle. Such thoughts are not new. They have enriched my own worldview since I entered Asia decades ago, and now such an understanding assists my reading of of 'A Short History of Lao: The Land in Between' by Grant Evans.

The book is nicely and sympathetically written without undue political bias, and had special meaning for me since I had spent so many periods in Laos from 1980 when I was one of the very few Westerners allowed to travel in the country. The book was also special because I knew the author having often met Grant in Melbourne as the only other local who knew Laos and had some similar interests to my own. So when in the rural Victorian town of Yea as part of Simone's 60th birthday treat at the Peppercorn Hotel, we strolled through the weekend market and I spied Grant's book on a secondhand book stall, I bought it immediately. The seller had clearly read it and had been in Laos, but I did not wish to engage with her, for my Laos and that of Grant was less of the romantic soft-fabric and sandled version or luxurious spas of modern Luang Prabang and more of the culture of resilence that characterized so much of the country where the Pathet Lao beat the foreign forces and formed government.

The book starts its history with the Tai people who migrated into the region and interacted with other Tai kingdoms. This immigrating Chinese tribe formed such kingdoms as Chiangmai, Sukhothai and Ayuttaya, which were matched for a time by the Lang Xang kingdom centred on Luang Prabang. But as economic and political advantages relied on rice fields, manageable irrigation, sea access and international trade, Laos could not develop as far and became a secluded poor cousin in the wider Tai zone. Colonized half-heartedly by France as a remote part of Indochina affored some benefits, but these were ultimately lost when nations were formed and Laos lost its Vietnam-centred education and administrative developments. Struggles against the French and later indirectly the US as part of the Vietnam war led to Laos playing a key unofficial and hence undocumented part. All factors worked together to make Laos poor.

Then the US withdrawal from Vietnam allowed the internal Lao conflict to be won by the nationalist, otherwise called communist, Pathet Lao. What duplicitous propaganda we were subject to in which the Pathet Lao were wholly evil and somehow a threat to the world; I was to work closely with many of their generals, uneducated men who remained barefoot as government ministers and spoke a version of Lao I that was sometimes incomprehensible to me. The definitive day of independence was December 2, 1975. I recall vividly being in Vientiane in the sacred That Luang pagoda's grounds for the five year celebrations, which were replete with Russian military paraphernalia and patriotic music and speeches that I found impressive and unthreatening. My successive visits on behalf of the World Bank, Australia, UNDP and later the Asian Development Bank and private groups meant that I spent more time in Lao than all but a handful of foreigners in the period 1979-1985. Enjoying more freedom of movement than those officially based in country meant that I visited most agriculturally important regions, often with minimal company as Lao officials through this period were more concerned with scraping a living than detailed government studies. I still regard it hving been a great privilege to have mixed people recovering from undeserved bombings and other war damage in subsistence lifestyles as we communicated easily in an imperfect mixture of Lao and central, Esan and northern Thai.

Grant's book reminded me of an evening after an obligatory dinner with multiple laolao toasts replacing vodka at the only approved restaurant in Vientiene with Rasami, who was Minister for Agriculture and related portfolios at the time. He, like many of his fellow Pathet Lao generals had assumed such top posts in their new government and were totally ignorant of what a ministry should do. After dinner as we walked home in the dark pot-holed streets devoid of vehicles, Rasami put his strong arm about my shoulder and continued to regale me with stories that I could understanding enough of to reply engagingly. So as I was the only one that he felt he could communicate with, I became the successive interprettor of what the World Bank would next do to continue underwriting the economy. Rasami spoke a version of Lao from the north that I never completely fathomed; he had lived in caves and was known to have violently killed many from the opposing forces during the war. I found him charming. I also formed a good although more distant relationship with his successor, a short man unlike Rasimi, like so many of the Laos that had suffered deprivation over the past 40 years. He would sit in his Ministerial office on a straight backed wooden chair bare foot with his legs crossed on the chair in the centre of the room and in simple ragged dress dispense unusual ideas on development to which I offered occasional information. It was a world in which I felt special and was consequently one that proved difficult to share – which is presumably why I have indulged myself in this long tangent.

It all changed – progressively and regressively – with neighbouring Thailand's economic boom and younger Lao people becoming employable. My own utility waned as routine development statistics became the basis of development planning. On later visits I have enjoyed the development, and lamented the country's loss of what to me was Lao-ness.

Even with my privileged access to the country and its culture, I found Grant Evan's discussion of the period enlightening. I had never been able to piece together the external

and internal forces at work, and his lucid descriptions of the extremes that the country put itself through provided a context for those and other unshareable memories. Other foreigners increased in-country, mostly for specific and limited technical roles and one or two adventurers that were larger than the life in action novels. Many Laos and some of the few foreigners were killed in the period I worked there; Laos were sent to 'seminar' to never return, or just shot. One fellow whom I met several times in the early 1980s had an agricultural diploma from Dookie College, which was a college I merged into the University of Melbourne in a later life. It was too dangerous to become close as he was under scrutiny as a Western-trained person. In later more relaxed decades, he became a businessman and by chance I met him at a New Years' party in Vientiene with some visting Australian-based Laos and we each had difficulty remembering each other. Prison camps continued, perhaps they still do, and yet tourists insist that Laos is an idyll that represents a past Asia. Another way to see it is as a forgotten pawn in half-hearted Western games and consequently increasingly influenced by China.

Lao has been around the wheel of time several rotations, including progressing to become the Lang Xang kindom, fading to become a vassel in Indochina, dreaming of a socialist utopia and succumbing to uncontrolled capitalism. It will continue to cycle, for it is the way of the world, the way of nature, of birth death and rebirth. Asian cosmology has this deeply embedded within it. I feel that this is something that Australians would benefit from learning in order to understand their own lives and land, perhaps as aboriginals once did; then Australia can be part of Asia. Yet this opportunity is squandered daily as we deny to ourselves that other world influences are increasingly blending with that of the West.

Our Western Delusion?

In the colonial era when European nations assumed forms of ownership over the resources, lands or products of various parts of the world, New World nations were either in the colonial category themselves, or asserting new policies that would have even greater impact. Thus in the 1900, the USA introduced an 'Open Door' policy that presaged today's free trade grail and was able to effect benefits from imports without taking responsibility for their costs of production. However, it was not in fact new – colonial trade was based on the same ethic. It was continuance of this mode of dominance that cemented the them-and-us scenario that Pankaj Mishra in his 'From the Ruins of Empire' eloquently describes as leading to independence movements around the world and Japan's actions in WWI & WWII based on the West being characterized as the 'white peril'.

Based on successful approaches from colonial Britain, trade without colonization was refined by the USA as it grew in international awareness and based its foreign policy on trade leading *the flag of the nation*. The policy was implemented with force – *the doors of the nation which are closed must be battered down* as Woodrow Wilson remarked in his 'History of the American People'. The rules of international trade were being changed radically in this period, and allowed such businessmen as Rhodes in Africa and Reuter in India to gain huge franchises with limited responsibility for their consequences. It is an

irony of international development that the morality espoused in such unbalanced exploitation found expression in the cultures of the less developed part of the globe as they struggled toward nationhood and economic development. But economic development in emerging industrial nations requires start-up capital and the capital itself was a tradable commodity dominated by the West.

Loans to developing countries, even before the post-WWII Marshall Plan and its successors, allowed leverage over countries with favourable deals on exports demanded by the lenders. And when combined with incentives for corruption this led to more doors being *battered down* and local moralities being breeched. It is this aspect of history, usually dressed in finer disguises, that gave rise to Indian Nobel Laureate Tagore's 1921 statement that: *Those who live ... away from the east, have now got to recognize that Europe has completely lost her former moral prestige in Asia. She is no longer regarded as the champion throughout the world of fair dealing and the exponent of high principle, but rather as an upholder of Western race supremacy, and the exploiter of those outside her own borders.*

That the West could not understand such statements then or even now does nothing to deny their validity, and does much to highlighting the cultural deafness that has accrued with industrial power. Wilson, as US President, nominated 14 points about free trade during WWI that were seen by the West including initially by defeated German eyes, as fair. No industrialized nation saw free trade was anything but a boon that made everyone richer. Little has changed in the morality-challenged zone of international aid, and so free trade has become a pillar of international agreements and assistance. But the economically disadvantaged of the world affected by free trade have long seen through the intentions that lurk behind well-meaning programs, and those nations with the capacity to industrialize have been doing so in recent decades to produce the shifting global power-base that characterizes today's global economy.

Persistent myopia renders this situation unrecognizable in much of the developed world, and even feelings that something may be missing from the Western system are commoditized in well-being industries rather than examined as a spiritual malaise. Yet confrontations between China and the West more than a century ago produced insightful observations that remain relevant today, such as that of Liang Chi Chao: *Material life is merely a means for the maintenance of spiritual life; it should never be taken as a substitute for the object which it serves ... In Western nations today, the tendency is to regard life solely as material development with the result that, no matter how plausible the contrivances, the malady only becomes worse ... Our [China's] problem is, under the condition of this unprecedented scientific progress, how can the Confucian ideal of equilibrium be applied so that every man may live a balanced life.'*

Liang identified the difference between East and West as not a material difference of developed and yet-to-be-developed but as a spiritual difference. Without denying the benefits of material developments, Liang made the first role that of relieving famine – including the spiritual famine that had arrived with the importing of value-free Western models of development. Even the Westernized and Western-raised Sun Yat Sen of China

deplored the loss of traditional virtues in China's young men in his Three Principles of 1924. Later in India, Gandhi made similar observations using terms such as *spiritual suicide* and *this quiet petrifaction of the soul into matter* to describe the effect of consumer-based social development. Tagore also predicted the effects of blind adoption of a spirit-free materialism as advocated by the modern West. *Great civilizations have flourished in the East as well as the West because they produced food for the spirit of man for all time … These great civilizations were at last run by to death by men of the type of our precocious schoolboys of modern times, smart and superficially critical, worshippers of self, shrewd bargainers in the market of profit and power, efficient in their handling of the ephemeral, who … eventually … set their neighbours' houses on fire and were themselves enveloped by flames.'*

All this is background to understanding why to Western eyes policies of self-sufficiency as a moral virtue are usually considered to be naive. The worldview that produces such outcomes has all but been destroyed in the West, yet has persisted in balance with material development in the East. Gandhi exemplifies the approach, yet he is viewed as both great and quaint at the same time in the West. In China, Confucian values produced moral villages that aimed at self-sufficiency through the 1920s, which in turn influenced Mao Zsedong's ideal of harmonious socialism. From such viewpoints, as in some interpreations of Islamic consciousness, the West is seen to have failed by conspicuously placing material progress above values. In this worldview, protests in such countries can be seen to be less about despots than about leaders who have sacrificed essential values in foavour of Western systems.

To label such divergent views as a clash of civilizations may suit a Western audience. It also indicates the conflict and competition-oriented approach inherent in the modern West. The dichotomy has long been identified in the East, and a faithful remnant has maintained the thought among Asian intellectuals. From time to time they may even have influenced the power of the West implemented through free trade, international debt and military menace. But the world has changed so much that Western tactics honed through the post-colonial period may not be effective when its creditors and manufacturers challenge it. Cheap labour combined with education and governmental-restraint on speculation in once poor nations has led to the West now being indebted to the East and reliant on its products. Perhaps this offers hope for our spiritual nature being acknowledged in planning as the East gains influence in our nations. But it is easy to romanticize and overstate such matters. As noted by Zhang Junmai for 1920s China, *the fundamental principles upon which our nation is founded are quietism, as opposed to Western activism; spiritual satisfaction, as opposed to the striving for material advantage; a self-sufficient agrarianism, as opposed to profit-seeking mercantilism; and a morally transforming sense of brotherhood rather than racial segregation. … A nation founded on agriculture lacks a knowledge of the industrial art, [but] it is likewise without material demands; thus, though it exists over a long period of time, it can maintain a standard of poverty but equality, scarcity but peace. But how will it be hereafter?'*

We live today in Zhang's hereafter and though difficult to see from within, we know that we have lost something essential. His options of equality and peace may only be possible

in conjunction with poverty and scarcity, and that is not compatible with current thinking in the West. As Pankaj Mishra in his 'From the Ruins of Empire', which most of the above thoughts prompted, points out the cushioned world of the West is based on an illusion that may easily fracture.

Sustaining the Illusion

Simone observed me reading Mishra's 'From the Ruins of Empire' and bought that learned precursor book by Edward Said, 'Orientalism'. Said uses colonial British, French and later US approaches to the East, from the Middle East to Northern Asia, as a demonstration the origins of an unfounded Western superiority that has permeated relationships to today. This approach provided a useful means of correcting the imbalance that pervades attitudes to sustainability as well as our own culture's superiority. Essentially Said claims that the origins of modern East-West relations derive from an academic invention of 'the East' that limited Western understanding and respect of cultural differences. Schools of oriental studies and the like established in colonizing nations adopted a quasi-scientific approach to research that made their outputs seem objective when in fact the basis of their comparisons were more akin to straw men and straw cultures of their own invention than to real Asians.

Said notes: *A field like Orientalism has a cumulative and corporate identity, one that is particularly strong given its associations with traditional learning (the classics, the Bible, philology), public institutions (governments, trading companies, geographical societies, universities), and generically determined writing (travel books, books of exploration, fantasy, exotic description). The result for Orientalism has been a sort of consensus: certain things, certain types of statement, certain types of work have seemed for the Orientalist correct. He has built his work and research upon them, and they in turn have pressed hard upon new writers and scholars. Orientalism can thus be regarded as a manner of regularized (or Orientalized) writing, vision, and study, dominated by imperatives, perspectives, and ideological biases ostensibly suited to the Orient. The Orient is taught, researched, administered, and pronounced upon in certain discrete ways.*

According to this view, invented Orient became the subject of all subsequent study and romantic writing, which cemented myths about habits, beliefs, attitudes and even basic capacity through romantic novels, academic texts and colleges producing colonial civil servants. It assumed the status of truth in Nietzsche's sense that *truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are*. As an influential academic tradition, and expressed in today's terms from today's worldview, it can be seen as fostering racism, imperialism and failing to consider the viewpoint of the other. But of course we cannot judge the past by today's views – the point here is to acknowledge that our views today are coloured by our culture, which has a biased past. This is the basis of Said's contention that Orientalism is a political lens through which the Orient is viewed by the West. No equivalent field of Occidentialism emerged in the Orient even in periods when that civilization was more advanced than the Occident.

Conventional history overlooks the eighth to the sixteenth century domination of an Oriental (Arab) culture of the West, which includes one of the most advanced periods of European development. Said says this categorically. *Anyone who has the slightest acquaintance with Arab or Islamic history will know that [the Abbasid period] was a high point of Islamic civilization, as brilliant a period of cultural history as the High Renaissance of Italy.* By limiting Western study and understanding of the East (the Orient) to an imagined world labeled Orientalism, stereotypic descriptions have been serially developed around such themes as sensuality, despotism, inaccuracy and backwardness, according to Said. In turn this dispelled more profound insights about the East by simply not providing an academic or political foundation for contrary ideas. Thus while there were certainly differences in style – particularly between British and French writings – all *kept intact the separateness of the Orient, its eccentricity, its backwardness, its silent indifference, its feminine penetrability, its supine malleability*. With such a separation from reality, reinforced definitions of Oriental *backwardness, degeneracy, and inequality with the West most easily associated themselves early in the nineteenth century with ideas about the biological bases of racial inequality*, particularly between advanced European-Aryan and other races. This in turn was used to justify the Western 'civilizing' act of annexation of Eastern lands. Quite a different history to the official versions.

Perhaps the most telling aspect of this subjective field of study is the uncharacteristic disdain its scholars could maintain for their life's work, such as Noldeke announcement that all of his Orientalist works confirmed his *low opinion* of Eastern races. Such emotion allowed the territorial expansion and economic dominance that defined the most successful colonial enterprises, those of Britain. Carrying the *white man's burden* responsibly, these British enterprises contrasted with the less organized French approach, which in turn conveniently fell into the European hierarchy in which the French were below the British in terms of emotional restraint and order. The French version of Orientalism included a wide novelistic genre that was essentially considered licentious and socially dangerous by the British. The combination of these attitudes produced the aberrant outcome that learning Oriental languages was discouraged except in the case of linguists who could explain the superior lineage of Indo-European languages over Semitic, just as intermarriage with Orientals was strongly discouraged in the British colonies much more than the French and others.

Britain's relationship with the East was thus simplified to possession, trade and efficient administration justified by such earlier independent statements as Emer de Vattel's that European states should assumed ownership of lands inhabited only by insignificant natives. With Britain clearly the major beneficiary of geographical expansion through the colonial period, France shifted its less pragmatic and more emotional approach to mimic others in acquiring foreign lands, apparently to regain face lost after the ignominy of losing the Alsace-Lorraine territories to Prussia in 1870. In this period, French geographical societies had more that twice as many members as all of Europe's societies, and new influential associations were founded including the Comite de l'Asie Francaise, the Comite d'Orient and the Societe Asiatique. European history acknowledged this spurt of activity as France facing *up to its transnational responsibilities during the last two decades of the nineteenth century*. While different in their approaches, the British and

French both used the compromised field of Orientalism as a tool to assume control in the Orient up to the twentieth century, not the least through educational systems delivering a Western worldview to colonial subjects.

As the twentieth century progressed, some objections to the rigid separateness of Orientalism became evident, such as Richards' challenge to assumed models for studying Chinese thought. But old models persist even into modern times, and as Said points out in referring to Massignon's continued interpretation of the Israel-Palestinian conflict as clouded by his insistence on the Isaac and Ishmael argument confounded by his view of Israel as the perpetuation of a Judiastic conflict with Christianity. Such interpretations that have undermined objectivity in academia have incidentally added fuel to not only to misunderstanding of that part of the East, but also to general anti-Semitism. The bias also warps history in such ways as Gibb's explanation that the West's learning from the East during the advanced period of Arab governance of Spain and southern France was simply a reintroduction of the West's earlier values, a view the continues today in support of the West's preference to portray its own lineage as deriving directly from ancient Egypt through Greece and Rome.

As the Western power-base shifted from Europe to the USA after WWII, a new approach to the East was possible, but in fact it tended to simply follow the old paradigm under new social science terminologies. This has produced such perpetuation of the imagined other as Huntington's 1993 'Clash of Civilizations' in the same year Johnson's article calling for a return to Western-controlled colonialism for nations where *states are not yet fit to govern themselves.* This is somewhat similar to the sentiment of the title question. And it is based, not only on gross misrepresentation but also disregards both non-Western value systems and objective consideration of their relative powerlessness.

Said's book caused me to consider my own relationship with Asia and in particular Thailand, which gave me one more cause to rejoice in the accident of being born Australian. As I see this part of myself, I, like my more serious colleagues, have grown up with a sound and broad educational foundation and access to the world texts that has been honed by a cultural suspicion of elite cliques in universities, business or government that have not earned their privileges personally. In this way we are part colonials, both historically and culturally, and yet privileged in having access to learning and to Asia, a trust in other cultures and a desire to learn more. Learning more includes languages in the full knowledge that there is little to fear in being overtaken by a foreign culture. Language, inter-marriage and open-mindedless are fillips that prompt the future into existence. Keeping the essence of one's own culture through such change is what all civilized persons would seek to do, and so see no new risk at all for it has happened countless times through history. Yet less educated moderns may see such change as the apocalypse.

The End of the Illusory World?

Wonderful discussions with my good wife have heightened my awareness that fear of death as one ages can morph into a pessimism. Ageing colleagues increasingly fear that

everything is going from bad to worse and *survival of our civilization/human-existence/the-environment etc*. This insight clarified a question a great mentor, the learned Rev Dr Wood, put to me in my early 20s on one of my visits to him when he was in his 90s. After offering his views of the world, he asked me *do you think I am becoming pessimistic?* Admiring him greatly and ever aware of the influence he had on my teenage formative years I replied that perhaps he had reason from his point of view, for the world that he knew was disappearing quickly. My answer was what Zizek would term a cultural response, which means it was not reliably true.

Today we have societies adjusting to their new status in the Old World and Asia, and in the New World we have a rising fundamentalism whose adherents actually believe that the world will end and that they alone will be saved. Such phenomena make the title of Slavok Zizek's book apposite and saleable; it is entitled 'Living in the End Times'. Set out with chapter headings echoing the grief cycle – denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance – it is an eclectic mix of his interests and views, culminating in a strangely salvific apocalypse.

Zizek's stimulating ideas include social castes as reflections of the cycles of life, with small animals eating larger ones and mammals eating the most. Yet rather than the most powerful man being at the top rank, priests are put there. Why? So that priests can interrupt the cycle of the gods consuming humans by the priests performing alternative acceptable sacrifices to the gods. This may be where notions of vegetarianism originate, because priests had to be as pure as possible in order to make sacrifices to please the gods and to so break the chain of eating and being eaten. In an unrelated section, he notes that radical modern-day vegetarians have proposed outlawing species-ism, which they define as demeaning another animal species by eating them. And following the same logic, he notes that French campaigns against anti-obesity and for healthy eating claim that they *damage the self-esteem of obese persons*. Strange world!

On religion he argues that eastern religions accept the wisdom that the *primal Void or Chaos* is reality and therefore social order is necessary to function, while Christianity is a project to change the nature of reality and is for that reason anti-wisdom. He claims that Paul's *sapientiam sapientium perdam – I shall destroy the wisdom of the wise* refers to this. But I read this Biblical verse differently, for I understand Paul to be noting that worldly wisdom does not approach spiritual wisdom. Zizek seems to use the same logic to argue that culture is opposed to science since the latter seeks to communicate only the facts, while culture filters facts to accommodate sensitivities. He uses such examples to illustrate his point as not telling the dying they are dying and maintaining a subterfuge with a dementia sufferer. My response to Dr Wood above would seem to qualify in Zizek's logic.

And so he jumps, as I do now, to politics and observe that China's apparent rise is not a despotic corruption of capitalism but a repeat of the way that capitalism developed in Europe. The conditions for capitalism were created by ruthless state dictatorship, and once established spawned the reaction of democracy. If premature democratization occurs in a state, then populism results according to Zizek, which explains to him the

success of Taiwan and South Korea, which each passed through authoritarian rule before democracy was introduced. He also seems to believe Brazil's claim that it is sharing of national wealth with all citizens as their right – *the Left's only original economic idea of the last few decades* – which he thinks places it on a par with the abolition of slavery. But these are not the way the powerful of the world are acting at present, as Zizek notes the current financial 'crisis' has meant that calls to *save the planet* and *save the oppressed and hungry* have been overshadowed by *save the banks*.

However, more than these it is his conception of apocalypse that intrigues. He presents three *versions of apocalypsicism today; Christian fundamentalist, New Age and techno-digital-post-human*. All share the final view that humans are facing a major transformation in the forms of millenarian emancipation, a dawning of cosmic awareness and human-cyborgs respectively. This seems to be Zizek's way to round off this eclectic tour of his mind, which has been vaguely anchored around politics with an emphasis of emerging from Eastern Europe. With his *end times* title and sometime theme, the apocalypse would be a likely point for developing a conclusion, which if he has one might be something like – humans will continue as before and produce unwelcome events and imposts and probably solve or mitigate them. Hardly astounding.

But to finish off he returns to political terms quoting from Mark Twain's 'A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court', viz:
There were two "Reigns of Terror" if we would remember it and consider it; the one wrought in hot passion, the other in heartless cold blood ... our shudders are all for the "horrors" of the minor Terror, the momentary Terror, so to speak, whereas, what is the horror of swift death by the axe compared with lifelong death from hunger, cold, insult, cruelty, and heartbreak? A city cemetery could contain the coffins filled by that brief Terror which we have all been so diligently taught to shiver at and mourn over; but all France could hardly contain the coffins filled by the older and real Terror, that unspeakably bitter and awful Terror, which none of us have been taught to see in its vastness or pity as it deserves.

I find Twain's popular words more insightful than most of Zizek's, and I feel Twain (Clements) would not think that was 'living in the end times' or consider that most people believe they are. Zizek's unsurprising contention that our existential angst can be channelled into progress, which is manifested as consumption for much of society while a few others might seek out a deeper understanding of contentment. In this way his minor consideration of Asian thought might have been better integrated with Western philosophy. Yet he seems discontented, and indeed it was one of his references to Freud – though he clearly thinks more of Lacan – that spurred me to read Freud's 'Civilization and Its Discontents'.

Shedding Illusions and Being Content

Having read of Freud rather than works by him, I asked Simone about 'Civilization and Its Discontents' of which she had an English translation. My imagination of its subject matter was based on frequent references to it in modern philosophers' writings from

which I had interpreted the title to refer to the marginalized and possibly dangerous elements in a society. So it was a surprise to read an erudite translation by David McLintock of the role of sexual repression on society and individuals. And of course it is all quite plausible.

I thus began to wonder about the use of the diverse references to the work, which for many is unrelated to the aruments about sexual repression. Perhaps, the very references to it indicate more about those who quote the work than about its actual content. Could such quotes ironically illustrate Freud's point? Could suppression of sexual energy into creative works be the cause of referring to this work without actually acknowledging that theme? A curious speculation.

Freud's humour, omnivorous gathering of anecdotes and analogies, as illustrated by his positive reference to hearing Mark Twain speak, makes his delightfully nineteenth-century intellectual argumentation a pleasure to read. I find enjoyment of a text always makes a difficult subject easier to absorb.

Apart from implying that civilization contains the seeds of its own demise through discouraging procreation, Freud's linking of indivudaal sexual restraint to general anxiety that plays on our fear of death has such a ring of truth to it that I wonder what other suppressed elements of life it might be applied to. Society certainly requires other restraints on the individual – but I imagine Freud would argue that all such elements are expressions of repressed sexual needs, such as competition in business and every aspect of life. Today there are many who seem to believe that competitive urges in society can be successfully and beneficially suppressed. But I observe that such attempts at suppression are not generally beneficial and where temporarily successful create the whimpish followers that Freud also describes as discontented.

The observations may well be correct; in any case, it is a fine theory to test against further observation. In practical terms, apart from what it offers psychotherapists who aim to assist persons whose discontentedness has become pathological, it offers a glimpse of the same solution offered by wise men down the ages. As Freud notes, *... the sages in every age have emphatically advised against this way of conducting one's life [basing one's life on a love object as the source of all sexual gratification], but it has not yet lost its attraction for much of humankind*. My reading of many of the sages is that their insights relate to unhealthy attachment and the illusions it generates, which result in suffering when the attachment object does live up to those projections. This is essentially the same thing.

Freud's wider view of the tragedy of the Jews in Europe was soon after reinforced when Simone and I visited the Munich museum's display of Nazism and the new Jewish museum opposite. There I bought Freud's 'The Future of an Illusion: Religion is the Universal Neurosis', a little book containing two essays, 'The Future of an Illusion' and 'Mourning and Melancholia'. The first contains a sentiment that I have independently advanced, not always successfully that *whoever knows nothing of them [religious ideas] is deeply ignorant: whoever has taken them on board as knowledge may consider himself*

greatly enriched'. In fact his earlier and superior theme is the same – that anyone who is not interested in their own cultural heritage cannot be expected to have sufficient knowledge base on which to build no matter how sophisticated their other learning. The view is becoming increasingly marginal it seems, and having grown up in an increasingly secular society I see it daily expressed. But perhaps we are living through a period of re-sorting, in which mass education, freedom from war and at least in Australia, the opportunity to advance in society, is creating a new elite. For it is among this secularized group that I note adults returning to learn what they missed out on by studying a secular dogma that religious history was somehow outmoded and irrelevant. One wonders how Shakespeare, most good literature and the basis of science and its methods is conceived by those who did not live the psychological paths of understanding that flow through the Old Testament, and the re-presentation of that self-development message in the New Testament. For it is from such knowledge that wisdom, whatever it is, might emerge.

A form of wisdom can come with humour, as is illustrated by Freud in his argument in the second essay where he says that speaking against blind beliefs should not harm the believer as he is confirmed in his delusion, but in some periods may harm the speaker. But *when a man has already risen above the displeasure of his contemporaries in younger years, why should it bother him in extreme old age, when he is sure of soon being beyond all favour and disfavour?* I am not in extreme old age, but the sentiment is the same if one is aware that one's life can end any instant. But the humour I mean is in the next line, *in the past it [speaking out] was different, such remarks were certain to earn one a cultailment of one's earthy existence and a greatly accelerated opportunity of gaining personal experience of the afterlife*. Funny and vivid! And he goes on in such a manner to make me think that I have been educated into Freud's thoughts without ever studying him when he says that the worst that can happen is that his writings might not be translated into other major languages.

It could be seen as a paradox that he pulls down religious belief and supports knowledge of religious ideas as essential to learning. He uses the analogy of St. Boniface cutting down the Saxon's sacred tree to show that cataclysm would not ensue, and when it didn't they accepted his Christian baptism. Today it is more confusing as a result of some versions of Christianity being as belief-based as the Saxon's sacred tree. If for a moment we accept the notion – not Freud's – that mass communication has mistakenly led the masses to believe that they can understand most things, then we have beliefs creeping back as the basis of society while a minority base their understanding on the healthy skeptism that fuels science. Here Freud is again relevant as he notes that once a belief – religion as he calls it – is embedded, it becomes unchangeable and punishments ensue for those who do not share the illusion. While science-based understandings may be called illusory by those without scientific understanding that such knowledge is always subject to change and that *no punishment attaches to not sharing them*. And he finishes 'The Future of an Illusion' with the sentence, *our science is not an illusion. What would be an illusion would be to think we might obtain elsewhere that which science cannot give us*.

This is a significant statement for someone like me who has insisted that science as communicated widely cannot approach non-rational or sapiential knowledge. It caused

me to reconcile Freud's use of the 'science' with my own writings, such as in my books "Religion and Agriculture' and 'Sustainability: Elusive or Illusory'. I saw that I have been limited by the very factor that I was criticizing – of defining knowledge partially. Freud, on the other hand, at the dawn of this era included his own experiential, neurological and psychological research as part of a wider conception of science. And why not, for it deals in the shedding of illusions.

Trapped in Delusions

In contrast to Freud's liberating thought, the life of one holocaust victim as captured lovingly by his student Roger Averill in 'Exile: The Lives and Hopes of Werner Pelz' might be seen as about a person maintaining an illusion for a whole life. Simone gave me the book for Christmas after we had both read reviews of it. Its themes appealed: including, overlapping ingredients of migration, Germany, Australia, LaTrobe University, serious flirtations with organized religion, philosophy, living differently to others and a perennial search for understanding, most forcefully expressed by constant writing. This sounded very familiar! And so much of this turned out to be true as I intimated to Averill in an email after reading it, viz:

Dear Roger

We don't know each other, but I take the liberty of writing to you as I have just finished reading your book on Werner Pelz, whom I had also never met. The book was a gift from my wife after I observed to her that a review of it in 'The Australian' mentioned so many common threads of my interests or experience – biography of one's mentor, Europe, migration, spiritual searching, religion, writing, being serious about life, LaTrobe University etc. Let me explain a little more. Among other responsibilities I write, not for publishers usually, and a recent diversion from my two usual themes of agriculture and spiritual matters was a biography of Prof Derek Tribe who had been my mentor in one of the worlds in which I have lived and worked. And that biography produced specific benefits to me as I expected it would, and as I expect your writings have for you; this is a noble response to a noble activity.

In reading your book some of the mundane parallels between Werner and Derek that struck me were the academic life as part of Werner, a passing connection with the University of Bristol and the application of charm to pursue unpopular approaches within universities. Of course, the main difference – the Jewish experience – was not shared by Derek, but your respect for Werner shining through the book reminds me of mine for Derek, although my book does not include such emotional matters as it attempts to follow the conventions of biographies of scientists.

The LaTrobe connection also intrigued me. I am a generation removed from your experience having been in the first intake of the agricultural science course in 1968, but the social sciences of the university even then intrigued me as a time-poor innocent young student in an overcrowded course. From those disciples came the anti-Vietnam marches and other social awareness that a university can offer but which LaTrobe was otherwise too young to have inculcated. Having spent much of the subsequent four decades outside Australia yet also having been integrally involved in the senior levels of university politics as a Dean at Melbourne, I can see that LaTrobe's flexibility was its strength and that people like Werner could only have found a home there at the time.

And the Jewish aspect is well done in your book echoing details, emotions and reactions I know from my now ageing doctor and friend who remains ruled by forces set in play on his family in a manner similar to Werner's. His autobiography is drafted and I was to edit into something more broadly acceptable but in the end declined, as it contained matters that are better left unsaid at this stage. You have been braver.
With these miscellaneous thoughts stimulated by your book, I thank you for such an open tribute that also adds to our awareness of the self-destructive and self-renewing animal of Western civilization and the individual sacrifices that it periodically demands.
Kind regards
Lindsay Falvey

The book contains gems once the reader becomes used to its style, such as an extract of a letter in German about the influence that 'The Brothers Karamazov' had on him, *all the people in the novel still struggle with each other inside me, live in me like people I know and in whose fate I am very interested. Just once, if I should ever find a real, firm faith (not meant religiously) and don't stay in the current "Yes maybe" or "possibly", Dostoyevsky will be among those whose hands I will have to grasp for that*. His search brought him – a holocaust-escaping Jew – to become an Anglican priest for a decade or two in the UK during which time he came to know that *we have domesticated Christianity, we have domesticated even Christ ... Religion is the final and subtlest rejection of God by man*. In some ways it makes me think that while an experience as absolute as the holocaust and the persecution ethic within Judish culture produces some motivated and thoughtful people, some may never find their way out of that labyrinth.

So Pelz and first wife apparently lived by questioning; they saw themselves like the sower *poised between life and death and life. He grasps to let go, he scatters to gather, he throws away in order to gain* in an endless rhythm of life. It is agricultural and something I can easily identify with. Yet I do not identify with the overall theme of Pelz's life, which to me seems to have been one of searching for lost love, lost parents, lost culture, lost country, lost illusions – and serially replacing them with new illusions in the form of religion, philosophy and dependent women. But as we are repeatedly told, one cannot criticize the experience of such survivors unless one has shared the experience – a common conversation-ending comment I hear from my friend Andrew who now in his 80s still feels guilty for surviving and is completely one-eyed over such matters as Muslims. And on this very point of who has the right to comment, I have Averill's book to thank for introducing Bernard Schlink's comment on this subject in 'Flights of Love', which I must soon read.

Love, Loss, Morals and Beliefs

Such an unusual combination of nouns occurs to me in thinking about how, as described above, I came to read Schlink's 'Flights of Love' and what those short stories mean to me. The story I was seeking after reference to some lines in it in the book about Pelz was 'Circumcision' – and those lines are even more powerful in the context of that short story. But each of the short stories is powerful – and similar, for they all speak with

existential angst from the perspective of human relationships, and perhaps even from a modern German worldview.

The book began well for me with 'Girl with Lizard' and its references to Strasbourg. The story's final emptiness comes when an imagined saga that has dominated a young man's life is revealed as wrong and pointless in the final lines. Likewise, self-delusion is a theme of the trigamous husband in 'Sugar Peas' whose cyclical means of escaping one woman for another leads him to seek time for himself in a kind of mid-life crisis until an accident renders him dependent – on the three women, who have met in his absence and decided how his talents can be used to their benefit. The theme continues in the next story in which a retired man grieving for his wife whom he had nursed through her final years discovers love letters to her from 'The Other Man'. His jealousy leads him to seek the other man out and to anonymously insinuate himself into a friendship to humiliate his rival, but he ultimately learns that his large-hearted wife had given all that his small heart could accept and had in that way remained loyal to him.

'A Little Fling' cleverly uses the East-West German divide to liken a one-night infidelity to a small spying incident, leaving the reader to mull over how each act affects subsequent events and relationships. Two other stories are shorter – 'The Son' and 'The Woman at the Gas Station'. The first deals with a man who is full of regrets and takes a dangerous assignment – it reads as if the choice was tantamount to suicide and in his case led to his death. It reminded me very much of my motivations – known to me only later – for accepting a mission to Iraq during the war. I similarly identified with the second story in terms of the relief for one who addresses a central theme through one's life, in that case a recurring dream and daydream precluded by a humdrum marriage until the man finally takes action. This vaguely paralleled my own insight from reflections after divorce with the assistance of Susie Rotch, Eastern insights and creating space for writing.

But the story that led me to the book itself was 'Circumcision', which describes young love between a New York Jewish woman and a German legal scholar. They share so much and enjoy each other completely, except that he has a nagging feeling that her friends and family resent him even though all treat him well. Schlink addresses a theme that has long intrigued me – intrigued rather than worried as I have the good fortune to not be part of that confused European world, but have become more attuned to it since meeting Simone. He reasons that the cultural divide between a post-holocaust Jew and a German can only be bridged by one accepting the other's culture, and so the German has himself circumcised, secretly by a long time friend who is now a doctor. When he returns healed from the operation and they make love, she doesn't even notice, and when he points it out she cannot recall whether she knew he was or not previously, and showed no real interest in the subject. The story ends with him silently leaving, and we are left to conclude that the integration and the divide that he had imagined were indeed unreal.

That is the story, but the lines that intrigued me were those that dealt with the frustrating birthright of one side of a discussion to call it off, because *you cannot possibly understand ...* . One common experience I have is on the subject of Jews, Israel and Muslims when speaking with my ageing Jewish friend Andrew. Schlink deals with it

through the German young man objecting to his cultural norms, in this case darning holes in garments, being linked to the *Nazi in me*, to which she responds that she knows he is *no Nazi, and I don't hold it against you that you're German*, and later *don't you remember? I was head over heels in love with you after three days, even though you're German*. He replies with, *How would feel if I were to say to you that I love you even though you're Jewish? That my friends look for what is Jewish about you? That they actually think it's a bad thing that I'm going out with a Jewish girl, but still like you anyway? Wouldn't you think that's anti-Semitic idiocy? So why is it so hard to understand that I find anti-German prejudice equally idiotic ...* . She is outraged and will not allow that being German can be separated from the Holocaust. The story moves on to his decision that I described above, but it is this blind belief passed across generations that intrigues me. And I still have no relief from the frustration I feel when told that I have less right to my opinions than another. Perhaps it can be seen as a long evolution of a victim-culture that stimulates internal cohesion and a striving to succeed while maintaining others at distance. In another way it seems akin to fundamentalism dressed up as a moral stance, in a manner similar to the militant vegetarians insisting that meat-eaters cannot discuss the subject because they are perennially culpable.

Food for Thought

The moral argument for abstaining from meat when separated from beliefs relies on objectively challenging common views, which is a worthy approach to life supposedly recommended by both the Buddha and Socrates. But somehow this leads advocates to linking this to *oppression of women, oppression of the environment, and the oppressive treatment of nonhuman animals*. And even among advocates the use of such linkages, such as Coetzee's likening intensive animal production to Nazi death camps, are decried as demeaning the victim in the same manner that the use of the word 'rape' in environmental terms degrades its real meaning. At base it all seems to be a discussion of beliefs and their defence through selective histories, evolutionary assumptions, sophisticated philosophy, resort to scriptures and alignment with political movements – these are descriptions of the sections of the collation, 'Food for Thought: The Debate Over Eating Meat' edited by Steve Stapontzis.

That many seek to categorize meat eating as unnatural produces logical inconsistencies with natural cycles, and usually seeks to place humans outside nature. Nevertheless, such discussions do serve to highlight the extent to which the meat consumer is isolated from meat production and particularly slaughter. And that is a matter for moral consideration.

One conclusion expressed by Frederick Ferré, suggests *that we may, if we desire, eat meat from humanely raised and slaughtered animals in moderation and with appreciation. But whether we eat meat or refrain form it, we are in duty bound to concern ourselves with the well-being of the animals who supply it*. This is the context for animal welfare, the only practical outcome of the often circular arguments surrounding meat eating. And once realized, that context provides the logical understanding that, as humans exist only as part of nature, we consume the products of nature just as we are consumed as products of nature. This cyclical revelation is as old as it is denial, for it

means that death and decay are parts of our lives; this is what much vegetarianism seeks to deny. Denial is apparently sustainable within the fantasy of lions lying with lambs as paraphrased from Isaiah's prophecy since predators of humans have largely been controlled, and Western death rites symbolically guard us from being eaten through absurdly strong coffins. And for me the real unaddressed nub of meat-free evangelists is its distinctly Western outlook when it assumes easy access to essential nutrients otherwise obtained from meat in a normal diet.

For most of the world, the abundant food choices available to Western consumers do not exist. Such ethnocentricity, as Plumwood termed it in her chapter in 'Food for Thought', is disguised cultural hegemony. In addition, claims made by militant vegetarians that meat comes from *inhumane factory farms* fail to acknowledge the benign and productive role of ruminants on pastures adapted to grazing. Such benefits are further enhanced by the various benefits of livestock for the majority of the world as village refuse recyclers, sources of power, manure and a range of other products in systems that have proved sustainable over millennia. In these ecosystems, animals are usually respected for their essential roles; the same is often true on repsonsible Western farms. But by damning all meat production and consumption and even classifying traditional practices such as Muslim halal slaughter as cruel, I am concerned less by the wrongheadedness of critics than by their undermining of the real welfare of animals.

Understanding Islam

My exposure to Islam had been limited to a few Muslim friends, mainly from Southeast Asia, and reading about the religion and its traditions until I conducted some assignments in the Middle East. Later, when appointed to the Board of the Qatar-owned Hassad Australia, I become more interested, read the Quran again and examined halal slaughter techniques from the perspective of my experience across different cultures. This led to a similar conclusion to that in the above section – that our culture is largely intolerant of other cultures' practices even when we attempt to show tolerance. I will not deal with halal killing here, except to note that respect and care for an animal before and through death counts for much more for both the animal and the human than do the hidden mechanistic approaches that allow cheap meat and pander to cosseted urban fear in the West. Rather, this section deals with our wider interaction with Islam.

Current propaganda makes it hard to discuss objectively with otherwise informed Westerners, which is what makes Graham Fuller's 'A World Without Islam' important. Fuller knows Islam and the West, and he takes an historical and political approach to conclusively show that Islam is simply a brand placed on disparate groups that react to being abused by our culture. I chose the book quickly when I had arrived for 10 days in Thailand without bringing books from my reading pile. I found it in the bookshop of the domestic terminal of Bangkok airport, which incidentally thereby supported my observation that key bookshops in non-English speaking countries often have a better selection of serious books than the pop-culture dominated bookshops in English-speaking nations.

Fuller points out our ignorance from the partial versions of history that we teach ourselves, such as the use of Rome as a central seat of power. In fact, Constantinople saw itself as the centre of the Roman Empire as a Greek-speaking culture; our naming of what became the Eastern Church 'Byzantine' turns out to be a 16th century appellation. The term 'Rome' was naturally used by the Eastern Empire and so found its way into the Middle-eastern and Muslim lexicons as the name for the Eastern Church and Empire in the form of the word Rûm until today, as a chapter in the Quran entitled al-Rûm, as in the name of a Turkish Sultanate, and in the Arabic name for the Mediterranean Sea as the Sea of Rûm, and even in the name of Western favoured Sufi poet Rumi meaning one who lives in Rome. In Rumi's case this meant Anatolia, which further shows that this generic use of the word differs from our specific use. The word 'Rome' spelled power and so was taken by the Germanic ruler Charlemagne and later by the German 'Holy Roman Empire'. But the European Romes were all short-lived, the Roman Empire itself petering out in the fifth century, Charlemagne's sons splitting his Empire and then losing it, and the Germanic version succumbing quickly to tribal fights. At the same time, the Eastern Empire and Church lasted at least 1,000 years and remains a powerful force today, particularly when it is noted that Russia saw and perhaps sees itself as the torch-bearer for the Eastern Empire today, and has in the past included 'Rome' in the titles of its rulers.

Such detail is an example of our biased understanding of history – and of how Western actions can potentially offend alternative wordviews. The Eastern Empire contains many of the cultures that became Muslim and so there is natural affinity between the Eastern Church and Islam, and in fact conflict between the Eastern and Western churches has been much greater than even the West's conflicts with Islam. Furthermore, the barbarism of the crusades led to Jews siding with Muslims against European 'Christians' who wrote of their barbequing of Muslim children when food ran short after they had destroyed food stores and food production systems. The West's record of cruelty ranks with the world's worst. Perhaps this was due to the centralized power, which todayis modulated in what is referred to as 'Rome' in Christianity and contrasts strongly with the absence of any central authority in Islam.

Islam has been the fastest spreading of the world's religions, reaching China within 15 years of its founder's death, and finding a compatibility with the Confucianism of China because of Islam's strong emphasis on social manners and equity in the interests of social stability.

Our interaction, labelled as a culture-clash with bloody borders by Hutchinson, might be little more that an old battle for our continued expansion. That we have more weapons, and that Islam seems to control oil reserves has led to compromise solutions that are unlikely to be durable. Marginalized by such power, offended groups resort to what is now termed *terrorism' – defined as illegal actions against the state*. But as no alternatives exist when Western-backed puppets replace locally elected leaders, Fuller's work leads me to see a bleak future. The West is unlikely to change and serial humiliation of Muslims is being compounded by Western expansionism, aggression and what is promoted as immorality.

This is the political scene. As a spiritual tradition, Islam offers the same variations as other traditions, which is why spiritually mature Muslims seem to me to be remarkably similar to spiritually mature Buddhists or Christians, while the masses also seem the same in their blind belief in the substance rather than the intent of symbols and rules.

Symbols to Substance

As distinct thoughts prompted by reading, the following paragraphs contain reflections based on more personal memories from my formative years, and in particular those about Dr Wood who was such an important influence on my life. His guidance, in part unwittingly on his part, established the means by which I could transcend the symbols of psychological support provided by a religion that was already unsatisfactory for a youth of the 1960s opened to science and education. He was a man of depth and wisdom whose life warrants documentation, which Ian Breward has done, first in his paper and then in his subsequent book 'Dr Harold Wood: A Notable Methodist (1896-89)'. I know intuitively that Dr Wood would have approved of that diminutive title but I would have entitled it 'A Methodist Champion', as I noted elsewhere in 'A Personal Memoire of Dr Harold Wood after reading the paper 'Dr Harold Wood: A Notable Methodist (1896-89) and a few years later the full book of the same name' (2013) – see <http://lindsayfalveysotherbooks.yolasite.com/a-personal-memoire-of-rev-dr-harold-wood.php>. I see his championship in contributions to the history of Methodism and to Australian life.

Ian had sought me out to gain my persective on Dr Wood, and I enjoyed the memories our conversation evoked. As I only knew Dr Wood from his St Paul's Deepdene Uniting Church phase, my knowledge of his previous seven decades had been pieced together from snippets of his sermons and conversations that referred to Tonga, the Methodist Church hierarchy and his personal experiences. Of these our intimate conversations over a decade or so added instances that he used to illustrate points he was intent on imparting to me as a representative of the next generation. Thus my image of Dr Wood had remained much the same in my subsequent three or so decades.

Breward's work has allowed me to reconsider my own relationship to Dr Wood in a more informed light. In fact, I find it curious that there are many more parallels in our respective lives than I can understand from the relatively short period that our lives overlapped. So, now I indulge myself by considering parts of Dr Wood's story that reminded me of my own life, though we are quite different people.

Dr Wood's childhood poverty is of another time and generation, yet his *boy's promise* being encouraged by those who crossed his path and his *independence of mind* bear some similarities to my childhood. In his youth *his religious views were also changing*, which led him from his parents' Salvation Army to the Methodists and an important mentor – Benjamin Danks – who instructed him in his Local Preachers' class. In a different and less religious time and environment, I shifted from what would have been an Anglican background to Methodist, and it was Dr Wood's Local Preachers' class that informed

parts of my changing youthful views while also mollifying the wider influences of the time of politics, university, cars and girls. Just as the young Dr Wood *was greatly influenced through reading improving books*, so was I through my teens and indeed my life to date. And the observation that *though intensely competitive, he took no lasting part in any sport* could equally be written about me.

Dr Wood's penchant for simultaneous studies while working also resonated, and even though life might have been easier in my post-war Australia, I note that few of my peers took the opportunities and challenges of working professionally fulltime and completing grdaute studies at the same time. The best way I can see Dr Wood's influence in my case is through his encouraging me to enrol in his Local Preaching course at the same time as I was undertaking a demanding university course. I still recall being moved when he once praised me privately for my studious attention to our weekly course readings. His views of conscription and the Vietnam war empowered me to uncharacteristic political engagement as a 17-18 year old for even though *he deplored violent protest, [he] welcomed student protests over Vietnam*. And a few years after that *he wrote an article for the young men setting out the principles to follow in choosing a wife* in addition to giving me very specific advice for my case, which I ignored and later regretted.

Dr Wood's time in Tonga featured frequently in his sermons and in conversations of great moments shared in our studies. And this may well have influenced my choice of career. Breward quotes him *I believe that we at Deepdene will do even more than we have already done for God's unfortunate children in other lands*, and notes that *compassion for the hungry millions was a regular emphasis*. He chose Tonga and a missionary role, while in my era – despite applying for a couple of agricultural missionary posts – I was pleased to be engaged by the burgeoning government aid where I felt real progress could be made. Neither his nor my main country of work had ever been officially colonized, unusual states for the Asia and Pacific region. And just as *Tonga had a subsistence economy*, so did Thailand in areas away from Bangkok. Dr Wood *speedily mastered Tongan* when other foreigners did not, just as I did with the Thai language when others did not apply themselves. He was around 40 years old when wrote 'The History and Geography of Tonga', which was *for many years the only book to introduce readers to a complex history*, and I was in my 40s when I conceived the book that became 'Thai Agriculture', which has been a significant university text and one of the most read of my works.

It may be thought that we differed in our appetites for the exotic and certainly mine was more omnivorous than Dr Wood's, yet his *stamina* and *stewardship* of time are both adequate descriptions of my own concentration, whether in Asia or elsewhere, on accomplishing tasks, writing papers and taking on additional responsibilities. This resonated particularly when I read that *holidays were ... usually combined with ... business*. While in Tonga, in addition to merging recalcitrant churches, typing out minutes of meetings in both English and Tongan, creating and editing a church paper and performing his ministerial and missionary duties, Dr Wood *in his spare time began to study for a doctorate*. In Thailand, I did the equivalent, completing my doctorate in while employed full time in research, editing papers for a local journal, writing papers for other

journals, drafting chapters for a book, and travelling to other agricultural sites and countries. And in terms of books, Dr Wood's library was soaked by a cyclone *and books had to be painstakingly dried out* immediately before he entered a new phase of his life, while my less significant library was similarly damaged in Darwin's Cyclone Tracey disaster.

After Dr Wood had left Tonga and became Principal of Methodists Ladies' College and the Methodist Conference, he *wrote the minutes beforehand and rarely found it necessary to change them*, which was the same advice I received from another mentor – Prof Derek Tribe – when I joined the University of Melbourne as Dean. And just as Dr Wood had merged churches in Tonga and later was a major figure in the merger that would create The Uniting Church of Australia, so I was to take on the role of merging six disparate colleges of agriculture with the University of Melbourne. In both of our cases, opposition was strong and many observers did not expect success – but we each succeeded in our respective ways. This may be due to Dr Wood having been *a rather directive chairman* which is just how I was seen within the intransigent university departments and colleges. Yet we both ensured *that varied views were heard* but did not allow them to unduly influence the inevitable. In the merger messages we both insisted that *unity did not mean uniformity*, and we each relied on historical information for our decisions – Dr Wood from his studies of church history and me from a study of agricultural education and its application to Victoria. Merging cultures of disparate organizations led me to institute a process of regular overnight meetings that deepened working relationships, which parallels Dr Wood's Joint Committee for Church Unification meeting *eight times for two to three days*. His plea *for acceptance of the Basis, for the three churches could not afford to fail yet again* was echoed in my *we have failed three times already, there is now no choice*. I know such parallels can be explained in the commonality of human behaviour, but chewing over the parallels in my mind delight me nevertheless.

Around the age of 60, Dr Wood's *intellectual gifts, his administrative skills, his commitment* led to his election as President of the General Conference. While he was a greater man than I, it is also humbling to find at a similar age various accolades were conferred on me, mainly for adventurous work in Asia and academia.

When I read that Dr Wood *travelled 6,500 miles in 11 weeks* in Europe and Britain, I surely with all those trained in Methodism, immediately saw a reference to John Wesley's thousands of horseback miles for preaching engagements. I know Dr Wood used Wesley as one of his life models for he recommended the approach to me. An energetic *steam engine in trousers* as seen by his peers, so in a similar way my energy to *get things done* was often commented on, which included accepting workloads far in excess of what is now considered acceptable. Such small revelations from Breward's biography enhanced the Dr Wood I already knew well, even when he remained an aloof or revered figure to many at our church. He indulged my excesses as those of youth and encouraged my enquiries, even when they strayed from conventional church wisdom and his own. They seem to have subsequently strayed very far, to my great benefit.

But perhaps they may not have strayed as far as some think! For when I next read that Dr Wood had *pointed out that Methodism combined Catholicity, Protestantism, Puritanism and Evangelism* share methodical values absent from secularism and humanism, I saw elements of my own ecumenism. And as this led him to be concerned that increasing numbers of persons *did not know their heritage*, so I have found myself lamenting the same in more than one of my books. It took me some years to realize that my assumption that peers had an underpinning cultural education that informed their philosophical staces was ultimately false.

Dr Wood's background with loving Salvation Army parents who had both come from alcoholism-affected families led to his Puritanical view of drinking, on which I disagreed with him even while in his Local Preaching Classes. I declined the naive oaths of the Methodists just as I had those of the Rachebites that were allowed to infest our school to coerce impressionable 13 year-olds to *sign the pledge*. As Dr Wood was a *strenuous advocate for total abstinence, refusing to attend even wedding receptions where alcohol was served*, I felt especially privileged that he agreed to make an exception for me. I have assumed this was because he had a few days earlier invested me as the only one of six starting candidates to complete the Methodist Local Preacher course over its four years. But when I read that much earlier *he supported a change to the rule which forbade dancing on Methodist property*, I realized that I had projected some other conservative views onto him. His objection to gambling has stuck with me, not as rule or as a fear, but just as common sense; others have suggested to me that I have gambled in other ways in my life but this was the nonsense used to justify the inaction of unquestioned lives. Dr Wood's wowserism was a badge of honour, and in some ways that is similar to the feeling I have when criticized for my conservative arguments about the social costs of gambling, mass edu-tainment, free-traded-food, responsibility-free rights and so on. And for those affected by their own actions in such cases, my association with Buddhism has shown me that compassion is much more than pity, which is the same as what Breward describes as the *intelligent compassion* preached by Dr Wood. It seems to me that what I didn't learn directly from him, he primed me to learn in other ways through my life.

When I read Dr Wood described as *a prolific author* I identified immediately, although his *clear mind which enabled him to type with a minimum of revision* has taken me decades of self-training to approach. And when I learned that Dr Wood's doctoral thesis was published as a book I wondered if this is what had spurred publication of a book based on my doctorate when this was far from common, and perhaps it is why I have encouraged Asian colleagues to do similarly for significant works.

There are so many other parallels and influences, but this is more than enough to illustrate my debt and origins to this remarkable man. So when Breward says that Dr Wood *began a local preachers' class ... Professor Lindsay Falvey, one of the group, deeply appreciated Wood's teaching and the challenge offered by their discussions*, it is correct in every sense. It is one reason I dedicated my book 'Religion and Agriculture' to him. Dr Wood's influence in my life continues today, and I now see it in influencing me to be open-minded to books that I might otherwise discount, such as Gray's 'The Silence of Animals'.

Silencing the Soul

If I had stuck with the belief-based Christianity of the church, I would not have read as widely or experienced as much of life as I have. Rather than constituting a rejection of the church, this may be seen as development of an understanding beyond blind faith, which is the message I read in scriptures and mystics' writings. This means that my appreciation of Buddhism is a recognition of the ultimate teachings of Christianity, which in simplisitic terms might be explained as 'God' being a mental creation that can be transcended as one understands life more deeply and reaches a state of contentment, even equanimity. It is this state of contentment that I think John Gray is seeking to define in his 'The Silence of Animals', which addresses man's constant search for distractions from silence or calm.

Gray's book is based on paragraphs of quotations that illustrate his points, such as a story of early Europeans in the Congo who *lived like blind men in a large room, aware only of what came in contact with them (and of that only imperfectly)* for they were too scared to venture further and understand more. Or in Gray's words *they cannot endure the silence into which they have come*. He explains this fear as a struggle for survival, which in animals is against other animals whereas man struggles against himself. During the era of empires, men were moveable assets of nobles and had no need to individually define themselves relative to others, says Gray. But as nation-states emerged, men became citizens defined as belonging to one group exclusively – which he sees as allowing the barbarism of WWII to arise. In this situation, Gray uses Orwell's '1984' to explain that the social pressure of one's group is akin to torture in that it forces citizens to believe the same thing – not the torture of the inquisition that produced false confessions but the insidious type of '1984' in which one comes to accept 'truths' of the group. And the pervasive 'truth' of our era that he highlights is the *vision of progress*.

Within this vision of progress, there is a blindness to the reality that *the human animal consumes what it has produced and then moves on*, a reality partly understood by Marx in his critique of capitalism and his observation that *humanity sets itself only such tasks as it is able to solve*. In Gray's view this means capitalism might be replaced by another system but that this may not be progress, which seems to accord with Buddhadasa's equating of capitalism and communism as two variants of materialism. In seeing such matters clearly, one may go *beyond good and evil* as explained by Nietzsche. It may also be as also argued by Freud about a good psychoanalyst requiring one to *be a bad fellow, transcend the rules, sacrifice oneself, betray, and behave like an artist who buys paint with his wife's household money, or burns the furniture to warm the room for his model. Without such criminality there is no achievement*.

Seeking to transcend the mental constraints of one's society is thus explained as the role of such therapy, which Gray ascribes to Schopenhauer ahead of Freud for recognizing that *sexuality is the prime moving force of human life*, which in Schopenhauer's words *knows how to slip its love-notes and ringlets even into ministerial portfolios and philosophical documents*. The science of such understanding owes itself, according to

Freud, to the greatest illusion of all, Christianity, which he sees as inferior to its predecessors because it allowed images of the deity. Thus man came to see God in human form and encouraged in that faith, closed off his search for self-understanding. From this point of illusions, Gray then suggests that fictions make life bearable and change as needed over time, and in this context he argues that the attainment of happiness is a grand fiction of our time that will change to some new fiction so long as we do not cultivate our inner resources.

With a life based on fictions, man is constantly searching for new distractions to fill his void, as Pascal noted *the sole cause of man's unhappiness is that he does not know how to stay quietly in his room*. Gray explains this clearly – *if you admit your need for silence, you accept that much of your life has been an exercise in distraction*. And searching for silence means men must *forget the silence they are looking for*. And such silence is not grounded in the foundations of modern society or its philosophers.

Gray challenges our acceptance of Socrates as simple faith in such ideas as human evil being correctable through advances in knowledge, that the good life is the examined life, and that reason allows us to alter our own fate. He advocates the silence with which animals seem content, but which man seeks to avoid at all costs. His conclusion seems to tend towards *godless contemplation* that sounds remarkably like Eastern teachings. But his *contemplation* differs from that of Buddhism as it is defined in today's West. Western contemplation is not a means of release or redemption as *it does not dissolve inner conflict into the false quietude of any oceanic calm. All it offers is mere being. There is no redemption from being human.*

Gray's book presents that final insight by the circuitous route of an intelligent mind. That others have reached the same point does not diminish his conclusion for he presents it in the context of our time using the fictions that underlie our life and beliefs. I found it a liberating book in that sense, for I sometimes find it hard to maintain distance from the distraction-based life that is so highly valued today. Yet more and more I find colleagues and acquaintances are deeply interested in some greater accommodation with their underlying worry. It is an angst easily fuelled by modern distraction-based life that define glamour in terms of vacuous celebrity lifestyles, travels and possessions.

The Vacuity of Celebrity

Being neither a routine television viewer nor sports follower I am often excluded from the interminable conversations about what was 'on last night' or the weekend's game – and it has always provided me with much additional time and space. One other consequence is that I seldom know current celebrities and in fact am perplexed at the interest shown in them by persons whom I see as having better things to think about. But, as those persons point out to me, I am missing a barometer of the society and its aspirations. I find that cost affordable when compared to the richness of pursuing my own reflections and professional pursuits.

Perhaps this is why, when I read Fitzgerald's 'Gatsby' before seeing the new movie version by Baz Luman, I found the book to be a simple metaphor of bourgeois New York 1920s life as a portent of what the middle classes aspired to after WWII. This led into the world into which I and everyone I had met until my adult years grew up, and it contained such practiced and attractive delusion that I am periodically captured by it when not on guard. So I know when one achieves what the delusion offers its very emptiness stimulates a yearning for knowledge – or else for other diversionary pastimes. And those pastimes are so sophisticated today that they achieve a sacred status themselves, which is the role celebrities illustrate.

The film takes the book, Gatsby, to a contemporary audience while remaining largely with the original period and storyline. In its sumptuous presentation, the film highlights the vacuity of the minds, lives and values of those privileged party-goers while at the same time showing the emptiness of attachment through Gatsby obsession with Daisy. Although Gatsby is more likeable than his guests and all others in the story except the narrator, he is to himself a fraud and despite his manners and more caring attitude than the wealthy dilatants, he is ultimately blind to reality. The narrator of the book returns to a more real world, while in the movie he is writing as therapy for the apparent nervous collapse the events of the story had on him. Misused celebrity, wealth and status provide a clear illustration of the emptiness described in John Gray's book that I discussed earlier. What is described by Fitzgerald's work for the 1920s has now become commonplace for many in a wealthy society such as Australia. Waterskiing, exotic cars and fancy dresses are divertissements of the broad middle class, which in Australian income terms extends to many tradespersons and routine employees. And so such vacuity characterizes most lives that are misnamed civilized.

The Uncivilized Life

For most circumstances, uncivilized and barbarian are used as synonyms. Those outside the gates, the wall or in the marginal lands have traditionally been regarded as barbarians with primitive cultures and habits compared to those living in cities – that is, civilized. It is a useful distinction if it simply separates city from non-city dwellers, but of course it always contains more pejorative meanings. But as virtually all who read or use such terms are from some form of civilized lifestyle, it is also useful to consider it from the viewpoint of the non-civilized. That is what James Scott has done in his 'The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia'. The thesis of the book is simply that the so called hilltribes in the contiguous mountain regions of China, Vietnam, Lao, Thailand and Myanmar, and not part of the mainstream civilizations of their nations having made a choice to be outside state systems. They have not simply been marginalized or yet to be offered the benefits of civilization – they have rejected it. Scott makes a good case in observing that many such peoples have left lowland agricultural communities to take up swidden farming and illiterate lifestyles, and supports his contention with numerous observations.

I find it compelling to entertain the theory for two reasons. First the anarchical explanation appeals to my nature, which may be derived from my heritage and nationality

– a useful trait that allows experimentation with risky and taboo matters avoided by many more *civilized* persons. Second, Scott is describing the people I worked with for five impressionable years in my 20s, and his thesis resolved many incongruities that had remained in my mind from that period. And his calling it an *art* to stay *not governed* captures the essence of a lifestyle that allows for frequent movement, changing of oral histories over time, absorbing persons who flee excessive taxes or other burdens of governments states, eschewing hierarchies and chieftains as the path to breaking down the society, and so on.

Scott adopts the regional term Zomia for the highlands of the countries mentioned, and uses the Thai proverb *put vegetables in the basket, put people in the muang* to describe the state-making approaches of all governments. The means of creating a state required labour for agriculture, which is a more labour consuming food production system than foraging, and allows control of labour for soldiering. In fact, he says, labour was the reason for war rather than using the less valuable asset of land. This applies beyond Southeast Asia because much history is better explained as raids being foor the capture of slaves; it also implies that slaves quickly integrated into the captor's culture thereby scuttling most arguments about racial purity. In 1747, the ruler of Sumatra's Palembang observed, *It is very easy for a subject to find a lord but it is much more difficult for a lord to find a subject*. And lest some politically correct moderns claim that slavery is an aberration of a short period, Scott quotes Karl Marx noting that no empire that Europeans could name could have existed without slavery. Added to this is another unpalatable fact that barbarians – today we may substitute words such as 'refugees' or sometimes even 'terrorists' – were and may yet be a necessity for justifying the narrowed lives that many must accept in civilized societies.

The theory advanced also provides an explanation of colonialism more consistent with the facts than that of exploitation and inequity. It assumes that colonial actions were in effect the same as those of past and future state-making actions, and displayed the same objective of governance in order to tax and control. An example relevant to Australians is the popular idea that the British invocation of Australia as a terra nullius was inequitable, uncharitable and inconsistent, being considered at a similar time to the French using clearer terminology in the form of *la France utile* versus *la France inutile* for regions that could cover their costs of governance from taxes or not.

But in these colonies, some observant young men noted the anomaly, such as Archibald Ross Calquhoun in his 'Amongst the Shans' in 1885: *The term savages, used by so many authors to denote all the hill tribes of Indo-China, is very inaccurate and misleading, as many of these tribes are more civilized and humane than the tax-ridden inhabitants of the plain country, and indeed merely the remains of once mighty empires*. Here *civilized* means cultivated or sophisticated rather than city dwelling, and the statement captures the additional observation that these are not yet-to-be-educated barbarians but groups who have chosen to avoid the imposts of highly taxed agriculture that is little more than slavery. To me the equivalent today is encouragement to mortgage ones' future labour without thought of the cost of one's loss of freedom to choose alternative lifestyles, occupations, localities or even to think differently.

Having escaped such bondage, groups such as the Meo maintained stories of fleeing with minimal goods and so maintaining frugal existence as a value system. This produced an unconquerable force, such as noted by a Spanish official in the 18th century Philippines, *nothing is more difficult than to conquer a people who have no needs and whose ramparts are the forests, mountains, impenetrable wildernesses, and high precipices*. In the case of leaderless groups such as the Lahu, Scott adds the defence of *divide that ye be not ruled* as a parody of the British *divide and rule* that applied to gaining power over existing states.

It is hard to label groups who evade servile lives in preference for freedom of choice as 'barbaric', and so that term cannot be used as an antonym for 'civilized', except of course that it or similar words are used politically for the purpose of stopping leakage of population from the 'civilized' society. And it seems the same today as we mop up the few remaining independent peoples of the world into our civilized states. It is time to lament our loss of such 'barbarians'.

Needing 'Barbarians'

Following on from this confused separation between civilized and barbaric peoples, we may well ask 'can one exist without the other?' And from that question arises a second question, 'does one in fact produce the other?' Political correctness – that misued tool of our time – would have it that the forces of evil must be controlled by our civilized violence. Still the best example of this was our willingness to drop atomic bombs on Japan (but not Germany) to settle that earlier 'axis of evil', since God and right was surely on the Western side.

The dilemma is old, and told in one form in the *most significant surviving Old Engish poem* of 'Beowulf' a millennium ago, which I read in translation by Michael Alexander that the great Irish poet Seamus Heany considered to be the most intelligible version. As the hero Beowulf's exploits are recounted, most tellingly against the disruptive monster Grendel, we learn of the warrior code as a basis for civilizing influences – in maintaining order, social hierarchy and wealth. Warriors defend those values and assets, and monsters – we could equally well label them barbarians or terrorists – destroy that security. The Beowulf poem goes on for similar battles of good and evil, offering tantalizing early references to such Old Testament stories as Cain and Abel and The Flood, and it culminates in the aged Beowulf having to fight one last evil influence in which battle he receives a mortal wound. He dies well, asking that the treasure be buried with him in a large monument that will ensure the immortality of his exploits in defence of the good.

But is it as simple as that? Being in an ancient tongue and being a poem and perhaps allegorical, various interpretations are possible. Some analysts seek a Christ-like hero in Beowulf, but I cannot see it – even if both stories have that 'hero' intent. Others see a nihilistic sentiment in the references to *fate* and postulate a sacrifice of the soul in a pact with the Devil while fighting against the Devil's forces – but to me this seems to add unnecessary complexity to life. Nevertheless, the nihilistic view encourages an existential

interpretation in which there is nothing to pray for or to, and this prompts us to consider that the imbalance between good and evil may be a imaginary figment with each only existing in response to the other. This is the same as my observation above that civilization and barbarianism rely on each other to exist – if one disappears, so must the other as in all dichotomous thought products.

Beowulf can be seen as both Preserver and Destroyer, which while Christians might label these as Christ and Satan might be better considered in the Hindu conception of Shiva to explain the forces within humans and all life. If that is the case, then the Creator – the third role of the Shiva Trinity – may be society or the human minds that create both the fear of loss of order and security and the means of preserving them. In today's parlance this means such undefinable grails as sustainability. The idea appears widely in fiction without commonly acknowledging the source of the fear of change being a fear of death – such as in Tim Hehir's (or Jivata as I know him under his ordained name) 'Julius & The Watchmaker'. His rollicking tale is aimed at teenagers and covers time travel, parallel worlds, greed and battles, it notes that *anything new or different is viewed with suspicion and fear*. Stability is valued almost at any cost.

Stability of Society and of the Person

To understand today's world requires a perspective beyond one's own experience and a willingness to eschew the deeply embedded views of one's contemporaries. Understanding life has always required that, it seems. With such an attitude, much can be learned from Martin Jacques' 'When China Rules the World', which of course is not about ruling the world as much as China's disciplined and consistent rise to become potentially a major world power. This long book expounds the thesis that the role of the USA as global trend-setter and powerhouse has already ended as a consequence of irreconcilable management problems within democratic capitalism. It is an extension of the observations of the decline in global influence of the UK after WWs I&II.

The context for this change is described in terms of the ignominy suffered by China through the colonial era, and its consistency in cultivating a unique *civilization-state* rather than the nation-states of the West with their trade-offs of power between government, church or lobby groups, and business. The historical context is useful to explain to Western readers – whom the book obviously targets – about what has been happening behind the propaganda to which we are subject from our own governments and business. But the long thesis can be summarized in the points that Jacques lists in his 'Concluding Remarks', which already looks like being superceded by what is being called the (Western) 'global' financial crisis.

The *differences that define China* are according to his 'concluding remarks' are:

- The *civilization-state*, in which the government is critical to citizens' identity and which acts as an overall father figure in the hierarchical patriarchal system that has sustained China for millennia.
- China has been and has become again the central tribute recipient of Asia, and within this model has loyalties that do not demand expensive military defence and which

cement the superiority of China and Chinese in the minds of others, consistent with the Chinese conceptions of themselves.

- Race is defined by culture more than past ethnicity, thus to be Chinese is to be culturally Han for the most part, which is an indication of the absorptive capacity of the culture and limits expansionism to borders set by ancient traditions of what constitutes China and hence where Han may live.
- China is effectively continental is size, and under one government it wields much market power both domestically and internationally, which when combined with its huge population means that it must act in a manner quite different from that predicted from Western models where no such nation has ever existed.
- The enduring ethic of Confucianism to inform all levels of society and to require responsibility at all levels leads to discipline and competence at personal, family and governmental levels in a manner unknown in Western history, and without the compromises in governance that are required by power sharing in the West.
- The Chinese Communist Party has been an exceptionally adaptive governance group and bears little historical or actual relationship to the 'communist' fear handovers in the West that derived mainly from Russia. In that latter case, the revolution was from the top and forced on the populace by those in power, while in China the intellectuals were controlled and ordinary people achieved influence. I refer elsewhere to an observation that China represents the fastest divestment of central power in the world's history, according to the US journal 'Foreign Affairs').
- China is both a developed and a developing country and has learned a means of governing itself accordingly, with multiple systems within one country, as exemplified in the separate local governance systems for autonomous regions including Hong Kong and Shanghai.

It is an exciting time for someone of my background even when it seems even difficult for others to accept, including some of my educated and learned colleagues. I hesitate to be catagorical but tentatively suggest it could represent entrenched views and fear. But it could also be our continued false view of 'the East' as I described earlier about Said's book. In fact this is illustrated in another book, about the Middle East, which I read during the same period as Jacques' about China. In keeping with the Leake advice of reading learned books from or about the regions while I visit them, I borrowed Anscombe's 'The Ottoman Gulf: The Creation of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Qatar' from the University's library to read while in the Gulf. What a disappointment! Far from the engaging descriptive writing of the colonial era, this was trivialized to the extent that I wondered what more important events occurred in parallel to those stretched out in detail in the book. The tug of war between the weak Ottomans and the British over areas that neither saw as valuable, would I think, have been a fine setting to discuss the lifestyles, self-sufficiency and culture of the region. Of course, I speak with hindsight – yet it is today's context that I and presumably others seek to understand from history, and this book added little to that quest. Said's clanging accusations of 'orientalism' rang through each chapter.

I prefer the quest for reality, which may be why on next arriving in Thailand, I picked up Richard Dawkin's 'The Magic of Reality' not realizing that it was written for 'teenagers'.

It is a nice exposition of some aspects of science contrasted with the beliefs of religious or otherwise superstitious persons – and as such is useful and mildly entertaining in a dated British fashion. But it was not the best use of my time. I mention it here to illustrate the need for periodic reality-checks by we Westerners in our views of China. And this will extend to spiritual dimensions as well. Rather than our assumptions of state atheism meaning that personal spiritual matters are not encouraged, we could interpret China's policy to apply to religious, political and other matters that undermine the common good. Within the modern Confucian ethic it seems to me that there remains some personal freedom for spiritual development through nature, the Tao, Buddhist practices and so on in China. It might even be seen as similar to the limits of what is socially acceptable within the spiritual-consumerism of the West. But I may be biased. In any case, apart from tantalizing philosophical differences between China and the West, the usual excuse thrown up for lack of integration is language – and this too may prove to be a furphy.

Invented Language-Barriers

Being Australian and involved in Asia through my career, friendships and interests, I have at times been critical of my countrymen who have similarly been exposed to other cultures yet remained monolingual. Indeed my criticisms have gone further at times, attributing this to a general laxity of only doing what's necessary. It accrods with me comparison of Australia with a mining camp – as they were in Australia with its egalitarian and paradisiacal workers' conditions. Like the camps, the whole country can be seen as a place where incomes and lifestyles for many are higher than could be expected elsewhere in the world for similar levels of work, competence and education. These two criticisms are related by the inherited attitude that somehow Australia can continue as a Western enclave surrounded by Asian economies that will support these high levels of comfort. Concerned that this may be a fools' paradise I based my much of life on principles different from my peers, and must now acknowledge that my forecast looks like proving both right for language and wrong for the effect of new foreign underwriting of our economy. But it is language that concerns me here.

As Steven Pinker's 'The Language Instinct' reveals, the excuse that learning a second language is difficult is just that – an excuse, not a reality. Of course, it is easier if you are under six years of age, but as his treatise explains, the underlying instinct for grammar is inherent in the human brain. To me this partly explains why we can so often discern what is going on in a tongue with which we have little familiarity. The problem of learning enters through well-meaning although not-so-clever teachers of language who have unquestioningly accepted that one learns a language from rules and formulae. I experienced this as déjà vu when such high-school French classes that insisted on grammar and precise pronunciation reappeared 40 years later in Alliance Francaise French lessons in Strasbourg. The same insistence on following artificial rules that had no benefit in improving communication, and the annoying insistence on interrupting learners mid sentence to correct a pronunciation had retained its de-incentivizing effects across the decades. Pinker's work uses the word grammar in the sense of commonalities between all languages including signing – it has nothing to do with teachers' rules or

naive ideas of standard versions of any language. His discovery is liberating though possibly confusing to those who have trained their minds according to abstract rules.

Pinker ascribed our delusional approach to language and indeed to modern understanding of ourselves to essential errors in social science. He describes the Standard Social Science Model as something that surprised me by its unscientificness, for it assumes that humans are unlike other animals and are molded by culture, and that therefore infants minds can be considered effectively as blank slates for social enculturation called as education. To be sure Pinker has been criticized by social scientists and psychologists but he has a point, which is that the neuroscience is largely ignored by the non-scientifically literate. Having fought for retention of the social sciences in those aspects of applied science education I once influenced, I was surprised to learn from Pinker that the scientific rigour we required of both the humanities and sciences in such cases has not commonly occurred among specialists concerned with language. Null hypotheses and constant questioning to disprove and improve theories has apparently been eschewed in favour of opinion and emotion. And such an approach gave rise, for example, to the myth of the Great Eskimos Vocabulary Hoax about their languages' plethora of words for 'snow'.

When Pinker continues with this line and compares the breakdown of terms used to discuss psychology with those used in neurological science, I become even more concerned about the impact of lazy thinking. He notes that a common psychology text would have chapter headings based on what the social scientist wants to control while a neurology text's headings would be based on the way brain works, which not incidentally allows a realistic consideration of emotions and their effects.

These are serious matters for a society that still equates being civilized to being superior. I suppose that the word mainly means that we live in cities – does that mean that larger cities are more civilized? Just as Rome grew weak before it fell, so we weaken our society by following false premises about how humans function. We counsel after 'trauma' to make it go away at the price of learning from the experience, we protect ourselves from seeing death in order to avoid confronting our own mortality, and we divert from grief in order to avoid loss reminding us of our psychological dependencies and attachments. How can we imagine that this makes us stronger, or better, or more equipped to handle the demands of life? I wonder if these social weaknesses are linked to those who deny the commonalities of the human mind in terms of language, and the means by which the vast majority of multi-lingual persons have learned other languages. The majority learn additional languages without instruction, without fear of speaking incorrectly and with confidence that the listener is trying to understand.

All this is important. So is a related aspect not developed in Pinker's book, which is the way that another language affects one's own mind and conceptual thinking. All languages and especially those linguistically distant from our own introduce new concepts and modes of thinking – a useful thing for a world that is increasingly intertwined. This should be particularly useful for a country where perhaps 70 percent are monolingual English speakers lying close to the most world's most populous region with linguistically different cultures. If the average Australia could consider this objectively I

think it likely they would agree that all Australians should learn a language of their neighbours. And considering that two near neighbours use modernized, streamlined and easy-to-learn forms of Bahasa, the excuse that its 'hard' no longer applies. In any case case Pinker argues with evidence that perceptions of difficulty are not matched in reality.

I will be considered biased for suggesting that it is the tonal languages that offer perhaps the greatest benefits beyond communication. I wish I had learned even more of Thai when I was younger, for I continue to learn more almost daily. For me it is evident that cultural appreciation grows with language interaction to become understanding and thus a way of thinking. For me it has progressively cleared some of the unnecessarily complicated theological fogs that surround the spirituality embedded in Buddhism.

Personal Spiritual Dialogue

The blessing that Thai language has afforded me in opening new vistas is linked to my formative religious study, a statement that may seem strange to Thai friends who observed my youthful behaviour in Thailand. I had long-held an assumption that my age peers shared and understanding of our history, culture, law, politics, food, religion and so forth derived from the West's adopted and accumulated history as maintained through the church. This has proved to be true in some cases, and false in many. Now I realize that much that I have said for a couple of decades has not been understood as I intended. With that realization I began reading in earnest and more widely, having already been influenced by Thai and Thai Buddhist thinking – and this led my writings into a broader perspective. And after some time, it led to my both my reading and my writing alternating between agricultural and what I call spiritual themes, and in some cases integrating them. I hope to integrate them further as I age if I am that fortunate.

I call this 'spiritual' mainly to distinguish it from institutionalized or belief-based religion. I am likewise not identifying with those who interpret words to have mystical meanings beyond human ken, for I have learned that such persons can be trapped in their attachment to protective mental projections; it is release from such a burden that spiritual teachings in all traditions address. Such were the introductory thoughts stimulated by a book that my friend Charan passed to me, 'Thai Buddhist Social Theory' by Tavivat Puntarigvivat.

The book is an eclectic collection of Buddhist referenced arguments about social responsibility. I find the book's thesis to be contrived yet probably useful for those who want a prescription. There are two reasons why I think it is useful even though I think it is not an accurate interpretation of Buddhist teachings. First, most people want to be told what to do and what to believe. Buddhist scriptures recognize this and suggest such persons be oriented to moral behaviour as a means of opening their minds to understand themselves further. Second, the message promulgated is beneficial in its own right. These are the same reasons for supporting 'self-sufficiency' and related promotions within wider society.

The book uses syncretism as a means to discuss Buddhist, Brahmanistic and Animistic inclusions in Thai religion, which provides an introduction to socio-politics of modern Thai society. Here the author begins to show his political colour and later in the book clearly espouses a view that to me seems contrary to many aspects of the Buddhist scriptures, yet nevertheless contains a social message. Before that the book presents a quick overview of reform in Thai Buddhism and focuses on Buddhadasa as an example of reinterpreting essential Buddhism. While this accords with my understanding of Buddhadasa, whose insights I have studied and in one case translated, I am not sure he aimed at effecting social change. I saw his aim being to assist individuals to deepen their understanding of the interrelationships of all things including cause and effect and to thereby allow them to be more effective in society. It is the message of all spiritual traditions of the major religions.

The book uses other examples, ranging from the rural Thai Luangpor Teean's approach to Japanese Zazen. The examples presented demonstrate the diversity of explications within Buddhist traditions centred on a common understanding of the interconnectedness of all things, including the mind. I am indebted to the author for reminding me of Hakuin Zenji's 'Song of Zazen', which contains the lines:
How sad that people ignore the near
And search for truth afar:
Like someone in the midst of water
Crying out in thirst,
Like a child of a wealthy home
Wandering among the poor.
Such descriptions explain why moral and mind-calming practices are useful tools for self-understanding, and why to understand one's self is to understand the world and life.

Tavivat concludes his book by seeking to align aspects of Whitehead's Process Philosophy with Buddhism's *Paticcasamuppada*. I find the latter to be the wisdom of the ages, and while Whitehead was perhaps approaching this, the between the two is a little clumsy. The author might have done well to develop Whitehead's own thought, which gave rise to an explanation I mentioned 'The Buddha's Gospel' that *The Buddha gave his doctrine to the world: Christ gave his life. It is for the Christians to discern the doctrine. Perhaps in the end the most valuable part of the doctrine of the Buddha is its interpretation of his [Jesus'] life*. If Tavivat had concluded with a discussion of this insight, he could have shown how Whitehead – as an intellectual European Christian – was limited by his conditioning according to *paticcasamuppada* and so sought further insight by shining a light on his own tradition. That would have been a Thai Buddhist understanding of Whitehead's genius, and it is a path I have recommended to many earnest seekersn based on my own experience – that is, deeping understanding from one's own cultural base is more beneficial than immersion in exotic approaches divorced from one's own experience. For Thailand and Thai people, deeper insight into Buddhism would seem to come not from the sterility of comparative religion and philosophy or the mediocrity of interfaith dialogue that has influenced such books as the one stimulating these thoughts, but from the insights such as those of Buddhadasa, which when mentioned are the strongest part of the book.

Is this a fair view of the book? I think it is, but it is necessarily biased by my own conditioning. This is the reason why my recent writings begin with an acknowledgements section that includes me acknowledging my own conditioning so far as I can see its relevance to the subject of the book. As Tivivat's book concludes with the insight of conditionality, followed by his CV I assume this as a similar approach, and I interpret his CV as one influenced by Western and hence Christian theological interpretation, which differs from spiritual understanding and the self-development aspects of Buddhism, Christianity and other traditions. Included in the genius of Buddhism is recognition of the range of psychological types and descriptions of a range of practices suited to thise different types. Usually presented in all traditions as ritual, meditation and ethics such practices can be found in all traditions, although for Christianity the subject is confused by its distance from what Jesus taught.

Jesusism versus Christianity

The difference between Jesusism, by which I mean what Jesus was probably talking about, and Christianity has long been stark to me. However, for many others it seems a stumbling-block to appreciating both the genius of Christianity and the logic of Jesus as a man conforming to his times. I have read many treatises on the subject and related works dealing with the evolution of theology and the difficulties of knowing anything significant about the historical Jesus. The ethics and practices of both versions may overlap for matters of self-discipline in personal spiritual development, but can differ for views on such subjects as wealth and working to assist the poor. For example, it only makes sense if it includes the poor in spirit, food, shelter, clothing, basic medical care at least as much as the poor in monetary terms. The insight of Jesus more than Christianity is that the things that matter cannot be measured by proxies such as money especially if it is inequitably controlled. And perhaps because these matters are more strongly advocated in what may be postulated as Jesus teachings than in the religion invented later that invokes Jesus as its divine agent.

Having read much on the subject, I have built on a sound foundation laid by Dr Wood in the Methodist course I took concurrent with my first degree. I have also had the benefit of travels and discussions with likeminded persons, many of whom provided enlightening explications of critical aspects of life from their own traditions. Most of my Western Buddhist friends were not of a mind to accept the religion of their own culture as anything but inferior to their newly adopted practice, which they tended to make more religious than its early teachings suggest. Nevertheless, the feeling of comfort with life and others that arose from this meeting of Buddhist and Christian insights served to enhance my confidence in continuing to pursue my own spiritual development in a manner that might not arisen from Christianity alone. And for some time this had caused me to be discerning in what I read in these fields.

My old friend John Leake offered Reza Aslan's 'Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth', which I thought it might repeat ideas I had read elsewhere but in fact offered new insights. While the book brings disparate research and thinking together very well it

also links in the history of the times such that Jesus' likely words and actions ring true. In essence, Reza Aslan succinctly points out how Jesus would have been seen as one in a string of messiahs who were usually executed for disruption under Roman law because the messianic tradition was firmly based in throwing-off the Roman yoke. As a marginal figure from a marginalized part of Palestine, Jesus' charisma created a loyalty and following of serious practitioners, who were all probably as illiterate as Jesus himself. A few years after he was killed by the Romans, as one among hundred of anonymous criminals, his brother James was carrying on his teachings as a minority Judaic sect in Jerusalem with Peter and John when the Pharisee Paul's teaching based on his own 'blinding light' experience came to their attention, and eventually caused them concern. Why? Because Paul was not teaching Jesus' practices of sharing life's essentials, helping the poor and observing the Talmudic laws but was preaching a religion of belief in a Jesus who was God in human form, which provided a heavenly reward without psychological change or special respect for one's lifestyle, attitude to wealth and the poor or traditional observances.

When Paul was imprisoned by the Romans after an altercation with the Jerusalem sect that incorrectly led the Romans to mistake him for another messiah who had arisen somewhere in the countryside at that time, he eventually found his way to Rome based on his Roman citizenship. There, as a citizen, he was effectively free to preach and gained a gentile following for his sect. Meanwhile Peter who had preceded him to Rome was gaining followers for the Jesus sect. The two sects clashed. This led to Roman suppression of the sects, without apparently much knowledge of how they differed. This was a time of further Jewish unrest that caused Emperor Vespasian to dispatch his son Titus to wipe out the trouble before it spread. Titus did this by destroying whole families and the temple in Jerusalem and surrounding towns. James had already been killed earlier for his practices, and thus the the Jesus sect was set back. Through subsequent decades the Paul sect grew and continued to contend with the remnant Rome-based Jesus sect until eventually an Emperor acted decisively. Constantine sought a religion for his Empire and so assembled his Bishops, who were all Roman citizens, and required them to unify the religion. But by this time the Paul sect had dominated the Jesus sect by embracing gentiles and relaxing observance of difficult rituals while offering belief-based rewards. The Creed that arose from the combined Bishops is that recited most Sundays as the Nicaean Creed, and it reflects that belief-based sectarian invention that is much more Paul's than Jesus'.

By presenting the scant history recorded by others through the period, Reza Aslan is able to show the storyline summarised above, which is consistent with the understanding most non-belief-based scholars that I know. The book can be seen as a masterful compilation of details that otherwise have not been so eloquently presented in one place. Reading 'Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth' allowed me to recall other writingsin an enjoyable recollection. It also stimulated me to read Pope Francis' book-length 'Joy of the Gospel – Evangalii Gaudium, 24 November 2013', which I find reflects Paul's belief-base yet calls for an improved response to the poor and unproductive wealth, among other praiseworthy statements. For example, Francis notes that *in the midst of conflict we lose our sense of the profound unity of reality*, and that faith must adjust to scientific

truths, but not to science being misused in ideological ways. The Church remains a Pauline invention, but that faith-based approach has clearly led many to spiritual understanding, and has guided many more to worthwhile disciplined lives that contribute to the social stability that Rome kept central in its governance approaches. And the metaphors, parables and similes contained in the scriptures remain poetic masterpieces even though the Old Testament (or to be more politically-correct, the Jewish scriptures) far outshines the New in literary style, as is rendered even clearer by the countless English translations that we can access so easily today.

Reading both of these books also stimulated me to re-read my own 'Dharma as Man: A Myth of Jesus in Buddhist Lands', in which I had taken a unified story of Jesus from the gospels and cast it into Buddhist terms and concepts in an attempt to demonstrate common spiritual teachings. I found revisiting my own work enlightening – obviously I capture concepts in a manner that suits my mind, but it also impresses on me the way my insights can come from the many interpretations of scriptural passages. It is much the same as when I re-read some of my poetry. I found many aspects of my 'Dharma as Man' accorded with those in Aslan's.

One problem of today's discourse seems to be an embarrassment in talking of spiritual matters other than chatter around crystals and other beliefs. But I find encouragement from *kalianomitra* around the world who correspond with me, such as a reply resulting from my relating aspects of Aslan's book to my old friend Jerry Murray in Maine. His response was Jesuitical in its logic about the need for historical study about Jesus and the scriptures in general as part of faith. This is the sort of faith that I can understand in contrast to unchallenged blind-belief. And Jerry's Christmas card that coincidentally arrived on the same day as his email also provided a link to the next book that was on my reading list. His card was his traditional religious scene printed by the National Rifle Association, which I take as his continuing commentary on human nature.

Of Guns and Wars

The next book – 'The Crossroad: A Story of Life, Death and the SAS' – was one I had perused in a bookshop after reading a review and thought it might be useful for wayward youths, and said as much to Simone. She bought it as a Christmas present for me. I quickly learned it was not the sort of book I would normally read, but persevering found a candid autobiography of a wayward youth who reoriented himself through discipline and a goal to join the elite SAS and then serve successive terms in Afganistan, eventually being awarded the first Victoria Cross for 40 years.

Donaldson details his life, which is remarkably Australian and perhaps exaggerates his own traumas, which he sees as motivators for his subsequent delinquent and army lives. It is insightful for a 40 year-old and written for a general Australian audience. Even with my bias against some types who overstate the role of individual actions in the military, I found it engrossing in a boy's-own way. There are no sections I would pick out to quote, and it not a book I would keep to re-read, but nevertheless is potentially useful. However, I expect part of its market will be the patriotic, royalty-loving and authority-bashing who

are sometimes victims of their own actions. It is quite a contrast the previous three books (Zealot, Evangalii Gaudium and Dharma as Man), and not one that I feel fuels my quest, even though I identified with some aspects of Donaldson's life. But then, I am at a different stage of life – and when I was his age I was accepting dangerous assignments while providing for a family and continually improving myself through education and professional opportunities, and I even placed myself in unnecessary danger at a later age of 53 in Iraq.

The stimulation of that adventure fuelled my reading at the time around the usual spiritual cum philosophical themes, and helped me include death in all my considerations. Like others conditioned by modern Western society I had compartmentalized this critical aspect of life. I don't think I was in as severe denial as many of my peers but I had not faced it properly, and with some awareness from Buddhist readings and practices I came to see stages in life more clearly. Thus for my 60th birthday I collated a short reflection on my life and to give to those who came to a celebration. Perhaps because it was quite revealing it generated only a few, but especially insightful, comments. That tract was divided into the Asian 12-year cycles of life, of which 60 is the end of every day responsibilities because a family would normally be raised by that time; the next cycle is for contributing to society from one's experience and abilities while becoming increasingly spiritually aware. And the next cycle for whoever is fortunate to reach it in good shape after 72 years is even more about spiritual understanding.

This could have been the subject of Daniel Klein's book 'Travels with Epicurus', which our friend and marriage celebrant Fran Awcock gave to us as one that had particular impacted on her. Fran is in her 70s and the book deals with the best ways to live after that age by considering Epicurus' philosophy and that of several others in the author's personal story of a stay on the Greek Island of Hydra. While it is not deep it is uplifting to see this modern academic philosopher wrestle gently with his age, and to offer some hints to other aging persons in similar situations. He ultimately gives himself permission to be old, to sit and gaze, chat, observe and remember, and perhaps to think. All beneficial, although I cannot help noticing how the effects of Western conditioning still kept a strong hold on him as it does for all of us, and so he apparently did not allow himself to meditate or contemplate on life deeply. He preferred to learn from past recorded lives and those he observed about him on the slow-paced Hydra.

The Pace of Other Cultures

Removing to the *slow-paced Hydra* may work to an extent, but really the conditioning we bring with ourselves to any situation dominates what we will see and learn. Klein's book included a passing reference to a Norwegian philosopher's writings about boredom, which piqued my interest. Searching it out in the wonderful library resources available to these days, I therefore next read Lars Svendsen's 'A Philosophy of Boredom'. In the modern philosophical style it is a work that interprets other's writings with a new slant. While in fact boring in itself in parts, the final chapter could stand alone as an essay on the subject. The bulk of the book feels negative, although not nihilistic, as it leads to that final chapter and its logical conclusion that boredom is a productive part of life. An

example of this is even evident in his preface where he explains that his book was a product of being *unable to do nothing*.

In the final chapter Svendsen points out that utopias fail because ipso facto they have all they want and this gives rise to boredom as Pascal had earlier observed in noting that it is not a good thing to have all one's needs met. Toccqueville went further in talking of *the strange melancholy which often haunts the inhabitants of democratic companies in the midst of their abundance*. These seem similar Bertrand Russell's opinion that *a generation that cannot endure boredom is a generation of little men*, and that in turn reminded me of the line that I heard years ago in a presentation by Oxford's Wilfred Beckerman about *the boredom of work and loneliness of thought* being too hard for most modern would-be scholars.

I found that my own understanding of boredom accorded with Wittgenstein's – boredom allows self-reflection, and as this task cannot be outsourced today like many other tasks, it is critical to our development. In this sense, Svendsen sees boredom containing self-insight. Yet he disagrees with the Ecclesiastes' line that *he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow*, which I have previously interpreted in my own reflections on that wonderful Talmudic poem in my rhyming interpretation in the book 'Pranja Anthology'. In that work, I saw wisdom allows one to see how things are, which includes the production of sorrow from routine deluded human acts. And this reflection leads, as does 'Pranja Anthology', to seeing easier interpretations of these matters in Buddhist philosophy than in the mire of Western philosophy. But I do agree with Svendsen in concluding that persons who attempt to jolly one into lightness when one is in a heavy mood are intolerable, misguided and unhelpful.

I read the Svendsen's book in Alice Springs where we were spending a week or so after four days at Uluru and Kata Chuta. Such a period was four-times longer than the longest tourist visits, and even locals suggestd we would be bored. We weren't, because we took time to reflect on many things, which is consistent with Svendsen's final chapter. While there, I also read Eleanor Hogan's 'Alice Springs', a book that flows well in its journalistic style but does not do the town of Alice Springs justice. Why not? Because it deals with aboriginal issues and social worker viewpoints and neglects the rest of the population, the history of the town, its diverse government services and its role as a service centre that is desert and larger than most countries. I was left with the impression that Hogan might have done better to write a novel to present her themes, many of which are easy to agree with. I do, however, disagree with the bias the book places on an important part of Australia, in political, economic and environmental terms.

Hogan lived in Alice Springs for three years and wrote about it during that time, I think. Our short visit cannot compete in duration but as we have done routinely we stayed longer than needed, with no specific program and ensured that we mixed with educated and informed persons whom we knew or knew of. Simone attended a session of a Royal Commission into abuse of aboriginal children with a colleague psychotherapist who was based here; we spent a pleasant desert evening over dinner with a couple of CSIRO rangeland ecologists on their elevated MacDonald Ranges veranda, and with an Academy

Fellow toured the well-equipped Desert Knowledge Precinct that houses programs for traditional aboriginal communities, the indigenous Batchelor College and CSIRO, as well as other visits. From these and through visits to many of the wonderful facilities dedicated to understanding the vast desert environment and by travelling through it we visited a vibrant town and region that would not be recognizable from Hogan's book.

Yet she is correct about the excessive welfare system that pads the lives of white social and NGO workers who probably do some good for disenfranchised aboriginals caught in their families' transition from traditional to modern society. The pace of such change is slow, and this seems to gel with the theme of Svendsen's book on boredom. Just as wisdom teaches respect for boredom as a mother of insight, so it should teach us to question rapid changes in many old cultural views – both black and white. It is a modern issue when society encourages us to eschew both time alone and space for boredom, and so demands action and black-and-white solutions, often to matters that might resolve themselves. It is a conundrum of superiority – wanting to help another culture at a pace that fractures that culture. These things take time and modern Australia is barely out of infancy. Many of us whose white forebears have been here for a several generations know this, and also know that we differ from people from other Western countries in the way we can feel that our land has shaped our persons.

The Old and Young West

My culture is influenced by my country. Being able to stand and breathe in spaces where there is no sign of civilization, enjoying clean air and clear skies, while able to retreat to urban comforts on demand is the world I have been shaped by. I examined such feelings in 'Fifth Hut', a tract and video tribute to my quiet rural 'cave', which is a retreat easily accessible from our city dwelling. This has rendered me more inclined to what feels important in a foreign land rather than what is said by others to be important, be it architecture or landscape. I do not think it is unromantic, just realistic about the way in which emotions work on and in us, or at least me – but I am also convinced that in this respect I am not an outlier on the distribution curve. My worldview is shaped by such conditions, in geographical terms primarly by Australia, and also by my exposure to Asia.

Perhaps contained in that conditioning is an inkling of the reasons that I have guarded myself from indulging in too many novels over the years. In more recent years after shedding some futile aspects of life and passing into a phase where I could enjoy literary-ness rather than just getting caught up in storylines, I found that good novels could consolidate my learning and experience. This is why I have on a few occasions followed a film that impressed me by reading the book, as I did with the 'The Book Thief' by Mackus Zisak. The film was a sensitive treatment of German WWII history, well acted and told through the eyes of Death about a young girl's life. It made sufficient impression on me to immediately read the book, which was of course even better at developing scenes and contained additional aspects to the story that illustrated the importance of death. But it is a best-seller novel, which can discourage its reflective use, even though it contains some revelation in the person of its narrator, Death. Portrayed as a solitary, sensitive and overworked cog in the cosmos, Death allows us to see that the actions of

humans are void of meaning – except in the case of compassion, which evokes his final words that he is ‘haunted by humans’. But I am not sure the story will bring many people to contemplate death as part of life; more likely, it will evoke the usual denial death by claiming that future wars can be prevented and our civilized beliefs will ensure freedom. Living in denial of reality propped up by advertising and entertainment makes us easily manipulated when threatened and makes us prone to wanting strong leadership that will deliver us from threat. A case in point led to Hitler.

I cannot know the future more than any other thinking person. The paradox of peace and its comfort leading us into new conflict suits poetry more than prose, and my own reflections have found expression in both forms; but then the much greater effort per word embedded in poetry than is usual in prose is undervalued. My rhyming poem ‘Song of Songs of Solomon’ was such dense multi-meaning poem, and I know from comments that only obvious meanings were noticed by many readers. That is OK because the benefit is in the writing, and in the case of that book, arranging the overall art work – bonuses also arrive in other forms. One such bonus that linked my cave, where much of the ‘Songs’ and other poems were born including those about the country that has imbued me with its colour, patience and variability, arrived one Christmas from David Pietsch the builder of my cave. David lives in Murtoa in the Wimmera in his own underground house, and having received ‘Song of Songs’ reciprocated with a book of poetry by a neighbour, a philosopher in retreat from cities. Homer Rieth’s ‘150 Motets’ indicates his broad education and scholarly interest in diverse fields and languages that have touched on his own spiritual wrestlings, his muse and the rural Australian land and people.

Rieth’s long poems are hard to classify. I found that I felt good while reading it both when I was in the rhyme or in understandong of his meanings. And such a practice opens my mind while calming it. The same experience accrues from writing, both prose and poetry. When I reflect further on ‘The Book Thief’ and ‘150 Motets’, I find that the former is more entertainment than edification, but that the distinction between fiction and other forms of writing is both artificial and not particulary useful to the most important aspects of life.

Fiction or Fact?

I have been overly critical of fiction in the preceding jottings as its power is probably more akin to poetry than to non-fiction – so my comparitor was wrong. For me non-fiction stimulates wide and intersecting thoughts, some of which turn out to be insights – and so does poetry. Perhaps this is a more productive way for me to approach the question – does fiction conduce to insight? And that depends on my mood more for fiction than it does for non-fiction. It is easy to slip into the fantasy as a means of diverting oneself from reality, from consciousness, from awareness. I find it revealing that these are the same types of terms used to review and sell fiction today, as if the function of reading is to ‘kill time’ rather than improve life. This thought is not so far from those opponents of making scriptures available to the common people; in fact, it seems to be the common people that define what is ‘good’ on the basis of popularity, and this now extends to persons who could know better.

My next reading was James Boyce's '1835: The Founding of Melbourne and the Conquest of Australia', a succinct history of the settlement of what became the city that has had the largest effect on my life. Boyce argues that, while it was a world marvel in its speed of development and richness, it could have been better for the indigenous population. No doubt that is correct, but this style of 'what if' history seems to me to ignore the wisdom of the ages, which observes that it is the prevailing conditions that produced events. The main point I gain from Boyce is that Melbourne is unique in Australian history as the only capital founded without British government sanction, in this case by free or freed entrepreneurs from Van Diemen's Land who took significant risks in trespassing on Crown Land.

As a triumph of free market activity in the face of limited government resources, leading to the government having to belatedly regularize what had occurred, it set the tone for what became the richest part of Australia, even before gold was discovered. And after gold it was indisputably the richest city, at times the richest in the world. That it had such a lead within ten years of its founding reflects the same environmental blessings that had made it the most settled and productive part of aboriginal Australia. Such richness led to extremely rapid marginalization of that population in the face of apparently noble protection policies from Britain. Greed, for land and water, trumped good intentions and so the world lost an understanding of much of the depth of aboriginal culture, and Australian agriculture lost a source of environmental understanding that is only slowly being discovered from today's science.

I assume all of Boyce's details are facts – he seems a diligent researcher, and while his environmental and cultural druthers shine through, I found the book intriguing yet not conducing to insight. These days I look to a good book for insights, which can come through any subject and so nourish my spirit, which in less loaded language just means something that helps me see more clearly the oneness of life.
HERE
One with Life

The State Library of Victoria's wonderful 'Love and Devotion' presentation of Persian influenced illuminations and writings evoked a feeling of oneness in me – I was drawn back to it several times. And discovering two years later that the Friends of the Library had dedicated a volume of their journal to papers inspired by the exhibition again kindled my spirit. The journal volume was among surplus books being dispersed among friends by Fran, our marriage celebrant and friend, who had earlier been the CEO of the Library.

The volume contained variable papers, but all shed light on what Persia offered and offers the world through its poetry and illuminations. To me, it added value to two prints in our hallway, one purchased by Simone before we met, and the other a gift from John Leake for our marriage.

The journal stimulated me to ponder more on Rumi whose metaphor of spiritual nature contains more than some others like *the kingdom of heaven/god? is like a (tiny) mustard*

seed that grows into a large tree. Rumi sees our spirit being like a foetus inside a pregnant woman that *grows regardless of what the woman eats or where she sleeps, and regardless of her outward experience whether in time of war or peace*.' Thus, he introduces the inevitability of spiritual awareness growing within us, as well as dispensing with the literal prohibitions of religions about unclean foods or wine, and even social propriety.

Likewise the use of human love as a metaphor for union of the spirit with the divine is highly developed in Persian and Arabic poetry. The story of Layla and Majnun being but one example, which in itself is part of the worldview of Rumi and other things that feed our spirits such as music and other forms of poetry. The exhibition that I introduced earlier that featured Persian manuscripts from the Bodleian, Baillieu and Victorian State libraries stimulated me to consider the Song of Songs anew. Thus my earlier poetic attempts of Ecclesiastes were revived, and surprisingly, even to me, I produced a love story illustrated with Persian images from that manuscript of the exhibition. Unity is a feeling of creation in such pursuits – for others it may come from chopping wood or carrying water, or from scientific epiphanies, or from acts of kindness, or many other things.

The role of such poetry is described as a conversation with a friend sitting opposite, or with an imagined better self, or an inaccessible beloved that may draw one's deepest emotions and inner voice to the surface. And the act of engaging in that conversation is itself a giving of oneself, which allows one to be one with life in the same manner as didactic stories of great lives across all cultures.

The First Biography

Just as nature speaks to us as being one with it, so do ancient life stories that are told to us down the ages. For those within a Western culture who have been educated in their religious and cultural history, Bible stories are a ready source of such heroes. This is probably why I started to read a book at a discount table while waiting for Simone led me to buy David Rosenberg's 'Abraham'.

Rosenberg considers Abraham to have first written biography in the world. Whether this contested or not doesn't matter. His point is made through analysis of German theologians' deciphering the different authors of parts of the Old Testament. But his book, 'Abraham', is hard to read partly because of its style of English and partly because it follows the US-penchant for introducing ideas so slowly that his main points can be missed. Apart from that he is compelling in his description of Abraham as an educated Sumerian interpreted his own cosmos among simple foreigners and away from the sophisticated urban environments in which he was raised. The book notes that Abraham began with many gods, adopted one of the Canaanites gods in the land to which he wandered and then spoke face to face with that god Yahweh who evolved for Abraham into a supreme God.

Rosenberg also introduced me to Nisaba, the Sumerian goddess of writing and learning, which since the cuneiform script of Sumeria was probably the world's first writing, makes her – for me – the high priestess of the muses. This was the culture that provided the proto-stories for early Biblical tales, from the Flood to the Exodus, and produced such wonderful poetry as in The Epic of Gilgamesh: *there is no permanence. Do we build a house to stand forever? Do we seal a contract to hold for all time? Do brothers divide an inheritance to keep forever; does the flood-time of rivers endure? It is only the nymph of the dragon-fly who sheds her larva and sees the sun in his glory*. And according to Rosenberg, these wonderful lines have endured for millennia with an lapis lazuli dragon-fly inlaid in the clay tablet on which the cuneiform characters were found. Incidentally and of interest to me for other reasons, these literary people are also claimed to have bred a special strain of prized black donkeys renowned for their ability to carry 90 kg for 25 miles per day.

Rosenberg's translation also reminded me that the covenant with the Jews includes the words *your descendants will walk freely through the gates of their enemy and all the nations of the earth will feel themselves blessed one day, knowing that your descendants thrive living among them ...* And accepting that truth lies behind irony, I appreciated his quoting Speiser that *translations are so much more enjoyable than originals, because they contain many things that the originals leave out*. Yet when I review the actual Biblical passage of Genesis 22: 17-18 I find the King James Version translation says *thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies; And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast obeyed my voice.* This is not quite the same meaning, nor is that of the Revised Standard Version with which I grew up, which says *your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies, and by your descendants shall all the nations of the earth bless themselves, because you have obeyed my voice* although it comes closer. Surely Rosenberg's version could excite debate today as we mature sufficiently to consider our own society's complicity in the events of WWII.

I gave the book onto my ageing friend Andrew Blecher with whom I lunch every couple of months and who became more Jewish with time. He will like it, and no doubt once again explain how lucky I am to have been born here and to be able to live with such a naïve view of the world – such is the blessing bestowed on those 'chosen' to be Australians in this epoch.

A Chosen Race

Australian characters are examined from multiple persepctives through Tim Winton's novel 'The Turning', to such an extent that one can identify with many in his stories. It is similar to the engagement one feels with the foibles of characters depicted in Coen brothers' movie. And the people remain the same across the generational economic advance common to Australia such that kids from dysfunctional and working class homes graduate from university and become professionals. The conditions of their childhoods infect their adult lives – just as they do for all of us. Some develop awareness, most don't, and of those, the ones who learn to cope seem like the most common of my countrymen. Winton's writing is the language that we grew up with in its slang and understatement, as

well as its values. Being alone, depressed, independent and resilient separates his characters from many of today's urban Australians.

The 17 short stories could have been called a novel since they are cameos from the lives of characters who have lived in the unimpressive coastal town of Angelus in southern WA. 'Angelus' is the title given to the French translation of the book, which Simone read as I read the English version, and as for other Winton translations she commented that the translation was superb in its nuances. We read the book before seeing a film made from it with each of the 17 stories coming from different directors – the film is variable in quality and probably unintelligible if one has not read the book.

A few months later, we each read Tim Winton's 'Breath' –Simone reading the excellent French translation while I read the Australian-English original. Again I found that feeling of my youth being retold. Such books advise me of the poitlessness of autobiography if intended for others to read – we could simply pick sections from others' accomplished works that provide the flavour of our lives at different times. In many ways, 'Breath' is similar to the story threaded through 'The Turning', although it allows a fuller psychological consideration of the main character, Pyke, as he retraces his young life of extremes through the trivia of adulthood to a mental and marital breakdown to an atonement-cum-resurrection as an ambulance paramedic helping people in crisis. Winton continues to capture the Australian character well, and I see it as a similar style to that of McCarthy and Coetzee, particularly in descriptions of using skills for characters who are living realistic lives infused with morality based on benign Christian origins.

Real Life: Applying One's Talents

As a youth I was impressed with what I assumed was a serendipitous pun on the word 'talents' in the parable of Matthew 25. It paralleled my less respectful yet still to me humourous, colloquial interpretation of Act 26:14 where Paul was made to see that *it is hard for thee to 'kick against the pricks'*. I note that some dictionaries even list 'prick' as a synonym for 'asshole'. Of course this is not what Paul was being told in that story. However, my assumption about 'talents' may have been more insightful than I realized. While most literalists insist that talents simply refers to the currency of the day it does in fact has the added meaning I imagined. Yes, it may have been the currency of that time and place, but if the value of one talent was 60 minas as is noted in other texts, and the minas mentioned in the story of the diligent servant in Luke 19 are, as some claim, to have been equivalent to 36kg of silver – then this was about 6,000 times the daily wage. That doesn't seems a credible parable to me. More importantly, the etymology of the word 'talent' traces it from an ancient Babylonian denomination of weight, which was expressed in the Greek of the gospels as 'tele' with a meaning to lift or support and 'talanton' meaning a balance or scales. This became a word for a unit of money and was Latinized as 'talentum' with added meanings of inclination, desire or will, and from there it entered English as skills or abilities. Thus the story of Matthew 25 is returned to me according to my youthful interpretations as counselling wise use of our inherent and learned skills to best advantage in the well-lived life.

Such linked thoughts have long entertained my brain in parallel with sessions at mundane school, church, university, conferences, dinner parties and undemanding books. And this is possibly why my thoughts about talents came to mind when speed-reading Larry Noye's disappointing 'O'Malley MHR'. Having read of King O'Malley's talented rhetoric in early Australian politics I expected some examples and discussion in Noye's book. But whenever it comes close to an opportunity the text veers into puerile paragraphs about charisma. O'Malley's Protestant language clearly informed his verbal dexterity in public speaking and deserves a better commentator. Harsh criticism? Not really, for the man had great talents and that is why he should be revered, not for political accomplishments, important as they were in their own small world.

By contrast, Andrew Marshall's 'The Trouser People: Burma in the Shadows of the Empire' is a masterful use of the English language to highlight the talents of his subject, Sir George Scott. He does it in a discursive diary style as he retraced Scotts steps 100 years on, noting differences and similarities in places and attitudes, while capturing the exceptional capacity of Scott as a colonial servant of Empire. An educated and serious man with a taste for adventure and danger, Scott won over violent enemies and contributed more to the Empire in this region than almost any other person. And he did it by using his talents of observation, persuasion, humour and persistence. While not a biography, the book allows us to understand the man and his motivations as he applied his talents and shared them with us through his extensive writings, as well as collected vignettes and other items vouchsafed through his brother at Oxford. He was a fine man whose time was ripe for his talents, until the Empire declined and his talents were not required.

Marshall has written a good book, capturing not only Scott but also the humour in his writings, by adopting a similar style of descriptive understatement with a levity unusual in modern works. However, it is a pity that his otherwise fine essay about the recent 'Saffron Revolution' in Myanmar is appended to the book, as it adds little and detracts from his final Epilogue, which is a fine finale to the real subject of the book.

At the risk of diverting my comparison of these two authors, which are not really comparable in any case, I have returned to this section to interpose a comment on Scott's own great work, written under the pseudonym Shway Yoe (True as Gold) as 'The Burman: His Life and Notions'. It has taken me a year to read its anecdotes, which itself tells of its depth and diversity in describing details of the life of a Burman from multiple perspectives. And it is humorous at the same time as making it intelligible to his untravelled compatriots – the very opposite of Scott himself. He notes that *the best thing a Burman can wish a good Englishman, is that in some future existence, as a reward of good works, he may be born a Buddhist and if possible, a Burman*. It still makes me laugh, and it rings true as an echo of sentiments still found in some parts of neighbouring Thailand.

Scott was accomplished in the language, well-educated, appointed to enter and claim new regions of Burma for Britain, was curious and had the time and inclination to engage in and write about the people. He did not dwell on his own adventures. In some ways Scott

and O'Malley might be seen as similar despite their different attitudes to Britian and colonies and different backgrounds. Both used their talents wisely in their well-lived and contemporaneous lives. To do justice to their talents, the approach of Marshall to Scott's life far surpasses that of Noye to O'Malley's life. And perhaps this is a reflection of an authors' talent.

Talent versus Tales

An author's talent can outshines his tale. like Coetzee's 'The Childhood of Jesus', a wonderfully readable book on a subject apparently unrelated to its title. In this case, the writing itself is a joy – simple, allegorical and considered. The subject is more difficult to describe; the storyline is simple, but its meaning and the meaning of the various intriguing dialogues of its characters, short as they are, are less easily defined. Yet it speaks to the reader clearly at a level other than the rational, and in this is its genius.

Coetzee has his own opinions and life experience that I notice have found their way into what I have read of his writing. This is a bonus rather than an intrusion to his works. Thus, for me it is useful to know from other parts of my life that he is opposed to raising animals for meat. I may not agree with him or his reasoning, but I certainly agree that he can present a cogent description of vegetarianism without mentioning the word in this novel. Likewise, I appreciate his Biblical allusions – some more obvious than others – in terms of the names of characters and their utterances. The storyline he has chosen, which I note some seem to think is about the migration experience and others feel is a desciption of purgatory, is a wonderful description of the psychological transition in religious experience and self-understanding.

This is a book I would consider reading again, which is unusual. Novels can easily be a diversion from real life, but real life is the subject of this novel. Nevertheless, I am guarded about what I allocate time to reading. Some, like Winton's, offer a good storyline and open up memories and reflections – but many others that are currently popular seem to be pulp prozac, and indeed this is how their stories are rehearsed by their readers and promoted by their publishers. Coetzee, like McCarthy, offers glimpses of ourselves, of transcendence in the codified language of the classics brought into today's world and allegories.

Transcending or Trusting

The spirituality that is part of us all is the subject within the works of Coetzee and McCarthy. But the genre of novels has other dimensions that can make it hard for those glimpses to be sustained. My own writings, evolving as they seem to with my own stumbling understanding of myself and the world, are mostly non-fictional attempts to explain such matters, although 'Reaching the Top?' was purely allegorical, 'Pranja Anthology' and 'Song of Songs of Solomon' were poetic and 'Dharma as Man' was partly novelistic. The serious arguments for such matters are hard to make interesting unless a reader is in a searching mood and is of a similar mind to the author. For some authors, their eloquence makes their message believable more than does the integrity of

their message. Such an author and his message would seem to be represented by G.K. Chesterton in his 'The Everlasting Man'. His use of English is masterful, completely engaging in its poetry as it flows through the reader like a soft symphony, especially when read by an accomplished voice such as on the audio book to which I listened. It was my first experience of an audio book and it has educated me to be selective about which books to listen to. I found that those that stimulate useful tangential thought can cut off that benefit just as quickly because the voice carries on reading relentlessly – rather similar to the mesmerizing effect of television viewed when tired or tipsy. One day I shall try the audio technology again for literature before I resort again to philosophy or logic, let alone science.

I may not have agreed with Chesterton's insistent reasoning, but I loved his style, his command of the language and his means of expressing ideas through metaphor and simile. And he is so eminently quotable. One example is his *there are two ways of getting home; and one of them is to stay there. The other is to walk round the whole world till we come back to the same place.* To illustrate the point he relates a story he toyed with writing but never completed, of which he says that *like every book I never wrote, it is by far the best book I have ever written*. With such a disarming introduction he enters into a romantic tale of the valleys on which the huge ancient White Horses were marked out by the ancients on the Wessex landscape. He relates that a boy who lived on such a slope set off to see part of such a figure on the other side of the valley, and when he arrived there, he looked back to see that his own home formed part of the same huge figure that had so intrigued him. Living on it he had never been able to see its grandeur – he had to distance himself from the subject to understand it, which is what Chesterton sees as the only form of *independent intelligence*.

From such an approach to his discourse on Christianity, he contends *that while the best judge of Christianity is a Christian, the next best judge would be something more like a Confucian. The worst judge of all is the man now most ready with his judgements; the ill-educated Christian turning gradually into the ill-tempered agnostic, entangled in the end of a feud of which he never understood the beginning, blighted with a sort of hereditary boredom with he knows not what, and already weary of hearing what he has never heard*.

Another metaphor he uses for faith, which to Chesterton means spiritual understanding, is that of a bee caught up in a swarm of wasps where the swarm stands for diverse esoteric sects. An ordinary observer would not see much difference between the bee – which gives honey and wax as symbols for sweetness and light – and all the wasps, yet the wasps were destined to die off. By this he means that Christianity is the bee of sweetness and light and the wasps the flood of pessimistic heresies that perennially infect most people and distract them from the true faith. As beautiful as his prose and metaphor is, Chesterton is an annoying bigot at such times, which elsewhere he elaborates in such statements as *the truth is that Islam itself was a barbaric reaction against that very humane complexity that is really a Christian character; that idea of balance in the deity, as of balance in the family, that makes that creed a sort of sanity, and that sanity the soul of civilisation*. His cosmology allows no path to insight but his own faith, and so is at complete odds with my 'Reaching the Top?'.

Yet when he says that *Islam, historically speaking, is the greatest of the Eastern heresies*, he qualifies it by noting its common origins with Christianity rather than other Middle Eastern traditions or even India or China and thus owing *nothing to the atmosphere of the ancient and traditional world of Asia, with its immemorial etiquette and its bottomless or bewildering philosophies. All that ancient and actual Asia felt the entrance of Islam as something foreign and western and warlike, piercing it like a spear*. It is easy to agree with his conclusions and reasoning while being repulsed by some of his terminology and insularity. He also claims that *Islam was a product of Christianity; even if it was a by-product; even if it was a bad product. It was a heresy or parody emulating and therefore imitating the Church. It is no more surprising that Mahomedanism had something of her fighting spirit than that Quakerism had something of her peaceful spirit. After Christianity there are any number of such emulations or extensions. Before it there are none.* It is a strange world that revolves around one -ism as the source of whatever one wishes to damn with faint praise – as beneficial in that which one is denigrating.

To Chesterton his religion is a visionary revelation of reality as distinct from the *day-dream* of mythology. Having said that he can observe that *a day-dream may come every day ... may be different every day* and if it is not mythology then maybe it is just a story that relates to real life. And somehow he can reason that periodic lapses into dark ages are a forgetting of reality and hence the true faith; this is proved to Chesterton in a curiously Western narrowness in which he says that *if there is one fact we really can prove, from the history that we really do know, it is that despotism can be a development, often a late development and very often indeed the end of societies that have been highly democratic. A despotism may almost be defined as a tired democracy. As fatigue falls on a community, the citizens are less inclined for that eternal vigilance which has truly been called the price of liberty; and they prefer to arm only one single sentinel to watch the city while they sleep. … Man does not necessarily begin with despotism because he is barbarous, but very often finds his way to despotism because he is civilised. He finds it because he is experienced; or, what is often much the same thing, because he is exhausted*. And of course, in his argument, democracy and civilization are synonymous with Christianity, and in particular the brand of Catholicism adopted by Chesterton.

Is Chesterton simply too trusting? Is his rejection of transcendence in any form except his Catholicism a blind faith that distrusts reason for fear of it fracturing one's faith? I don't think so, for his writings indicate a fine mind, one of great insight on matters where his eye is not blinded by the cataract of faith, and his command of the language makes him sound so credible. To me his attributes – gifts if you like – of eruditeness and intelligence make him a most interesting companion. And if he was my contemporary he is the very sort of person whom I would seek out for occasional discussions over simple lunches because there would always be something on which we would disagree – and many of those things would be derived from experience. I have learned that it is of critical importance to husband one's mind and not accept hearsay, belief or even one's past conclusions as valid unless they have been tested in many circumstances; this can be demanding at times when it others accept their received information as true. It remains a curiousity to me that many people prefer fearful messages to the reality of life as an ever

more comprehensible gift. Fear and pessimistic messages sell better than balanced calm news.

Reality Displaced by Fear

Among the popular worries of those who are healthier and wealthier than ever, Matt Ridley's 'The Rational Optimist' was a refreshing change. Jeremiads have peppered my lifetime with their apocalyses of famine, nuclear holocaust, terrorism, AIDs, bird flu, Y2K, climate change and so on. Ridley expresses an alternative and balanced view more eloquently than I have ever managed. While I share his viewpoint and most times see things as objectively as he does, I must acknowledge that the closer I am to a topic the easier it is to be myopic. Thus I saw little validity in the excessive projections of most of the worries listed, but have been swayed into preaching food shortages in one book and in a subsequent more nuanced book had to recant. Some see my support for subsistence farmers in the same way, although that is a misreading of its context.

Ridley relies at times on a cyclical view, which experience has shown me accords with natural systems. Fitting into natual cycles rather than fighting them reduces angst and generally makes life smoother. An early example he uses is: technology (gene: alanine aminotrasferase from barley) → new rice variety with lower N requirements → Africa grows and sells more rice with less fertilizer pollution → becomes richer → buys mobile phone from Western company → markets rice for greater profit → phone company profits rise → salaries increase for company workers → an extra pair of jeans is bought that have been made in factory employing other Africans → Africans grow in wealth → etc. This win-win scenario is an observation of what is happening already, most of which was unplanned and remains unplannable. Hence the theme of his book is that free markets work and that governments are monopolies that parasitize free markets – he does not quote Scott but this elements of his thesis is remarkable similar. Buried within this optimism is acknowledgement that while some negatives accrue they are outweighed by the positives.

It is clear that we have continuously become better-off. Ridley quotes that the essentials of food, shelter and clothing that cost the average US person $76 in 1990, cost only $37 in 2012. This has been going on since man invented the first tools and exchanged the product of his skills with a neighbour. Another way to express it is that today we have more persons providing for us than the richest man with many slaves had in any time in the past. The most obvious example is the supermarket that offers us a choice of food from remote places at cheap prices from the work of thousands of persons for each item. The more we exchange the better things seem to become, which is why Ridley opposes self-sufficient farming as retrogressive and costly. He is correct in his arguments, but it is not correct to extend this to the concept of self-sufficiency in total, and in fact Ridley is not saying that even though most readers may think he is. Let me present just two examples: first, self-sufficiency is a psychological state of maturity denied most modern persons who do not allow themselves time for reflection; second, as detailed in my 'Small Farmers Secure Food' book, in poor countries, powerless families on

marginalized lands remote from markets are subject to ill-informed development whims like cash cropping in place of food that can and has on occasion lead to starvation.

But while Ridley has a chapter on food, his central theme is the accelerating rate of innovation and the solutions it constantly provides, if left alone to work its magic. This has applied to all matters considered irresolvable in the past and its pace continues to accelerate. But it is not innovation alone that solves such issues as climate change. I found it comforting to find an ally in his book, in terms o: understanding: that climate is always changing; that that humans have adapted to greater changes in the past than are expected in our children's lifetimes; that fears of the planet reaching a tipping point are not outcomes of climate models; that there myriad changes some positive some negative in terms of current values, and that events reported as the worst ever are usually not. Ridley understands that the scenarios postulated by experts occur so slowly that our rates of innovation tend to exceed them for critical matters such as food and shelter. The same assessment of reality rather than fears allows him to see Africa developing. Just as we are all much richer than our fathers so are Africans whose overall rate of development exceeds any time in our history. Of course there are bad spots, usually attributable to government and leaders' excesses that hamper innovation.

Ridley does not strike me as a spiritual man, though he can see the damage done to spirits by institutionalized religions. Yet his message accords with the increasingly clear view I see of nature and everything. His is a message of good news – a gospel, and while reading it I was imbued with a feeling of wellbeing that accompanies spiritual reflection. And that, apart from his arguments, leads me to feel that he is correct overall; the details where he is in error are incidental to his overall theme. Understanding matters rationally is a part of wisdom that can dispel preconceptions. And in this way Ridley also confirmed my resolve to balance my scientific, historical and spiritual reading wisely.

With this strengthened resolve and blessed by the extensive university resources, I returned Ridley's book to the Baileau Library and borrowed David Shaw's 'Secrets of the Oracle: A History of Wisdom from Zeno to Yeats'. It was a delight to read its extracts of classical poetry and aphorisms. Shaw's frequent references to his daughter's suicide reveals this as his motivation for mining these poets as *oracles* of catharsis for his grief. I understand the motivation, but know that such writing can often mean much more to the author than a reader. One reminder that Shaw offered to me was to revisit William James' works when he quoted James' words, *wisdom is knowing what to overlook*. Seemingly superficial, James' statement contains deeper links between knowledge and wisdom in a manner that appeals to me.

Knowledge and Wisdom

My decades-long search to understand what 'wisdom' might be has been based on knowledge, which contains its own seeds of limitation by its intellectual approach. Far from a faddish curiosity my interest has culminated so far in a worldview that there are ways to lead a contented life. I see this as just anoter way of expressing what others might call the meaning of life or nurturing one's spiritual nature. A useful way for me to

approach this ongoing enquiry has been to reflect on the literary gifts left by great minds over more than two and half millennia referencing the means by which they have grappled with their own questions. Such reflections are collated in Xinzhong Yao's engaging 'Wisdom in Early Confucian and Israelite Traditions'. In introducing the subject he notes that wisdom has been defined variously as *the ability to deal with life's problems, or as enlightened understanding arising from intellectual contemplation, or as practical knowledge of the laws of life and of the world based on experience, or as the quest for self-understanding and for mastery of the world, or seeing it more generally in terms of a philosophical way of thinking or of a religious principle for living*. He notes that it may come with age but not necessarily, but that it is '*essentially concerned with relationships, and is meaningful only in the context of interrelatedness*.

Interrelatedness spans three arenas of wisdom – the world, society and the self – these three might also be defined as natural, social and self, with each informing the others. The Israelites associated the source of wisdom with their God, while Confucius' humanistic interpretation notes a hierarchy of those born with a natural understanding being above those who have learned through study who in turn are above the lowest class of the common people who *make no effort to study even after having been vexed by difficulties*. In fact, apart from the Israelite theocentricity, the two traditions are remarkably similar in their recording of the means of gaining knowledge that leads to wisdom. It is the Israelite tradition that advises us to accept the instructions of wisdom teachers and to study with determination in the Hebrew books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Job. And in such learning, Confucius implies from his own life that humble origins may help because one must learn to do many things oneself. In such observations I see the related cultural teachings of Buddhism about living simply, which was never meant to mean being obsessively austere.

The Israelite and Confucian views on the characteristics of a wise person differ insofar as the first is a person of faith while the second is one who meets all moral obligations as a result of his knowledge, intelligence and conduct. Yao is led to a conclusion that *wisdom is essentially a relationship, by which humans learn how to deal properly with themselves, nature, communities and transcendental power(s), and how to find meanings and regularities among natural and social phenomena as guidance to their choice of action*. I find this statement most agreeable and understand the *transcendental power(s)* to mean those patterns that we cannot discern with our limited senses but for which we can develop acceptance. And these are, presumably, what the continuous study and contemplation aim to make clearer to the searcher after wisdom.

The Confucian references often talk of *the Way* as being the lifestyle of the wise. This is the meaning it has to me in spiritual but non-religious exchanges about wisdom with René Salm on which we sign off with the encouragement to *stay on the Way*. The Confucian observation that *one who dies after having done his best in following the Way dies according to his proper destiny; it is never anyone's proper destiny to die in fetters*. As much I would like to take the final reference as Buddhist metaphor for attachments and angst, it may also be meant literally – that no one is destined to commit such crimes as to be locked in fetters and if they are it is an indication of having strayed from the

Way. Between those literal fetters and wisdom sits the majority of people who have little interest in cultivating wisdom, which to me implies that they are probably locked in the metaphorical fetters of attachment.

Yao observes that *the attainment of wisdom should be more properly understood [than just practical advice] as a personal and collective journey taken by intellectual and spiritual seekers to reach their goal*. He insightfully calls this *breaking through the human finitude* and concludes his work by noting that a synergy of wisdom from various traditions assists in making this transcendence. He has written a masterful document, and while I have learned much from it, my own experience is more of a gradual dawning of understanding rather than a breakthrough, and that is how I interpret his *breaking through the human finitude*. It might also be what Primo Levi has termed *Moments of Reprieve*.

Salvific Moments

To understand oneself is a precondition to being able to help others. This axiom is common to all wisdom traditions. *Know yourself* was supposedly written above the entrance of the Temple of Apollo where the Delphic Oracle later offered cryptic messages, along with the words *nothing in excess*. The same words now appear over the exit portal of my 'cave' retreat. Wise words – and while the first is widely quoted it is seldom understood beyond an intellectual appreciation. The second phrase stands in contrast to the lifestyles that have emerged in each period of civilized stability. As I age I learn that I have much left to learn, and have become aware that my assumed ideals for life have been out of kilter with the majority. I have strived to know myself – from teenage searchings through Protestant Christianity, to humanistic understand based on sound science schooling and university studies, to the influence of Buddhism. It has been, and remains, an engaging and fulfilling pursuit that requires very few of the material resources of which I, like my peers, have an excess. I have been fortunate to live in an era where anyone from a background similar to mine – which includes most of the Western world and today a similar number in the rest of the world – seldom lacks any material necessity. Of course, consumer advertising and a general lack of ability to use leisure productively has encouraged wants for more material things. In my lifetime, notwithstanding the deviations, detours and false paths I have trodden, I now realize that I have been conditioned to follow a Protestant ethic of spending less than I earn and not accumulating too many unnecessary things. While it seems bizarre to others this was my logic of prepaying school fees, eschewing borrowing for 'essentials' of modern life – family house, car, health costs, etc – and taking fulfilling even if less well-paid professional roles as my family responsibilities waned over time.

Perhaps this is why I continually seem to return to translations of great German writings of the past and why I seek to understand the Holocaust in a manner that differs from the proselytizing version. The Germans were the great scientists, intellectuals and theologians of our world up until the 20th century when the neglect of governance revealed its feet of clay. And it was in the cradle of Protestantism including versions emanating from Britain such as Methodism, the seeds of which were sown by the Moravian missionaries in the minds of the young Wesleys while sailing to America. And

so, after several visits to Germany and Protestantism's areas of direct influence, Simone and I made a reflective visit to the Berlin Holocaust memorial and its exhibits and to the seperate Jewish Museum. They revealed a clear similarity of German Jewish approaches to life and learning to that of the Protestant ethic in which I, and my contemporaries, grew up.

It was at the memorial that I bought Primo Levi's 'Moments of Reprieve'. I had read some of his other writings, but not the main ones – and this was the only one on offer in English. It is short stories that gladden the heart, as they did for Levi in his extreme situation in Auschwitz – acts of human kindness that show the make paltry today's attempts at being kind. I cannot define them further without revealing as empty vanity the comfortable versions of what we pretend is kindness and generosity today. And in this way, Levi relieved me of a persistent question I have lived with about my response to clever schemes set up to alleviate one's guilt through public sponsorships and donations.

In his introduction to Ruth Feldman's translation of Levi's little book, Michael Ingnatieff relates his view of Levi's works as being part of the *duty in remembering* honestly by paring stories down to their essentials without beautifying or sensationalizing them. In so doing human behaviour can be seen as it was and is, at its best and worst in that extreme situation. Levi's conclusion reaches beyond Auschwitz, beyond Germany and Europe, and beyond his time when he says *we are so dazzled by power and money as to forget our essential fragility. Forget that all of us are in the ghetto, that the ghetto is fenced in, that beyond the fence stands the lords of death, and not far away the train is waiting*. In his situation of abasement and deprivation, Levi learned the lesson of life that knowing oneself is liberation.

Liberation was a theme, although in a more mundane sense, of another book that accompanied this European sortie – Christopher Fischer's 'Alsace to the Alsations'. I had brought the book with me from the Baillieu library to read while in Strasbourg. It was a detailed book and my appetite for such dry history is waning. Dealing with mismanaged aspirations for regionalism between 1870 and 1939, Fischer's book – probably an edited version of his Ph.D. thesis – plods through newspaper accounts to reveal a few interesting facts. While somewhat trite in the context of the deeper subjects that engage me, this version of liberation to maintain a culture while under a greater military force adds to the view that border regions are interesting and diverse places. When Louis XIV acquired Alsace, he largely adhered to his *ne toucher pas de chose d'Alsace* to accommodate the Germanic region within France. However, after losing the region to Germany in 1870 and regaining it in 1918, France moved to integrate it fully into France, an exercise in assimilation that continues today. While not dealt with in Fischer's book, the regions' vulnerability in WWII consolidated that integration. The post WWII locating of the European Parliament, Human Rights Court and the European Council in Strasbourg curiously assisted the maintenance of some Alsation identity in the region through its locally benign presence and the additional wealth and political input it brought to the region.

Such books help my understanding about where I am at any one time and in this case to know more of the forces that have helped shaped Simone's stimulating intelligence. However, interpretation of 'liberation' as a political outcome seems to beg the questions about the psychological liberation to which much of my reading refers. It suggests to me that books related to insight, knowledge and scriptures are more useful that the dry details of histories. Thus a different treatment of the genius that arose in Germanic cultures in its golden era was to offer me greater understanding of the region, history and myself. The legacy of that era is found in both its emigrants who did not wish to accommodate themselves to the changing circumstances and sought a better environment. In general terms it is an ideal I find for life – if a circumstance is not conducive to contentment, seek another circumstance.

Damaging Ideals

Continue the theme of how beliefs in ideals can lead to tragedy I recall the insights I tried to convey in my 2005 book 'Religion and Agriculture', which included the consistent theme that observation and understanding of nature through science, poetry, music and so on is helpful; helpful as an indication of morality for those who think in social terms, and of contentment for those addressing their individual wellbeing. On the other hand, intellectualized notions or ideals do not seem to conduce to contentment or morality. It is also the same as I expressed in the book 'Beliefs that Bias' concerning climate change, where I mentioned that humans will address such change in the same way that they always have, through technologies and migration. This is an example of *accommodating oneself to the circumstances – or if circumstances are untenable finding a better environment.*

Just as Levi explained one aspect of Germany to me while I was there recently, so Peter Watson's tome, 'The German Genius', which I purchased in Nuremberg a few weeks later explained much more. Long, dense and requiring refelction, the book educated me more than many such histories have in recent years. Watson deals with great Germans across the humanities, science, art and theology to illustrate his contention that Germany has contributed more to Western thought – he claims the world – than any other Western culture since ancient Greece. The thesis is not hard to accept when he includes the New World, which to him means the USA, and pithily summarizes it in the words *the United States and Great Britain may speak English but, more than they know, they think German*.

It is not possible to even list the main German characters of the hundereds whose biographies he summarizes. But through these characters, Watson traces the thread in German thought that has become inherent in our way of life today. In reading the book, I realized how much of what he described was the way that I have learned to think, the way I learned science and theology, and perhaps the reasons that I continue to seek after more historical understanding and wonder about my artistic illiteracy. I find that my basic assertions may all be considered Germanic in Watson's definition, my assertions such as: that one cannot expect opinion versus knowledge arguments to be productive; that skeptism is healthy but relies on the skeptic educating himself; that one cannot

understand the actions within one's society or another's without an historical perspective; that one cannot even call oneself educated unless one has a sound grounding in one's cultural heritage, which of course remains quite Christian for the majority of the Westerners.

Another perspective in which Watson's work is useful is in tracing the demise of Germany's own ideals. He does this well. Through the 1800s, the great German philosophers and artists fuelled a pride in Germanic heritage and cultural superiority among the educated including the middle class,. This ethos held politics in disdain since it was related to both uneducated commerce and the aristocracy. Such insularity allowed ideals to be embraced without reference to social reality, and when the ideal of natural intellectual and cultural superiority was not respected by neighbours, WWI became a possibility. Germans lost that war when the US joined the allies; overall it was generally acknowledged that the German had superior strategies, discipline and quality of soldiers. Recovery from such defeat under the punitive conditions allowed the same idealistic notions to be revived not the least through German philosophy leading to Heidegger espoused the superiority of German culture. But economic turmoil and intellectuals standing distant from politics allowed the rise of a charismatic leader and led to WWII. In the decades before that war, Germans especially Jewish Germans, emigrated as Germany became less hospitable intellectually and then socially, and so the influence of German culture on their Anglo-Saxons cousins accelerated. Meanwhile Germany lost another war, again as a result of the entry of the US, but this time reparations were more productive.

Germany recovered as a nation with a wounded heart with foreign and particularly US influence and assistance to became an economic powerhouse. But recovery of the heart was harder and after suppressing talk of the war for a generation, the 1968 outburst of the younger generation began a process that seems, according to Watson, to have arrived at young Germans assuming that everyone in Germany knew what was happening during WWII but that time had in any case moved on. Yet Germany remains different, its Protestantism seems indistinguishable from its Germanic heritage and dominates both politics and work ethics. In this way I find it is remarkable similar to the Australia I grew up in. Yet I would never have even thought about such similarities until I met Simone.

There are also other ways in which this book explained things to me. The German cultural focus on *Bildung* – development of one's self – as the purpose of life is apparently a product of Protestantism's understanding that God need not be conceived as an outside force and hence doesn't exist as an entity. This conception has become a Western preoccupation of self-understanding as a personal developmental activity, and a reason for life traced through such personalities as Freud as part of the German Genius that Watson wants us to recall. I was grateful to find that this Euroepan heritage had arrived at the same conclusion as ancient Eastern thought, which confirmed my conviction that the origins of one's ideas and culture is a step towards self-understanding.

Self-understanding in and of The World

The *bildung* influence of the Protestant tradition fertilized by my education allows me to see the world as an integrated organism. When constrained by passions this provides some understanding of myself and my surroundings. Ways of viewing vary between individuals, and adopting a different perspective can assist self-understanding, especially when displaced from one's normal environment. Such a perspective allows the insight at the centre of Malcolm Gladwell's 'David and Goliath'. Gladwell deals with the power of minorities or the disadvantagesd in ways that are not quite as counterintuitive as he claims, but which nevertheless revive a forgotten aspect of social interaction. His examples range from the benefit of choosing a second tier rather than a high-status university where one might not be at the top, through the occasional compensatory mechanisms of such afflictions as dyslexia, to an unlikeable and obstinate doctor from a harsh childhood making breakthroughs, to marginalized Protestants hiding Jews and facing off Nazis in the French Alps, and so on. But his best chapter, for me, concerns the US civil rights movement and the manipulation of the white power base by the subordinated blacks under the guidance of Martin Luther King's advisors – especially the bre'er rabbitish Wyatt Walker.

The book is enjoyable even when relating unpleasant events and it appears to be well-enough researched to support Gladwell's thesis. But in the end it is a popular book that includes 'feel good' outcomes for the underdog, and omits cases that would not support his thesis. I say this with some regret, since by disposition we all incline toward arguments that support out opinions while and ignoring others. The book had the added benefit of causing me to reflect on my so-called career and its fortuitous turnings, which seem to follow similar although less spectacular paths to those presented by Gladwell.

This part of my experience has only become evident to me in retrospect. I can see many choices I have made put me into second in preference to first place. Even in situations where I appeared to be the senior person in a role, there was usually another role somewhere else that was more senior. I can recall from primary school, the advantage of being the second-top over the top student – less obligations and less pressure, yet allowed similar privileges. In competitions with only one winner, I sought to win – but chose which race. Similarly, gaining the largest contracts in business seemed to cost a disproportionate premium compared to silightly smaller contracts. It may not be exactly what Gladwell was suggesting, but to me it represented some parallels. Being free to reject unsavoury or pointless roles also has some similar elements – the freedom is usually in one's mind rather than in external conditions, although avoiding conditions that are not conducive to allow one's development is both an outcome and a prerequisite of awareness.

Thoughts stimulated by Gladwell's book clarified the value to approaching opportunities from unexpected angles and ever widening one's mind. Gladwell's stories are more compelling than mine, yet it occurs to me that just as I could have written of my life from a different viewpoint that focused on failures – too much travel, some particularly poor consulting advice, succumbing to exotic temptations, punishments for disrespecting authority, divorce (perhaps not a failure) and even some health issues – so could Gladwell have mentioned failures. He mentions some, such as the uninformed yet

popular influence of a grieving parent in introducing criminal punishments that were in the end counterproductive – and he does so to illustrate his thesis that we all have power in one way or another.

I wonder if his book offers much to persons who are not already of the persuasion of his thesis. I clearly am, but those who are not may see the 'battler wins' stories as uplifting – until they put the book down. Nevertheless, it was useful to me to trace quickly back over my own reasons for seeing the book's thesis as unsurprising, which then confirms to me that many people do not see the world as I do, for I continue to see good in many acts that others claim as wholly evil and vice versa.

The Good in Evil and the Evil in Good

That people might view the world differently from the way that as I do was illustrated by another book sent by my old friend John Leake, Kevin Dutton's 'The Wisdom of Psychopaths'. The book opened both new and old vistas for me. Discounting popular fascination with psychopaths, the book reminds that 'psychopathic' thoughts and occasional actions are normal for most persons, and can be seen as moral actions in many cases. This was a comforting one for me and tells me I am not excessively psychopathic, for if I was, I would not be concerned.

Dutton's attempts at humour distract from what he calls a serious book; he makes the mistake of assuming that being entertaining requires humour. Nevertheless, the book contains stimulates useful thoughts that are conducive to self-understanding. Some examples of the useful points are found in his best chapter, which deals with extreme psychopaths and their clarity of logic, morality and focus. One extreme psychopath asks, *but what's worse from a moral perspective? Beating someone up who deserves it? Or beating yourself up, who doesn't?*

Such focus on the task in hand reminded me of so many Buddhist teachings, including the benefits – and when I reached his closing chapter, I was pleased to see that Dutton draws on the very same neurological studies of Buddhist monks from the University of Wisconsin that I had been thinking about. I imagine that the power of such extreme focus, which is described as a two-edged sword in Buddhist texts, reflects the negative actions associated with psychopaths. But in practice I can discern no clear line between good and bad for the many functioning psychopaths that manage corporations or dangerous tasks to the benefit of many less psychopathic persons.

To amplify the above consideration of parallels with advanced Buddhist practitioners, I thought more on the four *Brahmawiharas* detailed in Buddhist texts. These four 'sublime virtues' ideally arise in a quiet mind and are usually translated as loving-kindness, compassion, empathetic-joy and equanimity. It would seem that psychopaths share something that sounds similar to the last of the three. In fact, it might even be said that psychopaths' empathy may be so highly developed that it is used as a tool to manipulate others. Equanimity is described in the psychopath as complete lack of fear or worry about consequences, which while not wholly consistent within Dutton's book, could be seen as

simple confidence that the right thing has been done, even when it is socially unacceptable.

In addition to such Buddhist examples the book stimulated other thoughts, at least one of which was not included - the character of Chigurh in Cormac McCarthy's 'No Country for Old Men'. Both the book and the Coen Brothers' film portray the psychopath Chugurh very well. Chigurh is the ruthless and single-minded psychopath who is described as more moral than anyone else because he is consistent in following through on commitments. McCarthy's portrayal of a psychopath remains more realistic than those portrayed by Dutton, even though Chigurh is fictional.

Psychopathy is a continuum on which we all register, in a manner somewhat similar yet unrelated to Asperger's spectrum. This means that searching for abnormal brain wiring correlated with excessive psychopathy is not confined to what current society condemns, but includes, according to Dutton, CEOs, lawyers, surgeons, clergy and so on. Society relies on the traits, indeed lauds them, while decrying certain actions (I recall some lines from a poem of mine – *Individualistic, distant, as a stranger uncaring / she knows him well, hates and loves his daring*). This to me indicates that this is no abnormality that will be 'cured' or weeded-out of society but simply an expression of the psychological diversity that is useful for survival of our species. The opposing noise is usually the fear expressed by those that register low on the psychopathy scale – the fear of what might go wrong, of danger in a dark street and so on.

Overall, Dutton was a refreshing read that allowed me to consider a part of me that had be described in negative more than positive terms. It provided a glimpse of how there is some good in evil and evil in good, which again confirms the inadequacy of our polarized communication. Yet as I am forcefully made aware more frequently, the comfortable delusion of such polarization readily fuels diverting fancies that sustain distraction from reality.

Reality Corrects Diversions

An extended visit to Ethiopia allowed a glimpse into some of its cultures while reading of its history. Long the victim of diverting projections of exotic fancy in the European psych, the Ethiopian reality is far from the idyll painted in many 18th and 19th century stories, and that evenextended into the 20th century by the Haile Selassie stories. In Samuel Johnson's 1759 publication of his 'The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abissinia', the land is presented metaphorically as a paradise where all is comfortable and provided, which stimulates an ennui in the story's characters as they escape to seek more from life. The metaphor uses the then common ascription of fantastic qualities to an unknown and inaccessible land.

But the metaphor is actually a means of presenting Johnson's own existential philosophy, which in itself is timeless. It is also appealing in such descriptions as that by the story's scholar sage: *the life that is devoted to knowledge passes silently away, and is very little diversified by events. To talk in publick, to think in solitude, to read and to hear, to*

inquire, and answer inquiries, is the business of a scholar. He wanders about the world without pomp or terrour, and is neither known nor valued but by men like himself. And among the scholars he later continues, *wherever I went I found that poetry was considered as the highest learning, and regarded with a veneration somewhat approaching to that which man would pay to angelic nature*, a theme that is developed more than most others in the short chapters of Johnson's romance. And after describing the poet in terms that a Buddhist scholar would recognize, he concludes that the poet *must know many languages and many sciences, and, that his style may be worthy of his thoughts, must by incessant practice familiarise to himself every delicacy of speech and grace of harmony*. He must know this and in addition observe every environmental and psychological nuance and interaction, and so appreciate the wholeness of life as neither good nor evil.

The idea is continued throughout Johnson's novella, which I had picked up in a Montpellier secondhand shop en route to Ethiopia. For example, when the small group of searchers consider the great pyramids of Egypt and the sage observes that *I consider this mighty structure as a monument of the insufficiency of human enjoyments. A king whose power is unlimited, and whose treasures surmount all real and imaginary wants, is compelled to solace, by the erection of a pyramid, the satiety of dominion and tastelessness of pleasures, and to amuse the tediousness of declining life by seeing thousands labouring without end, and one stone, for no purpose, laid upon another. Whoever thou art that, not content with a moderate condition, imaginest happiness in royal magnificence, and dreamest that command or riches can feed the appetite of novelty with perpetual gratifications, survey the Pyramids, and confess thy folly!*

Folly formed the theme of incidents reported in the other book I read in this once legendary land – Alan Moorehead's 'The Blue Nile', which had been recommended by Kenyan colleague and borrowed as often from the bounteous Bailieu Library. Moorhead uses the length of the river from its Ethiopian source to its Egyptian delta to trace the European incursions into the region. From the folly of Napoleon's attempt to become the Caliph of Cairo, through the Turks in Sudan to the Italians and British in Ethiopia, naivety and delusion are revealed across history. In the case of Ethiopia, colonial folly perhaps began with Portuguese missionaries who, in addition to describing the source of the Blue Nile, incited additional rivalry between the tribes by introducing Catholicism among the extant much older Christianity of the region.

Christianity pervaded all attempts to understand some early history of Ethiopia as we travelled. Official guides honed to repeat official histories had apparently heard little of the animism that informed much of Ethiopian Christianity. After we returned to Australia, I ordered a book from the National Library, again through the good graces of the Baillieu – "The Source of African Philosophy: The Ethiopian Philosophy of Man" by Claude Sumner. Sumner wrote long volumes of translations of the oldest Geez documents available, an Ethiopian language long gone and only understood by scholars, not guides – yet it is the source of knowledge that could better inform popular belief and one might hope, inform tourism. The book is mostly technical and contains English versions of most of: The Physiologue; The Book of Philosophers; The Life and Maxims

of Skendes; The Treatise of Zera Yacob, and The Treatise of Walda Heywat. Jacob's work is more significant than Heywat's (Heywat was the son of Jacob's patron whom Yacob taught). Skendes story is of interest as it links Ethiopian philosophy directly to ancient Greece through an Oedipus story that does not appear in many other cultures.

I found this enough of Ethiopian culture for the moment, and we had only travelled the north of the capital. It is hard to penetrate below the Christian veneer, even in Sumner's works, and while highly significant in African philosophical development, it probably adds little to knowledge now available from elsewhere. Is this arrogance? Perhaps, but time is limited and I have other foundations on which to build. If I ever return to such historic places, the mystery of the foundation cultures that predated Aksum might inform the story further. But in reality, the trade that linked Ethiopia to the greater producing and consuming cultures seems to have introduced influences that might not vary greatly from the Indic and the pre-Christian Greek world.

Greek Knowledge

We have bound the ancient Greeks to the modern West in our histories and are certainly influenced by them through Christianity, which itself is best represented as a constructive melding of Hebrew and Greek insights. Setting aside literal interpretations of what these belief systems entail, each of these traditions catalyses the other to provide deeper understanding in the scriptures. However, the same heterosis is less obvious in either the Christianity as it has arrived to us today or in most Western philosophy. Eastern philosophies that advanced and interacted with those of Greece can be a means of rediscovering such insights.

Having hoped for more in Ethiopian philosophy than might have existed, I next read David Leibiwitz's 'The Ironic Defense of Socrates'. This detailed work assumes an intimate knowledge of Plato's Apology, which it helpfully includes. The place of natural sciences in Greek thought sets the limits of what is possible. This is should not be hard to appreciate in modern life for those who think about it, but it does require that gods are not allocated a part of life. It is captured in the lines of poem of more than a decade ago – *and now with nothing thought unknowable, just unknown at this time*. But now I realize that this description does not apply to the majority who remain fearful of fate, accidents, rumour and so on. Even modern education does not appear to provide immunity to these mental infections. And that is what Socrates seems to have been arguing.

Leibiwitz thinks that now *perhaps it is possible to reconcile science and religion*. He does not develop this further in the terms that I understand his statement, which is the science – that is, knowledge about – the source and role of beliefs as revealed by psychology and neuroscience. To consider this matter, its is important to remember that Socrates/Plato was talking of the Greek gods with their distinctly human traits and representations of nature. For the modern unquestioning receiver of religions, monotheistic gods are above nature, and so there is a greater intellectual distance between God and science. To me it is curious that the world's major continuing polytheistic religion that retains some similarities to the Greek pantheon, Hinduism, has been the

longest well-represented culture in science. But this is not a theme of Lewibiwitz' work either.

Socrates investigation of religious experiences, like that of William James, includes constant consciousness; it is a vocation. And as Leibiwitz notes, *so important and time-consuming is this investigation ... that Socrates has, so to speak, "no leisure" for anything else: this activity, more than any other, or as much as any other, is the very core of his life*. This is the same life as the life that is worth living as distinct from the unconsidered life that in Socratic terms is not worth living. In practical terms, Socrates later in the Apology observes that for the majority, an education in virtue is the responsibility of a society. *Higher education, Socratic education, is essentially reeducation, which cannot work unless a noble primary education – which puts virtue ahead of goods like money and tries to make one "noble and good" – has already adequately shaped the student's soul*.

I find that a wonderful statement – but of course that could simply mean that it accords with my own view, which may or may not be 'considered' in that Socratic sense. It does accord with my life-experience, which I value perhaps more than is common as a result of exposure to Asian insights. The testing of teachings in one's own experience is a fundamental principle of Buddhism for actions that conduce to contentment. But to test something from experience assumes, as does Socrates, that one has a sound foundational education in one's own culture, which is in contrast to dilettantism or undisciplined 'openness' to what takes one's interest at any one time.

Education to Understand Historical Context

Education today is not what it used to be, as has always been said! Now it is improper, even illegal in some cases, to reprimand a student in the interests of learning. It is a difficult concept for me to absorb fully. Of course I can accept it intellectually as a well-meaning philosophy of our times that guards against psychological issue might linger into adult life. But it not disciplining of recalcitrant students that is the root of my puzzlement, but rather learning based on 'self-directed choice of undemanding interactions around a general theme'. It sounds ideal, but I wonder if at times it is any more than unguided play.

I mention this personal bias to introduce a detail I learned from Karen Armstrong's new book 'Fields of Blood: Religion and History of Violence'; that detail was that that *the [Chinese] pictogram 'jaio' showed a hand wielding a rod to discipline a child*. Discipline was seen as an essential to learn the foundations on which education could build, and training included cultural elements and memorization of critical shared knowledge and facts. Of course, Armstrong's book is about a far more important subject – war and violence. And in her many erudite words she is eloquent exponent of the role of violence as part of our basic human nature, and of religion as part of our means of making sense of life.

Education may be compromised by such well-meaning theories of learning if it is recalled that the primary function of formal education in to meet the needs of a society, not simply to fulfil the individual. Socially, education is an enculturating process that lays the foundation for future citizens. That is why basic arithmetic, writing and reading has been the basis of education through most of the history fo formal education alongside a shared understanding of myths and stories that form the belief of a people, which is sometimes called religion. Armstrong does not say all this, she has simply provoked my thoughts.

From her book, I also learned various other details, such as that in 2330 BCE, Sargon created the first agrarian empire in the world near Baghdad by conquering other cities, and styling himself as his name indicated, the *true and rightful king over all lands under heaven*. This was a theme that was to be reiterated through history, with war advanced with god being on the side(s) of the armies. Armstrong successfully teases apart modern confusion about religion's role in violence by briefly pointing out that our modern viewpoints are extremely recent. The separation of the state from the sacred was not deliberately avoided but was simply incompatible with the worldview of all peoples until very modern times. Thus to Confucius for example, the secular was sacred and he advised as part of his religious approach that the first priority of government was food followed by weapons in order to maintain social discipline.

From Sargon onwards, agrarian empires have been aggressive. This explains the dichotomous views of Yahweh who was essentially a war god set against agrarian empires. Yahweh destroyed the Tower of Babylon and confused the nation-builders' plans for a single language and imperial expansion. He insisted that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob each leave urban life for the freedom of a pastoral lifestyle. Even when Joseph finds he comfort in urban life and saves his family from starvation after he rises to a high post in Egypt, he used the famine to acquire more lands for the agrarian empires' pharaoh who held Joseph's family captives in the city. Later in the Biblical history, Solomon's grandeur was city-based and relied on an offensive army and corvée labour for massive temple building enterprise.

Later in history, Armstrong tells us that *In 540 Khusrow I of Persia began to transform his ailing kingdom into the economic giant of the region in a reform based on a classic definition of the agrarian state: 'The monarch depends on the army, the army on money; money comes from the land tax; the land tax comes from agriculture. Agriculture depends on justice; justice on the integrity of officials, and integrity and reliability on the ever-watchfulness of the king.'* In essence, little has changed with the façade of electoral democracies in our times.

She notes that war has been described as *a psychosis caused by an inability to see relationships* including relationships to emptiness and death. One example is the Spanish in the Americas – they would arrive in a new region and explain in Spanish to the inhabitants that the Pope had allocated the land to the Spanish and that *we shall take you and your wives and your children, and make slaves of them and we shall take away your*

goods and do you all the mischief and damage that we can. This was all in pre-modern times, and many erroneously believe – as I hear so often – that things are different today.

Things are different in technological terms that have accelerated the rate of change and fostered the modern nation state based on industry. Agrarian empires lacked the technological power to impose a uniform culture over such large areaa, and so pre-modern kingdoms were a mix of overlapping and ever-changing loyalties. Borders firmed up in Europe with industrialization, and booming standards in literacy and connections ensured that people felt part of the newly defined community. Out of this came Lord Acton's reservations: *By making the State and the nation commensurate with each other in theory, [nationality] reduces practically to subject condition all other nationalities that may be within it's the boundary. ... According, therefore, to a degree of humanity and civilization in that body which claims all the rights of the community, the inferior races are exterminated or reduced to servitude, or put in a condition of dependence*.

So things are different in one way and not on others. In Islam, there is a *sin of 'shirk' [which] is an idolatory that places a political ideal on the same level as Allah*. Yet the West places its ideal of democratic capitalistism above all else, and insists on a separation between state and religion. But religion is essential to people, and insofar as people make up the nation, such states will lack cohesion. This is expressed in multiple ways today, two of which are, a failure to adhere to values essential for maintaining social integrity of the culture's religion with its myths, stories and explanations, and distraction from educating the next generation to maintain the culture.

Armstrong says it this way. *Until the modern period, religion permeated all aspects of life, including politics and warfare, not because ambitious churchmen had 'mixed up' two essentially distinct activities, but because people wanted to endow everything they did with significance. Every state ideology was religious.* We have forgotten this and lost a part of ourselves, and in doing so have alienated other groups that seek to maintain the ancient tradition of all persons, states and groups being on a divine mission. It doesn't mean blindly following some faith-based literalism, but it does mean sharing common morality and common ideals inculcated through common education. This is the function of state-led education, which requires a parallel education of individuals to understand themselves. With the combination of being informed culturally and being objectively secure in one's mind, an understanding of conflicts mislabelled as religions, for example, should seen for what it is more readily. It would seems to need both disciplined education by and for the state, as well as the self-discipline that is essential to continued understanding of life.

Self-disciplined Understanding

I suppose these notes to myself from various books I have read can be seen as an attempt to advance my understanding of life. Much of what I write is no doubt trite, repetitive and reveling about my conditioning. While I can say that self-discipline led to me writing the notes, the question arises as to whether I have contributed much to my purpose. I am no longer motivated to write my thoughts after reading good books, but I am not yet joining

Thomas Aquinas who quit his 'Summa Theologica' after a mystical experience. Stating that *my writing days are over; for such things have been revealed to me that all I have written and taught seems but small account to me, wherefore I hope in my God, that, even as the end has come to my teaching, so it may soon come in my life*. Soon after, aged 49, he died. I understand Aquinas as having seen the puerility of attempting to convey deep understanding to others. Without claiming his insight, I admit to a similar feeling at times when readers find their own unchallenged biases in my writings, when I consider that I have clearly expressed the opposite. At times I have tried to write explanatory words to those who miss my point, and at times have felt like the poet Mallarme when faced with a similar the task – *I feel myself empty and can't put pen to the implacably white paper.* It is feeling that passes as frustration eases and realization dawns that humans are we have such diverse interests, capacities and biases that new ideas are less important than understanding ourselves as part of of the universe of interactions.

Over the decades I have come to know that we interact with everything and everyone else in such complex ways that no person can understand all influences. Insights have been revealed to me though a biological worldview complemented by some religious training within my culture. This explains why I return in these pages to laud that blessing. Within this conditioning, I see my jottings here as political in Orwell's sense that *where I lacked a 'political' purpose that I wrote lifeless books and was betrayed into purple passages, sentences without meaning, decorative adjectives and humbug generally.* This applies even more to my books than to these jottings. I do not mean that those books are universally viewed as useful to others, or that they sell well. All of my works are available free of charge for those who seek them and so seem to be widely read. It better for an author to be read than bought. In any case, this long assembly of notes across decades may or may not contain some insights stimulated by my reading that are communicable to others. If there is something of value to another in these lines I have met my objective in sharing them.