



# VICTORIAN HUMANIST

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## Food for all?

It is a long-established tradition to celebrate the festive season with food and drink. This tradition, which developed thousands of years ago in the northern hemisphere, is a cultural reminder of our ancestors' concern to get enough food for the cold winter months. Symbols like the evergreen pine tree were further reminders of nature's life-sustaining properties and the total dependence of humans on nature for survival. However, in urbanised societies, like much of Australia, this latter connection is now severely muted. Hence the stories of how some children and even adults can't name the plant and animal sources of many of our foods.

We now live in a world of 7 billion people. To feed this number requires vast resources from nature. It is estimated that two-thirds of the planet is utilised to feed humans and four-fifths of all ecosystems are under human influence. This dominance by one species is threatening the sustainability of the world's ecosystems by causing the extinction of many species and the pollution of land, water and air.

In addition to environmental destruction the current global food system is severely dysfunctional. It is not able to feed everyone adequately. Even though enough food is produced to feed 10 or 12 billion people (counting the grain fed to animals), uneven distribution and wastage results in around 1 billion people being malnourished and another 2 billion who experience food insecurity. At the other extreme, 400 million people are overfed, particularly with processed foods high in fats and sugars. These are the obese of western societies.

Researchers consider that this 'stuffed and starved' phenomenon is caused by the way the big agribusinesses, food processing companies and supermarket chains control the bulk of food production and distribution. They are in the business of making profits. They determine what we get to eat – food that can be transported long distances without damage, looks presentable and has a long shelf-life. Forget about taste and variety if the previous requirements are not met. Also, forget about farmers earning a decent living and maintaining the health of ecosystems: these are of little concern to the big players.

Food, clean water and air are essential to survival. Access to them is a basic human right. Currently the Australian government is consulting the public on a first-ever National Food Plan. Few details have been made public, but you can bet that the large retailers, commodity producers and agribusinesses are making sure their interests are not jeopardised.

Food justice for all should be a minimal goal of national governments and the relevant international organisations. So while you enjoy the abundant food supply we in Australia are fortunate enough to have at our disposal, consider how you might contribute to helping others to do likewise, along with a decent living for farmers and healthy ecosystems.

### References

'Food Sovereignty' Nick Rose & Fran Murrell. *Arena* magazine No. 114. 2011  
Raj Patel, *Stuffed & Starved: Markets, Power & the Hidden Battle for the World Food System*. Black Inc 2007.

Rosslyn Ives, editor

## SUNDAY

### Summer Social

11 December

12 noon – 3pm



4 Alandale Ave., Balwyn  
(home of Rosslyn Ives)

All welcome  
Bring food & drink to share  
for lunch + entertainment  
offerings, e.g. poems, jokes,  
musical items, etc.

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## REPORTS

### Remodeling religion in schools

*Humanists and other secularists are reminded to watch for the outcome of the case against the Education Department, to be heard before the Victorian Civil & Administrative Tribunal, beginning Monday 20 February 2012. Already the Department has been persuaded to remove some regulatory impediments to the fair treatment of non-religious children.*

ACARA – reminiscent of the American freshwater fish that builds nests and guards its young – stands, in the Australian context, for the parental role of the government in children’s education. The Australian Curriculum, Assessment & Reporting Authority issued ‘The Shape of the Australian Curriculum’ (3rd ed.) in October, showing that it had fixed on a number of ‘general capabilities’ to be developed not as definite subjects but across the whole curriculum. These include critical and creative thinking, ethical behaviour and intercultural understanding. ACARA summoned a multifaith roundtable to identify opportunities for learning about religions and ethics in the Australian Curriculum. Owing to the good offices of REENA, HSV was invited to participate. About forty people attended on 16 November (World Tolerance Day).

Barry McGaw, chairman of ACARA, began by explaining that the move towards national standards originated from the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* by State ministers of education in 2008. ACARA’s job was to define the national curriculum but not to police it. The subject (or ‘learning area’) of civics and citizenship was to be defined in phase 3 of the development of the curriculum, and McGaw saw that as a suitable place for religions and ethics. Cathy Byrne, of REENA and Macquarie University, reported educational practice in regard to general religious education (GRE) and ethics in the ten nations highest on the UN Human Development Index. She saw GRE as learning *about* religions and ethics as learning *from* religions. Sweden normalized secular GRE in public schools in 1962 and made it mandatory in 1994; in England & Wales it has been the norm since the *Education Reform Act 1988*. Children educated about different views were more tolerant and more respectful, she reported.

Humanists might well jib at having ethics taught from religions. It strikes me as putting the cart before the evolutionary horse. I agree with Sam Harris: ‘The faculty we use to validate religious precepts, judging the Golden Rule to be wise and the murder of apostates foolish, is something we bring *to* scripture; it does not, therefore, come *from* scripture.’ (*The Moral*)

*Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values*, 2010, page 78.) Just as one can be good without god, it is not educative to present religion as the real source of morality, still less of ethical deliberation.

(To be continued)

Stephen Stuart, president

### Dying With Dignity Victoria

Dying With Dignity Victoria’s thirty-eighth Annual General Meeting was held on Saturday 12 November 2011, at the Unitarian Church in East Melbourne. The President, Mr Neil Francis, reported on the past year in terms of lobbying. He then introduced the guest speaker, Tracey Spicer, newsreader, journalist and one of DWDV’s ambassadors for law reform.

Tracey Spicer related the plight of her mother, who died in prolonged circumstances in palliative care with considerable loss of dignity, in spite of her clearly stated wishes against the prolonging of her terminal illness. When Tracey published this story there was an overwhelming response from people with similar experiences.

Questions and comments from the floor showed exasperation with the political rejection of the wishes of 82% of the population who favour medical assistance to die. Tracey attributes this to a lack of political courage in the face of a powerful lobby representing a small percentage of the population. She will use all media outlets to publicise this issue.

The Vice-president, Dr Rodney Syme, added that we all needed to keep the issue of aid-in-dying in the public arena and personally lobby our parliamentary representatives.

The Rodney Syme Medal for Distinguished Contribution was awarded to Rowena Moore, who retired from her role of office manager after seven years. Her successor is Carolynne van der Cingel. Both ladies spoke of the honour of working with such a dedicated group of people on the committee.

The second part of the meeting dealt with treasurer’s report, election of new committee members and general business.

Halina Strnad

### Quotable

‘Accept the things to which fate binds you, and love the people with whom fate brings you together, but do so with all your heart.’

‘Everything we hear is an opinion, not a fact. Everything we see is a perspective, not the truth.’

‘You have power over your mind – not outside events. Realize this, and you will find strength.’

Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*

# The place of philosophy and religious education in Australian secular education

HSV Public Lecture by **Christopher Dargan** (U3A), at Balwyn Library on 27 October 2011

Report by **Jennie Stuart**

According to the philosopher and historian, Giambattista Vico, to truly understand a culture it is important to study what is valued by the culture, in other words, its art, philosophy and religion. (*The New Science*, 1725).

Can religious education be impartial? That is, can religious education be divorced from indoctrination? Christopher Dargan argued that it is certainly possible. For example, many Jews view the *Old Testament* of the bible as a historical document primarily. Alternatively the study of religion may focus on its influence on a particular culture. Other possibilities include an archeological approach to the background of a text, or even the perspective literary critique. For example, the bible could be viewed as a literary work, with god being the central character. There are also other ways of studying religion which are not linked with an imperative to embrace doctrine. From a personal perspective he explained that, when he was training to be a teacher at the Australian Catholic University and disclosed that he was a zoroastrian, he was deemed capable of teaching about catholicism.

However, as a separate question it is legitimate to ask if teachers can, and do, indoctrinate within the classroom. Although guidelines for religious education may proscribe this, it is evident that guidelines are simply guidelines and are not foolproof. The occasional case of sexual boundary transgression on the part of a teacher illustrates that practice may fall short of precept. Nonetheless guidelines are important in that they establish desirable limitations.

Christopher strongly endorses the place of philosophy in the classroom. He believes it is an important tool in encouraging students *how* to think, but not *what* to think. He gave the analogy of carpentry, where the instructor may impart information about the best wood to use for a project and then demonstrate the skills necessary for construction, without insisting on what should be made. He said some secondary school students flounder without a definitive answer to a philosophical question. Even when a series of positions are set out, they want to know which is the 'right' one.

He then conducted a mock philosophy class, preceding it with the outline of three main ethical systems that might be considered, namely deontology, utilitarianism and natural law. He gave a thumbnail sketch of each perspective; Kant's categorical

imperative that a general law was in operation, John Stuart Mill's view that the greatest good for the greatest number of people should be the guiding principle and finally, in the case of natural law, such as was espoused by Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, that the underlying purpose was to enable man to flourish. He presented a hypothetical ethical dilemma to the audience about an immigrant family with a gravely ill child. Australian doctors have told the parents that it is likely that their child will die unless he has an operation, but the parents are horrified because they believe that if surgery is performed the child will 'lose his soul'. Members of the audience were asked to take on the role and responsibility of the chief ethicist at the hospital and state whether it was more ethical to override parental rights in favour of saving the life of the child, or to accede to the parents' wish not to harm the child spiritually.

A very vigorous debate ensued.

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## Government research concludes that Germany will not return to religion

Research in Germany carried out for the Federal Government Data Report 2011 concludes that, since reunification, religion has dramatically declined in both the east and west of the country.

'The expectation that East Germans are less religious than West Germans as well as the question of whether the East Germans will retain their head start as far as secularism is concerned have been confirmed,' the report says. 'Church membership and Mass attendance are continuing their downward trend and Christianity is steadily losing supporters. There therefore can be no question of a return to religion in either half of Germany.'

In 1991, 11 per cent of the population of West Germany said they were non-believers. By 2008 this had risen to 16 per cent. In the east, the percentage had risen from 65 per cent to 74 per cent in the same period.

However, while the percentage of people saying they 'never' attended church rose in the west from 21 per cent in 1991 to 24 per cent in 2008, the east over the same period it fell from 60 per cent to 58 percent.

From the National Secular Society's on-line *Newsline*, 25 November 2011: [www.secularism.org.uk](http://www.secularism.org.uk)

### Receive your *VH* by E-mail

If you wish to receive your *VH* by E-mail, (except in months when mailed with *AH*), please advise Stephen Stuart [snstuart@msn.com](mailto:snstuart@msn.com).

The members' E-mail list that is being compiled will also be used to advise members of coming HSV and related activities.

## Letter

EACH YEAR in December Victorian Humanists celebrate the Summer Solstice. I suggest that we rename the celebration Humanlight, which is a specifically Humanist term whereas non-Humanists could also celebrate the Summer Solstice.

Humanlight was invented a few years ago by some American Humanists as a secular alternative to holidays such as Christmas and Hannukah. It is to celebrate Humanism's secular ethical worldview, celebrating such Humanist values as reason, compassion and hope. At Humanlight events people get together in much the same way as we do at Summer Solstice get togethers. The 'Human' in Humanlight refers to human values and 'Light' refers to the light of reason. Humanlight is celebrated on or about December 23. The Humanlight symbol shows three humans in front of the Sun. Further information is available on the Humanlight website,

<http://humanlight.org/>.

On the website they make the following comments: 'No matter how you choose to celebrate HumanLight, we request, and strongly encourage, that you follow three basic principles:

1. Your event/activity should in some way serve to celebrate and promote the values and ideals of Humanism.
2. Your event/activity should NOT be critical of, or negative towards, religious people and religious holidays such as Christmas. In this way, your religious friends and family might be comfortable attending.
3. Your event/activity should be family-friendly and children-oriented in some way, so that people with children will not hesitate to attend with them.'

There is a video about Humanlight at

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qsiYANxesTo>.

I suggest that Victorian Humanists produce Humanlight tee shirts and Humanlight cards similar to Christmas cards.

Wishing you a happy Humanlight,

**Joe Sampson,**

### Making the most of an opportunity

Mrs Brevoort, a widow, was hanging out by the pool at her country club when she spotted a good looking man sunning himself. She sidled up to him and said, 'Well, hallo, I don't believe I've seen you here before.'

'Not likely,' the man said. 'I've been in the penitentiary for thirty years.'

'Really? What for?'

'I murdered my wife.'

'Ah!' said Mrs Brevoort, with interest, 'So you're single!'

## Humanism – one way of putting it

**HUMANISM** is a rational philosophy informed by science, inspired by art, and motivated by compassion. Affirming the dignity of each human being, it supports the maximization of individual liberty and opportunity consonant with social and planetary responsibility. It advocates the extension of participatory democracy and the expansion of the open society, standing for human rights and social justice. Free of supernaturalism, it recognizes human beings as a part of nature and holds that values – be they religious, ethical, social or political – have their source in human nature, experience, and culture. Humanism thus derives the goals of life from human need and interest rather than from theological or ideological abstractions and asserts that humanity must take responsibility for its own destiny.

From *The Humanist*, publication of the American Humanist Association.

### Humanist civil celebrants

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### Have your say

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