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Pennant Hills Golf Club

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Evening all, the other day I was doing something for the Catholic Church. I had George Pell in the audience and almost everyone were nuns and priests, and I stood up and said, "I feel like a mangy old lion tossed into a den of Christians"; and I feel a little bit like that tonight I must say.

Ah, that was lovely, you see there's nothing like a class act God botherer really and I know because my father was one. My father was a 'congo'. Congregational minister in a little town called Maryborough and people often think that it was my father's influence or me reacting to Dad that led me on the path to perdition. Not so, I was one when he left the manse and went charging off to the second WW as a chaplain in the army, and I hardly saw him for the rest of my life or indeed his.

I came to my terrifying conclusions about the nature of the universe when I was four. And I can date it quite accurately because they were still flashing the searchlights in the sky over Melbourne on the little farm where I was raised by my grandparents. And I want to be brief... I understand George Pell's had a chat to you about this so I want to tell you what it's like to disbelieve in everything you believe in. It's a pretty lonely place to be when you're a four year old or five year old kid and it started with me at night in a great old brass double bed that I'd inherited from my grandparents, in a sleep-out, this is a term that you don't even hear much of anymore - a sleep-out. And the sleep-out was under these giant pine trees in our little farm, and I'd be in this thing at night, and as I drifted off, I'd drift out of the bed, and rise up, metaphorically I hasten to add, through the rusty galvo roof, up through the pine branches, up through the clouds, travelling faster and faster and faster, further and further and further, into the dark recesses of space. And ah, I was terrified, I suddenly realised I was dealing with infinity. Something that just went on and on and on and then went on some more.

And that all of us are born, wired, hard-wired, in a world where everything has a beginning, middle and an end, and this was just an outrage to my senses, add to that the thought of eternity, and it was overwhelming and I'd lie there in bed at night and it never occurred to me that I in any way would survive death; I've never for a nano-second been able to have the comfort accorded to others. It always seemed to me that death was death. But as a four and five year old I'd try and work out what it would be like. I'd lie there and think 'what colour will death be? Will it be black, or will it be white, or will it not have a colour at all, and how long will it be? Then I suddenly

recognised that in fact all time for a human being begins as you're conscious of it and ends when you lose your consciousness.

I rationalised that I'd be around for what seemed like all of time, but I had to deal with these two appalling ideas of infinity and eternity and I had to do it on my own. Now I wanted to discuss them, and around where I lived I don't think anyone ever raised religion as an issue, I don't remember anyone...or there is one moment when my grandmother clipped my ears, I'll tell you about that a little later.

So I was agonising over these great enormous dreads. And at night, every night I'd rocket out into outer space faster and faster, further and further, more and more afraid; and one night, problem solved I bounced off a great rocky vault of a round universe and I remember I tumbled back all the way back into that double bed and thought 'that's it, it's OK, it comes to an end. Well the next night off I went again, couldn't stop doing it, just off you go again, and that night I broke through the rocky vault as though it was an egg shell and once again I had to realise, had to confront the fact that there was always more in space and time.

For a while I tried to believe in God, simply because I was a well behaved little fella and people told me they believed in it, not with much passion, I don't think I ever met anyone that showed much enthusiasm for it, but they sort of believed in it; in the way they might have believed in the Liberal Party, or barracking for Carlton and that used to puzzle me because it seemed if I believed in what they believed I'd be taking it much more seriously.

But I started sending messages; I started phoning God on a pretty regular basis. He never returned my calls. I'd leave messages; he'd never ring back. And I thought well if that's his attitude and I then realised that I found the notion of God totally redundant. I couldn't see why the idea of God came into it. And this is the problem: everyone told me there had to be a beginning, a creator, who began everything. But the same people who told me that said there wouldn't be an end to space or time. And so I had this rather lop-sided universe which had to have a beginning but couldn't have an end. And so this occurred to me that this was a bit odd really and I said to my grandmother, and this was my grandmother who gave me the clip over the ear. I said, 'if God was the beginning, who begun God?'

Clip on the ear; not an argument, not an answer, clip on the ear, and I knew I was on to something. I knew I was on to something.

You were mentioning Bertrand Russell. And you would know by reading *Why I'm Not a Christian* that Russell didn't ask that question until he was 19; but that was the issue, the philosophical or logical issue in which it all fell over.

So there I was at the age of 5, I didn't know what an atheism meant, I'd never heard of the word I probably didn't even hear it for another perhaps 5, 6 perhaps even more years; but I was all alone in the universe. My father was absent, I was raised by grandparents, I was an intensely lonely child at the best of times, and here I was in this cold and for me absolutely meaningless universe. A universe without an author, without a purpose, without a direction. So what do you do when you're in this situation? Well first of all you're very lonely and a little bit afraid; and then you have to try to start to develop a belief system that meant you could cope with that.

Because it's one of the great impulses of religion, to me there's any number of them, but first the overwhelming fear of annihilation, the fear of death is common to almost every faith that has ever existed on this planet. You're all invited to come to stay at

the house up at the farm. And when you come you'll share the house with the largest collection of dead gods in Australia. I collect antiquities and I've got thousands of them. I don't think too many of you here believe in the Greek gods, the Roman gods, the Egyptian menagerie. Hands up those who follow the Aztec or Incan faiths...of course you don't. But all those gods have run out of time, have run over their use-by date. My attitude is that there's just one left and he's going to run out of his, or if you prefer, her use-by date. But it is not easy to be that lonely, that isolated, and that insecure. You see you start to try and develop a philosophy that brings you some comfort, and I found mine over the years in social justice issues, oddly enough there was a moment lapse in 'Joan hearing her voices' when the librarian at the East Kew Municipal Library realised I'd read all the Biggles books three times and exhausted the possibilities of 'William', and 'Mary Brad Bruce' some of you remember him, don't you? And this woman took me up this one step, a little step, a small step for a boy, up to the grown-up library. And with extraordinary prescience she handed me *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck. Now I cannot tell you how many people have exactly my experience over the years; because if I ever write about Steinbeck, about *The Grapes of Wrath*, in come the letters, and these days those ghastly e-mails, and so many people had exactly the same response to it.

And in reading *The Grapes of Wrath* and injustice, and every child knows about injustice, to be a child is to suffer constantly at the hands of parents, teachers, and other authoritarian figures; you suddenly realise that injustice was politically organised, and that, perhaps, you could do something about it. So little by little I converted, what to me was the moral revelation of *The Grapes of Wrath* into a way of living.

Malcolm Muggeridge, who remembers Malcolm? Hands up! Barry Jones my oldest friend - other people have got 'Google' - I've got Barry. If I need to know anything I just pick up the phone and he tells me. Barry brought Malcolm out to Australia just when he was well and truly on the turn when he fallen, absolutely fallen in love with Mother Therese, and given up sex. Mind you, at his age it had probably given him up. Out he comes and I'd always seen him on television in black and white and I remember we picked him up at the airport in Melbourne and he was bright red. And I couldn't believe how bright red he was. Fantastic bloke, he'd flown all the way from England and all he wanted to do was talk all night, and we were discussing images of Jesus in movies and I was pointing out that just as the renaissance paintings always cast Jesus, or gave him the ethnicity of the painter and his audience and that Hollywood had a very bad habit of having blond blue eyed non-Jewish Jesuses. And there was a notorious case where Tab Hunter (can you imagine a more less powerful figure?) was shown on the cross with shaved armpits, in other words completely cosmeticised. Good if you were Jesus. So we going through all these terrible films and agreeing that they were pretty rotten. And I said, "But you've seen *The Passion According to St Matthew*, haven't you Malcolm?"

Oh, yes. Now I don't know how many of you have seen it, it was filmed in Calabria, in the villages with people with very bad teeth, playing roles in the Bible. And it was an angry Jesus; it was a radical Jesus, absolutely thrilling. And I got Malcolm to agree that that was the only time he had ever seen a film on Jesus that had anything like the appropriate conviction and passion. And then I said, "Malcolm, are you aware that Passolini the director is a communist, atheist homosexual?" And I remember watching Malcolm's face redden another couple of degrees. Now I make that point not to ridicule Malcolm but to point out that just as there are a million ways of interpreting *Hamlet* there are millions of ways of interpreting Jesus Christ. And those of us on the radical side of politics see the radical, see the sky confronting power, see him being pretty cheeky.

So I have a great respect for him as a radical and a teacher and some of the aphorisms and one-liners are superb. But equally I have a fair bit of time for some of the other great religious teachers, and I don't ridicule religion the way my friends Christopher Hitchens or Richard Dawkins do because I've always understood the yearnings apparent, the reasons that people want to have the sense of meaning and purpose and comfort and solace. They want to have their lives organised so there's a book with a set of rules they can follow or fail to follow, and at the end of the day there's a system of rewards and punishments.

I live in a world where any activity is unpunished ultimately. I don't get frequent flyer points to heaven, nor do I face the threat of Hades. And, I think, hasn't purgatory been recently cancelled? Or was that 'limbo', or both? But it seems to me that it's terribly important to understand that you can live as I do, in a totally meaningless universe, where the only meaning it has is the meaning that you attribute to it. Like what you might write on a blackboard with a piece of chalk.

And yet at the end of the day, I don't think it means that we're strangers.

I live in a different universe to most of you, but as I often say when I'm ending a letter to a cranky Christian who's taking me to task over something or other, I say, "I bet there's a thousand things we agree on, so don't let a little thing like God come between us".

Now during the twelve years of the Howard Government, I was always on the attack. Principally over the treatment of refugees, which I believe to have been the most horrendous and shameful thing in modern Australian history. And once again I found myself shoulder to shoulder with Christians. And as I used to say to people that about the only people left winners in Australia were Josephite nuns and Jesuit intellectuals. And ah, so that convinced me.

Mind you I must say that Dawkins is very nasty as is Michel Onfray of a thoroughly repulsive French agency who was in Australia a short while ago, whom I interviewed for an hour on the wireless. Omfrey dismisses the good works of Christian believers because he says they do it for reward; you do it for the frequent flyer points, you do it for heaven. Therefore your moral basis isn't as good as atheists who just do it because he or she thinks it's a good thing to do. I don't make that distinction. In fact I think many of us have a very strong inbuilt impulse to do the right thing which may manifest itself by being drawn to religion. Or be drawn as I was, to its antithesis. It seems to me that evolutionary theory should calm Dawkins down more than it does, because there is abundant evidence in the millions and millions of years there's been life on Earth, and in the almost 4 billion, there's been something approaching human life on Earth that we are as wired, as hard-wired for altruism as we are for violence. That all life forms learn forms of collaboration, they learn how to work together, to survive together. I don't think we're innately good, that's sentimental, but I think that we have within us the capacity for goodness just as we also have tragically, the capacity for evil. Nor do I ever suggest for a moment that atheists are intellectually or morally superior to God botherers. Atheism says nothing about your belief; all it says is something about your disbelief. An atheist doesn't believe in God. Doesn't. Some of the nastiest people in History have been atheists, I'm only too ready to confess.

So at the end of the day as I get older (and I meant to apologise for my appalling appearance, I've just stepped literally from East Arnhem Land for a week and I haven't had a chance to get home and get changed yet, sorry I meant to say that up front, although I won the worst dressed man in Australia four years running, four

years running! They put me in the hall of infamy with Don Dunston so they could give the award to other people. No I'm not here, I'm not trying to stand up here looking provocative, it's just that I haven't been home yet to get changed).

OK, so to me atheism is a statement of disbelief, it does not follow from an atheist's position that an atheist is going to be good on social justice issues – I know plenty who don't give a damn. Atheism can lead to hedonism just as easily as it can lead to moral scruple. But equally as all of you here know tonight, Christianity, or any of the other faiths, is no guarantee that the person who proclaims that faith is going to be worth two bob, when it comes to fulfilling any decent social role. I would point, for example, to the incumbent president of the United States of America, and I pray to God that his term in office ends with an Obama victory in about 90 days...I would if I was given to prayer.

But if you look at his sort of toxic fundamentalism, I sit there in the studio at night and again, and again, and again, I realise that I'm dealing with a guy who's a fun park reflection of Bin Laden. The two are both bigots, they're both crass, and I think they're both people of profound and dangerous cruelty. Here's a president who thought nothing of sending a world record number of people to execution in Texas: about 150. We know now that he never gave a damn about it, he'd joke as he signed the documentation. And he allowed, and we don't know, we don't know, but there are many people who believe that a million civilians have died in Iraq. A million, there are also two and a half million internal refugees, and another three million who are external refugees. The great hush-up on the civilian death toll has been an immense scandal. But even if it was a quarter of that, and it's certainly that, 250,000 people killed, men women and children, because of some crazed idea, totally inaccurate, that the Ba'athist regime was in any way supportive of Bin Laden type terrorism.

So, I know that Christianity can hide a multitude of sins. I was talking the other day to Marcia Langton. Professor Langton, one of the great warrior women of indigenous politics who lived in Darwin for a long time before she went down to Melbourne as a professor. [She told me that] the Ku Klux Klan operate energetically in Darwin and we know what good Christians they are! They display it by burning the cross on the front gardens of terrified African-Americans.

So, if you are the Dutch Reformed Church you will support apartheid, if you are - if you were, I'm afraid, many of the people in the Catholic Church during the Second World War, you'll become involved to one degree or another in the Holocaust. So, it is no guarantee of virtue to profess your Christianity any more than it is a guarantee of virtue for me to thump my chest and claim to be an atheist.

Can I just borrow that book, just for a second, and I'll shut up then. I wrote the original edition of this in the middle '80s. And on the back you can see what the first edition shows. It's a pastiche of the Sistine ceiling, and the old feller's leaning down, with the finger, that famous finger. And I'm tweaking it, I'm Adam, and I'm tweaking it in a rude way and my head on the very eloquent torso. So that was the cover. I'm flying to Rome, and it was at a time when terrorism was peaking, we forget these things so quickly, and there'd been a massacre at Athens airport. Don't you remember that? And when we climbed on board the Qantas flight to Rome they were still cleaning up the airport, the mess that had been left behind. So, I'm nodding off, and I'm woken up by the Captain as we approach Rome airport and he says, "Ladies and Gentlemen in a couple of seconds we'll be over the Vatican." Now everyone's anxious about terrorism; at that second there was the most enormous 'bang'. All the lights in the plane went out, the plane rocked wildly in total darkness, everyone was screaming, the lights flickered on and the Captain clearly shaken said,

"It was a bolt of lightning". But of course it never strikes twice in the same place. 'Bang' It did again, same thing, squealing, darkness, shaking aeroplane. When the plane landed, the pilot checked out what could be seen on the fuselage. And both the lightning bolts had hit by my seat.

So, you know...we've negotiated a truce, God and I. It's lovely to be here tonight. Steve's will be up shortly, Steve's a lovely bloke, one of these rare creatures, someone's made a lot of money, and he wants to do something with it. I have to say in Australia the whole tradition of philanthropy is pretty stunted, and it's good to see Steve recycling his ill-gotten gains, no not ill-gotten, quite nicely gotten gains, in terms of international peace, and trying to get that up. I don't think even Steve's got enough money for that but its good that he's trying.

It's delightful to be invited here, surprising to be invited here. That's right, I've got another story to tell you...I'm sitting there tapping away; an e-mail comes in from the Blake Prize people. You know, the prize for religious art. Would I officiate at the opening of the Blake Prize? They'd just got into terrible trouble that day with a really ghastly painting of the crucifixion, and one of the judges had spat the dummy and walked out. So I e-mailed back and said "You've got to be kidding, aren't you in enough trouble already without having me cut the ribbon?" "Ah, no, no, no, no..." So I said "well," then I remembered I'd done it once years ago and nothing calamitous seemed to have occurred, no lightning bolts. So I agreed and then a second later just as I was pressing the "send", in came an e-mail from a guy called Peter Smeeth, who painted me for the Archibald last year. Now Peter, in his painting, is ultra-realistic, no photograph is as compellingly realistic as Peter's painting. And he painted me up at the farm surrounded by some of my collection of religious images, my huge Buddha, an Egyptian mummy case there and a few other things around. And he didn't make the cut. I told him it wouldn't because I actually won the Archibald, 10, 15 years ago, so they're not going to put me in it again. But he can make the 'Salon de Refuse' and it wins the prize there.

So he thinks he's on to something with this bloke; so without telling me, he paints another painting of me; this time completely buried in religious imagery. You know there's a glass of wine, a loaf of bread. Every religion, there's stars of David. And ah, I'm just amazed to think once again I'm getting the message, I'm getting the message. 'God wants me to open the Blake'. I think tonight I'm going to give up on atheism, this is probably as good a time as any to change my mind, no, no, no, not quite yet, but any day soon.

Thankyou very much for having me, I've got to go back to work and introduce the programme about aboriginal politics in Gama, and I won't even be able to stick around for you Steve, if you'll forgive me.