

Materialism - the real foe?

The big issues of our times often hinge on the highs and lows of human values. Sometimes they are so close to the bone it is personally challenging even to write about them. But in a recent article, headed *Getting to the root of modern evil*, Ross Gittins, economics writer for the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age*, begins with the following statement: "If you don't like the way economic rationalism is changing our country, you haven't quite put your finger on the problem. If you object to the increasingly mercenary behaviour of big business, you are missing the point. It has taken me ages to realise it, but these things are just symptoms - outward manifestations of something a lot deeper. To understand the root cause of these developments you have to appreciate that we're living through an era of heightened materialism."

Just in case we're in doubt about the meaning of materialism, it is defined as "a doctrine where consciousness and will are wholly due to material agency, and with the tendency to prefer material possessions and physical comfort to spiritual values". Characteristically it is an exclusive pursuit. Being entirely self-centred it does not concern itself with others, and when threatened is strenuously and sometimes viciously protective of its own interests.

The almighty dollar

Though materialism is not only about the almighty dollar, Gittins gives several examples of why he sees that in the past 20 to 30 years we in Australia - and elsewhere - have become more preoccupied with money than before. He points to the rise in economic rationalism, corporate sponsorship in sport, remuneration packages of company directors, accompanied by a preoccupation with the bottom line, and the amount of litigation, as some of the symptoms of modern materialism.

Some may say "so what", or see it as a healthy trend if it leads to a higher standard of living. But is it time to

take a deeper look, as Gittins suggests, to understand the effects of this relentless clamour for more and more? What is the impact on us as individuals and as a nation?

We can all add our quota of outrage to the recent revelations of corporate greed that tend to make us cynical about big business and its leaders. We can throw up our hands in horror that our Aussie kids are reportedly the most obese in the world. Or in the face of global warming, we can criticise the Government for not signing up to the Kyoto Protocol because of self-interest. But are we all prepared to do our bit to make some necessary changes?

Greed afflicts us all - even in little ways - and can leave us cynical about everybody, including ourselves. It makes us less willing to share, which arguably may even explain the reluctance of some to share this land with those they regard as less deserving than themselves, including asylum seekers or indigenous Australians.

Another approach

Other examples, however, demonstrate a different spirit. Witness the thousands involved in voluntary work in this country. It is there in some industries also. The directors of the Australian hire firm, Kennards, recently distributed some of this year's profits amongst their 530 employees, saying, "Why not give some of it back to those who contributed to it?"

Ultimately, though, the manifestations of materialism and the alternatives are best calculated individually if we are prepared to take an honest look. What about our quality of life, our attitudes, our relationships with others - particularly to those closest to us - our appetites for spending, status and our expectations of success, comparing ourselves with others, not to mention the stress any of these may cause? To some extent they are all factors in making us what we are.

The question is whether material benefits can serve our needs without becoming our master. We may

already know of some basic - even fundamental - changes that need to be made to our lives. Then it's simply a matter of making them. But extra time may be needed to stop and think and listen to the spiritual side of our lives to learn more about ourselves - how to serve others and the purposes beyond self-gratification. The question then becomes not how the world treats us, our group and our nation, but how we treat other people, other groups and other nations.

The conquest within

In the midst of World War II, Frank Buchman, initiator of Moral Re-Armament (now MRA-Initiatives of Change), described the most important conquest as being "materialism within our borders and within ourselves.

Without (this) our nations will decay from within while we prepare to defend ourselves against attack from without."

The influence of materialism, and the answer to it, comes back to choices and priorities. For those who care to look at themselves and the world around them, it is to ask if everything is in the right order. If "materialism is democracy's greatest enemy", as Frank Buchman put it, then we need to place those spiritual qualities latent in us all at the forefront of our lives and our nations.

- David Mills

MRA - IC National Gathering in Tumut ...

A two and a half day gathering for those who feel responsible for MRA-Initiatives of Change will take place at Tumut, in NSW, 7-10 November. This will include a focus on the needs of Australia and the global situation and how to advance the aims of the MRA-IC-initiated regional conference in April, 2003.

Accommodation will be at the Rivercrest Christian Camp Centre in Tumut. The cost will be \$100 and it will be necessary to bring a sleeping bag or sheets and doona, and a pillowcase. An extra blanket is also provided. Arrive by 5.30pm on the Thursday evening in time for a meal and leave after lunch on Sunday. To confirm your attendance, or for further information, please contact John and Helen Mills at (08) 8379 3211 or on e-mail at:

<johnbpmills@compuserve.com>

Gifts that make MRA - Initiatives of Change possible

In 1977 we completed construction of the new wing which extended the MRA centre at *Armagh* in Melbourne. Margaret Tucker and David Mills, on behalf of indigenous and younger Australians, ceremoniously opened the curtains to the new areas and to the new programs and initiatives made possible, such as the regular training courses - *Effective Living* and *Life Matters*.

For those involved it had been a visionary effort with a budget way beyond our bank balance. But many friends throughout Australia, and even some in other countries, committed themselves to the task. Some contributed cash, others gave time and physical effort, suppliers and contractors gave special discounts. One of the main contractors, however, went much further. He and his wife came to appreciate and recognise what *Armagh* stood for and what MRA was aiming to do in society.

For the next 25 years, without fail, they made quite substantial annual donations of four to five figures. With

their final donation this year, our friends wrote, in these touching words, "Unfortunately age is catching up with us and we are no longer in a position to continue our financial support. It has been a great pleasure to us to have been associated with MRA and we wish you well and God's blessing in the work you are doing."

People often ask, "How is MRA - Initiatives of Change financed?" There is no mystery. It is thanks, from the bottom of our hearts, to friends like these.

- *Chris Mayor*

Following an MRA-IC international conference held in Perth in 1979, Ken and Val Waldron made a very generous gift of their home at 77 Dean Road, Bateman to MRA-IC. A second storey was added as a home and office for MRA-IC while the Waldrons continued to live in the ground floor. Adelaide architect Gordon Brown drew up the plans, giving his services without charge. Many people across Australia contributed generously

towards the building fund. Over the ensuing years people from all walks of life have taken part in activities ranging from seminars, video and film evenings, to garden parties and special celebrations. Overseas visitors found a warm welcome there, sometimes staying for many months and contributing richly to the work of MRA-IC in this city.

Now the time has come to sell the house, which is too large for our present needs. After an extensive search a well-designed, light and spacious home in a nearby suburb has been found with all the elements most suited for the foreseeable future. The home in Dean Road is now on the market. David and Betty Lancaster will continue as hosts of the new home.

Our continuing and heartfelt gratitude goes to Val and Ken Waldron and those who contributed to the building of "77" for all that this gift has made possible over two decades and into the future.

- *Lindsay and Margaret Cartwright and Doreen Walters*

Prayers for Humanity in Geneva

On 11 September Geneva's historic Cathedral of Saint Peter was filled for *Prayers for Humanity* and a renewal of *The Geneva Spiritual Appeal* which abjures the use of religion to justify violence and domination.

The Geneva Spiritual Appeal was first launched on 24 October 1999 by the Muslim, Orthodox, Buddhist, Jewish, Protestant and Catholic leaders of the city, as well as by the UN Commissioners for Human Rights and for Refugees and the then President of the International Committee of the Red Cross, Cornelio Sommaruga.

Now at the ceremony of renewal Sommaruga, as President of Caux-Initiatives of Change (the Swiss IC body), presented the Appeal again.

Two teenage Muslims, a boy and a girl, were the first to read it, in Arabic. Ruth Dreifuss, the first Jewish member of a Swiss Federal government, read it in French. Klaus Schwab, the founder and President of the World Economic Forum read it in German, and the director of World Vision in English. Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu and Christian contributions enriched the ceremony.

As people left, they crowded round

tables to sign the Appeal. It can be found, and signed, on the Appeal's web site:

www.geneve.ch/appelgeneve/welcome.html

The Appeal states:

GENEVA SPIRITUAL APPEAL

Because our personal convictions or the religions to which we owe allegiance have in common a respect for the integrity of humankind;

Because our personal convictions or the religions to which we owe allegiance have in common a rejection of hatred and violence;

Because our personal convictions or the religions to which we owe allegiance have in common the hope for a better and more just world;

Representing religious communities and civil society we appeal to the leaders of this world, whatever their field of influence, to strictly adhere to the following three principles:

A refusal to invoke a religious or spiritual power to justify violence of any kind;

A refusal to invoke a religious or

spiritual source to justify discrimination and exclusion;

A refusal to exploit or dominate others by means of strength, intellectual capacity or spiritual persuasion, wealth or social status.

Grounded in the Genevan tradition of welcome, refuge and compassion, our appeal is open to all whose convictions are in accordance with these three demands.

Among the documents on the Initiatives of Change Caux website www.caux.ch is the concluding statement from the *Dialogue between concerned Muslims and non-Muslims* which took place at Caux this year. Dr Sommaruga, one of the Dialogue hosts, sent this statement to Kofi Annan, the United Nations Secretary-General. Dr Annan responded by saying he was heartened to hear about the dialogue. "I read the concluding statement with interest," he continued. "Nothing is more important than keeping the lines of communication open. I commend your ongoing contribution to such efforts and look forward to hearing more about the Dialogue in person when we next meet."

Armagh, the Australia-Pacific Centre for MRA-IC in Melbourne, is home to an international community. At present the 'family' includes people from Mainland China and Hong Kong, Taiwan, Korea, Japan, Canada, Samoa and Australia.

Aleksandra (Ola) Wedzony, 19, from Poland, returning from 9 months based there, writes:

It was one of 41 boring Mondays of my last year in school, but when I crossed the threshold of my home something seemed different. My mother was beaming. "Guess what has happened?" she asked. "You have been invited to Australia for the *Life Matters* course!" That is how the most incredible nine months of my life began.

MRA-IC workers from Poland, Germany, Britain and Australia put lots of effort into collecting money and arranging details to make my journey and stay possible. I do not know words in any language that express how thankful I am for their commitment and hard work. But more lessons were yet to come...

In my everyday life I had become cynical and did not trust people. I was very surprised by the attitude of the people I met in *Armagh* and in the *Life Matters* course. It was as if the whole world opened its heart to me. I was amazed how honest people were, talking about very personal experiences in their lives. Nobody was hiding their feelings. Everyone's opinion was important. *Life Matters* gave me some theoretical knowledge about conflict resolution, active listening and community building. Equipped with tools like that, I stepped into everyday life in *Armagh*. I was surprised how challenging life in community is, but with time and thanks to the love and care everyone has given me, I started to trust people. Now I hope that I will be able to keep that way of thinking when I am back home. (NB: The next *Life Matters* course is 7-16 February 2003 in Melbourne. Details from the Melbourne office - Ed.)

Open Homes - Listening Hearts: Sharing our Stories

Following the enthusiasm expressed at the first *Open Homes - Listening Hearts* coffee morning on 29 June at *Armagh*, a group of Melbourne women initiated another on 31 August, 2002 for *Sharing our Stories*.

About 70 women came from 20 different countries of birth, several bringing their friends. They were greeted at the door by a Sri Lankan lady and a young woman who had recently married a Sri Lankan. Conversation

bubbled as people ate and drank round small tables throughout the morning.

Walda Blow welcomed everyone to Wurundjeri land, giving each person a gum leaf. Then she told her own story of growing up on an Aboriginal reserve, always afraid of being removed from her family, of deprivation and struggle, and of her life-long battle to improve the quality of life for all her people. She was so honest and real, yet without bitterness.

A young Palestinian woman, whose family came to Australia when she was a baby, told us that, since she decided to start wearing the hijab, the Muslim scarf, two years ago, she has experienced real hostility. On one occasion, she and her brother were making an emergency dash to hospital with a friend in labour. Most cars moved out of their way, but one driver tried repeatedly to cut them off and brandished a knife at them.

A white Australian woman who had married a gifted Aboriginal singer told of growing up in the Depression, and of discrimination she and her husband suffered. Since her husband's death, she has studied and is now practising healing arts. A recording of her husband singing was entralling.

The morning concluded with a very moving dance to music from the film *Rabbit Proof Fence*. It was created by a student at the Victorian College of the Arts and depicted the experiences of refugees in Australia.

These two occasions are generating new friendships and honesty, indicative of a yearning in many people living in Australia to get to know "the other who is different". A further occasion is planned in early November. For details, please contact the Melbourne office.

Global Club, which regularly brings together young people of different ethnic backgrounds, hosted an afternoon at Armagh on Saturday, 21 September.

Four participants of the *Action For Life* (see last *Newsbriefs*) shared highlights from their 10-month journey in PowerPoint presentation, songs, dance and sketches. Sharon Hopkins from Canada, who is spending a year with MRA-IC in Australia, spoke of healing that has come since she wrote to her alcoholic father apologising for years of bitterness.

On the horizon

Tirley Garth, UK, Global Consultation, 17-24 October :

Two main themes are: how Initiatives of Change might help with relations between Muslims and non-Muslims worldwide, and relations between the United States and the global community. Ron Lawler and John Williams from Australia are taking part.

Sydney, Saturday 2 November, 7.15pm, Lane Cove Civic Centre: Round table discussion on the theme **Individuals can make a difference...**

Humanity, Belief and Freedom

This course, organised by MRA-Initiatives of Change, 14-24 November 2002, Yarra Junction, Victoria, has been endorsed by two distinguished Australians.

Hon. Jim Carlton, AO, former Federal Minister of Health and former Secretary-General of Australian Red Cross, wrote: "On numerous occasions I have assisted MRA with their youth programs, which have been extremely successful in encouraging young people to re-examine their lives and focus their attention on improving the condition of humankind."

Rev. Tim Costello, Executive Director of Urban Seed, Melbourne, wrote: "When I was a student in Switzerland I visited the Moral Re-Armament centre at Caux and was incredibly impressed with the work they are doing for peace, reconciliation and justice. I think it would be wonderful if other young people could have the sort of exposure I experienced back then to a course such as this."

Brian Lightowler, Cambridge-educated British journalist, who has made his home in Brisbane, Australia, was one of the initiators of **Our Decision for a Corruption-Free Queensland** in the 1980s.

His interest in how to confront and cure corruption has led him to research a booklet on this highly topical subject, bringing together stories from all over the world. He would like to include more Australian material.

If there are any *Newsbriefs* readers who have experiences of costly honesty in the workplace and initiatives taken against corruption, please send them to him at:

61 Moordale Street, Chapel Hill, Queensland 4069, or e-mail <lightow@ozemail.com.au>

Cherishing a lasting peace with all nations

Edited talk given by Rajmohan Gandhi, Indian writer and academic and a member of the Initiatives of Change International Council, at the University of Illinois, USA, 11 September 2002:

My own fellow-feeling for America, following the enormity of 9/11, was I think sharpened by experiences that many like me, in different parts of the world, have had. Among friends of mine killed in violence linked to terrorism are - or were, I should say - Ahmed Gooru and Hirday Nath Wanchoo of Kashmir, the first a Muslim and the second a Hindu; Lala Jagat Narain and Romesh Chunder of Punjab; Prime Minister Premadasa and Amirthalingam of Sri Lanka, the first a Sinhalese and the second a Tamil; Lungshim Shaiza of Nagaland, and, only a few months ago, Ehsan Jaffery of Gujarat and Abdul Ghani Lone of Kashmir. I had known most of these friends in their homes, and have some idea of the impact on families and communities of the sudden and heartless extinction of human life.

Terrorism

Today, on American soil, let me reaffirm that terrorism can never be accepted or tolerated as a response to perceived injustice. Our responsibility for our individual actions is a condition of our being that we cannot escape from, whether we are Indian, Arab, Israeli, Kashmiri, Chinese, American or whatever.

Similarly, may I affirm that the existence of terrorism does not eliminate justice as a value. The need to strive for justice is also, perhaps, a condition of our being as humans. And the need to be wise in this striving, the need to adopt right means, may be a condition of our survival as humans.

Inevitable clash?

We hear of the thesis, offered on both sides of an obvious divide, of the inevitability of a clash of civilisations. We hear, on the one hand, of some

allegedly innate flaw of Islam, apparently a flaw that would, on the one hand, guarantee a clash of civilisations, and on the other disqualify every Muslim prayer.

After hearing this argument a few times, I have often asked myself, when looking at a Muslim bent in prayer, or when looking at a picture of a million Muslims kneeling and pleading in prayer, whether I could believe that for some compelling reason these prayers that I was observing were doomed before they were uttered. I could not, and do not, believe that. And I remain unconvinced that almost all modern violence and terrorism, and especially that in which Muslims seem to be involved, can be traced back to some Koranic verses removed from their context. On the other side of the divide, we hear, loudly and pervasively, of the wickedness of the USA. What blindness and rage it must be, or what sordid motive, that can produce such an outlook, which only adds to the tragedies of the lands that foster it, and alienates those lands from a country that contains the world's greatest resources for freedom and justice.

On a day like this, we can but long for persons of conscience and wisdom who can speak frankly to their people, and we can be thankful for those who do.

At a dialogue I attended in Switzerland in July, influential Muslims from a variety of countries and non-Muslims of standing held an honest conversation on peace, justice and faith. All agreed that terrorism was anathema; that justice had to be pursued nonetheless; that Muslim lands should know of the values honored in the non-Muslim world; that Islam should be better expressed in non-Muslim lands; and that democracy should be promoted everywhere, including in Muslim countries.

Recalling 9/11, we think - with anguish, respect, warmth, and prayer - of the thousands directly affected in New York, Pennsylvania and Washington DC, and of the even larger number indirectly hurt in America. Yet if healing and hope are to enter the world, then we must think also of the

reconstruction of a country like Afghanistan - a reconstruction of homes, schools and roads, a healing of traumatised Afghans, a reconciliation among Afghanistan's divided ethnicities, and a restoration of trust and friendship between Afghans and Americans.

The vision of Abraham Lincoln

Ever since September 11 last year, I have been puzzled at the apparent absence from the 9/11 discourse of Abraham Lincoln. This morning, no doubt with stirring aptness, the Gettysburg Address was recited at the Ground Zero commemoration. Yet I have been puzzled that so few have publicly asked whether Lincoln's Second Inaugural might not have some relevance to these times. Referring to the two sides in the civil war, Lincoln said:

Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces; but let us judge not that we be not judged.

In the final sentence of the Second Inaugural, Lincoln, you will remember, spoke of the need for healing. "To bind up the nation's wounds" was his phrase. And in the very last words of that address he spoke of the need "to do all which may achieve and cherish a just, and a lasting peace, among ourselves and with all nations".

In some of our world's recent confrontations, both sides have again prayed to the same God, each invoking His aid against the other; and men have dared to ask a just God's assistance in wreaking destruction. And if this return of 9/11 sends our thoughts also to the Middle East, perhaps we should have the courage, with Lincoln, to pray for a just and lasting peace there, with the involvement, perhaps, of ourselves and all nations.

All your contributions of items, news, comments are welcome. Next deadline: Wednesday 23 Oct 2002

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