# The Good and the Bad of the Self-Referential Church



In an article on churchleaders.com Thom Schulz talks about the growing numbers of those who are "Done with Church." His insight is the distinction he makes between this cohort and what we normally mean by the de-churched. These are not those who have simply drifted away out of boredom or a sense of the church's irrelevance. They are not consumer-Christians, takers-not-givers, dissatisfied with the product and unwilling to ask-not-what-your-church-can-do-for-you. Rather, these are active, involved, motivated leaders and contributors who have thrown in the towel when it comes to the church machine. They retain a strong faith, and even a strong call to ministry, but find, for some reason, that their involvement in a church organisation is no longer tenable.

As an employed pastor, whose very livelihood and expertise is dependent upon the organised church, who has invested time, money, health, and youth into the organised church… this is a scary thought. It's scary for two reasons:

**1) What does this say about the the organisation(s) to which Gill and I belong, and depend upon, not only for our bread-and-butter, but also for the way in which we seize the depths of life's purpose and aspirations? and**

**2) I often want to join their ranks, for I share much of the disillusion.**

The second of these places me at the beginning of my thoughts into the question of what is wrong. The first of these forces

us to the heart of the matter.

The question of what is wrong is a problem with two-sides, **the self-referential church:**

Here's one side of the coin:

You know it when you see it: when the organisation becomes its own ends. There is a caricature: the highly-institutionalised bureaucratic husk in which the performing of sacred rituals is the centre of life. Mission is reduced to the maintenance of those rituals and, apart from acts of service that maintain the necessary infrastructure, only passivity is expected. The time, focus, and energy of individual members, and of the collective as a whole, goes into the maintenance of the organisation's own existence. The self-referential church.

It *is* a caricature of course. While some may readily apply it to churches that are further up the candlestick than most, that is not the marker that I'm using. There are traditional churches who have avoided this plague. And there are many, many evangelical seeker-sensitive churches that have not. These involve a functionalised "evangelism" aimed at getting bums on seats in order to listen to a weekly monologue and give their tithe. They are served by many hours of volunteers and staff devoted from everything from the building to the entertainment of youth, from the music and sound desk to the morning tea roster, and everything in between and surrounding. These churches can just as easily fit the caricature.

The self-referential church: when the spiritual journey becomes a sterile lurch from Sunday to Sunday.

No wonder the motivated ones are leaving. These are the ones who have DNA grounded in the stuff of a life-changing gospel. They often have had experiences in, with, and through the gathered people of God that have been life-changing encounters with their Saviour and Lord. They have gifts that have been tempered through some fire. And they long to be part of God's

mission – to build the kingdom, change the world. They invested in the church with this in mind, even as they were aware that it wasn't all glitz and glamour and breakthrough, it was often about serving in season and out of it, and times of self-denial and menial work.

They leave, **not because of the type of the labour, but the nature of the seed being planted** by the well-oiled machine. When that seed is found to be church-shaped and not Jesus-shaped, well, it's either time to break the machine and fix it, stay in the machine and be broken by it, or leave.

Many leave.

Here's the other side of the coin:

Jesus loves his church. The church *is* the point, for Jesus is about drawing people to himself and making them a people that reflect his truth and his love.

You should see it when it works! A crisis happens, and the community rallies – people are supported, embraced, loved, helped. A lost person is encountered – and they are welcomed, and fed: supported, and embraced, and loved, and introduced to Jesus who does all that also, but in the deeper parts, as exhorters, intercessors, truth-speakers, carers, and leaders speak life, life and more life. The church must exist, and needs to exist!

It is necessary for a healthy life-giving church to be self-referential in some sense. A healthy community is one in which the members deliberately invest in themselves, who choose to spend time together, who are honest with one another, and seek to fix whatever fractures appear. Mission and church go together: "by this shall all people know that you are my disciples, if you have love one for another…"

I know of a missional community meeting in a large city. A good church community of this sort should have a clearly

defined “out” – an outward looking missional activity. They do some of that sort of of stuff, but in the main they have realised that a lot of their “in” is also their “out.” In a large city full of disconnected people, their cohesive community, an “extended family” of sorts, speaks of the love and life of Christ and reaches out as much, if not more, than any outreach program.

It can be a joy for a church to come together weekly, and for people to serve one another in that gathering. Sundays can be a highlight, a time of celebration and thanksgiving; and a true way of being fed and resourced and lifted up for life and the work of life. God bless those that help this weekly machinery turn, to bless their brothers and sisters in this way.

Why would you want to leave?

But they are, and we must get to the heart of the matter:

Two sides of the “self-referential” coin. What is the difference?

**It’s not “mission.”** The first generation of the “Done with Church” left many years ago. They formed or joined parachurch organisations and mission agencies. They promoted evangelism or social work. And this blesses and has it’s blessing. But “mission” is also its own self-referential coin. The organisation that lurches from outreach program to outreach program fits the problem with it’s “mission” as much as another organisation fits with it’s Sunday formula.

**It *is* partly bureaucracy.** Sometimes bureaucracy serves, and sometimes it demands service. The organisation that is unable to reform its bureaucracy and hold it loosely and flexibly ends up conforming reality to its own shape. This almost defines negative self-referentiality, and those leaders who are unable to fix it, flee.

**It *is* partly traditionalism**. Sometimes tradition serves, and sometimes it demands service. The organisation that throws out everything disconnects itself from motivational currents and beaches itself. The organisation that clings to all hides in the lee of a self-made rock and goes nowhere. Leaders who look to where the river runs may end up searching for another boat.

**It *is* most definitely about discipleship.** This is the heart of the matter.

Gill and I have been in full-time ministry for 18 years or so now. We've seen some fruit. And very little of it is in the church organisation. Whatever outcomes have existed within the organisation are fleeting – congregations come and go, groups band and disband, structures are built and fall – and this is good, because these outcomes are not "fruit", they are gardening tools or garden beds that have helped the fruit to grow. They work for a time, and then they wear and have had their day.

No, we have found that the real fruit is in people: Relationships that now transcend continents. Lives that have gone from a broken A to a delightful B in a way that can only be the work of Jesus. Strangers welcomed, and life shared, even if only a little bit. Leaders raised up. Cruel people resisted. Broken people embraced. Authentic community formed, sustained, enjoyed. Family as team, and (in different but related way) team as family.

Church organisations are good at investing in programs: outreach programs, growth programs, educational curricula, administrative efficiencies etc. We have processes and procedures. But these are *nothing* without investment in people, as persons.

You can send someone off for theological education (or bring it to them), but unless you disciple them and walk alongside

them you will have, at best, a lonely theological clone; at worst an arrogant know-it-all with knowledge but little of the spirit, correct but rarely right.  You can assess someone for ministry, and give them regular reviews; but unless you invest in them, pray with them, mentor them, and walk with them as they seek the path of their obedience to God, all you have done is make them a cog in the machine, not a member of the body of Christ.  You can introduce a new program to church; but unless you raise up the leaders, invest in them, help them to see the vision, seize the reigns, and grow in their own gifting, you will only burn your people out and grow bitterness and dissent.  You can teach from the pulpit; but unless you also help people to worship and thirst for the things of God, the best you will do is build your own preaching pedestal and further divide Sunday from Monday in the lives of those that matter.

You see, the self-referential church *does* work, but only when it references itself in, with, and through its people.  When it references itself by its organisation, or its structure, or any other ecclesial tool, it is fruitless and those who are motivated to see real fruit may, eventually, leave.

It is why we are tempted to join their number.  But it is also why we currently stay: while the fruit of God can be found in with and through us in our current context – the real fruit, of God at work in real lives including our own – of investing and being invested in, of forming and being formed.

That’s the call of life.  That’s the purpose.  That’s the task.  Whatever happens next, wherever we find ourselves, we’ll *never* be done with that.

# Skepticism About Unity and Religions of Peace




Islamophobia has been the phrase used to describe those that attack, belittle, and generally vilify Muslim people and the Islamic faith. In this last week, in response to the terrible events in Sydney, we have seen plenty of real islamophobia. I've seen everything from Pauline Hanson quotes on facebook to my Iranian friends (who are actually Christian, but fit the physical middle eastern stereotype) feeling scared on the streets and in the shopping malls. The #illridewithyou impromptu movement has been a worthy, albeit imperfect, response to this real xenophobia.

The response from the Islamic leadership and the Muslim community to the siege in Sydney has been appropriate and right. The evil actions have been absolutely condemned. Condolences have been offered. Again, I have seen in my Iranian friends (including those who are Muslim) the collective sense of shame and betrayal that they feel about this man. Not only has he dishonoured his compatriots, he has betrayed them, who have escaped the trauma of their homeland, by bringing such trauma to their new home.

I have admired the response to the response. Christian, Muslim, and Jewish leaders have moved towards each other with shared prayer times and other expressions of unity. To the extent that we can stand united, as Australians, and as fellow human-beings, this is the right attitude to have.

BUT, and there is a "but", I have some skepticism when it comes to the level of populist engagement with it all.

**1) "Unity" at the expense of distinctives is actually divisive.**

I have heard on the radio a montage of last week that has John Lennon as the backing track (*"…and no religion too, imagine all the people, living life in peace…"*). While nice and sentimental, it is unhelpful on so many levels, consider:

- It misunderstands the role of religion. It presumes nominalism – that people are religious in name only, and religious adherence is merely a facade. Facades *can* be discarded for the sake of something deeper. But this is not the reality. For many, their religion is already about the deepest depths of who they are. This is true of both Christians and Muslims, and of the Secular Humanists too! At a personal level, "religion" and "world-view" are coextensive – it defines and informs a person's, and a community's, identity, purpose, morality, ethics, relationships, self-worth and view of others. It is exhaustive and is not something that can be flipped on and off at whim. It's why changing religion is called a *conversion* – it is a total realignment.
- It presupposes that tolerance only comes from the transcendence of religion. It was wrong in Lennon's time, and it's wrong now. It's actually a politically-correct form of xenophobia. Real peacefulness seeks to overcome fear of the different. This "transcending" philosophy actually seeks to eliminate the difference altogether. "You all worship the same God after all, right? It's all about loving each other, right?" actually causes an elimination of identity through the elimination of distinctives. It is progressive humanism doing what it always does, failing to recognise itself and thereby imposing itself on others. It is the opposite of pluralism.

So when I stand in unity with my Muslim neighbours, it is not

because we have been able to *transcend* our differences, it's because we have found *within* (informed, shaped, and bounded by) our world view a place of *common ground.* And so the Christian doesn't stand with a Muslim because "we're all the same really" – no, the Christian stands with the Muslim because the way of Christ shapes our valuing of humanity, our desire to love our neighbour, and even our "enemy" (for some definition). I can't speak for the Islamic side of the equation, but I assume there are deep motivations that define the understanding of this same common ground. Take away that distinctive and you actually take away the foundations of the unity, the reasons and motivations that have us sharing the stage right now.

**2) What on earth is a "religion of peace"? Depending on how you define it, I've got some big questions for Islam.**

We all love peace. None of us love violence. Except that that is not true in an absolute sense. Sometimes we need to fight injustice, and sometimes we need to punish bad people by doing "violence" to their life or liberty. All it takes for evil to triumph is for good people to do nothing. And so even Christians have the doctrine of the "just war" motivated by standing against tyranny. But then again, the whole point of exercising justice is to bring about the peace that was removed by the injustice. In an imperfect world, peace sometimes rests on ethically bounded acts of violence.

In this broadly brushed sense, Christianity is a "religion of peace" and so is Islam. We want peace, but we don't like injustice either.

Most of us have peace as the loftiest and deepest of goals. And because these goals are informed by our religious depths (see above), ultimate peace and endpoint-of-religion often go together. This is basic eschatology. Christians believe that the return of Christ will usher in the fullness of rest; the triumph of the Prince of Peace is the advent of a time when

tears are wiped away and lions lay down with lambs. Jews, as I understand it, are awaiting their Messiah, who will lead them out of exile into the shalom of life perfectly shaped, inwardly and outwardly, by Torah. Muslims, as I understand it, associate ultimate peace with all humanity united in Islam, perfectly faithful to shariah and living in perfect submission to Allah's way.

There are differences but clear similarities in these eschatologies. Again, in these broad eschatological brushtrokes Christianity is a "religion of peace" and so is Islam – but we mean something different about the focus and shape of what that peace is.

The sticking point is when it comes to seeking to "advance" the religious cause.

Christians, for instance, are keen to see their neighbours "come to Christ" and convert. In doing this, ideally, they are motivated by a constructive belief that the way of Christ is the way of renewal, restoration, and reconciliation, that brings life and freedom. Ideally, the method of the Christian is persuasion and example. The gospel is *proclaimed*, and the life of Christ *is witnessed* through the Christ-imitating ways of Christ's followers. Violence is not only avoided, it is explicitly prohibited. Jesus commands the sword be put away, even at the cost of his own life. It is grace, not force, kindness and welcome, not compulsion, that leads to the proclamation of truth, the furthering of justice, and reconciliation with God and others in Christ.

In this *methodology* the phrase "religion of peace" is clearly applicable to Christianity. Yes, there are extremists who have used violence in the name of Christ – from the crusades to Westboro Baptist. But the way of these extremists do not accord with the way of their founder, the heart of their supposed religion. The answer to any Christian extremism is not whether or not the extremist is supported or rejected by

fellow Christians, it's whether or not that extremist is supported or rejected by Jesus. "Jesus never did it that way" is the answer to any Christian warmonger.

But I am skeptical about Islam. The more I learn about the way of Islam's founder, Mohammed, the more I worry about his methodology.

On the one hand, I can affirm it: I can see the vast majority of Muslims, particularly in the Western World, following the peaceable ways of Mohammed during his early years in Mecca. At this time Mohammed did not have political or military power and preached harmony and non-violent engagement, particularly with other "people of the book." The "higher jihad" speaks of the war against the destructive passions of the human person. There is much common ground with the Christian here for sure.

But on the other hand, I question it. When I hear about the ways of Mohammed in his later years in Medina I hear of conversions by the sword, the dhimmitude servility expected of Christians, and oppressive enforcement of shariah law. I cannot ignore this. This picture of Islam seem to be in accord with the general vibe of Muslim majority nations, particularly in the Middle East: the denigration of women, and the oppression of freedoms and other religions. Furthermore, I cannot ignore the testimony of my brothers and sisters who have converted from Islam, having experienced firsthand, spiritual and physical violence in the name of Islam.

There is little, if any, common ground here for me to find. The end problem is that I do not see how to find it. It's not enough to point to the thousands/millions of Muslims who eschew such ways, if that doesn't tell me how to say to a violent jihadist, "this is not the way of Mohammed." Because it does look like his way! It seems like peace only in the sense of the "pax romana" – peace when Islam wins, peace

through subjugation!  And I cannot agree that that is peace at all.

In fact, it looks like an injustice.  And an injustice is something I can't be peaceable about.  And I would "fight" it in some sense.  In the very extreme, many of my brothers and sisters in recent months have "fought" it by dying for their faith in Northern Iraq and Syria.

So there's a complexity within Islam.  It's a complexity within the life of Mohammed himself.  It's a complexity that, if I am to respect distinctives, I must engage with.  Finding the common ground on one side, questioning deeply on the other.

And of course, my engagement must be in accord with my own methodology: declaration of God's truth, persuasion, demonstration of God's love.

In embracing truth, I must question whether "religion of peace" language is helpful.  Does it actually help us get to the truth, to real respect for distinctives and motivations, or is it just another way of glossing over?

In embracing persuasion, I must ask questions.  They are not unanswerable and I may learn something, but they also make a point:  "Islam is a religion of peace" must be met with "What do you actually mean by that? How do you embrace this foundational teaching, or this behaviour of the devout, that appears to contradict the way of peace?"  I can even put my own perspective: "Let me tell you about the truest peace I have ever known, I have found it in Jesus Christ."

In embracing demonstrations of love, I continue to welcome.  I recognise a fellow human.  I recognise someone wrestling with the deep things of life, and empathise.  In particular, in my context where I am the "majority" I use that position to stand against xenophobia.

Do I want to get rid of Muslims from my country? No!
Will I associate a nutcase who takes the name Muslim with the essence of that religion? No!
Will I refuse to share common ground, particular in times of national emotional unity? No!
Will I ride with them, and speak up for those who feel mistreated?  Yes! Absolutely!

But I'll still have some big questions…

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# Porn is a Drug, Taking the Pledge

In 1993, at the age of 18, I obtained my first ever email address.  I had joined the internet age.

In 1994 I was introduced to my first online pornographic image.  Someone had downloaded it at a uni lab from usenet, transferred it on a floppy disk, and displayed it on their computer when I was in the room.  For a wet-behind-the-ears not-yet-a-full-adult like myself it was a smack between (and through) the eyes.

This was before the "world wide web" had caught on, and the "Netscape" browser was less than niche, and even further from mainstream.  I am nearly 40 years old now, but I can tell you, I am one of the earliest members of the electronically pornified generations.

For us Gen-X'ers, it wasn't ubiquitous.  The seedy stops on the "information superhighway" could be reasonably easily avoided.  Unless you got hooked – but we didn't know about that back then, and many of us weren't prepared.

For the digitally native Gen-Y'ers and younger, a sexualised internet is part of the background noise. It is not an inevitable trap, but it *is* ever-present. For those of us who have struggled and for those of us who have hoped and prayed and wrestled with ways in which to protect and care for a younger generation: the context has been daunting, and the message and method unsure and seemingly untested. To speak about it, or not to speak about it – and how? – that is the question!

There has been moralising, and therapising, and agonising as to what to say and how to say it. The ethical evils – objectivisation of women and corruption of men – have been expounded by everyone from radical feminists through to bible-beating conservatives.

But slowly over the years, a useful approach has taken shape. In the Christian sphere, authors like Allan Meyer and books like *Wired for Intimacy* and many others explored the psychological and neurological effects of pornography: the dopamine kick, the addiction cycle. Here was a explanation with practical implications. Here were doorways to *effective* tools for those who struggled: the well-known tools for addictive behaviours. From support groups ("Hi I'm … and I'm a pornoholic") to accountability partners, awareness of limits and situational avoidance, Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, spiritual direction ("My brain is broken, Lord, please help"), and self-talk. Among these were the things that worked (and work) for me.

Until recently, however, I had not yet seen much in the "secular" arena. What I have seen has mostly been about unhelpful guilt-avoidance ("there's nothing to be ashamed of, go ahead, it's healthy curiosity" type stuff) rather than actually about dealing with the objective reality. But I have recently come across a website, even though it's been around since

2009. It's called *Fight The New Drug* and while it's not perfect, it is very very good.

It has focussed its purpose. It's not calling for censorship. It's not about pontificating. It's about *educating*. It declares it simply: **Porn is harmful: Pornography affects the brain; Pornography affects relationships; Pornography affects society.** It is backed by research. Articles unpack the issues anecdotally. It is useful, and very very relevant.

It also provides a tool for response. It's symbolic, but meaningful. It's a *pledge* that goes like this:

> *As a Fighter I am…*
>
> *STRONG: I have joined an army of supporters and will rely on their strength as well as my own to adopt a new shouldering of obligation in helping others understand how pornography is affecting their lives.*
>
> *OPEN-MINDED: I recognize that mine is not the only opinion. I will respect others points of view just as I expect them to do the same towards me.*
>
> *ACCEPTING: I know that judging others actions is not my place. I will respectfully promote my opinions but in the end allow others to choose for themselves.*
>
> *A TRUE LOVER: I seek real relationships and shun their hollow counterfeits. I will not be that lone ranger looking for love from behind a computer screen.*
>
> *BOLD: I am not afraid to speak openly about the effects of pornography.*
>
> *A REBEL: I refuse to follow the status quo. I will do what needs to be done and say what needs to be said regardless of what is popular.*
>
> *REAL: I do not pursue false imitations or masked*

> *presentations. I am confident enough in myself to be genuine.*
>
> *UNDERSTANDING: I am aware of the difficulty some may face in ridding their lives of pornography. Rather than condemning actions I will help relieve shame.*
>
> *ENCOURAGING: I will not turn my back on those that need my help. I will commit to helping them overcome the effects of pornography.*

It's not perfect, of course. And from my own point of view, a recognition of Christ (and his strength) would deepen and strengthen the words. But in terms of broad edification and taking the right track, this is brilliant. The final lines are right: Relieve shame. Provide encouragement. This pledge is an articulate accountable approach.

Generationally, the movement and the pledge are aimed at the millenials.

> *Fight the New Drug is a movement. A cause. A campaign. A group of young, passionate, and creative people with the simple mission to spread facts on the harmful effects of porn.*
>
> *No religion. No political agenda. Just spreading the word through science, research, and personal accounts.*

But, generationally, mine was the first to encounter electronic porn. I was there in that insidious beginning. I will not leave it to the younger ones to stand up alone.

I am now a middle-aged man, a father of teenagers (one just about to be an adult), and, yes, I am a pastor. In the rest of this post I am going to share something of my story and what I have learned. It's a story that I've shared off-and-on and to greater-and-lesser extents in a number of places. But it hasn't been written down. It is intended as encouragement.

For teenagers, young men, and even men of my own age and older: For those who feel bound, and hopeless. You are not alone. And there is always hope.

**My story:**

My wrestle with pornography has two parts. I have mentioned the first in my initial exposure in my university days. I didn't know it at the time but the effect was amplified by some of the pain and problems of my own life. When the pain reared it's head, so did the cycle: the dopamine kick would provide false comfort against the pain, and the subsequent low would increase the pain. I would never have done drugs, or turned to alcohol. But in a very similar way, I was allowing my brain to be rewired through the abuse of the pleasure centre. I was hurting myself, and I brought hurt to my new marriage. Damage was occurring and it was heading towards out-of-control.

It was through counselling that I not only started to become aware of the cycle, but of the underlying psychological pain. With lots of help (personally and professionally and spiritually) I was able to face that pain and find healing and resolution. By this time I was in my mid-20's. The result was confidence and strength that I had never known before. I consider these a gift from God.

The second part of my story began: Even with a new-found strength, my brain was still wrongly re-wired. Old habits continued as ongoing weaknesses. Times of depression, loneliness, and other situations became trigger points. I had to learn to protect myself. For me, there are three things that help me do this.

*The minor one is this:* Building boundaries and "fences" back from the edge. There is no technology that I cannot circumvent, but I can make it so that I don't quickly slip. I learned these things by trial and error. I use OpenDNS for my

entire home network.  I flick every safe-search switch I can find.

*The intermediate one is this:* I look for accountability.  This isn't always easy because it needs someone else who is willing and able to ask the "How are you doing?" question without fear or favour, nor condemnation, but with seriousness.  My accountability has sometimes been, by agreement, with my wife, who is the most gracious and loving person I know.  At other times it has been with a prayer partner, a member of a retreat group, a close and unconditionally-accepting friend.  Sometimes it hasn't been easy to find the right person for accountability, but I value such a person greatly.  The Bible talks about "provoking one another to love and good works."  This form of provocation is one of the greatest gifts a man can give his friend.

*The major one is this:* I have learned to listen to myself.  I have learned to recognise signs of depression, both emotionally and physically.  I don't pretend I'm strong when I'm not.  Honest self-awareness can become the stuff of accountability in supportive relationships that build resilience while you're still a long way from "the edge."

I am now almost 40 years old.  And the wrestle with the drug that is porn is part of my story.  Am I free of it?  The truth is that while the draw of it does dissipate, I cannot pretend I am strong when I am not.  My brain is still broken and assuming it isn't is to choose an unwise path.  The protections must still be in place.

There *is* regret and sorrow.  How can there not be?  The *Fight the New Drug* site is correct: porn causes damage. I must own my damage.

And there is a certain amount of trepidation and wariness, and that is good.  Down the end of the porn road is self-destruction and utterly severe consequences for life, family,

work, ministry, relationships, right-thinking, and all that is good and godly.  I have felt the dread of this road.  That's the right thing to feel, and to the extent that I feel it, I know something is working correctly.

But I have come to a place where I do not *fear* it any longer.  I think this is because whatever strength I have I still consider to be a gift from God.  He has gifted me with a wonderful loving forgiving wife.  He has gifted me with wise counsellors and accountability friends.  He has gifted me with his own internal workings of his Spirit.  It is in Jesus Christ that whatever pledge I, personally, make has force.  It is he who loves me without condemnation, and it is his love, and his truth, and his heart, that is the best antidote to my own broken desires. It is *his* strength that I have found at work in my own life.  And because it his strength, and not mine, I can share my story, make my pledge, and even call myself "fighter" and confidently assert:  there is hope, and you are not alone.

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# Love Making A Way

Is the *Love Makes A Way* campaign a new phenomenon? Maybe, maybe not. It certainly is within this generation of Australians.




For those who are unaware, it is a movement grounded in the Christian churches, that protests our government's (and therefore our nation's) utterly appalling treatment of asylum seekers and refugees. There is much that can be said, and *is* being said, about this, the real issue: Australia is mistreating men, women, and children – real men, real women, real children, real people. The justification is a veil of spin. The execution of the policy is empty, not only of humanity, but of foundational political principles about accountability, transparency, and the power of executive government. My commentary here would only add to the noise, particularly since the devastatingly draconian amendments to the Migration Act were recently passed. A good place to start, however, would be this article by two political heavyweights from both sides of the fence (a former conservative PM, and a former Labor Minister) who rightly note:

> *We should rightly ask, if the government is prepared to be so cruel and give itself this much unchecked power over refugees, who's next?*

It is genuinely scary stuff.

But to return to *Love Makes A Way*: The form of protest adopted

by this group is one of non-violent civil disobedience. Pastors, priests, nuns, and other Christians, enter the electorate office of a politician; they sit down and pray and politely refuse to leave while their concerns about refugees remain unaddressed. In the vast majority of cases they are eventually gently lead away by police, charged, appear in court, and are given a rap over the knuckles or even vindicated. Awareness is raised, the alternative voice is heard.

Personally, there is much that I admire about this:

1. Civil disobedience in the "pure" sort is when you find yourself in the path of a wrongdoing and you refuse to cooperate. *This is the next step*: In physical, practical terms, by entering the electorate offices the protestors are placing themselves in the path, and then refusing to cooperate. To the extent that silence in the presence of oppression is a form of cooperation, it is my view that this next step is justifiable.
2. It aspires to protest *in the right spirit.* There is nothing about this that is angry young chanters who are violent in their words if not with their actions. This is about polite, gentle, peaceful, but firm refusal to cooperate with wrong, and I find that admirable.
3. It is (and I hope it remains) *distinctively Christian.* Not in the sense that only Christians can protest this way, but by the self-identity of the protestors: it is Christian spirituality that is their common ground (across quite a diversity of other distinctives), and it is their Christian spirituality which motivates them. This not only gives coherency, but also identifies the movement with a much wider swathe of the community than your typical banner-waver. [NB: There have been rabbis involved in some of the protests, so perhaps "Judaeo-Christian" would be the more precise descriptor]

As to its effectiveness, that remains to be seen. In terms of

public perception, it is surely more notable when a nun gets arrested for sitting in an office than if an angry young student gets arrested in a caterwauling face-off with police.

In political terms, not much has changed. It certainly hasn't checked the resolve of Abbott, Morrison and co. (many of whom claim a Christian faith) in their policies, nor even in their attitude and manner of executing that policy. I've always said that it's one thing to have to be "tough" in a world of terrible choices, it makes a whole new other thing when such toughness is crowed about with triumph, not exercised as a perceived necessity with tears and trembling.

In electoral terms, it's complicated. On the one hand, from a conservative point of view, these are not protestors that can simply be wiped away into the corner of "loony lefties that would never vote for us anyway." No, those who sympathise with and support *Love Makes A Way* includes the full-range of swing voters (like myself), and is encroaching into conservative home territory. And many of those who are protesting are thought-leaders. If I were a Government MP I'd be counting my numbers. But… and this is the big but… I wouldn't be too worried because the Opposition's track record on this issue is almost as bad. It's a matter of "who else you going to vote for?" Unless there's a viable alternative, the electoral effect of *Love Makes A Way* is severely dampened.

But there's nothing quite as persistent as those who know they're on a "mission from God" (just ask the Blues Brothers). Except of course, those who are on a mission and also *have blood in the game*. And this is what we now have with *Love Makes A Way*. It takes a certain level of courage to face arrest. But once that hurdle is passed, the resolve is strengthened. I mean, "What's the worst that could happen? We get arrested?…. Again?" Movements that pass that point are persistent, and people notice, and it scares them.

In these last few days, *Love Makes A Way*, has passed this

particular threshold.  On December 10, Human Rights Day, another round of “pray-ins” occurred throughout the nation.  It could have been just another round of polite conversations, awkward-looking but very-professional police, a file past the TV cameras, and an obscure court appearance a few weeks later.

But in Perth, for some reason, someone thought an increase in intimidation would be sensible.  A media release describes it:

> *Australian Federal Police and WA Police attended the scene. WA Police repeatedly threatened the church leaders with strip-searches and attempted to provide the group with inaccurate information about other sit-ins around the country. More than 7 hours elapsed between the arrival of police and arrests being made. At the Perth Watch House each of the church leaders was refused the opportunity to seek legal advice, stripped naked and searched. The church leaders repeatedly expressed that they did not consent to the search, and repeatedly advised police that they were not in possession of firearms or drugs.*

From the Government’s point of view, the escalated response is stupid.  It just brings more attention, it engenders more sympathy, it’s a lose-lose in every conceivable outcome.  My first thought was, “What were the authorities thinking?”  And my second thought was: Dear *Love Makes A Way*, keep in the opposite spirit; to indignity and violence, render gentleness and respect.  Keep “on attitude” as well as “on message.”

If they can do that, they’ve won.  They may not see it for a while, but they’ve won already.

The response from *Love Makes A Way*, so far, is pretty good:

> *Us pastors & a female priest being strip searched “for weapons & drugs” is not the story. The dehumanisation of refugees is. #LoveMakesAWay*

> — Jarrod McKenna  (@jarrodmckenna) December 10, 2014

> Perth #LoveMakesAWay arrestees being released slowly. All strip searched. Nothing compared to indignities suffered by those in detention.
>
> — Father Chris (@FrChrisBedding) December 10, 2014

> ‘I was outraged to be stripped naked’ ‘but more outraged at the way gov is treating helpless babies’ http://t.co/ouLZB9GLYH #LovesMakesAWay
>
> — Sydney Hirt (@Sydhirt) December 10, 2014

> We can confirm Perth #LoveMakesAWay group were indeed strip searched by police. But the real story is the ongoing dehumanisation of refugees
>
> — Love Makes A Way (@lovemakesaway) December 10, 2014

They are right, the real story is the asylum seekers. But it is not the only story.  The story of a growing number of ordinary Christians, willing to do the hard yards of finding the right spirit, and refusing to cooperate with evil, is also real.  And it’s a story that hasn’t readily been heard in Australia, certainly not in this generation.

Postscript: As I write, a group of seven *Love Makes A Way* protestors are facing court in Geelong for their protest in October.  They are pleading guilty but asserting their belief that they have done the “right thing.”  They are giving no guarantees of good behaviour, because in all honesty, they will not commit to repeat their actions.  They have been fined $200 without conviction recorded. This of course would be very interesting if it ever gets this far in Tasmania, considering the recent passage of new anti-protest laws in this State.

# A Commuter’s Cognition of Divine Proximity

Well, there’s this song:

And there’s Psalm 23:



> *A psalm of David: ADONAI is my shepherd; I lack nothing.*
> *He has me lie down in grassy pastures, he leads me by quiet water, he restores my inner person.*
> *He guides me in right paths for the sake of his own name.*
> *Even if I pass through death-dark ravines, I will fear no disaster;*
> *for you are with me; your rod and staff reassure me (Psalm 23:1-4 CJB)*

And chunks of 2 Corinthians:

> *But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it will be evident that such overwhelming power comes from God and not from us. We have all kinds of troubles, but we are not crushed; we are perplexed, yet not in despair; 9 persecuted, yet not abandoned; knocked down, yet not destroyed…*
> *This is why we do not lose courage. Though our outer self is heading for decay, our inner self is being renewed daily. For our light and transient troubles are achieving for us an everlasting glory whose weight is beyond description. We concentrate not on what is seen but on what is not seen,*

> *since things seen are temporary, but things not seen are eternal.*
> *(2 Corinthians 4:7-9, 16-18 CJB)*

And right now, I *feel* none of it.  I am dis*affected*.  But *cognitively* I know it to be true.  And I'm glad it is.

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# Hobart Coffee Rankings 2014



It's been eighteen months since my last roundup of coffee places in Hobart.  It's about time I updated, but I'm not going to give some sort of league table.  Here are the coffee shops I know about and enjoy.  All of them would be in my "Tier 1" (coffee is their speciality) or "Tier 2" (they do coffee well) categories.  All links are to facebook pages.

1) Vilicia Coffee is reasonably new in town.  It opened while we were away on our trip with baristas we knew from other places around town.  Code Black beans are used to their best.  Being close to my work, this is my current "sit down" coffee shop where I go for conversations.  A really friendly atmosphere.

2) Yellow Bernard is right next door to Vilicia.  It's my current "take-away" coffee shop.  Their "Project Yellow" blend is consistently good, and they know how to make a single origin with high notes zing.  Friendly staff who handle their busy demand really well.

3) Parklane Espresso is where I go when I’m in Salamanca. It’s a little hard to find – a hole-in-the-wall behind the Mercury Building in Salamanca Square, but well worth seeking out. Excellent, particularly at the shorter end (macchiato, piccolo). A small amount of seating is available.

4) Pilgrim Coffee is an old favourite, but I usually only get there now for the “gathering thoughts” time between services on a Sunday, or when visiting the hospital (over the road). They still know how to make a single origin sing and have that perfect balance of cozy-with-enough-room-to-sit-down.

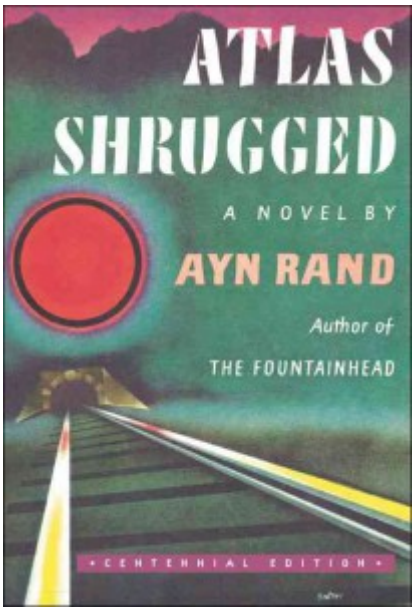
5) Nextdoor is a reasonably new discovery. There’s a clear passion for excellence. They remember me and hand me a top-notch piccolo whenever I’m in. This place deserves more attention.

Honourable mention: Westend Pumphouse, which is more a restaurant, and hasn’t always been impressive in the coffee stakes. But it is an excellent place for a long conversation and the coffee standard is on the rise. Also Boutique Espresso which I haven’t visited for a while, but were consistently good when I did.

But what about? Hobart coffee drinkers will note the absence of Villino. It’s not because it’s bad coffee, it’s just that I hardly ever get to that part of town, and when I do there is nowhere to sit down. Their hole in the wall, Ecru, commits the sin of not having EFTPOS facilities.

Photo credit: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Dark_roasted_espresso_blend_coffee_beans_1.jpg

# Review: Atlas Shrugged




You don't often get to read a book that's a philosophical-economic-apocalyptic-thriller. Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* is that, and more. It is also 1950's capitalist propaganda, but of a reasonably intelligent sort.

The story begins in ordinary post-war America. Dagny Taggart, a railroad heiress and a true industrialist (and therefore the heroine of the book), is going about her job as Operations Manager of "Taggart Transcontinental". Frustrated in her attempts to tap new markets and improve infrastructure she runs into some boardroom intrigue and some political power-plays. She eventually succeeds at refurbishing a branch-line with a new metal developed by another industrialist (and therefore another hero), Hank Rearden. At this stage I almost gave up on the book as a slightly more coal-dusted version of *Madmen:* interesting characters, an insight into an era, but not much more than a soap opera.

But the end of the story is reached, everything is different. The heroic industrialists have slowly been squeezed out of power by a socialist-pietist elite. These elite have first undermined, and then nationalised, all the good selfishly-motivated but prosperity-generating industry of the heroes.

In broad brush strokes, this is just another socialism-is-the-end-of-the-world tirade from the reds-under-the-bed '50s, penned by an angst-ridden author whose father was impoverished

by the soviets in the early part of the twentieth century. The unique factor, however, is what Rand does with her heroes:

As the economic apocalyptic horsemen appear the industrialists of America begin to *dis*appear. They lay down their factories and vanish off the face of the earth. "Where have they gone?" is asked time and time again. "Who is John Galt?" is the enigmatic answer, a phrase that has come to mean "Who knows?"

At the same time Dagny Taggart, now in the midst of an utterly rational sexual affair with Rearden, is searching after the inventor of a revolutionary new piece of technology. This inventor is out there, somewhere, a messianic figure of self-made virtue. Of course, she eventually finds him. He has hidden himself away, and with his perfect philosophy and rhetorical flair has convinced the oppressed industrialists to join him. Together, they have gone on "strike" – unwilling to exercise their virtue for the sake of the "looters", the socialists who would seize by force what they have not earned. This man is none other than John Galt, the man of memetic legend.

Galt is their perfect leader. The heroes, including Taggart and Rearden, swoon before his intellect and Rearden relinquishes his romantic attachment to someone so much higher than he. As Galt's identity is revealed the socialist overlords also swoon, bending their knee; "We need you, we need you!" they cry, aware of their inability for industry. But he remains solid, immovable, even as they attempt to torture him into submission. The world falls apart, and yet Galt remains, untainted by mere affectation, ready and willing to lead his industrialists back into darkened cities to bring forth light and power and a brave new world, stamped by his creed:

> *I swear by my life and my love of it, that I will never live for the sake of another man, nor ask another man to live for mine.*

In summary, that's it.  That's the story.  A bit tedious at times.  Intriguing and attractive characters are marred by unrealistic soliloquies and monologues that drone like lecturers who are unaware of their pretentiousness.  Have you ever had a book where you feel an attachment to the characters but are angry at the author for turning them into puppets?  That's this book.

But underneath it all there's actually a coherent (if naïve) philosophy that's worth engaging with.  It's Rand's own philosophy, which she dubbed *objectivism*.  Some notes at the end of the book, helpfully summarise this worldview in Rand's own words:

> *My philosophy, in essence, is the concept of man as a heroic being, with his own happiness as the moral purpose of his life, with productive achievement as his noblest activity, and reason as his only absolute"*

And the essence of objectivism is presented:

1. *Metaphysics: Objective reality*
2. *Epistemology: Reason*
3. *Ethics: Self-interest*
4. *Politics: Capitalism*

What Rand has done in this novel is build caricatures: objectivist heroes, anti-objectivist villains, and a couple of people who transition from one side to the other to highlight the contrast.  While quite exhaustive in scope, there is very little nuance.  She builds straw men, into which anyone from the postmodern or communist to the religious conservative could fit, and burns it to the ground in a world over which she alone has control.

Consider her metaphysics of objective reality. In a three hour rant from Galt, on hijacked airwaves, Rand unleashes her

rhetoric.  Chief amongst it is the metaphysical assertion "A is A."  In practice, the antithesis is this:

> *To a savage the world is a place of unintelligible miracles where anything is possible to inanimate matter and nothing is possible to him.  His world is not the unknown, but that irrational horror: the unknowable  He believes that physical objects are endowed with mysterious volition, moved by causeless, unpredictable whims, while he is a helpless pawn at the mercy of forces beyond his control.*

The industrialist can prosper because he embraces causes, and becomes a cause. The "looting" mystic simply *wants* and refuses to answer questions such as "how?" and "is it possible?"  The fear-driven mystic simply asserts and demands the fruit of a realist's virtue.

Rand's affirmation of reality is a worthy thing.  The errors of Rand's looters are manifold and there are some connections with the errors and troubles of the contemporary world where the double-speak of self-constructed "progressive" worlds are apparent.

But Rand's problem is that her world is not just *real* it is also entirely *known*.  Her realism is mediated through almost-omniscient and almost-omnipotent reason-bearers.  Amongst Rand's Galt-led objectivists there are no disputes, not even debates, about the real world.  Everything simply "is," in an unreal containment of the obvious.

With any assertion of objectivity, there's always the question "who is the subject?"  Rand avoids that problem by avoiding situations in which her heroes must grapple with disunity, difference of opinion, diverging rational arguments, and incomplete evidence.  Objective reality is best conceived teleologically – as goal or purpose or direction.  Rand's reality is static, and captured by characters that are therefore eventually, and disappointingly, arrogant.

Each of her other tenets are similarly affected: robust only within her fictional world they avoid the questions of the real one.  The serene rational man of Rand's world is the unfeeling utilitarian of real experience.  The ethics of self-interest, while refreshingly honest about how many of our "sacrifices" are actually expressions of what we actually want to do, allows no other boundary than that drawn around the individual; it is noteworthy that Rand only explores sexual and fraternal relationships in this book for I don't think she could contain maternal or familial relationships. And her capitalism conveniently assumes a common sense of fairness (an unreal innate altruism) and avoids the propensity for exploitation that we see around us.

We are all so quick to caricature the 1950's with their repressive picket fences.  It's a constructed world that we shy away from.  Rand's constructed world doesn't have picket fences, but it is still an unreal caricature, useful for drawing on for allusions and similes, but not for constructing a coherent picture of the real world.