

Value added, even if you don't believe

Talking point
Dominic White



To the end, Christopher Hitchens, the polemicist and atheist, stuck doggedly to his non-believing ways.

For anyone with a passion for the scientific method, there is a deep satisfaction to be had watching YouTube clips of Hitchens, who died of cancer last week, confronting creationists with the stark facts of Darwinism.

He inspired a fashionable re-evaluation of faith through his writing and lectures, including an address to Sydney's Festival of Dangerous Ideas two years ago.

And yet, as with Richard Dawkins, that other high priest of non-believers, many of Hitchens' messages on faith can feel cold, arrogant and depressing.

Perhaps it's because both men have devoted so much time appearing to make religion and

religious people somehow wrong.

Dawkins' latest tome seeks to prove that he's not really just an old Scrooge. *The Magic of Reality* is his first "family book". Beautifully illustrated, rigorous and insightful, it states that the real world, as understood scientifically, has a magic all of its own. But is it just me or is there something creepy about Uncle Richard sitting you on his knee and telling you how wonderful his godless world is? He wouldn't even do you the courtesy of wearing a Santa outfit.

Into the debate, with impeccable timing, now steps Alain de Botton. The populist philosopher tends to wind up crusty academics in the same way that broadcaster and writer Simon Schama maddens studios, worthy types with his unapologetically entertaining reinterpretations of history.

But like Schama, de Botton has a rare gift for spotting a subject that is ripe for re-examination. His forthcoming book, *Religion for Atheists*, won't be in the shops for Christmas, a missed opportunity,

but it is likely to spark controversy when it comes out in the new year.

Its central thesis is a fresh take on an old argument: that atheists and the plain indifferent get a free ride on the better work that's been done by religion — creating culture, ethics, laws, etc — without having done much to replace it.

It is obvious that religions have much to teach the unbelieving and unsure.

A non-believer himself, de Botton sees it as a wonderful opportunity to pick 'n' mix the best ideas of religion and leave the faith bit alone.

He asserts that "the most boring and unproductive question one can ask of any religion is whether or not it is true".

The error of modern atheism, as he puts it, "has been to overlook how many aspects of the faiths remain relevant even after their central tenets have been dismissed".

Even for a relative simpleton who

lacks de Botton's confidence to simply dismiss the central tenets of others' faiths, it is obvious that religions have much to teach the unbelieving and unsure.

It takes me back to a relative's wedding day just over a year ago. She married a fellow believer, the nicest bloke you could ever meet, in a traditional High Mass ceremony, having refound her Catholic faith in a way that has very obviously made her a much happier, more contented person.

As the incense wafted and the Latin incantations droned, I felt an entirely unexpected emotion: envy. They are going to be just fine, part of me thought. It's no guarantee, of course, but when the chips are down they'll at least have their faith to come back to, plus a community.

That sense of community is one of the key benefits that de Botton points to, along with others such as education, perspective, art and tenderness. Most atheists or agnostics have personal examples they can point to, too.

My mother still attends church

every week, prays for us (God bless her), and routinely practises random acts of kindness. Yes, she's my mum, so I would say that, wouldn't I, but it's true.

For lapsed types like me there are many other routes to relearn the lessons first taught in a religious context. It could be Douglas Adams's neat observation in *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* that "one man got nailed to a tree for saying how great it would be if everyone was nice to each other for a change".

It could be volunteering, being mindful, or the lovely surprise of learning that the person who was in the queue in front of you at the cafe just paid for your coffee and left one of those kindness cards that the folks at WakeUp Sydney give out. That stuff seems to work whatever you believe or don't believe in. It's a bit like Christmas. Despite its materialism, it's a festival that evokes feelings of community and belonging in many, whether or not they believe, or if — unlike Hitchens — they're just not sure. Have a happy holiday either way.

Letters

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Bilingual benefits

I am thrilled with Greg Earl's "Valuable lessons in learning an Asian language" (December 15), which stresses the importance of incorporating a compulsory Asian language into the HSC scores due to our increasing economic and financial relationships.

He does, however, overlook some additional (non-economic) reasons which strengthen the case for the inclusion of a language at first instance and hence, indirectly, an Asian language.

A compulsory language will help give students a more well-rounded outlook instead of the maths/physics bias which typically produces "brainiacs" who can solve complex equations but have difficulty communicating in, let alone understanding, the real world.

Studies have shown that bilingual children tend to demonstrate greater cognitive development, creativity and divergent thinking than monolingual children.

Valerie Misoyannis
Carlingford NSW

Ditch boogie woogie

Administration of Cricket Australia must be a parlous state if it cannot make a quid out of staging the Bradman Oration at \$250 a head ("Public access to Bradman oration", Letters, December 15). Reports of the oration that I have seen do not say how many attended, and neither does Peter Young. Let's guess 100 turned up. That's \$25,000 and still the "admission cost did not cover the cost of staging", according to Young. Maybe the group that "entertained" diners with the boogie-woogie ditties of the Andrews Sisters came at a steep price. Rahul Dravid's text may well be on the web, but nothing beats being there. For future orations CA should can the fripperies and lower the price, thus encouraging folk other than the rich to attend.

Graeme Barrow
Hackett ACT

Olympus exposes trust gaps

Olympus's \$1.47 billion fraud further highlights the urgent need for greater transparency among businesses in Asia. The crisis over hidden investment losses and false accounting over 13 years in the Japanese camera and medical company highlights an issue for businesses and shareholders in the Asia-Pacific region. Asian business has always been entered into on the basis of trust and relationships. As noble as this is, it can often lend itself to poor corporate governance, and having directors who are friendly to management or family shareholders. This does not allow for the

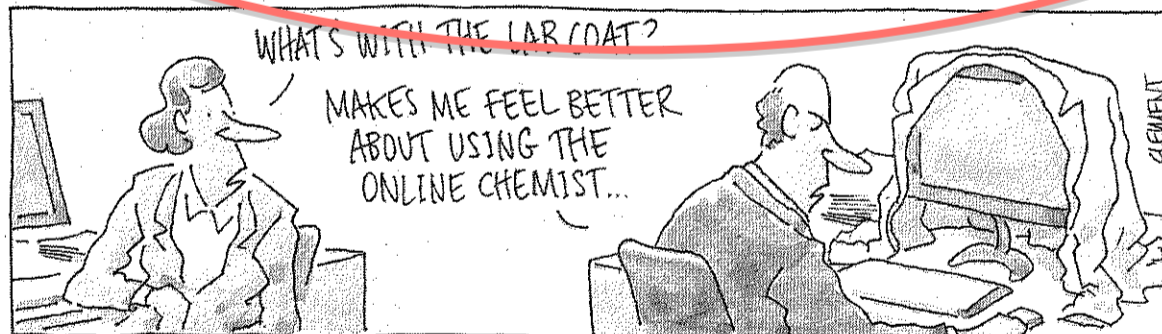
objectivity, transparency and independence needed by shareholders. As Asia is one of the few global growth markets, longer-term investors will demand minimum levels of corporate governance.

Having an adequate number of independent board directors with the capacity to ask hard questions without fear of being removed is a good place to start. Governments and regulators will continue to be comparatively judged in the region. They must continue to mandate greater independence on boards and move away from inter-relationships

in the eyes of shareholders. Some suggestions for a more robust governance platform could include shorter tenures, a cap on the number of board roles a director can hold, and a minimum level of professional qualification and experience.

Finding truly independent outside directors who can fill gaps in expertise, providing diversity or adding geographical reach can be difficult, but improved corporate governance is fundamental.

Jamie Spence
Managing director, Billarook
Hong Kong



Labor's IR limitations

Mark Latham has identified the effective takeover of the Labor Party by a few union officials who have no real connection with the dwindling party members ("Labor: running on empty", Opinion, December 15). Labor's almost total dependence on trade union officials has significant implications.

It suggests that the government is unable to change the extraordinary union bias in the Fair Work Australia legislation, reflected in decisions by the administrative tribunal against which there is very limited scope to appeal. This despite the development of what now seems close to a crisis in workplace relations. And this means we are

close to the position recommended in the Hancock Committee report in 1985 that trade unions effectively be treated as above the law.

Moreover, while the then Labor government rejected Hancock's recommendation and proceeded shortly after to start reducing the regulation of industrial relations, today there appear to be no leaders likely to follow that course.

Yet if the situation continues, not only will Australia suffer but so too will the Labor Party and political government in Australia.

Des Moore
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Pensioners miss out

The Japanese samurai swordsman Miyamoto Musashi is quoted as saying: "All things entail rising and falling timing. You must be able to discern this." Perhaps our polities needed to consider this before claiming 31 to 32 per cent pay increases when the "Banks are told to prepare for the worst" (December 16). Surely there should also have been consideration of at least a similar increase in pensions, especially as we acknowledge their recipients' contributions in enabling our lucky country to remain so by paying their taxes and producing the wealth during their working lives.

Laurence Strano
Northbridge NSW

Online model a magic pill

It is inaccurate to suggest (Letters, December 14) that the rapid growth and success of the Gance pharmacy empire Chemist Warehouse is due to trading terms.

Gance brands now have 12 per cent of the Australian pharmacy market, remarkable in just 10 years, but interestingly 12 per cent of these sales or \$200 million a year come via the group's online channel. So, quite apart from dominating the pharmacy sector, Chemist Warehouse has quietly become a major online retailer. This has been achieved by offering consumers a well-marketed, low-price strategy and wide product range. I run specialist e-commerce solutions for the pharmacy sector but have no affiliation with the Gance group.

However, the recent Australian Communications and Media Authority study identified convenience as the major reason Australians shop online, with price running second but rising fast. This is an opportunity for pharmacies. The click-and-collect business model of Coles, Woolworths and JB HiFi would be perfect. The global giant Wal-Mart also offers orders online and pickups in-store. Such a model would make pharmacies very convenient. Consumers can order from home or the office and pick up from their local pharmacy when it suits via an express lane. This provides a very different and convenient reason to shop at a local pharmacy.

Sadly, our pharmacy sector is stuck in an outdated business model, but by adopting the digital age, pharmacies can quickly change to offer support and service to consumers. Many business models are built on convenience. They may take time to implement but they avoid the race to the bottom on price.

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