

## KNOW THY ENEMIES

Reviewed by Samuel Gregg

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*The High Price of Heaven: A Book about the Enemies of Pleasure and Freedom*

by David Marr

Allen & Unwin,

St Leonards, Australia, 1999,

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One of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's giants of moral philosophy, Alasdair MacIntyre, has noted that among the worst evils befalling the use of language in advanced Western societies is 'the taste for pretentious nostrums described in inflated language which induces excitement rather than thought.' A reading of David Marr's latest literary offering, *The High Price of Heaven: A Book about the Enemies of Pleasure and Freedom*, makes it difficult to dispute the accuracy of MacIntyre's observation.

Two clues to the nature of this curious book by a biographer of Patrick White and Sir Garfield Barwick are to be found in its title and the short note about Marr himself on the book's inside back flap-cover. These are, respectively, the word 'enemies' and the description of Barwick as 'the judge who plotted the coup d'état of 1975.'

That Australia experienced a 'coup d'état' in 1975 is at best an interesting proposition, but the idea that Barwick was the *eminence grise* earnestly plotting the Whitlam government's downfall strikes this reviewer as an even more 'interesting' contention. What is not questionable, however, is whom Marr regards as the 'enemies' of what he understands to constitute freedom and pleasure. They are, in a broad sense, those Christian clerics or lay persons whose faith-commitments influence their views on particular public policy issues, who use their right to free speech to articulate their churches' teachings on sexual morality in an unambiguous manner, and whose religious beliefs are a strong motivation underlying their choice to lobby for particular public policy outcomes.

The underlying paradox of Marr's position—and one that is never resolved—is that there are numerous subjects such as immigration, refugees and the plight of Aborigines, where the views and consequent political activism of many committed Christians closely coincide with Marr's own

beliefs about the appropriate direction of public policy. Indeed, as one reads this book there are times when it almost seems as if Marr's driving concern is to demarcate a territory of causes which he feels that he will be able to occupy without finding himself associating with devout Christians, especially if they happen to be of the Catholic or Sydney Anglican variety.

Marr begins with an introduction entitled 'Confession' in which he states that he was once a Christian. It is not long, however, before the anger that appears at least partly to have motivated Marr to denounce his former brethren begins to manifest itself. This is particularly evident in the somewhat extravagant language that Marr often uses to depict his enemies. Is it really necessary, for example, for Marr to describe one priest as having 'a comfortable roll of fat under his chin' (p.223)? But name-calling and labelling—and there is much of that in this text ('ecclesiastical showman' [p.274]; 'economic rationalists' [pp.42, 108]; 'fundamentalists' [p.259]; 'headstrong bishops' [p.224]; 'cheerful reactionary' [p.185]; 'whingers' [p.109]; 'passionately bad-tempered old man' [p.88]; 'Boadicea of Birmingham' [p.81]; 'engine of homophobia' [p.67]; 'moralising herd-mentality' [p.33]; 'bigots' [p.286] 'bigotry' [pp.53, 62, 67, 268]; 'renegade Tasmanian moralist' [p.75]; 'moralising' [p.78]; 'moralists' [p.181]; 'moral vigilantes' [p.109]; 'puritan haughtiness' [p.87]; 'bully churches' [p.286]; 'bullying indifference' [p.xiii])—is no substitute for scholarly research, reasoned debate and calm discussion. Unfortunately, none of these feature heavily in Marr's musings about the Australian churches,

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their teachings about sexuality, the manner in which they shape public policy, and their place in a secular, pluralist and constitutional democracy.

Marr's starting point is his conviction that religious belief and the churches play a powerful role in Australia's social and political life under a variety of disguises. From this perspective, the book proceeds to study certain individuals (two chapters attempt to place John Howard and Brian Harradine in the context of their religious background), particular issues (censorship features heavily), and various civic institutions (most notably Sydney Anglican schools as well as the High Court). In each case, religious belief or activism is portrayed as playing a crucial (sometimes *the* crucial), albeit often hidden, part in shaping individual outlooks, policy outcomes and even court cases.

Stylistically, most of the book, with the exception of the more self-revelatory sections, reads like a racy newspaper feature article. A glance at the book's notes indicates that earlier versions of most of its chapters were previously published as newspaper articles (the notes also reflect an extraordinary reliance upon *Sydney Morning Herald* pieces published by Marr's colleagues). A comparison, for example, of the chapter 'The Spires of St Mary's' with Marr's *SMH* Spectrum article 'The Mandate of Heaven' (31/7/99) reveals few substantial differences.

On the positive side, the book does provide a certain insight into the dilemmas created by human sexuality. Few would question that the churches, like all other institutions, have not always grappled with such issues in a sensible and sensitive manner. To a certain extent, Marr does capture the frustration and pain, the sense of despair, not to mention the jungle of emotions that often surfaces when people are brought face to face with these matters.

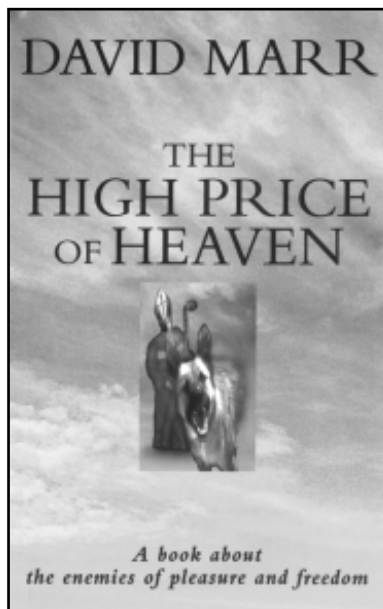
There are nonetheless innumerable flaws marring this text, many of which suggest that Marr is simply out of his depth. Prominent among these is Marr's basically superficial grasp of Christian doctrine. This is betrayed in somewhat dramatic but ultimately flippant comments such as: 'Among the handful of beliefs common to nearly every brand of Christianity . . . are these two: that Jesus Christ rose from the dead, and that homosexuals are bound for hell' (p.62). But as Marr himself acknowledges, most churches carefully distinguish between homosexual

orientation and homosexual acts (p.56). Moreover, few churches actually teach that either necessarily guarantees a person a swift road to hell, even though most churches certainly do regard homosexual acts as sinful and therefore state that such acts should not be chosen. Nor in this connection does Marr seem to understand the critical role played by man's repentance of sin as well as God's mercy and forgiveness in what Christians believe to be the economy of salvation.

Marr's limited knowledge of Christian teaching also manifests itself when he quotes himself asking a Salvation Army officer in the context of the debate over drug injecting rooms, 'But isn't keeping people alive the fundamental obligation of Christians?' (p.13). As any half-competent Christian theologian knows, the fundamental obligation of Christians is to love God and love their neighbour, and that one of the fundamental Christian moral principles derived from this is that you may not do evil in order to achieve good (or, in rough Kantian terms, the ends do not justify the means). That is why the issue of injecting rooms is more complex for Christians than Marr's question would suggest.

A third example of doctrinal inaccuracy on Marr's part may be found in his claim that: 'Sex without the chance of procreation has been forbidden since Clement of Alexandria set the church and Western Society down the strange path of demonising all sex unless its purpose is breeding. That's still Rome's fundamental principle today' (p.282). Again, Marr is mistaken. If Marr read some of the documents of Vatican II, such as *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), he would soon discover that 'Rome' praises what it regards as the sexual acts proper to marriage because the Church believes that such acts uniquely express and perfect married love. This dimension of sexual activity is, in the Church's view, just as important an end of marriage—though not more so—as the procreative dimension. A little more research on Marr's part would soon indicate that Karol Wojtyla (better known as John Paul II—one of Marr's super-enemies) devoted much time to arguing in favour of precisely this position in *Love and Responsibility* (1960), one of his many philosophical works written before Vatican II.

A further difficulty marring *The High Price of Heaven* is its debatable grasp of the facts surrounding several important events examined in this book. Marr's discussion



of the wrangle within the Catholic Church during the 1998 election over the appropriate Catholic attitude towards the GST features prominently in this regard. Marr states, for example, that ‘The bishops backed the Catholic Social Welfare Commission in declaring it a regressive tax. No such tax could have the support of the church’ (p.227).

Close scrutiny, however, of the relevant document—the Position Paper on the Moral Reference Points for Tax Reform (28/7/98)—issued by the Central Commission of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference indicates that the bishops said something rather different. While they did state that ‘indirect taxes are regressive’, the bishops qualified this remark by stating that ‘To a large extent, the regressive nature of the indirect tax system is unavoidable.’ Having then outlined, in a very carefully balanced and detailed manner, the economic and moral dilemmas involved in broadening the consumption tax base, the bishops ended by stating that they believed that such a measure (i.e., a GST) could be introduced, provided that three conditions were met. In other words, the bishops neither explicitly supported nor opposed the introduction of a GST. Rather, their paper was primarily concerned with articulating a moral framework based on principles of Catholic social teaching, awareness of the socio-economic context, and acceptance of the need for tax reform, which individual Catholics could then apply to *both* the Government’s and the Opposition’s respective proposals for tax reform. In light of these facts, Marr’s account of this particular saga suddenly begins to look very thin indeed.

Then there is Marr’s often-odd way of attempting to refute his enemies’ stance on various moral questions. This is exemplified by Marr’s statement that ‘At the end of the century of Freud, Lawrence, de Beauvoir, Kinsey, Proust, Cavafy, Nabokov, Masters and Johnson, Joyce, Genet, Stein, Foucault, Jung, Baldwin, Schnitzler, and Thomas Mann—the Catholic Church still *officially* insists that only men and women may have sex together, and only within marriage, and only if a child may result’ (p.222). As far as one can tell, it would seem that Marr considers the writings of all these commentators to amount to an overwhelmingly self-evident case against Catholic teaching about questions of sexual morality. He does not, it appears, feel the need to explain how these writings undermine the Catholic position (most of which is shared by most Protestant churches) on these matters. A mere appeal to the authority of Freud, Kinsey et al. is apparently enough.

Yet Marr himself concedes that Kinsey’s scientific reputation is now very shaky (p.156). Marr is also probably aware that while Freud is certainly the father of psychoanalysis, few of his intellectual successors take his

conclusions about the role of sex in human affairs seriously (Jung, for example, explicitly repudiated him). As for aligning Foucault on the side of enlightenment, more than one commentator would argue that Foucault’s ideas have done much to thrust much contemporary Western philosophy into an intellectual abyss in which the only truth is raw power. Is this really the type of ally that Marr wants to rally against his enemies in defending his vision of freedom?

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This absence of any attempt to engage his enemies’ arguments in any intellectually substantial way underlies one of the two broader problems with Marr’s book: his failure not only to explain precisely what he understands to constitute freedom and pleasure, but also to elucidate why his understanding of these concepts is superior to the views articulated by his enemies. Reading this text, for example, one gets the impression that Marr considers freedom to be a matter of being free to do whatever one wills provided that it does not involve harming others. To a certain extent, John Stuart Mill would align himself with this position. A different view, however, is taken by figures such as Aristotle, St Paul, Thomas Aquinas, John Wesley, Edmund Burke, Alexis de Tocqueville, and Karl Barth. Their view of freedom, which also happens to be the Christian position, is captured in Lord Acton’s statement that liberty is not to be defined as ‘the power of doing what we like, but the right of being able to do what we ought’. The realisation of freedom, from the Christian perspective, is therefore intrinsically linked to the responsibility to order one’s freely willed actions to the knowable and objective truth about good and evil.

Here is not the place to compare the merits of Marr’s understanding of the nature of freedom and pleasure with the views held by Christian thinkers as well as non-Christians such as Aristotle and Kant. But Marr’s failure to enter into these debates in any meaningful way does leave a philosophical void at the heart of his book.

The second major philosophical difficulty with Marr’s book is its implicitly majoritarian view of how pluralist

democracies should work. At one point, Marr concedes that reference to opinion polls is not how we should make decisions about fundamental issues (p.102). Yet he is not slow to appeal to opinion polls as a way of bolstering his claim that certain political decisions or policies that happen to be supported by many Christians should be overturned.

To this end, the figure 70 percent is cited on several occasions: '70 per cent of us believe adults should be able to see and read what we choose' (p.76); 'a clear 72 per cent support for the sale of non-violent erotic videos' (p.76); 'it's not the 70 per cent—the confident, relaxed typical Australian—that decides who runs this country, but the anxious, at times vindictive, often militantly Christian 30 per cent' (p.77); 'we're speaking for 70 per cent of Australia' (p.91); 'The euthanasia debate demonstrated [the Catholic Church's] awesome capacity to achieve a result that's deeply reassuring for Catholics and other Christians but opposed by something like 70 per cent of the population' (p.218).

The clear implication of these comments is that there is something fundamentally wrong in a democracy if the wishes of 70 per cent of the population are denied. In such cases, Marr becomes somewhat of what Friedrich von Hayek described as a 'doctrinaire democrat': i.e., someone who believes that 'the fact that majority wants something is sufficient ground for regarding it as good.' In the works of innumerable philosophers of democracy such as Tocqueville and the 19th century French Protestant liberal Benjamin Constant are to be found systematic refutations of doctrinaire democracy, the perils of which should be obvious. If, for example, 70 per cent of Australians thought that it was permissible to stone homosexuals to death, Marr would presumably agree that this is hardly a sufficient basis for such an aspiration to receive legislative fiat.

But an even more disturbing aspect of Marr's vision of life in democratic systems is his apparent desire to exclude Christians from any involvement in public discussion of various issues. This is most evident in Marr's treatment of censorship which Marr concludes by stating: 'We're not going to emerge from this censorship mess until we get God out of the picture, leaving faith to the faithful and the screen to us' (p.91).

And who, one might ask, are 'us'? Given the context of Marr's statement, 'us' is presumably anyone who does not hold to any particular faith. But is the fact that someone is religious—be they Protestant, Jewish, Muslim, Catholic—a sufficient reason to exclude them from

expressing an opinion on various subjects or being involved in the formulation of policy decisions? Is this not contrary to the very essence of pluralist and tolerant societies? Surely it is characteristic of pluralist democracies that any group, be they homosexual activists or One Nation supporters, can express their views and vote, lobby and agitate for what they want, provided they are willing to do so under the auspices of the Rule of Law.

In this regard, it is revealing that Marr seems bewildered by the fact that, as he acknowledges (p.225), those Christians who lobbied for the overturning of the Northern Territory's euthanasia laws did so not by appealing to the demands of faith, but rather by presenting their case on resolutely secular human rights grounds. What Marr could have, but did not, elaborate upon in this context, is that the euthanasia debate illustrated that religiously informed contributions to public policy debates *can* be based on and defended by appeal to publicly accessible reasons provided by principles of natural law and natural justice. To put it another way, Christians can, as John Finnis and others have argued, participate in public policy debates without necessarily appealing to their religious beliefs, relying instead upon those 'public reasons'—that is, rational and therefore universal and communicable moral norms—that are accessible to people of all faiths and none. In doing so, they circumvent the usual accusations of imposing their 'irrational' beliefs upon others.

One suspects, however, that this is not enough for Marr. It is also probable that he will not be content until the churches effectively abandon all that they have ever taught on questions of personal morality and strenuously avoid saying anything that might be contrary to what Robert George of Princeton University has called 'secular orthodoxy'. Indeed there is a distinct tone of Voltaire's *Ecrasez l'infâme!*, not to mention a sense of Bismarck's declaration of *Kulturkampf*, underlying this book which should disturb anyone, religious or otherwise, who believes in tolerance and religious liberty in a free, pluralist and democratic society. It follows that if people are looking for a serious and balanced discussion of the very complex questions surrounding the matter of how the churches and people of religious faith engage in public policy debates in Australia, they will not find it in *The High Price of Heaven*. Sadly enough, this book in the end primarily provides its reader with an insight into one man's twilight of Nietzschean unknowingness.

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