

## A Message from the Rector . . .

I noted with interest last weekend, that the magazine in the Sydney Morning Herald, the Good Weekend, had a special feature on the French philosopher, Michel Onfray who is described as “*the most popular and most controversial thinker in France.*” What has stirred up some of the controversy in France is the publication of his book, ‘*The Atheist Manifesto.*’ He is alleged to have written the book in reaction to threats made against him after he wrote a book on the Ethics of Science and Medicine.

I was both interested to read the account by the journalist, Amanda Hooton, and disappointed that Onfray was really only trotting out tired old arguments which have long since reached their ‘use-by date.’ Hooton herself seemed a little mesmerized by her subject speaking of him writing so beautifully, as in the phrase - “*well-conducted introspection dispels the dreams and delirium on which gods feed.*” Whether he writes beautifully or not might be a matter of opinion, but the more important question is whether his ideas are true. If it is simply one man’s opinion, we should be wary of building our lives on such a subjective assessment of reality.

The two things which come in for severe criticism in Onfray’s writing are the Christian belief in life after death, and a Christian response to suffering. In regard to the former he says : “*The afterlife suddenly struck me as a counterworld invented by men exhausted and parched by their ceaseless wanderings across the dunes or up and down rocky trails baked to white heat. Monotheism was born out of the sand.*” He reaches this conclusion because the biblical lands are so barren they “*generate a yearning for oases, where water flows, cool, clear and free.*” On the basis of this deduction he argues “*God exists only to make daily life bearable despite the path that every one of us treads towards extinction.*”

His response to the Christian answer to religious faith offering comfort to those experiencing suffering, he states – “*This is a swindle. We might have the impression that religions are doing us good, but it is by dint of a lie, a fiction, an extravagance.*” His modus operandi seems to be to combat the root of religion, which is fear of death, by having a happier time in life. “*I argue in favour of immanence, in being in the here and now. I believe in erotic immanence, ethical immanence and political immanence ... in what we’ve got here.*” It appears that Onfray is a Hedonist, (and he acknowledges this) someone who believes that the purpose of life is pleasure. Hedonism was first advanced by the Greek philosopher, Epicurus, more than 2000 years ago.

What would you say if you met our philosopher on the bus and engaged him in conversation? Is he right in his criticisms and the way he apparently supports the idea that this is part of the great ‘God delusion?’ Part of the difficulty of this sort of book is that it begs so many questions. In ‘Man’s Search for Meaning’ Victor Frankl (as a Holocaust survivor) argues that “he who has a why to live endure almost any how.” Would the holocaust survivor be persuaded by Onfray’s argument that the purpose of life is pleasure in the here and now?

He also seems to place great emphasis on human reason. “*As soon as reason developed (when he was about 8 or 10) I couldn’t believe in it any more. . . Each of us should use our own understanding, critical will and intelligence to fight against faith, belief and fables. We should make use of our own Enlightenment inheritance, which tells us that we are all capable of improving our own condition. The proper study of man is not God, but man.*” This strikes me as simply old-fashioned humanism dressed up in modern guise. This goes back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century and names like Rousseau, Voltaire, Lessing and Kant. It is hardly any surprise that Rousseau and Voltaire were both Frenchmen who were skeptical of religion and seeking enlightened views of human knowledge. Both were bitterly opposed to the Catholic Church and both had a naively optimistic view of human nature.

It may be this hostility towards the Catholic Church and the belief that it represented nothing but deceit and corruption, that is the source of this skepticism. Maybe the fact that Onfray’s mother abandoned him as a child and used to beat him mercilessly, and he was placed in an orphanage when he was ten years of age has some bearing on his ideas about God. One wonders what effect this had on him during his formative years. Maybe his popularity in France is to be explained by the French love of secularism, and general repudiation of religion, inherited from people like Rousseau and Voltaire.

I found myself asking the question, ‘has Onfray ever seriously examined the claims of Christ and the Christian revelation?’ If Christianity is such a gigantic fraud, how is it that all attempts to expose it and eradicate it once and for all have been so unsuccessful? Tragically, the philosophers of the Enlightenment (and I take it Onfray is very much like them) show little willingness to grapple with the event of Christ, but simply engage in evasive tactics, all designed to avoid taking the event seriously.

On this Sunday after Ascension Day, we need to be serious about what we believe and why we believe it. We need to be wary of the latest popular fads, lest we be seduced by “fine sounding arguments,” as St Paul warns us. (Colossians 2:4) Oh, and by the way, we need to ask ourselves ‘What is the purpose of life, really?’ Is it not “to glorify God and enjoy him forever.” (Shorter Catechism).

*Hugh Cox, 20<sup>th</sup> May, 2007*