
Commentary

Dingo Girl: Ten Years On

On 17 August 1980 a ten-week-old baby girl mysteriously disappeared from a tent in a camp site at Ayres Rock. Her disappearance triggered one of the most protracted and more bizarre series of legal processes in Australian history.

The secular press has made very little of the anniversary, but such an omission would be inexcusable in a Religion Studies Review. Much of the hysteria surrounding the Chamberlain case derived from the couple's religious commitment. Fear of the unfamiliar and sectarian prejudice engendered exaggerated rumours which were readily spread in the media. Not only the couple but their church were on trial.

The Seventh-Day Adventists Church has never had a high profile in Australia, and perhaps in other parts of the world, until the Lindy Chamberlain case. Even now, knowledge of the beliefs and practices of the SDA Church (SDAC) is vague, or just plain wrong.

Seventh-Day Adventists, as indicated by their name, place great stress on the second coming or Advent of Christ, and of course, their observance of the seventh day Sabbath (Saturday) as being holy, constitutes the most distinctive doctrine of the church. Other beliefs, such as the importance of baptism by immersion, and the observance of a certain of a dietary codes, also set Adventists apart. However, the great majority of SDA doctrines are similar to those of mainstream Protestant denominations.

In this brief commentary Norm Young, author of Innocence Regained which is reviewed in the Book Review section, shares his study of the reactions of the mainline churches to the struggle to obtain justice for the Chamberlains. Peter Bentley summarises the many reviews of the film Evil Angles and remarks that the religious element so central at the time seems to have been ignored.

Azaria: Christian Consciences a Decade Later

Christians have no monopoly on prejudice. The attitudes manifested by the media, police, politicians, lawyers, scientists, and dingo lovers towards Lindy and Michael Chamberlain over their ten-year

ordeal proved that. Because they worshipped the God of Jesus Christ in a sectarian community, many mainline believers showed a spirit that was hostile

towards the Chamberlains. This is so well attested that it hardly requires proof.

There was little, if any, Christian or Jewish protest against the linguistic nonsense that tortured macabre meanings from the baby's innocent Hebrew name 'Azaria'. Christians believed as readily as any other Australian that a clergy was a liar and his wife a murderer. Gossip items, such as the false rumours of child-abuse, went through the churches as quickly as the pubs. The 'evidence' of the black dress, the supposedly marked family bible (the passage concerning the death of Sisera was erroneously said to be underlined in Lindy's bible), and the gimmick-coffin were as convincing to Christians as to 'Ockers' that Lindy had sacrificed Azaria as an atonement for sin. It is doubtful whether Christians would have been so swift to accept such vicious rumours - as Chester Porter QC, Council Assisting the Royal commissioner, after prolonged investigation, deemed them - if Michael were a minister in a mainline tradition.

Help was not always forthcoming from Christian leaders. One Anglican Bishop was not even sure in June 1985 what he could do personally to help. The Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace as late as March 1986 (Lindy was released from prison in February 1986) 'was not in a position to offer assistance'. The Adventist leadership itself, though offering remarkable and tangible support to the Chamberlains, balked at criticising any part of the judicial process, or publicly calling for a Royal commission, or openly declaring their belief in the Chamberlains' innocence. As far as the Adventist community was concerned, public agitation was almost entirely a lay initiative.

Of course many Christians from the beginning were concerned about the jus-

tice of the Chamberlain case, and individual Christians were at the vanguard of the support movements. Church papers were often very bold and insightful in their appraisal of their case. Before the trial *The Australian Church Record* (February 1982: Anglican) wrote a trenchant editorial slating the media for irresponsible reporting. The same editorial doubted that an impartial jury could be impanelled in Darwin, but called upon the Christian community to put prejudice aside and pray 'for the proper administration of justice'. In August 1983 numerous churches held services praying for justice for the Chamberlains. Alan Williams wrote an editorial in *Australia's New Day* (December-January, 1984/85: Charismatic) that spoke of the 'growing backlash of concern among Christians across the country at the implications raised by the gaoling of Lindy Chamberlain'. In April 1984 the Council of Churches in NSW sent to the Attorneys-General of Australia and the Northern Territory notice of its resolution calling for a Royal Commission. In August 1985 the evangelical journal *On Being* brought out a special edition that noted that being Adventist Christians had 'counted both for and against' the Chamberlains. The articles in the special issue were supportive of the Chamberlains' struggle for justice. The editor of *New Life* (12 December 1985: Anglican) added his voice to the call for a Royal Commission and for prayers for the Chamberlains. At the end of 1985 Anglican, Baptists and Adventist clergy in Darwin led out in a prayer service for the Chamberlains - the cause of justice momentarily transcended the divisions of grace. Thus Christians, despite their initial prejudice were the first to change their minds.

Nevertheless, many Christians to this day remain hostile towards the Chamberlains and towards their church, though most have allowed the principles of Christ to triumph in the end over bigotry. By some perverse process of logic, too many Christians condemned the Adventist community along with two of its members. The wildest opinions were entertained about the Chamberlains and their Church's beliefs on no better basis than the sectarian status of Adventism. There are obvious lessons for all Chris-

tians to learn from this painful episode in Australia's legal and social history.

First, mainline Christians must not attribute grotesque practices to sectarian groups simply because they disagree with the latter's theology. Secondly, Adventists should realise that they cannot damn their fellow Christians as 'Babylon' or worse and expect to be well thought of and sympathetically treated.

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~~Evil Angels People~~

Writing About the Film

How would you write about the film *Evil Angels*? Would you mention that there is a major religious dimension? Perhaps you would note that the main characters are a Seventh Day Adventist pastor and his wife? Or, would you neglect these keys to the film's making and interpretation? Is religious faith (particularly Christian) such an oddity and so misunderstood, that it is better to leave out any reference?

After reading over one hundred articles (over 500 words) and reviews about the film *Evil Angels*, I almost came to the conclusion that I had viewed a different film. Over sixty percent of the articles did not mention any aspect of religious concern. The remaining forty percent usually only made some passing reference. (Half of these articles did note that the religious denomination in question was Seventh Day Adventist.)

The absence of religious reference reflects the secular attitudes so well cap-

tured in the film's vignettes. People did not know very much about the Seventh Day Adventist distinctives (and still do not). The Producer Verity Lambert explained 'Lindy was tried and convicted by religious prejudice and Australian television and the press. Nobody really knew what the Seventh Day Adventists were about, so they made up rumours about ritual sacrifice.' (*Daily Telegraph* 15.8.1988)

By the time of the film's release, the rumour mongering had run its course. The Chamberlain's innocence had been fully established and it would have been foolish for a writer to embark on a sensationalist religious expose. Instead, it seems that the opposite happened. Religious references were downplayed or left out altogether. Few writers examined the theme of religious prejudice. Interestingly, most who did so were quite sympathetic.

One person who went against the sympathetic critic was P.P. McGuinness. He asked 'Where did the vicious rumours, the treatment of her as a member of a bizarre sect, come from? After all, the Seventh Day Adventists are pretty well-known, and there are few people who have not eaten Sanitarium products or passed by one of the shops where well-scrubbed girls totally free of make-up sold vegetarian food until recently. It is difficult to believe the simplistic view of the film that there was any special antagonism to this religion.' (*Financial Review* 4.11.1988)

As a researcher primarily concerned with religion in Australian society, I would have to express my strong disagreement, if not amazement with these remarks. Australians are not knowledgeable about the Christian religion, let alone a small Christian denomination like the Seventh Day Adventists. A country which can provide over three hundred way of spelling Presbyterianism (according to the 1986 Census) and can let the 'vicious rumours' which did circulate grow to 'established fact' is far from being a religiously aware society. In fact, I would argue that the media in general have a poor understanding of religion in Australia. If the disseminators of information usually provide little religious news (and simplistic analysis), what hope is there for the 'ordinary Australian'.

As Steve J. Spears commented in his curiously titled article 'How Meryl eluded a hooker in gumshoes', 'People get them mixed up with Scientologists (awful people), Mormons, Baptists etc. But S-DAs are all right.' (*National Times* 6.12.1987) Perhaps this also illustrates Spears' religious prejudice.

One key scene in the film encapsulates the religious chasm in Australian society.

After the first coronial inquest Michael and Lindy face the media on the steps outside the court. One reporter asks what has accounted for their ability to stand up to the events. Michael talks about Jesus Christ being a personal friend. The fortitude comes from a personal living faith in Jesus. His remarks kill the questioning. The reporters are depicted as lost for words. How do you respond to a faithful answer from a faithless perspective? Neil Jillett commented 'The Chamberlains are fundamentalist Christians (Michael a Seventh Day Adventist pastor), and these days, compared with the population as a whole, that makes them odd-balls. It was their faith in Jesus that enabled them so often to display what seemed to be a superhuman, or even inhuman, stoicism in the face of their baby's death and the drawn-out ordeal that followed.' (*The Age* 4.11.1988)

It is not simplistic to argue that much of the reaction against the Chamberlains was born out of religious prejudice and misunderstanding. Of course, the film does not provide all the answers. After all, how can one really explain the depth of hysterical reaction which followed a purported infanticide. The religious dimension provides the key to understanding the film, as well as the Chamberlains.

The respected critic Sandra Hall was able to discern the importance of the religious dimension. Writing about Sam Neill (who played Michael Chamberlain) she said 'It's a portrait of a man confident in his faith and in his own pastoral abilities, yet strangely awkward with the language of intimacy. Used to comforting strangers, he resorts to formal and familiar phrases when expressing his own grief, then finds he can't quite get them out and breaks down.' She goes on to

say, 'The film is at its most subtle when charting the shift in strength as Lindy is provoked and stimulated by her indignation and Michael is brought to the point of questioning his faith and his future.' She recognises that, 'Beneath the hysteria is a flat, hard, laconic Australianness, which tells a story of prejudice born from a scepticism so ingrained that its almost reflexive; and of a naturally occurring antipathy towards minorities - especially religious minorities.' (*The Bulletin* 15.11.1988, p.165)

Though Sam Neill does not call himself a Christian, he does recognise the importance of Michael's faith. Neill has stated 'And it seems to me his religion insulated him from a lot of life's realities.' 'Now, although his faith has taken a pretty good beating, he's much stronger and more capable of dealing with the real world. And they sure as hell are in the real world now in no uncertain terms.' (Interview with Ivor Davis, *Melbourne Sun* 10.11.1988) Peter Crayford commented about Neill's performance that he 'manages a very difficult task in coming to grips with a complex psychology and a fracturing faith.' (*Financial Review* 11.11.1988) Paul Byrnes notes Neill's portrayal of Michael's 'embattled faith in God's plan.' (*Sydney Morning Herald* 10.11.1988)

Still, the definitive comments about religion and *Evil Angels* are made by James Oram. In a lengthy article with extensive mention of the religious dimension he writes that 'Stories were told like they were holy writ and that Azaria was deformed,... that Seventh Day Adventists were a peculiar, macabre sect that demanded human sacrifice. If you asked someone where they picked their story from, the answer reflected '...God knows...'. The problem was - and the

film brings this out well - the Chamberlains were members of a small sect with strict beliefs not always in line with mainstream churches. For instance, they go to church on Saturdays, a day most Australians set aside to worship at beaches or racetracks. Australians don't mind people having religious beliefs, although they would prefer them not to shout about it from the roof tops. Seventh Day Adventists are so committed to their faith it dictates their every move. Biblical quotes drop from their lips the way comments on the weather might from other less religious people. They live religion. They see life as a stepping stone on the path to eternal happiness, which is why the Chamberlains were able to treat Azaria's disappearance so calmly. They would see her again in Heaven. Australians don't see much beyond tomorrow and could not understand this belief, this passion. Nor could they cope with it. And so, as *Evil Angels* shows, they turned on the Chamberlains the hatred reserved for people who worship in different temples and they became obsessed. So did politicians.' (*Sunday Telegraph* 6.11.1988)

In an interview with Philippa Hawker 'The Making of *Evil Angels*', the director Fred Schepisi says 'That was the unshakable thing, their Seventh Day Adventism, the thing they were most criticised for, and it will be the thing that will be most reconsidered.' Hawker comments that Schepisi believes that 'For those who see the film, the greatest revelation will be the strength of the Chamberlain's faith...' (*Cinema Papers*, Nov 1988 p.12)

Well, apart from James Oram and a few other critics, this aspect of the film hardly rates a mention. Hopefully, other Australians will have experienced a personal revelation viewing this film.

Whether 'faith' or understanding of faith is reconsidered, the film demonstrates a powerful medium. From the opening of the film, with the cynical sniping truck driver to the end with the ever hungry media representatives snapping more shots and asking more inane questions, there is a carefully built up representation

of a couple with a deep faith. They were certainly not an 'ordinary couple', but they were subjected to extraordinary prejudice by a mostly faithless media and public.

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Book Review: The Chamberlains

Innocence Regained: The fight to free Lindy Chamberlain

Norman H. Young

Sydney: Federation Press, 1989

Pp xx + 303 + 16 colour and black and white illustrations, index, pb\$16.95.

As a young adult in Western Australia, Norman Young was in business as a fitter and turner when he was encountered by Christianity in 1961. With his PhD in New Testament from the University of Manchester (1973) and a MLitt in Classical Greek from the University of New England (1981), Young's writings have usually focussed on the exegesis of Scripture and the evangelical faith.

His latest book has the precision of a fitter and turner and the conscience of a New Testament ethicist. Retiring by nature and a Seventh-day Adventist by conviction, it wasn't easy for Young to become an activist in the struggle during 1984 to free Lindy Chamberlain.

Innocence Regained is a participant's history of recent events. There is a razor-like sharpness in some of its language. Young juxtaposed the prejudices of Australians, and the immobility of our legal system, over against the determination of 'countless Australians, small and

great, Christian and non-christian alike, who fought in various ways to right a grave injustice' (:iii).

On 17 August 1980 a ten-week-old infant disappeared from a family tent at Ayres Rock. It was a long time, in terms of human trauma, until 15 September 1988 when three judges of the Northern Territory Court of Criminal Appeal unanimously quashed the Chamberlains' convictions.

This side of the Morling enquiry, it is inevitable that the goodies and the bad-dies are known. Young tells 'how the determined efforts of a minority overthrew the immutable verdicts of the country's most venerated institutions' (:v).

The Pro Hart painting on the cover reflects the contents. Hart believed the judge and jury were blinded and masked. Young applies a laser beam to the forensic issues, and pulls masks off participants who will not thank him for his devastating accuracy. Chapter 13 is a stockholder's report on winners and losers for the Chamberlain saga; All Australians are involved because it is our system of justice which has been tried and found wanting. In the next and final chapter, Young asks 'Why, Australia! Why?'

The Hon. Justice Michael Kirby suggests (in an afterword, :289-91) That the Chamberlain case has attracted more attention than any other trial in our history, 'with the possible exception of that of Ned Kelly'. Of the volumes available about the case, *Innocence Regained* is among the few that will retain credibility after the closest scrutiny.

This is a disturbing book, for a number of reasons. Have we who claim to be evangelicals really created a balance between our related commissions to save souls and to save society? Are we content to let fellow human beings, unknown and without the support the Chamberlains had, 'struggle alone and unnoticed with

little hope of redress' (:274) from victimisation? Do we judge minorities by facts or by prejudices? Are there ways in which the profession of evangelical Australians is severely challenged by the social conscience of citizens who make no profession, but who in fact repeat the deeds of Jesus of Nazareth? *Innocence Regained* will help us in the search for historical answers to such annoying questions.

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(Reprinted with permission from the editor Lucas: an Evangelical History Review and the author.)

The Un-Guru and his No-Copyright Book

The Dame Edna of the Swami Circuit Visits Australia

U.G. Krishnamurti, who paid a very low key visit to Sydney recently, is no more related to the famous J. Krishnamurti than John Hewson is related to John Howard. Krishnamurti is a given name which is preceded by the initials of the surnames. The fact that U.G. Krishnamurti appears, at first glance, to be carrying on his famous namesake's mission is a deception concealing very real differences.

Yes, UG does travel around the world warning people against gurus, and his main bases are India, California, and Saanen in Switzerland. In fact he was born into Theosophical circles in Madras at the time when J Krishnamurti was being groomed for world leadership as the New Avatar and UG later studied with him. The result was disillusionment

for UG, and today he calls his famous namesake 'the greatest phoney' on the grounds that while he was proclaiming 'Call no man master', he was actually publishing books, founding schools, and becoming in effect the spiritual master for thousands around the globe.

UG, by contrast, has earned himself the nickname of 'Un-Guru' because he insists that the whole spiritual trip is a nonsense, the whole notion of enlightenment an illusion. In fact he says that the whole idea of mind or spirit as something higher than the body and material nature is a myth. Mind he maintains is a kind of malfunction of the nervous system, which has the effect of separating us from nature's marvellous transpersonal interconnectedness and locking us up in individual prisons of fantasy; it is an evolutionary

mistake which has brought all kinds of unnatural conflict and violence to a previously harmonious planet and now threatens extinction of the whole species.

He denounces all ideals, from health foods and environmentalism to Truth and Love, as 'fascist plots' to dragoon us into subordinating natural bodily individuality to the social collective, the radically unnatural group-cultures which mind creates through its most deadly trait, the process of generalisation. He holds that in nature real harmony happens without any fuss, and could happen for us if we weren't trapped in grand universal visions, which actually create the very evils which they pretend to cure.

UG's authority for all this is an experience which overtook him in 1967 on his forty-ninth birthday. The process was quite painful, but it left him free to call on his mind when, but only when, he needs it to get around in society.

He insists there is no recipe to offer for anyone else to move into this state. He believes that what happened to his was a complete accident, and adds that, since bodies are truly individual, general rules for 'liberation into nature' are impossible. Recipes and disciplines, which imply general principles, are all part of the mind's disease, and the mind neither can nor will contrive its own destruction, even when it pretends to desire it.

So he has no positive message, only the negative one that religions and

spiritual paths are at best waste of time, at worst intensification of the human predicament. He won't advise anyone *not* to pursue a spiritual goal, if that's what they like doing, but they should be clear that its both futile and in no way superior to worldly goals.

It would, of course, be completely against his principles to write a book or give classes, but he has found over the years that many people who have become disillusioned with various gurus or spiritual paths seem to benefit by talking to him, and he somewhat reluctantly agreed to allow one group (of ex-Rajneeshis in India) to bring out a collection, based on tape recordings) of 'Disquieting Conversations with the Man Called UG'. His condition was that the book, entitled *Mind is a Myth*, should also bear the following copyright statement:

My teaching, if that is the word you want to use, has no copyright. You are free to reproduce, distribute, interpret, misinterpret, distort, garble, do what you like, even claim authorship, without my consent or permission of anybody.

A fascinating start to a fascinating volume!

John Wren-Lewis

(Makes you wonder what UG's views on the study of religions would be like!!
Eds)

