

The life and death of Barry Jones

Reviewed by Greg Clarke

A Thinking Reed

Barry Jones

Allen & Unwin, 2006. 561pp.

Brilliant writers of the last hundred years tended to spend their lives wrestling with Christianity. Samuel Beckett obsessed over the promises of Christ in plays such as *Waiting For Godot*. D.H. Lawrence was gripped by the Bible and attempted to re-read into it a pagan spirituality. C.S. Lewis was hunted down by the Hound of Heaven¹ until, in his words, he eventually gave in and admitted God was God.

Barry Jones is not a brilliant writer, but a brilliant Australian intellectual of extraordinary capacity and influence on Australian public life. His autobiography, *A Thinking Reed*, reveals the same kind of spiritual struggles that great authors undergo. Too bright for politics and too practical for academia, Jones occupied (and to some extent still does occupy) an unchallenged position as the brains trust of the Australian Labor Party. He made his fame by starring on the black-and-white TV quiz show ‘Pick-A-Box’ in the 1960s and has always retained the tag of ‘Smart Bloke Who Can Remember Things’. A mind such as his can be a curse as much as a blessing—when Science Minister, people used to ask him constantly to answer trivia questions. But the more significant blessings and curses of the curious mind are revealed in his autobiography to relate to the ultimate questions.

“After I turned six, death was very much in my mind” (p.42), he writes early in the book. After just a two-chapter run through his childhood—the story of a precocious, intellectually gifted child in a mediocre pre-war context with an absent father and disappointed mother—Jones gives chapter three over to the subject of the death penalty. It seems that here is where his religious sensibilities began to take shape. He was

¹ A poem by Francis Thompson, which Lewis said described his feeling of being pursued by God. Available online at <http://poetry.elcore.net/HoundOfHeavenInRtT.html> (29 Nov 2006).

horrified and terrified of death, his imagination sparked by two hangings that occurred at Victoria's Pentridge Prison in 1939. He had read the New Testament by this time (aged seven) and thought of Jesus as a victim of capital punishment, a thought hard to reconcile with God's plan for the world. Why would God support such a heinous activity?

"One of the factors that makes life bearable is the uncertainty of the hour of our deaths." (p.74). He can't explain why the death penalty became such an obsession for him, but he connects it with the theological wrestles over crime, vengeance, justice and mercy. His frustration with Fundamentalist Christian appeals to the Law of Moses, rather than the words of Jesus, sets the scene for discussions of Christianity later in the book.

Of course, Jones's book is full of insider interpretations of Labor history, opinions on past, present and future political stars, and statements of Jones's position on a range of issues. His discussion of 21st century political events is sobering; he locates Australia in a post-*Tampa*, post 9/11 culture of fear and threats to the rule of law. He could not find an optimistic political note on which to end his book (no kind words for Kim Beazley here). But he describes himself throughout not chiefly as a politician, but a thinker and seeker:

I was never much of a true believer, generally a qualified believer or doubting Thomas...Part of my problem in politics, apart from my lack of killer instinct, was that I could always see the opposite side of a proposition (except with capital punishment) (p.133).

This is reflected in the book's emphasis, which is not on politics itself, but the ideas behind the systems and structures. Jones is more interested in Tolstoy's version of the Gospels, or the effect of new technology on employment, than in who was blackmailing whom on the back benches.

Towards the book's end, Jones devotes a chapter to 'Beliefs', about which he still has a "deep uncertainty". He thinks it probable that God exists, and possible that Jesus had a special relationship with God. He thinks there may be a collective soul, but that individual existence beyond death is unlikely. In a quote that will stay with me, he writes, "I am not confident enough to be an agnostic" (p.417). He seems suspicious that his friend, Phillip Adams's avowed atheism is disingenuous.

Jones has read Albert Schweitzer and Geza Vermes on Jesus, and his views seem to be largely influenced by these two authors. In summary, this amounts to the view that Christianity is the religion of Paul the Apostle, and that Jesus was a social revolutionary later deified by his followers. Jones considers Jesus' resurrection to be "the central unresolved mystery in history" (p.424), an event he says he would have liked to witness to dispel his doubts.

The sense of the numinous spurs Jones towards belief, and his chief guide has been Pascal, who felt the mystery of the universe and believed that the mind was the best way to come to terms with it (the book's title, 'A Thinking Reed', comes from Pascal's *Pensées* #200). He also drew from Barth's *Dogmatics*, lectures by Hans Kung and the Christology of Edward Schillebeeckx.

Despite his doubts, Jones eloquently describes himself as a Christian:

I define myself as a sceptical Christian fellow traveller of the school of Pascal, a follower of Jesus, hovering on the margins between religious experience and aesthetics: an ecclesiastical voluptuary transformed by the impact of music, architecture, liturgy and text.
(p.437)

The emphasis here is on the connection between sublime experience and spiritual realities. Jones's internal religiosity seems dependent on elevation to counter the scepticism; his external religiosity is shaped by a desire to provide that richness for others as well. In an interview on the television talk-show, *Talking Heads*, Jones summarised his political vision in religious language:

[M]y commitment, really, is to adapt something that Jesus said. I'm very much committed to the concept of the abundant life. And that was what drew me into politics. To take people out of poverty, but not just material poverty. Intellectual poverty. Spiritual poverty.

Aesthetic poverty. All those things. That's got to be the central point of our politics.²

I was intrigued by this book (though hardly expect it to strike a chord with everyone), and felt a strong thought-world connection to its author (whom I've never met). But as I read I was increasingly aware of a difference between us (and it's not just a rather large number of IQ points). Like Jones, I'm horrified by death and baffled by injustice. But the crucifixion of Jesus is for me an incredibly liberating event, an answer to the otherwise insoluble problem of justice, where wrong must be addressed and atoned, and yet love and mercy must prevail. Barry Jones's dread of death and his horror at human injustice seems to lead him away from the cross as the focus of religious life, in search of something more experiential and rapturous which is nearly always elusive. Were he to pursue a rigorous theology of the cross, as so many reformers have before him, I wonder whether he would find a greater sense of certainty to ground the religious instincts that drive and nourish him.

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² <http://www.abc.net.au/talkingheads/txt/s1668989.htm>