

Trivial Pursuits

I can't buy the book. Does this mean that it is popular or that no one cares?

The recent article (SMH 29 July 2008) *Triumph of triviality*, by John Schumaker is a challenging piece for every Christian, especially those who are teachers and educators. His book, *In search of happiness: Understanding an endangered state of mind*, is unavailable although still on the book store lists. Perhaps a reprint will appear, but I am not too sure. His basic premise is that in the second half of the 20th Century we lost our way culturally and it should be acknowledged from the beginning that he is talking about western culture and countries.

In the 1950s, Schumaker claims that commentators were enthusiastic about the future. They believed that humanistic thinking would *herald an enlightened age characterised by a new social order distinguish by raised consciousness, depth of purpose and ethical refinement*. But what happened? *Human potential took a backseat to economic potential*. From the rebellious 1960s economic security gripped the West and self absorption took over on a massive scale. *Popular culture seduced the masses into an ever changing smorgasbord of false material needs*.

During this time a decline in Christianity in western countries, especially represented by church attendance, has occurred and those groups that have tried to embrace popular culture have often *reconceived or rephrased God in order to render religion insubstantial, non threatening or, best of all, entertaining*.

For Schumaker, our culture represents a *triumph of triviality over a life of substance*. While there will always be some with religious or secular world views that maintain a life of purpose and direction which is focused on broader community needs and the illusive common good, he argues the vast majority have been seduced by popular culture.

I thought that I would like to take up this theme and look at some examples in our society and invite other TCFNSW members to comment or to put a different case. Your responses would be welcomed.

Just a few examples of this culture of triviality might be:

Superficiality in thinking, education, work and relationships. Illustrated by the icon of the mobile phone, a life is pursued where short often trivial conversations replace depth, where staying in touch means short calls or texts to confirm that relationships continue, where gossip proliferates and extensions of video and Internet are a must to be declared *cool* and on top of the latest technology. Like all technology, the mobile phone has its place and what is wrong with its entertainment and communication values? The problem is more that it has become a symbol of the shallowness of many lives and relationships.

Undergraduate degrees often driven by economic and industry concerns aim to produce people who will fit in and not challenge the culture of business and work. Once jobs in agriculture, manufacturing and essential services characterised the workforce, now, almost eighty percent of Australians are in service industries often providing the entertainment, television, radio, media, sport and newspapers that thrive on popular culture - the trivial, the exotic and the sensational, and opinion pieces follow their lead as the demand for substance dwindles amongst viewers, listeners and readers. Believing in its power, the often self-indulgent media creates its own agenda based on what it perceives its clients want. This is well demonstrated in how the Sydney Morning Herald presents the print news from its newspaper on its website – it's "racier", highlights sensation and thrives on trivia. Even letters to the editor are selected, not to inform, but to maintain discussion and engage readers.

Television, the magazine racks and the movie complexes produce a mainly voyeuristic view of other peoples' imaginary lives as escapism and fantasy capture people's interests. There is nothing wrong with having movies that provide escape and momentary pleasures, it is the overwhelming dominance and popularity of these movies that suggest a deeper need. For those whose own lives

lack excitement and meaning, these experiences fill the void and through all these entertainment mediums each of us is pounded by advertising for things we mostly do not want or rarely need.

Superficiality dominates and the more some people get of it the more they hope it will fill the hole in their lives and stop serious questions like: Who am I? What am I doing here? Does my life have any meaning outside myself and my wants?

- **Mindless distraction** characterises much of people's television viewing, music listening and entertainment. The mundaneness of life is countered by immersion in computer games, I-pods, socialising around alcohol and for some, risk taking behaviours, often with cars, to test that they are alive. Whatever can stop people thinking about the meaning of life, love and relationships can help fill the void in their lives when they are not really sure if they are people of worth and loved by any significant others.
- **Vanity** that exemplifies itself in fashion, cosmetic surgery and personal products. A 24 hour fashion pay-TV channel expressing a hedonistic and unreal life style highlights the focus on individual enjoyment and improving how a person appears to others. The *right* clothes, the *right* job, the *right* car, the *right* holiday, the *right* boy/girl friend are about a selfish view where what others think of a person means more than who you are.
- **Passivity** has invaded institutions and social organisations. People do not want to be involved and prefer mindless distractions and the trivial. As a result, they facilitate the tyrant and injustice. The churches, the trade unions, political parties, the clubs and even professional associations are losing membership. Detached from any purpose for living outside self, there is no commitment to the wellbeing of others. People entranced by what is seen of the world on television and through the Internet, but detached. Conscience may be relieved by the occasional gift to those who are in need, but there are fewer and fewer volunteers who want to make a difference or who aspire to leadership. Injustice abounds in the world of indifference and passivity.
- **Ego** is delicate and, without a meaning to life outside self, its insatiable appetite needs to be constantly feed. Advertising reinforces that the most important person is the individual and so life pursuits and relationships are about self-satisfaction, an agenda that is serviced by trivial and mindless pursuits.
- **Denial** of the reality of life rarely surfaces. Consciences have been deadened by media and advertising, relationships have been poisoned by shallowness and the gods have become work and pleasure to fulfil self images. Surveys continue to show that Australians are working by choice a extraordinary number of hours each week, or is it by avoidance? Work can provide fulfilment, self-image and self esteem and, for Christians, be part of worship, but for many Australians work alone provides meaning for their lives and has become their god.

In line with Pauls writings in [Romans 7](#): *Who can free us from the culture of triviality? Thanks be to God it has been done in Jesus Christ.*

God's way is not the way of the world. We were created for a purpose and that purpose is to bring pleasure to God, as discussed by Rick Warren in, *The Purpose driven life*. Once the focus is off us and onto God there is a new perspective on the world. Christians, in thankfulness to God for what he has done for them in Christ, want to live their lives to please him. Being loved and accepted by God, Christians are empowered to live their lives for him. For them, service to God and to others is what life is about and their self worth is given substance by what Christ has done for them and what they can now do in partnership with him.

As Christians we know that the humanist view that *we are ethical creatures by nature and that we'll do the right thing when necessary, we will transcend materialism given the freedom to do so*, is neither a Biblical view, nor a view born out in the reality of our societies. When sin entered the world, humans lost any right or ability to deliver their own salvation. Where sin reigns, only God, through a life giving message to the world, can change his creatures to act in the Spirit and to bring

pleasure to him.

Christians have access to the values based (the nature of God) to change the world they live in and need to be involved, not indifferent or passive, in what happens in the world ([Matthew 5:13](#)). As you read this article, I will be in India working with a school system to provide better educational outcomes for students. These students are lovely – too lovely. Because the children are from India's poorest families it will not be enough for them to do well at school and for some go to college and university. To achieve these goals will be good in the world's eyes, but without a passion to change the social order of India that has discriminated against them for centuries, they may well continue to be passive and accept the status quo and their improved circumstances within it. In such a scenario, their education will have failed them, providing privilege and not reform.

Education is always about changing people and in Australian classrooms it is no different. Christians have a role to play in addressing the shallowness of people's lives and immersion in triviality. That students know God and put their trust in him is the outcome that changes people and changes society. Filling lives with the Holy Spirit, not the trivial, extends purpose and meaning and avoids mindless distraction. Our students and our society need the Lordship of Christ in their lives.

As Christian teachers and educators some areas of involvement that we might like to be challenged by include:

Political involvement

Christians are often keen to support their church through administrative and ministry positions and responsibilities and can be critical and cynical like much of the community about political parties, unions and lobby groups. There are very good reasons for Christians to be involved in these organisations in our society including Jesus' comments about Christians being the "salt of the earth". Some have argued that the poor state (including membership numbers) of unions and political parties is because Christians have chosen not to be involved, instead leaving governance and ultimately power to those who have chosen to be involved.

There is always a cost to being involved and in our current society, especially for high profile Christians. Whether they are Roman Catholic or from *Hillsong*, they can expect additional scrutiny from the media and their opponents. While this is not a calling for everyone, there must be more who could influence these institutions for the Kingdom by active participation moving their lives more towards substance.

In education, political parties behind the government of the day have a great say in education policy and how resources are used. Initiatives and programs that you might not like can be best influenced from within political parties or the bureaucracy that supports government. It is hard to work up a community protest of the size that will change a government's direction, but the right advice at the right moment can completely change an intended direction. Christians need to be on the inside, not the outside of these decision making bodies and processes.

Local interest

The recent local government elections were characterised by so many people saying: *I didn't know who to vote for*. Lack of information and misleading information made it difficult for many people to know who people represented and whether "Independent" really was independent. Again a lack of involvement meant that "we get the government we deserve". We could blame the media, but they respond to people's interests. If the community is not interested in local government issues, then the media sees no reason to increase its coverage. No, the problem is with humans, caught up in popular culture, including work for more things and security, they give their time and efforts to trivial outcomes and not to what might change lives, including their own. Are Christians any better than the rest of the community?

Currently in education, one of the greatest pressures for change to the provision of religion in schools is coming from a small but vocal group of secularists in groups like the Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations the NSW Greens and amongst some media and occasional writers. In previous years, the number of Christians within organisation like the Federation of P&Cs would not have resulted in such a campaign, but with the flow of Christian parents to church and Christian schools the Christian remnant are fighting a difficult battle and need the involvement of Christian parents with children in public schools to be active in their local P&C and influence this agenda. But its hard to give that much extra when you work all day, involved with your church and committed to a myriad of family arrangements to. It is matters like this that should challenge Christians to review their priorities and lifestyle and to ask how they can do more Kingdom work by being involved in the wider community as well as a Christian community.

Social action

When did you last join a protest, sign a petition or write to a politician or a newspaper? Not that I would wish you to become a professional campaigner or whinger. But there are democratic processes aligned to freedoms that we enjoy in our society that we should value and use. Cynicism about these processes means that they are under utilised and responsibilities neglected.

At all levels of government, ministries are very sensitive to a run of correspondence on a matter. If about 12 individual letters are received, then they look seriously at what the issues are and ask for a briefing. If a 100 identical campaign letters are received, then they all receive a predetermine reply and have little influence. The recently published letter in *TCFNews* to the NSW Minister for Education and his reply, provide an example of how just one carefully worded letter can force home an important point and counter others who are lobbying differently.

Christians are often confused by the many social issues that various interest groups bring to their attention. They either do not have a position or are confused by different positions amongst Christians. Seduction by popular culture insulates people from much of what goes on in the world. We all viewed the devastation of the tropical storm in Myanmar earlier this year, but what is the current status? Few care, it's in the past and the media see no reason to investigate and report. Similarly, ongoing seemingly unsolvable issues like Darfur in Sudan cause people to become hardened and indifferent and not until the blotted bellies of starving children in Somalia are brought to the world's stage will efforts be focussed on averting another human tragedy in that country. In addition to giving to Christian organisations involved in relief work, what can Christians do to influence the politics that often drives these tragedies: the inept government, the interference of other foreign nations and an inappropriate tolerance of evil?

When teaching about such matters it would be more powerful as Christians to be able to talk about our response to these situations than to only have children study them as just more trivia in another topic in the curriculum. We can encourage students to be active citizens, but how active are each of us at home and nationally? How much impact could Christians have in the world if they acted passionately about something – indeed anything – that would improve the lives of others and show them Christ?

Curriculum

Teachers and school principals have rightly complained that the curriculum is overcrowded and that students are being forced to learn more and more irrelevant pieces of information. Unpacking this concern reveals a number of issues for educators. One is the age-old relationship or "balance" between process and content. Students should learn how to learn and not be filled with an unnecessary overload of facts. But students should know some things, whether it is the rote learning of the alphabet and mathematics tables, or the cultural heritage of their society, students do need a core of knowledge, skills and understanding. In some Asian countries the curriculum is packed with

facts and tested by examinations that favour rote learning.

A greater challenge for teachers is relevance. Students continually complain that the material they are asked to engage with is boring and irrelevant. Some claim that teachers need to work harder at a pedagogy that makes this material interesting. These questions raise fundamental issues about what the aims of education are and most systems adopt a whole-of-child approach as per the Adelaide Declaration of *The National Goals of Schooling in 21st Century*. But exams and student performance measures dominate in a competitive market and schools sometimes wish more attention had been paid to values, to risk behaviours and safety issues when young lives are lost in needless tragedies.

Our perception of what is important in life and in schooling is often shaken by death or injury which questions the purpose of competition and examinations. In the midst of this, Christians maintain a sense of purpose in knowing God and attempt to communicate this understanding by their words and actions including how they use the curriculum and the strategies they select for teaching.

Christians in schools can support a focus away from self, popular culture and materialism by engaging students in the big ideas of life and not by focusing on the volume of knowledge. And teachers are good at this. Everyday we hear stories about how students have engaged in work to help others, their community and their environment. This engagement is essential if students are to have lives of meaning and purpose and are not to be seduced by the materialism of popular culture and the trivial.

General religious education (GRE)

Finally, it is worth remembering that the curriculum and Education Act 1990 allow all schools to teach non-denominational Christianity as GRE. This is an opportunity that needs to be further explored and better represented in the curriculum so that students know the Christian heritage of their country and know about the major religion that has shaped who we are. In these matters, teachers need to be less afraid of upsetting the secularists in our society and more concerned that students have this knowledge so that they can choose meaning and substance over trivia and shallowness for their lives and that they can live with popular culture, but not be subsumed by it or fall for the lies of materialism.

Epilogue

I have just been informed that the book is out of print and my money will be refunded. I guess that the message of the book, even from a secular viewpoint, is one that most people caught up in the way of the world do not want to hear. But for Christians, it is part of a reminder "do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world but be transformed" (Romans 12:2 NIV)

John Gore