DAVID MARR
The high price of heaven
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THE HIGH PRICE *of* HEAVEN

reviewed by **CLAUDINE CHIONH**

DAVID MARR MAY NOT BE THRILLED by the association but *The high price of heaven* demonstrates the qualities of a good preacher. This collection of articles and speeches (from 1996, when Marr returned to journalism and joined the staff of the *Sydney Morning Herald*), is akin to many of the sermons thinking Christians are subjected to today: reflections on worldly affairs in the context of lofty theological ideas, neither glib and superficial nor ponderous and esoteric. A predilection for story-telling, the repetition of fundamental moral values, and the choice use of the *bon mot* distinguish both extended journalism and the preacher's craft. Unfortunately, Marr is not immune from the partiality and emotional

manipulation that has marked religious discourse since Adam bickered with God. And as with the best—and the worst—sermons, there is a strong personal touch to these articles. *The high price of heaven* may be Marr's most personal book to date.

The *Confession*—or *Testimony*—of St Augustine of Hippo has provided a literary and psychological model for many struggling with conflicts between earthly temptation and the promise of redemption. Marr prefaces this book with his own testimony of conversion to and later rejection of neo-fundamentalist Christianity. It is a sadly familiar tale, of a young man coming to terms with the love that dare not speak its name—especially not within the Church—and simultaneously being wooed by that brand of Christianity that measures its worth in the number of souls enlisted in its earthly army. Marr abandoned formal Christianity at university, but:

> Twenty-five years later I was writing about censorship, wondering why people still bothered, when it came to me that what's at stake here is heaven. The enemies of films and books and magazines, of sex and music and drugs and television, of drink and dancing are Christians. And what they're campaigning about is not this life but the next ... For those who have no faith in the afterlife, the price we're expected to pay for getting us all to heaven is too high. Too much waste, too much cruelty, too much pain. (xii, xiii)

There is a theory amongst certain preachers that every person—believer or not—has in them a single sermon. In *The high price of heaven*, Marr has compiled a number of articles on discrete subjects that, taken together, chart his preoccupation with the undue influence of Christian morality on government and public policy. Marr profiles a number of figures—John Howard, Brian Harradine, George Pell—who view the world as in need of earthly judgement and constraint. They want to get to heaven on their own merits and drag the rest of their church or country with them. Marr too is on a mission—to debunk the moral claims of mainstream Christianity and expose its role in Australian politics.

For George Pell, Catholic Archbishop, Fred Nile, protestant proselytiser, and thousands like them, much revolves around sex as an obstruction to heaven. Although Marr's book addresses a broad range of those 'social issues' that excite the minds and emotions of Christians, such as native title and the decriminalisation of 'hard drugs', he shares with those he criticises (at least in this book) an overriding concern with sex and the body. He is at his most fanciful when discussing the murder of Don Gillies in 1993, a case that brought the 'gay panic' murder defence into the High Court of Australia. The murder of Don Gillies provides ample material for a case study of contemporary legal and psychological theories and of the social perceptions of middle-class homosexuals in rural communities, but here it serves as a platform for Marr to deliver a diatribe, with poor historical foundations, against mainstream catholic Christianity.

In Marr's history of Western homophobia, rural New South Wales is only a short way down the road from Leviticus. This much reviled book of the Hebrew Bible is a dreary, repetitious catalogue of laws whose name has become a code word for the 'Christian' denunciation of homosexual men. Leviticus, the Gospel of St John, the

letters of St Paul and even the Psalms contain many authoritative passages that trouble socially liberal Jews and Christians. For hundreds of years, learned theologians and ordinary people have been working to untangle the Gospel's message of liberation from the *zeitgeisten* that found scriptural excuses for slavery, war, monarchy, imperialism, homophobia and the subjugation of women. To continue to use the Bible to prop up discrimination and oppression is an insult to thinking Christians. It is barely less insulting to find, in the works of reputable scholars and journalists, passages such as:

> From Leviticus to the Lateran, every step was bigotry. As with all bigotry, the moral at the heart of its history is that it didn't have to turn out this way. Other traditions that might easily have allowed homosexuality to survive with pagan dignity were stifled and crushed. Gay Christian historians try to present this as a series of unfortunate accidents. But it doesn't wash. What's remarkable about Christianity is its persistent focus on issues of sexual purity and its use of homosexuality—especially in this last millennium—as a dramatic example of impurity. (67)

What's remarkable is Marr's bravado in condensing the various moral concerns of Jews and Christians over approximately three thousand years into a simple obsession with the proper use of genitalia. Likewise, distorting the cautious spirit of John Boswell's pioneer work, *Christianity, social tolerance, and homosexuality*,[1] he makes the bold assertion that the Third Lateran Council's decree of 1179 prescribing the excommunication of known homosexuals was mere revenge on the part of straight clergy whose marriages had been forcibly dissolved.

But interwoven with Marr's messy revision of church history is a piece of fine narrative journalism, as he recounts Gillies' story, an account of a successful gay businessman's friendship with a lonely, nervous petty criminal who would end up killing him for making sexual advances. He goes beyond reportage in his narration of the circumstances leading up to the crime, and in examination of the backgrounds of the men involved and the local community that nourished Gillies with little regard for his sexual orientation. When he attempts to discern the motives of judges of the criminal courts of New South Wales and of the High Court, however, Marr lapses into inconsistency, inaccuracy and generalisation. The High Court acquitted Gillies' murderer, Marr claims, because the bench was dominated by Catholic Justices Brennan, McHugh and Toohey (p. 62). That Michael Kirby, whose sexuality was an open secret in the legal profession, was one of the dissenters in the case is barely touched on, and Marr glosses over the fact that Gillies played the organ for an Anglican church and was discerning a call to ordained ministry in that conservative, 'Establishment' denomination.

Marr profiles a number of prominent figures in the Christian crusade on Parliament—ordained ministers such as George Pell and Fred Nile, and laymen such as Brian Harradine and Gerard

1. John Boswell, *Christianity, social tolerance, and homosexuality* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1980).

Brennan. In them he falls over the same stumbling block evident in the article on Gillies. Marr matches the audacity of his analysis of the Gillies case, for example, by inferring too much from John Howard's Methodist childhood and marriage to a North Shore Anglican:

> He has preached work and respectability all his life. Charity must be earned. He'll have a drink these days but he still loathes gambling. This is Methodism. (28)

This is also the mindset of the self-made man—the protestant work ethic lived out earnestly and passionately by petty bourgeois families and businesses across the globe, regardless of culture or religion. It is the work ethic and the core values of capitalism, rather than any overtly religious values, that mark the conservative middle class of our day. It is the work ethic, not Protestantism, that marks the values of the Prime Minister, who has frequently urged various church leaders to stick to religion and keep out of public affairs.

These articles are punctuated by a brief interlude in the middle of the book, an account of the Turkish government's slow progress in restoring Hagia Sofia, the architectural jewel of the Byzantine Empire that served as both church and mosque before becoming one of secular Turkey's chief tourist attractions. Here Marr comes close to explaining the great intellectual divide between believers and non-believers.

> Doubt and disbelief are at the core of Christian art—doubt especially about the power of the Word. In the last couple of millennia the most compelling arguments for the faith have not been made by books and preaching but by sound, light and sublime space. Hagia Sophia goes a long way further than mere words could hope to go to prove the existence of a magnificent God. (146)

Words cannot express the *incredible* love that God has for humanity, nor can they explain the ludicrous faith that people hold in this same God in the face of science and philosophy. Still, Christians and non-Christians continue to try to talk to, or at, one another in our limited language. It is apparent from passages such as this that there is room in David Marr's heart for the message of liberation and salvation that the first Christians saw in Jesus. But Marr, like millions before him, has been hurt by bigoted and judgmental elements within churches and governments. *The high price of heaven* raises serious questions about the influence of church and government on each other, questions that Australians have ignored for too long, but it is regrettable that, as with the Christians Marr warns his readers about, personal experience and bias so often get in the way of critical analysis.