

A SLOW WALKER

THOUGHT FOR THE MONTH (#1)

Philip O'Carroll Apr 2018 phil3068@hotmail.com www.philipocarroll.com Share at will. Responses welcome

The thought for this month is about why I have decided to circulate a monthly *Thought of the Month!*

In 1945, I was born the fourth of eight children to an Irish Catholic family in Auckland, New Zealand. In those days, many Catholics, including my parents, revered the religious professions: priests, nuns and brothers. Two of my sisters became nuns, one rising to the level of (global) superior-general of her order. My older brother became a "brother", and worked in a monastery for 20 years until he returned to "the world". I fully intended – from the age of five until I was sixteen – to become a priest. The calling to the religious life was known as a "vocation".

Going to church every Sunday, and receiving religious instruction at Catholic school, I became very interested in the elaborate system of Catholic morals. There were venial (less serious) sins. And there were mortal (grave) sins which required going to confession (with sincere contrition) to have the sin forgiven - or *lifted from one's soul*.

But there's nurture and there's nature; I was born with an enquiring mind. I can clearly remember parents and other adults quitting on conversations I'd started with them; too many

questions, too many puzzles they could not solve for me.

I seem to remember that my first clear crisis of faith arose (perhaps when I was twelve) over the issue of the "illegitimacy" of babies born out of wedlock. A non-issue today, but a "grievous" matter in those days. I knew well the Catholic doctrine that a mortal sin had to be (1) a grievous matter, (2) committed with full knowledge and (3) committed with full consent. But it seemed crystal clear to me that the tone of disdain directed at "bastards" was not justified by the definition of sin. The babies in question failed at least two of the three requirements for sin (knowledge and consent).

This same issue became a deal-breaker for me when, at 16, I was helping my parish priest to fill in the forms for my entry to the seminary. He asked me for my parents' marriage certificate. I asked him why. He said it was to establish that I was legitimate. I couldn't believe it. Would Jesus reject a disciple on the grounds of legal illegitimacy?

I felt then that the religion I had grown up in was not based purely on divine inspiration, but was polluted with prejudice and "respectability" based on

local and temporal social mores. I suddenly realised that every world religion had grown out of a particular culture, and that for most followers including me, adherence to a faith was not based on discerning choice, but was simply an accident of birth.

I am not anti-religion today, but am only interested in interpretations of religious propositions that transcend local customs and legends and could be true – either literally, or, through enlightening stories, could convey vital information about human life.

My “vocation” faded away. But I was now more interested than ever in the philosophy of ethics. Is there a rational way of building a code of moral behaviour that benefits humanity – and doesn’t just enforce local customs, however benighted they might be? Good ethics entails good logic, with which to transcend local prejudices and political propaganda.

A couple of years later, I attended the University of Auckland, and discovered that Philosophy was a subject. I stretched my (three-year) BA to seven years, doing all the philosophy courses I could, sub-majored in behavioural psychology and abstract maths (two-year units), and took one-year units in English, German and Education. During three of these years, I was employed by the Philosophy Department as a Logic Tutor, demonstrating the validity or invalidity of many arguments to groups of around 20 students. I also ran the Philosophical Society for 4 years,

engaging figures of interest, often academics visiting Auckland University from overseas. They would speak before an audience of 40 to 50 senior students and interested lecturers, and I would chair, often asking most of the questions myself.

After graduating, I moved to Australia. I was a full-time tutor in Logic and Linguistics at ANU (Philosophy Dept) and a lecturer in Logic and Ethics at the Uni of WA (Philosophy Dept).

Since leaving university life, I have used philosophical skills to carve a path through many obstacles in the early formation of *Fitzroy Community School*. I have used logic in constructing the expanding pattern of successive sounds and special words for the (80) *Fitzroy Readers*. And ethical ideas are regularly involved in my ongoing *Letters to the Editor*.

In the 90s, I studied theology part-time at the *United Faculty of Theology* at Melbourne University, staffed by professors of various denominations. It took me 10 years to get the B Theol. I enjoyed the intellectual stimulation.

I miss philosophical dialogue and I enjoy opportunities to explore ideas and patterns of thought with an interested fellow thinker. That is why I walk slowly when walking and talking with a companion. Sometimes the companion walks a metre ahead, trying to “magnetically” speed me up.

But, you see, I am in no hurry for the dialogue to end! □