

## Shrink Rap Radio #52, September 12, 2006. Religious Delusions

### Dr. David Van Nuys, aka “Dr. Dave” introduces Frank Smolle interviewing the Reverend Christopher Heath

(transcribed from [www.ShrinkRapRadio.com](http://www.ShrinkRapRadio.com) by Jo Kelly)

**Excerpt:** *“But it also has caused me to reflect very much on what faith is, and how much sometimes I think a lot of what passes as religion is in fact an excuse to avoid dealing with mental illness. And for me, that which sets us apart from others is automatically, in my thinking, a delusion.”*

**Introduction:** “That which sets us apart from others is automatically a delusion.” That very provocative thought comes from the Reverend Christopher Heath who is an Anglican priest in the south of Australia. He is Chaplain for Bloomfield Psychiatric and Orange Base Hospitals in the Anglican Diocese of Bathurst, New South Wales. This interview comes to us by way of Frank Smolle, our psychological correspondent from Down Under, who’s got himself a new MP3 recorder, and whom you may recall from some earlier episodes.

Going to Rev. Heath’s website <http://users.bigpond.net.au/frsparky/cv.pdf> I discover some commonalities in our backgrounds. We’ve both studied Electrical Engineering. We’ve both practiced Yoga and we’ve both been amateur radio operators, or “hams.” And I also see we’re both Macintosh fans. So he’s okay in my book! More importantly, though, as I listened to the interview I really found myself resonating with his ideas about the essence of spirituality as opposed to the trappings of it, as well as his timely and thoughtful reflections on the divide between Christians and Muslims.

**Frank:** How do you like me to address you?

**Christopher:** Oh Christopher is fine.

**Frank:** And what is your official title?

**Christopher:** My official title is the Chaplain at the Orange Base Hospital and Bloomfield Psychiatric Hospital; and I’m an Anglican priest and I’ve been 29 years in full time parish ministry prior to coming to Orange. I actually trained and did some units of CPE in 1977.

**Frank:** What’s CPE?

**Christopher:** CPE is Clinical Pastoral Education; and I worked at Flinders Medical Centre in Adelaide. That's really an exercise in doing pastoral ministry within a hospital, in a clinical situation where you reflect on your pastoral encounters with a supervisor in order to gain some insights as to how you are operating and how also you are affecting the person in the bed.

Parish ministry has always been good, but after 29 years it's good to have a change. I've enjoyed wherever I've been and I've been grateful for the journey on which I've come, and just to have a pastoral ministry is a wonderful thing because you meet so many interesting people. Because I operate as the Chaplain of the Orange Base Hospital I see everyone, regardless of what faith they have or what faith they don't have; to be a friendly face, to be a listening ear, to be open to where they are at, and their own concerns. And that is remarkably, very welcomed by the people that I see. Obviously people of no faith still appreciate being noticed and happy – I obviously don't talk about religion much.

**Frank:** You are also the Chaplain at Bloomfield, which is the largest mental health institution west of the Blue Mountains.

**Christopher:** Yes.

**Frank:** Your role there is to?

**Christopher:** A similar role. That's been in some sense a learning experience. I had some contact with the Mood Disorders Association in South Australia, for various reasons; so I have had an interest in mood disorders, which is different from mental illness in that sense, technically. But it also has caused me to reflect very much on what faith is, and how much sometimes I think a lot of what passes as religion is in fact an excuse to avoid dealing with mental illness. I would see much of what passes for Christianity defines who Christians are as opposed to someone else. And a lot of what I see in terms of mental illness sets individuals up as a guru or a person who is set apart from other people. Some sort of an election or whatever. So they are actually fairly parallel sort of paths. And so the difference between a mental illness and a religious delusion actually is very hard to define. And for me, that which sets us apart from others is automatically, in my thinking, a delusion.

**Frank:** So it's "in-group, out-group"; that "us and them" situation.

**Christopher:** Yes, that's interesting to me, because we live in a world of terrorism; of very much them and us. And also the realisation since I've come to Orange, though perhaps the seeds of it were before I came to Orange, that in fact the religious delusion is actually far more dangerous – the person who is religiously deluded – is far more dangerous than the person who has a mental illness. Because in fact they have the ability to affect the behaviour of others through their faith teaching, to actually cause others to set themselves up as apart from others. The things that the religious churches do is actually exclude people; and so a lot of what passes for Christianity, though my Christianity even, is division between how we are different from the rest of the world. Those Muslims who follow Jihad and things like that, where other people are expendable, and that is where it becomes dangerous.

The people at Bloomfield who have those sorts of things are generally nice people, they really actually don't hurt any other people – they might hurt themselves – it's the people who are actually in positions of power and authority who do. I see people getting over their delusions through adhering to a drug therapy, and that seems good, and some clear thinking; but the problem with religious delusions is that people believe they are on the right track. And Christians as much as Muslim people, I'm not talking about -

**Frank:** It's regardless of which religion, it covers all humanity, wouldn't it?

**Christopher:** Yes, yes. And often people with a religious delusion feel that they have to convert the world, and a lot of so called evangelical Christians want to convert the world. It's a horrible life, and I wouldn't worship a god that put that upon them, who tried to put that upon them.

**Frank:** Is that in line with the passions that you hold in your daily job?

**Christopher:** Yes. My passions in my daily job are that our atonement with God is dependent on our atonement with other people. So true religion is actually about embracing other people who are different, and through that there comes atonement with God. In fact atonement with God is less important than our atonement with other people, our being at one with other people. So anything that sets Christianity as opposed to something else – whether it be Muslims, or Jews, or Buddhists, or Hindu, or gays, or lesbians, or women in power – that opposition ultimately for me says that that's a delusion. (laughs) A fairly profound statement.

**Frank:** So thinking about the verse and chapter, where one of the disciples of Jesus comes up, and says “and how many times should I forgive my brother?”

**Christopher:** Yes.

**Frank:** Seven times a day is not enough; so seven times seventy, and even then it’s not enough.

**Christopher:** Yes.

**Frank:** And Moses, and love thy neighbour, it’s all along that line.

**Christopher:** Yes.

**Frank:** I’ve seen you in action at work; I’ve seen that you are very, very approachable.

**Christopher:** Yes; and that’s part of, that’s the working out personally of being at one with those people with whom you see who are in the detox unit, just being a friend. But it shows that here is somebody in authority who cares.

There is a lovely story about Pope John XXIII, and he is my favourite person, who once went to a prison – and it was unheard of that a Pope would ever go to a prison – just a beautiful story about how he went and just talked to people. I don’t know how many lives he changed, but he at least went, and he showed them that they were still children of God, whatever they’d done. And to me that’s – you start to see some of the passion in my work – and if I can do that, then I’m content.

Well for me that atonement with other people is the key that opens it all up, to do that expanding. For me, the reason why Jesus was killed was because he associated with others – the people who weren’t religious – the tax collectors and sinners. The “other” people.

**Frank:** The Gentiles.

**Christopher:** Yes, and the Gentiles, yes. And while the traditional Christianity says that Jesus was killed because he claimed to be the son of God, that’s actually the excuse that those who killed him gave.

**Frank:** I've learnt a lot about stigma and stigmatisation, and being guilty via association. Even walking into the premises of a psychologist or a counsellor automatically infers that you are nuts (laughter); and I can see the relevance where you were just talking about Jesus associating with "the others" – how that's guilty by association.

**Christopher:** Yes that's true. The religious people wanted Jesus just to associate with them and support their little delusion of the truth. Because Jesus was killed for associating with others, the resurrection is the guarantee that that continuing association of the living God with other people continues; and part of my passion comes from the realisation of how much more there is. The more I talk to other people the more I am blessed.

It's interesting as I have moved in to Bloomfield – which is quite the most interesting part of my work – the psychiatrists, the psychologists, the doctors, the nurses, and then you have the social workers, the occupational therapists, the diversional therapists, the activities nurse, you have the domestics, you have the people who do the food, the linen, the administration, the HR, the occupational health and safety people. You have all of these people around, trying to help lift a person to their feet; and I think "isn't that amazing?" Because as I read the bible, time and again when people fall down before God in awe and wonder, God lifts them to their feet. And to me that means more than how we walk from here across the park, it means our primal dignity as human beings to stand on our own two feet, rather than grovel, and also to use our brains rather than just conform, that won't be taken from anyone.

So for me as I look at the hospital and these people who in times past would have been dismissed, locked away or whatever, here they have this whole system. I mean it's hard work for everyone; but to me if you want to know where I think God's at work, I think God's at work at Bloomfield in the doctors and nurses and all those other people that I said, and whoever I missed out on. And they are doing God's work, because they are lifting somebody to their feet, or trying to. And that's lovely to see, and it's lovely to be a part of.

You know an occupational therapist will help a particular patient – just choosing one out of – what lies behind it is a care, a desire to help this person in getting gainful employment. Now that may or may not happen – all your efforts to help a person be gainfully employed may not bear fruit – what lies behind it is the care. But I actually also try and step back and not do things, not become a therapist, because I somehow I say – it's me here, caring for you there. Not because other people don't; but because it can get

lost perhaps in the therapy that is legitimately being brought to bear, or to help this person. The occupational therapists don't stop doing what they do and start simply caring for the person, because people do need that help to be gainfully employed. And that's an interesting exercise to see, that it's me that's called to be there for another person.

If Jesus just wanted me to repeat, parrot fashion, John 3:16 "for God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life" – he could actually get a whole lot of Mac computers and get them to (laughing) or train a whole lot of parrots.

But it's me that's called to stand alongside these people, because I care. It's that care, it's me that's there. They do appreciate having somebody who comes along and gives them perhaps just a couple of minutes of their time, and that there's a system that enables that to happen.

The church has this myth that the world out there is irreligious; but all of these people have their God, and they have their perceptions of something, and they need those perceptions affirmed and they need to be encouraged. And I'm happy to come and do whatever I can. It's interesting because you can say, well it's not me, and yet it is me.

Dorothy Rowe, do you know Dorothy Rowe? A psychologist from England who is very critical of religion – mainly because the religion with which she has been familiar has been negative and repressive. She talks about the importance of being positive, and the importance – I'm sorry I'm probably doing a disservice here, and I apologise to her in advance – she very much believes in the innate ability of people to be positive and to overcome depression and things like that.

Anything that diminishes people is demonic, anything that lifts people up is of God, for me. So there is something about physical contact which is important, which makes that connection. It can't be just intellectual, and that is particularly difficult in my situation and in circumstances that we find ourselves in, in the church at the moment. But part of the ritual of giving communion is a physical thing; part of the anointing for the sick is a physical way of making a physical connection, and I believe that is very important.

When I am praying with people in the hospitals – more in the Base perhaps than at Bloomfield – I try and at least hold their hand. There is an importance of physical touch that brings that connection and is supportive,

and caring and positive. I hope it is seen as supportive and positive, rather than invasive and manipulative.

**Frank:** How does having that belief help people recover from grief or recover from situations in day to day life? Even if a family member has a mental illness, how does that belief help them?

**Christopher:** It's interesting to me that often in the gospels Jesus would say to a person "your faith has made you well" – not "my power has made you well". One of the things is if we look at our faith as a bulwark against difficulties or illness, then that is actually self-focussed, it's focussed on ourselves; as such it's not really what God is about. God's about us becoming at one with the people around us. Becoming at one with the people around us enables the healing skills of the doctors and the nurses and all of the people around about them.

Within the wider context of the world, if you see your faith as opening yourself to the joys and the contributions that people of different faiths make, then there is the possibility for world peace; whereas if you separate yourself off from others, then the possibilities for world peace are considerably lessened.

So if you open yourself to the contributions of the people that God puts around you in hospital, the possibilities for health and wholeness are considerably enhanced; not guaranteed, but enhanced – because we all die at some stage. Empirically I can't give you guarantees, but I don't have to convince you of those truths because you know them within yourself. It's a bit like anger: if you dwell on anger, it only gets worse. If you dwell on the devil: as often people who are mentally ill do, then you only magnify the importance of that.

The essence of what I have already said is that God wishes us all to stand on our own two feet, to use our brains, to think for ourselves, to not cower, to not conform, to be creative, to become all the potentialities that lie within us to have them fulfilled. That's what God, for me, is about.

**Frank:** I was thinking, when you were talking about organisations are humans helping other humans, and you were talking about a collectivist outlook where we are all connected through our actions; and nowadays it is very hard to find that in the media.

**Christopher:** Well perhaps it's because the media has become so all pervasive and often they focus on the negative, whereas before they weren't quite as all pervasive.

It's interesting also, I find it incredibly profound, they will say the thing that really has helped me are the other patients. And I think this is being at one with other people in the same boat, and how powerful that is.

I mean we are all different, we are all meant to be different. It was interesting that I have just been to a conference of Chaplains up at Brisbane, and they had speakers from the Jewish faith, from Islam, from aboriginal spirituality, and also Buddhist. And one of the commenters said, well you start to think there are so many differences between people, perhaps the differences are not an aberration, where God's actually failed, but actually God meant it to be. And that's an astonishing statement, coming from a good Church of England, where everybody had to be a white anglo catholic Church of England, straight, and (laughing) differences were never – and of course if we were all the same, it would be so easy to love everyone.

**Frank:** It would be boring!

**Christopher:** Well yes, it would be boring but it would be so easy; and life is not easy.

**Frank:** It's easy to hate though.

**Christopher:** Yes it is – well I'm not sure; it depends on how you look at it of course.

**Frank:** It's easier to travel when you're downhill than up.

**Christopher:** Something like that. It's interesting, I think a lot about the church, and much of my thoughts – often the church has gone through various reformations; I don't want the church to be reformed, I want the church to open itself to the world.

There is a wonderful story about the 99 sheep, and the one who goes off. And every time I've heard that, the church is the 99, and somebody wanders off from the church so God brings the person back to the church. The numbers are wrong: the world is the 99 and it's the people in the church who go off by themselves thinking they are better, and Jesus brings

them back to the world. For anyone who is religious, that is scandalous (laughs).

**Frank:** I was just thinking, if it was 100 years ago, you would be burnt.

**Christopher:** That's right, yes. But Jesus came to bring the religious back to the world, that is why he was crucified because he did it in the name of God.

**Frank:** Yes, it's just interesting, it was in a movie or something, I don't know where, but a little kid asks a mother – why are there so many different colors in the world, everybody's got different skin colors, it's the same with attitudes and behaviours.

**Christopher:** That's right.

**Frank:** Theories of life, and beliefs. She said, well God likes to paint with many colors; how boring would a painting be if it only had one color.

**Christopher:** That's right. There are lots of ways to avoid loving. The church has many of them. One of the most recent ones is to challenge other people, so rather than love them we challenge them. I have a hate for the word "challenge"; it only appears once in the bible, and that's because whenever somebody challenges God, because the root of challenge actually is a fight; it's not actually the mountain is there and the challenge is to climb it. It's not at all, that's a modern use of the word challenge. One of the things that the church often does rather than love people is to challenge other people; and they think they are doing God's will.

So a lot of my theology actually finds itself in critiquing the church, and how it is in fact an unloving, abusive place. And I've said it from the pulpit, we know what the problem with paedophiles are – they believe they are loving somebody who is a minor, and it is actually manipulating them and dominating them; but that is what the church wants to do all the time, in the name of God.

**Frank:** Strong words.

**Christopher:** Well they are in my sermon, I'm not just saying it; because we need to make sure that our love actually means something, and it's not self seeking.

**Frank:** See it's like that with the studies, the psychology, all they can do at the moment is operationally define what love is: they can't say what is love. These endorphins are flowing through the body, and this is what happens behaviourally; what happens up here, in the mind – that's another thing – they don't know that. With the studies that have shown the human can fight off diseases fast; they recover from behavioural problems faster, like depression, anxiety; it's almost as if God has said – those that love will heal yourself, and faster.

**Christopher:** Yes.

**Frank:** The body is designed in the way to work at its most optimum when it works around love.

**Christopher:** Yes. Well again, healing comes through being at one, and I'm sure that's the healthiest way to be. I am quite convinced of that; and it gets back to that physicality, that touch, and how important it is. It can't just be intellectual or emotional; it has to be physical too.

Well how does that sound?

**Frank:** Christopher, thank you very much.

**Christopher:** It's my pleasure.