Science has now allowed millions of humans to understand the strange orbit of Halley's comet, to predict its arrival, its brightness, and even penetrate the comet itself, wonder of wonders, send back images of its burning heart. To our living parents and grandparents, such scientific achievements join an already long list which, as my dad used to say, once existed only in Buck Rogers, the science fiction comic. Halley returned, though, to a world in which the results of science are perceived as a mixed blessing.

In the days before modern science developed, all kinds of ignorant "explanations" were proposed about Halley's appearance and meaning. It's amusing to read how hysteria about the comet's return in 1910 and 1834 included fears about the earth being enveloped in toxic "comet gas" or that the newly harnessed electricity would run riot under the comet's influence. Historically, comets have been interpreted as explanations for actual events. Some say the star of Bethlehem which, in Biblical myth, guided the three wise men to the infant Jesus could have been Halley in 11 BC; and the Romans interpreted comets as an omen of misfortune.

But can we afford to be superior today? Halley returns to a world in which superstition, not science, is gaining more acceptance. Subjects such as astrology ("What star are you?!) are being taken more seriously. Pseudo-science, such as creationism, is being taught in US and Australian schools. If the anti-scientific impulse was purely irrational it would be simple to dispose of. But millions of people are acutely aware that human life on the planet could end because of a pinnacle of scientific achievement being turned to the needs of war. Science fiction writers and futurologists of the 'fifties thought that science would be the New Religion, but, as they say in the scriptures, that has not come to pass.

Seeing Halley links us with previous generations of humans who have stared with wonder at the starry skies, but it also serves to emphasise that we are the first generation to see religion displaced from its central role as a unifying philosophy and world view.

The earliest days of human life saw not only a struggle to survive and eat, but also to understand. When lightning and thunder were beyond the understanding of early humans, they created gods in their own image to explain them. Today, the power of the human mind to explain the physical world has made enormous strides. Science appears triumphant, yet there still seems to be a need for something perceived as beyond the realm of the physical and material.

For a growing number, creationism, which is anti-scientific and denies the findings of evolution, acts as a rallying point for this need. It is connected to a fundamentalist religion that emphasises old-fashioned values and simple moral choices. Christian fundamentalism (and, for that matter, the Islamic variety, too) seems to be a backlash and an attempt at renewal from organised religion against the processes which have undermined it.

But, for others, the absence of religion in our culture is being filled by the environment movement which has a very practical side, but also taps the need for something akin to spirituality, in this case a relationship with Nature. At its most "cosmic", it is a form of nature worship, a mystical search for "oneness" and an individual solution to the world's problems. If you have shivered alone on top of one of the peaks of the Snowy Mountains at dawn, or watched the sun rise over the Olgas — or, perhaps, watched Halley travel across the Milky Way and the infinite heavens, then you may get a glimmer of this need.

Every society must have some form of religion, whether it is called that or not, to respond to the yearning for "the spiritual", and to provide a philosophy and values to live by. Perhaps creationism and the fundamentalist world view of which it is part will fill that need. Certainly that seems to be the case in parts of the USA. Or perhaps by the time Halley returns in 2062 it will be a form of environmentalism — a rationally based "worship" of nature — which will become one of the new, popular religions of the 21st century.

DAVID McKNIGHT
A QUINO AND THE LEFT

The early part of this year saw dramatic and unexpected changes to the Philippines government. While not dwelling too much on the details of the events, a brief outline will set the context for the current situation.

Prior to the February changeover, the Philippines was ruled by the Marcos dictatorship, strongly backed by the United States. However, Marcos was becoming increasingly politically isolated within the Philippines, and his attempt to maintain his 20-year stranglehold was marked by an increase in human rights abuses, and a failure to take account of the poverty of the mass of the Filipino people.

Marcos, now defeated and departed, called a snap election in November 1985, under pressure from his US backers who wanted to see at least a veneer of democracy and liberalisation in their largest military reserve in Asia.

Both the election campaign and the election itself were marked by violence and corruption, resulting in the massive upsurge of what is popularly called "People's Power". The upsurge was totally unexpected — by the US, the left, and the whole gamut of the Philippines political machinery. Even the church, which backed the upsurge, could not have known that it was possible. In fact, the US was repeatedly forced to modify its policy as events unfurled and the situation became more and more untenable for Marcos.

The triumph of the left would have been seen as an utter disaster by the US, and they resurrected the idea of a "third force" — an idea shelved in the aftermath of Viet Nam. The US, in finally backing the Aquino/Ramos/Enrile "alliance" hoped (as it still hopes) to give support to a third force which would float somewhere in between a dictatorship on the one hand, and communist insurgency on the other.

It is doubtful whether the US would have supported Aquino were it not for the defection of Juane Ponce Enrile and Fidel Ramos, both military leaders once firmly placed in the Marcos camp. Both men are heavily in favour of US bases and still control the Armed Force of the Philippines (AFP) a major stumbling block for the left and Aquino.

Aquino herself has remained neutral on the question of bases, agreeing to honour the current agreement and take a referendum of the people at the end of the lease.

Given the fragile situation which now exists in the Philippines, what can we expect from Aquino, and what hope is there for the left? Clearly, the US would prefer Aquino to outmanouevre the left, but whether she will, or wants to, is another question. It is unlikely, however, that her personal popularity, stemming as it does from a wave of resistance against Marcos and some sentimental support derived from the assassination of her husband, Ninoy, rather than in any firm belief in her capacity to change anything, will be enough. In fact, she is an unknown quantity to the majority of Filipinos.

We are left with a situation where the Philippines is still governed by a traditional elite, composed into a shaky coalition. Briefly, the power blocs can be identified as:

* The military, pro-US faction, led by Enrile and Ramos;
* the Catholic Church/Jesuit Mafia under the influence of Cardinal Sin;
* Laurel's (Prime Minister) Unido Party, very much a part of the ruling elite and fluctuating on the issue of bases (Laurel favours national plebiscite); and
* Aquino's Lakas ng Bayan, with a liberalisation/human rights philosophy but no party machinery to back it up.

There are a number of progressives within the administration, including Jose Diokno and Lorenzo Tanada, both human rights advocates, and others, who stood in opposition to the Marcos dictatorship.

While the direction Aquino takes is not predetermined, it is unlikely that

the landowning elite will allow her to really come to grips with the vital issue of land reform, an important prerequisite for changing the lives of the people in the rural areas. It should also be noted that Aquino's alliance with Enrile and Ramos is very fragile. In fact, Enrile has warned that the AFP "reform movement" would be "displeased" if he were fired from his position as Defence Minister.

The military remains intact and if, as it is expected, Aquino's attempts to promote land reform fail, the AFP will be a revitalised force to unleash against the New People's Army when they increase the armed struggle in the rural areas.

Aquino has already begun to implement reforms. For example, at the May Day rally in Manila this year, she announced a range of reforms to the labour code, promising to uphold ILO conventions and make changes to the labour laws. She is moving towards creating the middle ground that the US wants.

Some sections of the Philippines left predict an erosion of the middle ground that has emerged under Aquino, and an eventual return to civil war, resulting in a left victory. However, it is possible that the ruling classes will decide that there are long term gains to be made by measures of liberalisation.

Aquino's biggest stumbling block in the liberalisation program is the economy. The Philippines is the most indebted country in Asia. It has a massive investment in infrastructure but few profitable exports. It is under heavy pressure from the IMF/World Bank to implement austerity measures. For example, at the May Day rally in Manila this year, she announced a range of reforms to the labour code, promising to uphold ILO conventions and make changes to the labour laws. She is moving towards creating the middle ground that the US wants.

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The left finds itself in a complex situation and one for which it admitted it was unprepared. However, the current situation does provide a "holiday period" where the progressive and revolutionary forces can press on with open and legal struggle, riding on the momentum of people's power.
The Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), the leading force in the National Democratic Front, has called for a campaign that emphasises the close connection of fascism with imperialism and feudalism, linking also the questions of the people's economic welfare and their struggle against exploitation.

It is important that the CPP broadens its influence among the Filipino people, supporting the initiatives of the liberal and progressive forces both inside and outside government. It must support these initiatives whether or not they are closely co-ordinated with its own organisations and activities, and statements released by the CPP indicate that this is its current strategy.

It will work two ways, through working with and in the mass movements, the CPP can strengthen the movement and encourage its direction, and also strengthen itself.

Meanwhile, the legal left has to tread carefully the line between support for Aquino and maintaining its integrity and political clout. Currently, the major coalition of the mass movements, BAYAN, is giving critical support to the Aquino government, but maintaining its right to disagree and make progressive demands. BAYAN will also be looking to increase the depth of its support and building itself up for any future turn to the right.

SHERIL BERKOVITCH

GETTING TOGETHER BETTER THAN EVER

The Getting Together Conference held in Sydney over the Easter weekend attracted approximately five hundred delegates from all over Australia. The Tasmanian Wilderness Society must be given credit for the efforts they made to facilitate such a large-scale gathering of "greens" and other peace/environmental activists. Workshops were conducted on a wide range of subjects including the role of peace education, alternative investment strategies, alternative technology, deep ecology, eco-feminism, and the trade unions' relationship to ecology.

It was quite evident that the conference shared a deep concern, not just for conservation and disarmament, but also for issues of social justice such as Aboriginal land rights. The conference unanimously supported a proposal from the Broad Left Conference condemning the federal government for its backdown on land rights and its efforts to disband the Northern Lands Council.

The fact that the Getting Together Conference occurred simultaneously with the Broad Left Conference was probably accidental but nonetheless highlights the differences in the way solutions to current problems are seen by the two broad groupings involved. We should, however, be careful not to oversimplify the nature of the so-called "green" movement.

Just as the organised left in Australia is diverse so, too, there are many different interest groups who share a green perspective. That is, organisations and individuals with interests as diverse as conservation, animal liberation, Aboriginal land rights, feminism, anti-nuclear activism, green politics, alternative life styles, etc., strongly tend to share ideals which involve a nuclear-free Australia, a sound conservation program based on non-exploitative economic policies, and social justice. This consensus was apparent in a large number of broad policy resolutions passed unanimously (bar the odd philosophical quibble) at one of the plenary sessions.

Despite this apparent unity of aims, major differences emerged between green/green and red/green. Between the greens there are differences about political strategies. In a climate of deep political cynicism some held that all political structures were, by their nature, corrupting and that the peace movement was morally obliged not to participate in the formation of yet another hierarchy which would oppress minority groups. This perspective led to calls for non-violent civil disobedience and grassroots networking. Political action at the local council level was held to be effective, providing grassroots involvement was maintained. The other perspective was that some effective political structure is needed at both state and federal levels, and that this was indeed possible, given the broad agreements between greens.

This focus on grassroots activism is present also in the European Green Community where power has been directed away from parliamentary politics. The situation is different in Australia, however, since the closes we have to an organised green presence is Senator Jo Vallentine, the independent who ran for the Nuclear Disarmament Party in the last elections. There is room, therefore, for concern that large numbers of Australians will be disenfranchised at the next federal election. Despite these differences, and others, there is a strong sense of moral community, and an as yet loosely defined coalition of groups and individuals has emerged from the Coming Together Conference. In addition, a coalition newsletter is in process.

Many of those at the conference were familiar with the broad ideas of the left in Australia. There was sympathy with the left's concern for social justice and equity, but there was objection to the left's traditional emphasis on economic analysis. Increasingly, it is seen that the right and left are engaged in a struggle for the spoils of relatively unrestrained development — this struggle is seen as costing the earth. There is also frustration with the left's inability to use its trade union muscle, in particular to halt the export of uranium and to support ecological struggles. The philosophy and style of the "old left" (which remains a popular stereotype of left politics) is not an asset if you are green. Centralised
hierarchies, emphasis on labour at the expense of environment, and a high rate of in-fighting are actually some of the causes of the political disaffection which significantly facilitated the Getting Together Conference.

In some minds, though, a more important immediate concern is the ground shared by these two popular movements and whether some working alliance is possible between the left and the ecologically based protest which mostly occurs outside the framework of the organised left. The most promising of these common grounds is indicated in the Broad Left Conference's proposal to work towards policies based on environmentally sustainable economics. Current issues like the preservation of rainforests and the relocation of workers in the woodchip industry are matters that need cooperation between workers, unions and conservationists. Whatever shared antipathy to the conservative Hawke government there is should make that dialogue so much easier.

TOM JAGTENBERG

NATIONAL AGENDA FOR WOMEN

Women's organisations have until August to contribute to the federal government's National Agenda for Women. The agenda, announced in parliament last November by Prime Minister Hawke, is meant to establish a federal government program of action on women's issues up to the end of the century. In Hawkespeak, this means giving women "a choice ... a say ... a fair go".

The National Agenda was the result of the government's participation in the UN End of Decade for Women Conference last April. Around 500 women participated, representing an impressive diversity of organisations and views.

Among the hundreds of resolutions supported by conference participants (resolutions were adopted by majority votes) were calls for equal pay for women, universal and affordable child care, increases in family allowances and the abolition of the dependent spouse rebate, a single national superannuation scheme, and the introduction of unemployment benefits for married women and those in de facto relationships.

Senator Susan Ryan, the Minister assisting the Prime Minister on the Status of Women, speaking at the conference, appealed for women's organisations to avoid the "shopping list" mentality which lacked a thorough economic and political approach to issues. "It is not good enough for WEL to say: 'There are 200 things we want...we just want those 200 things or we will sell out.' This is unjustified criticism of the women's movement.

Whether the women's movement is willing or able to agree on a list priorities for government action to assist women is debatable. However, it is unrealistic to believe that various sections of the women's movement will postpone their programs for change or defer to the "greater good" of a National Agenda, just as it is unrealistic to expect the Wilderness Society to reduce its demands on government because the National Trust wants priority for the preservation of old buildings.

The accord is, in its own peculiar way, an agreed agenda for joint government/union movement action in a wide variety of areas from taxation to education, to wages and back. But government ministers would not deride it as a "shopping list" because it is intended to cover all those facets of government activity which affect Australian workers.

A National Agenda for women, though problematic, is not a bad idea. We can argue that an embryonic "agenda" already exists since the women's movement places great emphasis on discussing and changing ideas. Most women would find it a relatively easy task to list the areas in which they would support government action, those services which should receive additional funding, and so on. But there will be important variations in priorities and not all women will agree exactly on what is to be done.

Labor governments often seem to have difficulty in relating to movements. They see them as too demanding, as unrealistic, as unwilling to see the limitations which prevent governments from giving their all. The gender handicap: comparable worth demo, Melbourne, 1985.
Nevertheless, it is in the interests of the women's movements to participate with the Office of the Status of Women and Labor women parliamentarians to establish an agenda for action. It is a valuable tool for activists to know what governments are planning in advance. It wouldn't harm the government to know, either. 

But if the federal government is asking the women's movement to make a commitment to a National Agenda for Women, it must also be prepared to do the same. If the government continues its current economic programs it is difficult to believe that it will abide by any long-term plan to relocate resources so that women will get their "choice .... say .... fair go".

LOUISE CONNOR

AUSTRALIA'S PACIFIC CONNECTIONS

Australia's foreign policies towards the Pacific came under close scrutiny at a significant national conference held in Sydney over the Anzac Day weekend (April 25-27).

Organised by the Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific (NFIP) Committee, the conference, entitled "Australia's Pacific Connections: a Regional Analysis" attracted some 300 participants from all states. They included representatives from a wide range of church, aid, peace and trade union organisations, as well as many individual activists from peace, solidarity and Aboriginal groups.

Indigenous representatives contributed much insight and first-hand knowledge into the conference discussions about their struggles and the effects of Australia's policies in the Pacific island states.

Pacific speakers included Susanna Ounei from Kanaky (New Caledonia), representing the FLNKS; Julian Riklon from the Kwajalein Atoll Landowners Corporation in the Marshall Islands; Wadan Narsey from the Economics Department of the University of the South Pacific; and Amelia Rokotuivuna, an activist in the Fiji Anti-Nuclear Group. 

The issues of Aboriginal land rights and self-determination and the effects of nuclear testing were strongly presented by Pat Dodson from the National Federation of Land Councils and Archie Barton from the Maralinga Tjarutja. Karen Flick opened the conference and welcomed the Pacific guests on behalf of Aboriginal people.

Throughout the conference, participants were exposed to the reality of the direct connections between nuclear/military developments and self-determination/independence issues, in our region. Since the first Nuclear Free Pacific conference in Australia in 1980, a greater awareness about these links and about the significance of the Pacific region, has been growing among peace movement activists and the wider community.

The Pacific Connections Conference was a further step in the process of analysing Australia's role in the Pacific — politically, economically, culturally and militarily — and working towards alternatives. Seminars examined Australia's relationships with Indonesia and Papua New Guinea, France in the Pacific, the Pacific Economic Basin, Australian Aid Programs, Militarisation of the Pacific, the Superpower Arms Race and Australia's Defence and Foreign Policies.

Action/strategy oriented workshops covered a wide range of issues and campaigns which are under way. They were a valuable opportunity for better co-ordination and networking between activists involved in campaigns such as US Bases, nuclear warship visits, the nuclear fuel cycle, support for struggles in the Philippines, Micronesia and Kanaky, Aboriginal land rights, etc.

The conference clearly showed the significance of the NFIP movement which has developed over the last 5-6 years, not only in Australia but throughout the Pacific region. The issues inherent in the long-term goal of achieving a genuinely nuclear free and independent Pacific are now more widely understood within the Australian peace movement and other concerned organisations.

The conference opened up further possibilities and a renewed commitment to continue work around the many areas examined. Over the next few months, several campaigns will be undertaken including an International 'Disarm the Seas' action in June, work towards the South Pacific Forum in August, aimed at achieving a stronger South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty, and participation in an NFIP regional conference in Fiji prior to the Forum.

BEVERLEY SYMONS

Further information and Conference Report available from NFIP Committee, P.O. Box A243 Sydney South, NSW 2000. Phone (02) 267.2030.