Learningguild Letter

2.2004*

Dear members and friends of Learningguild,

For our annual day conference for 2004 in philosophy of religion, held on December 9th, we ventured into territory new for that conference. We took two authors notable in Judaism, Moses Maimonides of the twelfth century and Joseph Soloveitchik of the twentieth, and had two Jewish speakers to expound parts of their writings to us. They were Dr Michael Fagenblat of Monash University's Australian Centre for the Study of Jewish Civilization and Rabbi Ralph Ganende of Mt Scopus College. I heartily thank them for their willingness to assist us and for what they had to say. Unfortunately they felt obliged to tell me, in response to my later request, that they had not the time to write something for *Learningguild Letter* related to their talks. Hence I have set myself to read the standard English translation (that of Shlomo Pines) of Maimonides' *The Guide of the Perplexed* and to write here about some of its themes and passages, with a good deal of quotation, mainly so that readers may get much closer to him than if they were dependent on summaries from me, and to some extent test views I express. I hope that this letter will be taken as a further indication of Learningguild's interest in the study of works written by Jews, and of our welcome to Jews whether as members or as speakers, irrespective, of course, of their own particular standpoint within or outside Judaism. (In our Thursday seminar, which ran from 2003 to mid-2004, and ended because I found I could not sustain, along with other work, the leading of two seminars a week, we included among our books for study Rabbi Jonathan Sacks's *The Dignity of Difference*.)

For information on Maimonides' life I am largely indebted to an article in the famous British medical journal *The Lancet*! That is because Professor Sidney Bloch, Professor of Psychiatry in the University of Melbourne and working at St Vincent's Hospital (whom I heard speak at a conference on October 31st organized by Michael Fagenblat and others), has written in that journal, in 2001, on Maimonides as an exponent of holistic medicine. He sees him indeed as an antecedent of the biopsychosocial approach to medicine set out in the 20th century by Professor George Engel, in which the patient's own particular psychological characteristics and relations with others are regarded as crucial for healing. Though Maimonides stressed the importance for all of a good diet, plenty of exercise and clean air, he says "Any sick individual presents new problems." I shall gladly send a copy of this article to any reader who requests one.

Maimonides was born in 1135 in Spain, but persecution from a Muslim sect led to his family's move, when he was in his early teens, to Morocco and then, when he was 30, to Cairo. The death of his father and brother led him, already notable as a scholar in philosophy and theology, to study medicine in order to support his family. His reputation as a doctor so grew that he was appointed as the physician to the court of Saladin, the regent of Egypt; and he wrote ten medical works. He died in 1204.

He never ceased to be a philosopher and theologian, an interpreter of the Law and the Prophets who had learnt much from Aristotle about rational discussion. *The Guide of the Perplexed* is written, as we learn in the letter that opens it, for his advanced pupil Rabbi Joseph, as representative of those who like him had studied mathematics and then astronomy, and then logic, with its distinction (I.33) between demonstrative and non-demonstrative arguments. (The former, if valid, necessitate a conclusion on pain of self-contradiction, the latter do not and are of varying degrees of strength or weakness.) Joseph and others were liable to be perplexed by language used in the sacred writings about God, especially language that appeared to describe God in anthropomorphic ways and were so understood by "the multitude": it seemed to such a man that he had the choice between following his intellect and giving up his religion or maintaining his religion to the detriment of his intellect (Introduction to Part I, first paragraph). Maimonides therefore sets out to explain to Joseph four subjects, in this order: the real meaning of that language about God, whom it is essential to believe to be one and incorporeal; what is involved in being a prophet; what is to be believed concerning divine providence; and why, in relation to our human nature, the many scriptural commandments are as they are.

In a book written in Arabic, and later translated into Hebrew and Latin, and of which Pines's translation runs to 638 pages, the first subject is covered in 360 of them in Part I and II.1-31; the second in the rest of II and in a commentary (III.1-7) on the account of the Chariot at the beginning of the book of Ezekiel; the third in III.8-24; and the fourth in the rest of III. It is, I think, undeniable that, especially in dealing with his first subject, Maimonides did not sufficiently consider how he could best and most concisely expound the basic principles of dealing with anthropomorphic language concerning God, and that as a result the work is unduly long and not as systematic or (to judge from the translation) as eloquent or memorable as one might wish. I cannot recommend the reading of it as a whole; someone interested to read at least some, with the help of a table of contents, should go for that table to pp.xi-xiii of Leo Strauss's introductory article. (The book is in the Baillieu Library of the University of Melbourne: 181.3 M223.)

As is often best, let me deal first with some particular themes and passages that I admire in the work. Maimonides, like any good doctor, was shrewd and perceptive. He notices, for example (III.45), that in Numbers 4.19 there is a commandment that Aaron and his sons should appoint each of the Kohathites to his own particular task, and comments:

> For slackness and negligence in all things occur when various functions are entrusted to a group of people, and every individual has not his own particular work …

He has a passage in I.31 on habituation which should give us all pause: I should have preferred him to have applied it not only to "the multitude", of whom he comes close to despairing, but to himself and other deep thinkers who must nevertheless remind themselves of their own fallibility.

> … man has in his nature a love of, and an inclination for, that to which he is habituated. … man has love for, and the wish to defend, opinions to which he is habituated and in which he has been brought up and has a feeling of repulsion for opinions other than those. For this reason also man is blind to the apprehension of the true realities and inclines toward the things to which he is habituated. This happened to the multitude with regard to the belief in His corporeality and many other metaphysical subjects as we shall make clear.

That goes far to explain the common intractability of so many disagreements, especially over religion, morals, education and politics. It would be helpful if people who disagreed were more ready than they usually are to ask themselves and one another **how it came about** that they formed or maintained a particular body of belief, and only then discuss what reasons might be offered in its defence and against it.

Maimonides does not want to consider the commandments as arbitrary and inexplicable commands of God, for which no reasons need be sought. So he says (III.31):

> … every commandment from among these six hundred and thirteen commandments exists either with a view to communicating a correct opinion, or to putting an end to an unhealthy opinion, or to communicating a rule of justice, or to warding off an injustice, or to endowing men with a noble moral quality, or to warning them against an evil moral quality.

He opposes anthropocentrism at III.13:

> It should not be believed that all the beings exist for the sake of the existence of man. On the contrary, all the other beings too have been intended for their own sakes and not for the sake of something else.

He writes well in II.47 on the use of parables, hyperbole (allowable exaggeration, as in "The cities are great and walled up to heaven" at Deuteronomy 1.28) and figurative language: "I will blot him out of my book" (Exodus 32.33) does not mean

> that there exists a book belonging to Him, may He be exalted, in which He writes and from which He blots out, as is thought by the multitude because of their not being aware of the use of figurative language in [such passages].

He has written similarly about scriptural talk of the throne of God (I.9), God's dwelling with the children of Israel (I.25), the face of the Lord (I.37), and so on. He stresses God's unity and incorporeality throughout, and says that "the description of God

… by means of negations is the correct description" (I.58), since He is "above every attributive qualification" (I.55).

Maimonides' view of the scriptures is such that, though much is seen as needing explanation, nothing can be seen as defective. At I.54, writing in relation to the command in Deuteronomy 20 to "save alive nothing that breathes" in the idolatrous cities of the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, etc., he says on the one hand, admirably, that

> it behooves that acts of mercy, forgiveness, pity, and commiseration should proceed from the governor of a city to a much greater extent than acts of retaliation,

pointing out that the characteristics attributed to the Lord in Exodus 34 are all characteristics of mercy, with only one exception, "visiting the iniquities of the fathers upon the children". Having mentioned that exception, however, he refers to the commandment against idolatry in Exodus 20, takes idolatry to be the iniquity in question, and then, having quoted from that chapter the warning (also in Ch.34), which he ascribes directly to God, that such iniquity will be visited (i.e. punished) "unto the third and fourth generation", he writes the following explanation of a command made "with a view to blotting out traces that bring about necessarily great corruption".

> He restricts Himself to the fourth generation only because the utmost of what man can see of his offspring is the fourth generation. … Scripture, as it were, predicated of Him that His commandments, may He be exalted, … comprise the commandment to kill the offspring of idolaters, even if they are little children, together with the multitude of their fathers and grandfathers.

There is no thought here of the possibility that the writers or compilers of these passages in Exodus and Deuteronomy were fallible men who failed to see that the will of an all-loving God would not be that Israelites should kill idolaters, let alone their children, grandchildren and infant great-grandchildren. Nor women called witches: but many Christians used to take as authoritative the fateful sentence at Exodus 22.18. What a limitation it can be on human thought and sympathy, and even on respect for other human beings, to believe in an infallible Book.

Maimonides cannot extend his recognition of exaggeration to the statements made in Genesis about the lives of early men: we are told of Noah, for example, at the end of Ch.9 that he died at the age of 950. The doctor is, I think, uneasy in writing, at II.47:

> As for the precise statements made by the texts of the Torah regarding the length of life of certain individuals, I say that only that individual who is mentioned lived so long a life, whereas the other men lived lives that had the natural and usual duration. The anomaly in the individual in question may be due either to numerous causes attaching to his nutrition and his regimen or is due to a miracle and follows the laws thereof. It is not possible to say of this anything else.

Like many Christians down the centuries, Maimonides cannot regard the story in Genesis 22 of Abraham's binding of his son Isaac upon an altar, with a view to obeying what he took to be God's command to kill him (but an angel intervenes and a ram is sacrificed instead, since Abraham has proved that he reveres God) as anything other than an amazing illustration of how far obedience to God's commands can go.

> … because of his fear of Him, who should be exalted, and because of his love to carry out His command, he holds this beloved son as little, gives up all his hopes regarding him, and hastens to slaughter him after a journey of days. For if he had chosen to do this immediately, as soon as the order came to him, it would have been an act of stupefaction and disturbance in the absence of exhaustive reflection. But his doing it days after the command had come to him shows that the act sprang from thought, correct understanding, consideration of the truth of His command, may he be exalted, love of Him, and fear of Him.
>
> (III.24)

I turn now to Maimonides' treatment of the subject of circumcision, presented in Genesis 17 as the sign of the covenant of God with Abraham and his descendants. How significant it is of what is best and most universalist in Judaism that Rabbi Isidore Epstein, on the strength of the inclusion of foreigners who had been bought, and the new name 'Abraham', should say in his Pelican Book *Judaism* (1959, p.14):

> Primarily intended as a national mark of consecration to the service of God, the rite provided for the inclusion within its scope of all strangers who were willing to join the Abramic nation in this communion of service …. … Literally meaning 'the father of a multitude [of nations]', this new name signified that the promises under the covenant went far beyond those who were the Patriarch's physical descendants, and embraced all the families of the earth, who were to be blessed in him and in his seed.

How different is Maimonides' explanation of the rite (III.49), though it seems that the third reason he gives for it, quoting from Genesis 17.7, leads him, rightly, to think that perhaps it is stronger than the one he had put first! We shall consider after reading his three reasons what view of human nature disposes him towards that first reason. I should think that the word translated 'people' should be rendered by 'men'.

> … one of the reasons for it is, in my opinion, the wish to bring about a decrease in sexual intercourse and a weakening of the organ in question, so that this activity be diminished and the organ be in as quiet a state as possible. … The Sages … have explicitly stated: *It is hard for a woman with whom an uncircumcised man has had intercourse to separate from him.* In my opinion this is the strongest of the reasons for circumcision. … According to me circumcision has another very important meaning, namely, that all people professing this opinion ─ that is, those who believe in the unity of God ─ should have a bodily sign uniting them so that one who does not belong to them should not be able to claim that he was one of them ….

> … everyone who is circumcised joins Abraham's covenant. This covenant imposes the obligation to believe in the unity of God: *To be a God unto thee and to thy seed after thee*. This also is a strong reason, as strong as the first, which may be adduced to account for circumcision; perhaps it is even stronger than the first.

In the Introduction to Part One we have the clue to a great deal of Maimonides' thought, doctor as he was; and it may well remind us of the extreme aversion to the body, as a distraction to and misleader of the *psuchē*, which is, doubly unjustifiably, put into the mouth of Socrates by Plato in the *Phaedo*.

> … all the hindrances keeping man from his ultimate perfection, every deficiency affecting him and every disobedience, come to him from his matter alone ….

The great influence of Plato and especially Aristotle on the philosophical milieu in which Maimonides lived goes a considerable way to explain this unbalanced view. But his view of sex was not confined to him, and many Christians, and of course many others, have been as far as he was from a readiness to delight in the body of their partner. How much loss and frustration for both wife and husband is suggested by the quotation in III.52: "the way of our most renowned Sages with their wives: *One uncovers a handbreadth and covers up a handbreadth*".

Rightly Maimonides, when he writes on providence, attends to the book of Job, whose complexity he treats vividly (III.23). In Chapter 17 he has valuably reviewed five different views concerning providence. His own is that God has a general but not a particular providence for plants and animals, but that "divine providence watches only over the individuals belonging to the human species and … in this species alone all the circumstances of the individuals and the good and evil that befall them are consequent upon the deserts …". As Professor A. Boyce Gibson remarked to us in Philosophy I, in 1953, with reference to Psalm 37.25, "The Psalmist who said that he had not seen the righteous forsaken nor his children begging bread was singularly unobservant." Concerning natural disasters or congenital illnesses, Maimonides tries to take comfort in their rarity, as perhaps some theists are tempted to do in the face of December's tsunami:

> … you will find that the evils of this kind that befall men are very few and occur only seldom. For you will find cities, existing for thousands of years, that have never been flooded or burned. … the birth of an infirm human being is an anomaly, or at least … such an individual is very rare …. (III.12)

I conclude with two criticisms of kinds which Kant might have made. The bond between you and God is, says Maimonides to his pupil, the intellect (III.51); and "the perfection of the moral virtues" is a lesser one than "the true human perfection … the acquisition of the rational virtues" (III.54). The reason given is that "all moral habits are concerned with what occurs between a human individual and someone else". The prophets (conspicuously, Jeremiah at 22.16) would not thus have underestimated those habits or those occurrences; but moral habits such as moderation and an inner truthfulness are in any case intrinsic to clear thinking and personal development (and so to any

valuable discipleship). At III.49 Maimonides puts a view that has, one might venture to say, been as prominent among Jews, and as harmful, as an insistence on "saving faith" has been among Christians, though neither has been universally maintained. He goes so far as to say:

> … fraternal sentiments and mutual love and mutual help can be found in their perfect form only among those who are related by their ancestry. Accordingly a single tribe that is united through a common ancestor ─ even if he is remote ─ because of this, love one another, help one another, and have pity on one another; and the attainment of these things is the greatest purpose of the Law. Hence harlots are prohibited, because through them lines of ancestry are destroyed.

How much better to say that the grateful and wonderful development of partnerships, families, and **open** societies characterized by mutual love, help and sympathy (and honesty in discussion) is an indispensable end to pursue. But let us never forget how pernicious in itself and its consequences has been the readiness of so many non-Jews to exclude, persecute and even slaughter Jews merely because they were Jews.

Yours,

John Howes

Tsukuba City
and travelling by train and bus in Japan

MAX STEPHENS, *a member of Learningguild, had some years of teaching mathematics in Victorian high schools before many more of guiding teachers and prospective teachers, as a school inspector and then as a lecturer at Melbourne, La Trobe and Monash Universities and at the Australian Catholic University in Melbourne. Through numerous visits he has become well known to many Japanese educators.*

In 2004 I spent four months in Japan as a visiting professor at the University of Tsukuba. I had been to Tsukuba several times before, on shorter visits to Japan. On these occasions I was escorted by my hosts (or by a student dispatched to meet me) by train or bus from Tokyo without having to attend to the precise details of which train to take or where to board the bus. This time I was expected to be more self-reliant.

Tsukuba City is about 60 kilometres from Tokyo and about the same distance north-east of Narita airport – the main port of entry into Japan. The decision to create Tsukuba Science City was made by the national government in the late 1960s, when land

was acquired from several villages and towns in Ibaraki Prefecture. Tsukuba Town existed before as one of the six towns and villages that were merged to become the Science City. In this sense, Tsukuba is a planned city, with large areas of land reserved for the University of Tsukuba and half a dozen national scientific agencies, such as Japan's Aeronautical and Space Agency, the National Materials Testing Laboratory, and the National High Energy Physics Laboratory.

This concentration of national agencies in one city is quite different from what is possible in Australia. Here, each one of the states (and territories) is expected to lobby strenuously and loudly to have a large national agency located within its own borders. They have been successful, for the most part, in having government agencies dispersed around the country.

Prefectures in Japan seem to operate as regional authorities and are answerable to the national government. In the late 1960s the national government announced that Tokyo Education University would be relocated to Tsukuba. The new University of Tsukuba was founded in 1973, to include not only a school of education but also schools of engineering, science and business, a medical school and teaching hospitals, and a college of nursing.

Some locals told me that during the 1960s Tokyo Education University had been a hotbed of union activity and anti-government feeling, and so the government rather liked the idea of having it placed in what was then a collection of rice fields in rural Ibaraki. Moreover, Ibaraki prefecture has long been associated with conservative politics in Japan. Mito, its major city, was the last stronghold of the Tokugawa family in the 1860s as reform swept through Japan, culminating in the abdication of the Tokugawa Shogun, restoration of the authority of the emperor (the Meiji restoration) in 1867, and the institution of modern forms of government. Tsukuba University, like the Science City, has been well endowed and relatively well planned from the outset.

The planners made one mistake. They made no provision for a direct rail link to Tsukuba City. They assumed that travelling 60 kilometres or so to Tokyo by car or bus would be quite straightforward. During the World Expo of 1985 visitors from all over Japan and overseas were able to take a train to a specially created railway station, Hitachi no Ushiku, on the Mito line, and then a bus for a ride of 20-30 minutes to the World Expo site in the centre of Tsukuba. The Expo provided the final push for the merging of towns and villages, and in 1987 Tsukuba City became the twentieth new city in Ibaraki prefecture and the 655th new city in Japan. Today its population is over 200,000. For commuters from Tsukuba City, Hitachi no Ushiku station has a large all-day car park, but that station is of little help if one lacks a car.

Over the past twenty years, the planners seem to have underestimated the impact of an ever-expanding flow of road traffic into and out of the mega-city Tokyo. Even with elevated freeways, traffic flow can be quite unpredictable, especially when it is inward. Merging toll roads, peak periods, and the narrowing of traffic lanes – from three and four lanes to two as one gets further in – can be a recipe for delay. A traffic bottleneck, or worse still a motor breakdown, can bring traffic flow to a slow trickle or a stop. My worst experience was a three-and-a-half-hour bus trip into Tokyo on a Sunday afternoon. I decided after that to go there by train whenever possible.

I found it convenient and reliable to take first a twenty-minute bus ride from Tsukuba Centre to Tsuchiura station, the nearest express station on the Mito line. Regular express trains could take me from there to central Tokyo in just over 40 minutes. Express trains were frequent and on time. With good connections, I could be in Tokyo in an hour and a half. (Travelling the other way was less prone to delay. A bus trip from Tokyo Station to Tsukuba Centre usually took an hour and ten minutes.)

As my bus drove into Tsuchiura City, I often wondered what the locals thought of the arrival of Tsukuba Science City just over thirty years ago. The huge expenditure on facilities and infrastructure here seemed to me to have occurred at Tsuchiura's cost. During World War II, it was a thriving town and major military depot. Today, it has several medium-sized office buildings and a large railway station, but none of the glamour of Tsukuba City. It looks like many other ageing Japanese cities.

In September 2005, a direct rail link between Tsukuba City and Tokyo will open. The privately funded Tsukuba Express, traversing Chiba Prefecture, is expected to get travellers to Ikebukuro station in Tokyo in less than 40 minutes. Many Japanese commuters spend far more time than that coming into Tokyo each day from their homes. My guess is that the advent of the Tsukuba Express will attract more people to come to live in Tsukuba and its own growing suburbs. The inducements are considerable. Land is far less expensive in Tsukuba than in Tokyo. House blocks are comparable in size to those in outer suburban Melbourne. The city has an excellent school system which feeds into a top-class government-funded university. So it will be possible for people to work in Tokyo and at the same time enjoy all the advantages of clean air and living outside the capital.

Travelling by train in and around Tokyo made me think how much our public transport planners could learn from Japan. Trains are invariably on time and frequent. Stations are well manned, usually with a small office at each checkout where people can speak to a station official. Even with quite sophisticated electronic ticketing, there is always someone whom one can ask for help or tell of a difficulty.

There are several options for paying. For travelling on Japan Rail's suburban lines, I obtained a plastic *Suica* Card which carried a pre-paid cash balance that could be topped up electronically at a special machine when the balance became low. No need to buy or find out the price of a suburban ticket. One simply placed the card on or near a sensor at each check-in or checkout. On first checking in, a standard amount was deducted from the card – according to the minimum cost of a journey. At one's destination, a small screen at the checkout showed how much the trip had actually cost, and the remaining balance.

It is still possible for people to buy an electronic ticket for each trip. A map above ticketing machines indicates costs to other stations along the line. If one makes a mistake or decides to get off somewhere further along the line, there is a machine before checking out which allows one to "top up" to the correct fare. For a foreign person who may not be sure how much to pay, it is easy to go to a side office and ask for help. No need for ticket inspectors and no possibility of fare evasion. The system is efficient and simply assumes that travellers are honest.

When I returned to Japan in 2005, for a short visit, I found that my *Suica* card simply failed to work. This happened at a very small station. The station attendant advised me to take my defective card to my nearest station, in this case Hitachi no Ushiku. I thought that this was all unnecessary. Why couldn't I buy a new card on the spot? Perhaps new cards were not available at small stations. "Typical Japanese bureaucracy!" I thought. When I presented the card at Hitachi no Ushiku station, I was told to come back next day. I was even more confused.

I tried not to appear exasperated. It's one of my bad habits at times to play the part of an exasperated foreign visitor. This is not surprising when a foreign speaker of Japanese is faced with an unfamiliar context and just doesn't know the right words to frame a question or a comment. My cross behaviour and angry words, mixing Japanese and English, surely create a bad impression on the usually very patient Japanese.

The next day, a graduate student from Tsukuba kindly offered to drive me to the station to pick up my new *Suica* card. It became clear why the delay had occurred and why I had not been issued with a new card (and a zero balance) when I reported the trouble. The staff at Hitachi no Ushiku station had identified my defective card on their computing system, and found that from 2004, seven months earlier, there was an unspent balance of 740 yen (about $9 AUS). This amount needed to be transferred to a new card. Only then could my defective card be disposed of, and a new one issued with the carry-over balance. I thought that this was a wonderfully efficient and fair service. Would this happen in Australia?

A weakness of an electronic ticketing system is that it is not always possible to get a receipt for train travel. Rail and bus travel is expensive, and I wanted to be in a position to include necessary expenses in my tax statement. A receipt was always available on request when buying a ticket from a JR Ticket Office. Receipts for bus travel from Tokyo station seemed to depend on the driver.

Travelling back to Tokyo by bus from a conference, I bought a ticket at the bus station. It came with an attached receipt stub. On boarding, I gave the driver the main part of my ticket, and kept the stub. So far so good. Sometimes people got onto the bus and paid cash. As we drew near Tokyo, a young lady who was the attendant came through collecting stubs. I made the excuse that this was my receipt, and that I needed to keep it. She explained through a passenger that she needed the stubs for her records. "Please give me a receipt, then", I asked. "We don't give receipts on this bus", she replied, as if it this was something I should have known. I quickly became the exasperated Western traveller, asking for a receipt in simple but firm Japanese. An elderly Japanese man sitting across the aisle became quite distressed and shouted at me "When in Rome!".

Of course, I knew what he was implying by these three words. "Please mind your own business!" was what he got back. No point blaming the young lady. She had to complete her records. So at the last stop, Tokyo Station, I decided to ask the driver and attendant quite politely if they would write a receipt for me – even in Japanese characters, so long as it gave the date and the amount.

I had to wait to get their attention after everyone else got off the bus. The driver and the attendant were speaking with another passenger, a young Japanese woman, for at least five minutes. "This is taking far too long", I thought. Maybe I should just leave. Then I picked up from their conversation that they assumed that the young woman and I were travelling together.

Maybe it was a gesture that helped to disclose their assumption. I said that I wasn't connected with her at all. "Could they please write a receipt for me by hand?" I could say that in simple Japanese quite easily. I even had some notepaper if they needed it. The young woman then turned to me and said, "That is what I have been trying to say to them on your behalf." She had been pleading my case all the time I had been waiting. She said "These bus companies can be very inflexible. I told them that they should write a receipt for you by hand. It's a perfectly reasonable request." Yes, they wrote a receipt. Not entirely happily, I guessed, but with a sense of resignation after the representations made by my "advocate". They couldn't treat her as a difficult foreign person. (The Japanese have an unflattering expression, '*komata gaijin*' – 'such a person should know better'.)

I thanked them all, especially the young woman who stayed behind and spoke up for me. She had expressed her views calmly and politely. There were no raised voices. I never cease to be surprised by Japan. It is possible to become more self-reliant there, but never completely so. It is Japan, not Australia.

By train to Simla and Mysore

ERIC SIBLY, *a member of Learningguild who is one of six stationmasters at Box Hill in Melbourne, wrote not long ago about his train journeys in India in 2002 (see* L'g L *1.2003). He was there again two years later, and gives us this report, mainly on the Simla narrow-gauge railway and the Mysore Palace.*

With two Anglo-Indian friends who live in Chennai (formerly Madras), I travelled by train in India for 2½ weeks in September 2004, over distances totalling 7060 km. The trains were mostly hauled by electric locomotives drawing current from overhead wires. From Chennai we went first to the twin cities of Hyderabad and Secunderabad, and thence to Agra, to Jhansi for the famous Hindu temples at Khajuraho, and New Delhi. Thence we had a return trip north to Kalka and Simla. After that we headed south-west to Mumbai, then south to Goa, where we stayed at Margao (Madgaon) and the industrial town named after the first European navigator to reach India, Vasco da Gama of Portugal. Our last journeys were to Bangalore and Mysore in the state of Karnataka, and back to Chennai.

Fares were about the same as when I was in India in 2002, or lower, and persons aged 60 and over receive, on documentary proof of age, a 30% concession on all but the cheapest fares.

A highlight was our return journey on the narrow-gauge railway (2'6") from Kalka, 264km from Delhi and 2100 feet above sea level, to Simla (6800 feet) in the mountains of Western Himalaya. Simla, now with a population of 123,000, is the former British summer capital of India, to which the Raj administrators resorted because of the intense heat of New Delhi's summers. The Simla Railway was opened in 1903, is 96km long, and has 102 tunnels (the longest 3752 feet, over 1100 metres) and 869 bridges! The steepest grades are 1 in 33. We had departed New Delhi at 6am on the express Himalayan Queen, which had originated in Mumbai. Such main lines have the broad gauge of 5'6". We arrived at Kalka at 11.20, and the connecting narrow-gauge train to Simla left at 12.10 and arrived at 5.20.

The gem of my Indian holiday was a visit to the Mysore Palace, completed by the British in 1912 for the Maharajah of Mysore. The name of this State was changed to Karnataka in 1973. When India became a republic in 1947, the then Maharajah was so popular that he was elected Governor of Mysore State in 1956. His family still live in the rear part of the Palace, which has three storeys. The main rooms in the front are open to the public daily. In one large and beautifully built room, a series of magnificent wall paintings depicts life in Mysore in the early 20th century. There are Hindu temples in the very large grounds, and also accommodation for about twenty cows and six ceremonial elephants.

In all my Indian travels, in 2002 and 2004, I did not see one road collision nor any pedestrian knocked over. This seems to me amazing, considering that there are few traffic lights in India. The unwritten rule of "Give way to the stronger or faster vehicle" is widely followed. Traffic is very noisy: the tooting from cars, motorcycles and bicycles can be overwhelming.

India is very cheap for Australian tourists as basic costs are approximately 10% of what they are here. It is an immensely interesting country, not least, for us, because much of it mirrors the life of Australia a century and more ago. There is still much animal-drawn transport, even in city streets. English is widely spoken, written and displayed, so that Australians are likely to have little difficulty.

Learningguild is continuing its support for two schools in India, one in Bharatpur, near Agra, and the other in the Okhla Industrial Estate in Delhi. Stephen Howes, one of our members, wrote about the latter in L'g L *2.2003. After six-and-a-half years in India he and Clare and their four boys will come to Canberra in July 2005, where he will be an economic adviser to Ausaid.*

WHAT'S A GOOD INTRODUCTION TO … *MYTHOLOGY?*

ANDREW THORNTON, *a member of Learningguild who in 2004 completed a B.Sc course at Deakin, mainly in mathematics, has wide interests that include chess, astronomy, the life and writings of Churchill, and English grammar, as well as the subject on which he writes here. The book is* **Mythology: An Illustrated Encyclopedia**, *edited by Richard Cavendish, and published by Black Cat (an imprint of Macdonald and Co.) in London in 1987.*

This collection of illustrated essays, arranged in geographical sections, is in my opinion an excellent introduction to the mythological ideas and symbols found in different countries. Each of the thirty essays in a book of about 300 pages is by someone qualified in that particular area of myth or religion. There are commentaries on myths in Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and all other major religions. Less well-known religions and cultures are also covered.

After a brief introduction we go first to Asia: the chapters deal respectively with myths in Hinduism, Theravada Buddhism and Zoroastrianism, and then those found in Tibet, China and Japan. The second section, on the Middle East, moves from Mesopotamia to Syria and Palestine, and then Egypt, and ends with a chapter on Islam. The third, "The West", describes myths in ancient Greece and Rome, and then in the mystery religions and Christianity. (A separate chapter ought to have been devoted to myths in Judaism.) It also considers myths among the Celts and the Slavs and in Scandinavia, Germany, and Armenia, Georgia and the Caucasus. The section on Africa is divided into regions: central and southern, east, and west. The fifth section, "The Americas", has chapters on the North American Indians, what is called "Middle America" (Mexico and the central region), the Incas, tropical South America, and Voodoo. Finally we have "The Pacific": Polynesia and Micronesia, Melanesia, and Australia. In that last chapter Catherine Berndt, an anthropologist at UWA, writes about aboriginal mythology.

The chapter on the myths of Christianity is a typical one. The author is Richard Cavendish, the editor of this encyclopedia. He has written books on such subjects as alchemy and the Grail and their association with Christianity. He begins with this paragraph:

> It is not the purpose of this article to argue that the doctrines of Christianity are untrue, or for that matter to argue the contrary. Christianity contains myths, in the sense of powerful and impressive stories about the world and the human condition which were for centuries generally believed to be literally true, but which few Christians any longer regard in that light. This is not to the discredit of Christianity or of millions of faithful Christians in the past. A great myth, like a great poem, contains truth more profound than the literal.

Cavendish faces the difficult task of discussing Christian history and mythology while maintaining a reasonable degree of objectivity. The temptation to let one's own opinion of Christianity taint the discussion must be enormous. Yet I think that he succeeds admirably in achieving a fair, balanced presentation. He provides on his first page a useful map showing the extension of Christianity in and beyond Europe from 600 CE to 1300, and deals successively with the Genesis myths of Creation and Fall and myths concerning Paradise, heaven, hell, and the Devil. Then he turns to the Grail, alchemy, and "the witch mania".

He has said on p.9 in his introduction to the book that

> A myth is a story or tradition which claims to enshrine a fundamental truth about the world and human life, which is regarded in its own milieu as authoritative, but whose truth is not literal, historical or scientific,

and so he covers not only cosmological myths but what he calls "the myth of the organized conspiracy" which he says lay "at the heart of the witch mania" (p.169). Such a myth involved belief in the Devil. When he goes on to say that in the 20th century this myth "has played its part in anti-semitism, in the Nazi atrocities in Germany, and in the persecution of supposed enemies of society in America and behind the Iron Curtain", he is perhaps too readily linking widespread belief in a myth to widespread suspicion and hostility.

The illustrations and photographs throughout the book are superb. They leap from the page: the drawings of heaven and hell, the figurines of the Incas, the photographs of the Brazilian Kamiura tribe in traditional dress, and the amazing ceremonial shield of the Papua New Guinean people. Most of the photographs and drawings are in full colour; only the older photographs are in black and white. The Japanese drawings of Taoist deities are beautifully done in pastel colours. Each image has also been chosen thoughtfully to complement the essay around it. A good example is the placing of the Tibetan Wheel of Life on p.51 next to a paragraph headed "Origins of the World".

The language in all chapters is kept as simple as possible: a technical term is used only if it is necessary. Many of the essays present complex mythologies, such as those involving a group of deities, by way of a numbered list. A glossary of technical terms is provided on p.292. The authors do justice to the complexities without burying the reader in abstruse words. I recommend the book to all who would like to dip their toes into mythological waters for the first time.