

THE AUSTRALIAN ATHEIST



ATHEISM:

is the acceptance that there is no credible scientific or factually reliable evidence for the existence of a god, gods or the supernatural.

PHILOSOPHY

The Atheist Foundation of Australia recognises scientific method as the only rational means toward understanding reality. To question and critically examine all ideas, testing them in the light of experiment, leads to the discovery of facts.

As there is no scientific evidence for supernatural phenomena, atheists reject belief in 'God', gods and other supernatural beings. The universe, the world in which we live, and the evolution of life, are entirely natural occurrences.

No personality or mind can exist without the process of living matter to sustain it. We have only one life - here and now. All that remains after a person dies is the memory of their life and deeds in the minds of those who live.

Atheists reject superstition and prejudice along with the irrational fears they cause. We recognise the complexity and interdependence of life on this planet. As rational and ethical beings we accept the challenge of making a creative and responsible contribution to life.

AIMS

To encourage and to provide a means of expression for informed free-thought on philosophical and social issues.

To safeguard the rights of all non-religious people.

To serve as a focal point for the fellowship of non-religious people.

To offer reliable information in place of superstition and to offer the methodology of reason in place of faith so as to enable people to take responsibility for the fullest development of their potential as human beings.

To promote atheism.

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FROM THE EDITOR

It is my very great pleasure to be involved with this first publication of THE AUSTRALIAN ATHEIST in the new format. The truth is that almost all of the work for this first issue has been carried out by Lee. I need to add that this was not through wilful dereliction of duty on my part, but mainly the fact that I have been heavily occupied of late with work-related and other private issues, and have simply not been around the place long enough to pitch in. Lee has not only designed the logo and layout for the new magazine, and co-ordinated it all with the printers, but has done all of the leg work involved in assembling and editing the various articles. Thanks Lee, for doing my job and making me look good!

Carl Sagan's book *The Demon Haunted World* has a chapter called "No Such Thing as a Dumb Question". The thrust is the 'dumbing down' of society, particularly in relation to science and mathematics. As Sagan says, there is "the impression that science or mathematics won't buy you a sports car". In a recent editorial in the *Adelaide Advertiser* the editor lamented the 'dumbing down' of science, yet this newspaper, along with most others, still allows the publication of horoscopes and a 'Quote of the Day' from the Bible.

The following statistics from Sagan's book refer to the USA. I don't know the equivalent figures for Australia, but would not be surprised if they are similar. In Algebra testing of 17 year olds from many countries, the USA ranked last. In a Chemistry test the USA was third last out of 13 countries. "South Korean students were far ahead of American students in all aspects of mathematics and science...Sixty-three per cent of American adults are unaware that the last dinosaur died before the first human arose..." Polls show that "something like half of American adults do not know that the Earth goes around the Sun...Only nine per cent of Americans accept the central finding of modern biology that human beings...have slowly evolved by natural processes ..."

In Issue 12 (Dec 2006-Jan 2007) of the science magazine, *COSMOS*, the guest editorial is written by Dr Alan Finkel, executive publisher and co-founder of *Lunar Media*. He raises this matter in a slightly different way, pointing out that if we are to have a more rational debate about issues such as water resources, global warming, nuclear power and so on, we need to "...teach our children – and our politicians, lawyers, accountants, carpenters, engineers, doctors, economists and taxi drivers – to understand how scientific theories work..." and to "understand the nature of science and how it is different from belief...".

What can be done about this? I don't see how we can re-educate adults in general who did not pursue science during their high school or university education. But for the future we could make 'basic science' a mandatory subject in school.

The 'basic science' I propose is 'popular science' available to the non-scientist, such as myself. Books by authors Richard Dawkins, Graham Greene, Carl Sagan and John Gribbin make science accessible to the general public. You don't need to be able to write out the equations of general relativity to appreciate the grandeur of the theory. You can get a sense of the amazing (and counter-intuitive) behaviour of sub-atomic particles without having studied quantum mechanics. For school students we need lessons which are the equivalent of these popular science books – no complex mathematics or unintelligible scientific jargon, just some basic ideas about the scientific method, and about cosmology, genetics, the structure of matter, evolution and so on, presented in a way that gets across some essential understanding to all students, and perhaps inspiring more to pursue a career in science.

I can think of no better way to improve the chances of future generations being able to reduce the negative influence of religious ideas on society than to ensure that our education system churns out people who have at the very least a grasp of elementary scientific principles. How else do we expect to have a sensible debate about subjects such as therapeutic cloning, evolution, the use of abortion drugs, same sex-marriage, and many others?

Dennis

Letters to the Editor

I cannot remember how many times, during my eighty years plus on this planet, I have been reminded by Christians of the 'fact' that Atheists, when finally confronted with 'meeting their maker' always convert to the 'compassionate love of the Lord Jesus Christ'. Well – my chance came on October 21, when, after a long and complicated operation, my urologist told me “You have a rare, aggressive and inoperable cancer of the bladder and there is nothing more I can do”
BOOM!

Not many hours later, while still in recovery, I had a visit from an angel from the administration of the hospital. She asked me if I would like 'spiritual counselling'. This, despite the fact I had registered as an Atheist. In the most tactful and diplomatic language I could manage I politely told this emissary from God that if some pale-faced, snake-oil salesman, social predator wearing a long dress slithered into my room and tried to talk dirty talk in my Shelley Pinks I would toss him out the third floor window.

Since that eventful day my emotions have been on a roller coaster hovering between suicidal depression to exhilarating optimism but not once did my thoughts ever turn to religion in any form or shape.

The only faith I have now is in the radiotherapy which commences in December.

MYTH BUSTED!

Rhys Watkins



Dear Ms. Holmes and the committee,

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for accepting me into the Atheist Foundation of Australia. It was with great delight that I found out about this organisation one evening while doing research for a university assignment. I have always taken a fairly lackadaisical attitude to politics and religion in general. However, over the past few years, having been more aware of a lot of the unreasoned, vitriolic hatred of atheists, I felt it was time to seek out other like-minded individuals.

I have had an interesting history with religion. Two groups came to loggerheads, my fairly conservative grandfather, who demanded I be christened in his church (Serbian Orthodox) and my parents who preferred that I was christened in the Anglican church. The result was, I was never christened. Over the years I developed my own view on religion and in my early teenage years, I decided that atheism was the only view I could agree and identify with.

However, my grandfather is quite spiteful and a few years ago refused to give my father a mention in his Will, unless I was christened. In 2005, he finally got his wish and I went through the motions at the ceremony, to help out my father. It appals me that this sort of snide, under-handed dealing occurs in the name of a religion that touts itself as all loving and all welcoming.

I have enjoyed the 'Newsletters' and issues of 'The Australian Atheist' I have received so far, and look forward to the new format publication in 2007. Thank you and keep up the good work!

Sincerely,
Lee from WA



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I joined you guys a month or so ago and didn't realise an Australian group like yours existed. I found the Australian Skeptics some time ago and I said to them as I will say to you guys it's my equivalent of finally finding my tribe.

I am a life-time Atheist. I was introduced to formal religion at Kindergarten in Sydney's west some time around 1963 or 64. We had an Anglican minister trying to sell us on the benefits of God. I still remember sitting cross-legged on a mat at his feet and smelling some kind of rat. I do not know what it was that sparked my scepticism. The minister was busy presenting heaven as a kind of celestial Hilton Hotel complete with pictures.

I remember during recess when other kids were kicking balls around, myself and a group of 3 or 4 were discussing could it be possible that there was no God. For ones so young the depth of our conversations startles me to this day.

It's worth noting, that Churches start very young on 'converts' and they are not silly in doing so. We should perhaps take a leaf from that book.

Up until the age of 18 I considered myself an Agnostic, thinking the position safer. Some time later I couldn't ignore the real depth of things and realised myself an Atheist.

I am 49 years old this year and remain stronger than ever in my disbelief. I have brought up my young daughter an atheist much to the disappointment of her late Catholic mother. I have also introduced the concept in other people's lives and have changed some views along the way.

Today I don't heavily broadcast these views. I have business partners with strong Catholic beliefs and others that can influence your work place conditions etc. I find I have to be discrete with my world views.

I applaud your organisation and have requested your printed copies because I actually lend them to people at the edge of organised religion. You never know what influence you can wield sometimes.

Godless Ray



Hi there.

My girl (Julie) and I have just joined the Atheist Foundation of Australia and made payment as instructed on your website.

I found the Foundation through a link on the 'Atheist Alliance International' website, which I came across as a result of reading (and I'm still reading) Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*.

Having been a hard-core atheist for... gee... not too sure now... several years? I've recently found myself moving more and more toward being anti-religious - I now regard myself as being precisely that.

I'd not considered actually uniting with other atheists until very recently, however the idea has grown massively in appeal.

I look forward to meeting up with some of the Sydney members soon.

Regards and thanks — MANY thanks!

Shayne Coles



Greetings,

Welcome one and all to our new style magazine; a combination of *The Australian Atheist* and *The Atheist Newsletter*. The Foundation is deeply indebted to Lee Holmes, Web Editor, Treasurer etc, for the amount of work performed on its behalf in setting up and managing the new production. In conjunction with this we have been installing a new and updated computer system at head office to accommodate the increased workload. As mostly a bystander to the severely extended birth-pangs I can assure the readers this has been a mammoth task and one which lesser mortals might even have been reduced to a cry for divine intervention at many of its troublesome stages. Well done — from all of us.

The last couple of issues of *The Atheist Newsletter* contained information concerning the debate between the AFA and creationists in Launceston, Tasmania. We have at last access to a DVD of the event. Unfortunately due to copyright by those producing the tape [Newstead Baptist Church], the cost will be in the order of \$28 each, which includes postage. Apparently, the ‘God will provide’ assertion is helped by the ‘prophet’ motive. To give due credit, the creationists did pay for the filming, which is not cheap. Whereas Atheists tend to disseminate information at the lowest cost possible, religions are more into financially foraging in the pockets of their members. The DVD has not been edited and therefore contains some rough edges. This was the first debate by our valiant team comprised of John L Perkins and Richard Doyle up against the 30 years experience of head of Creation Research, John Mackay. It is still a very interesting look into the minds of those who throw in the ‘god of the gaps’ at every available opportunity.

The idea of the debate was not to ‘win’ as even Richard Dawkins and other luminaries have difficulty in overcoming the dubious and anti-scientific methods used by creationists. Debates are not science in action, they are personal presentations comprising various interpretations of existing knowledge, and winning is an irrelevancy. Our goals were this: To bring to the attention of the wider public the Atheist philosophy and the existence of the Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc and, in doing so, to demonstrate to the religious audience we are credible, likeable and presentable people and not the monsters they are taught we are. Our purpose was also to create niggling doubt in the minds of (some) ‘believers’ and we achieved this by providing cogent and wide-ranging argument in favour of evolution and Atheism. The many weeks of media coverage and radio interviews were a bonus result. Overall, the Tasmanian debate was a resounding success.

On the subject of debates, the AFA has been challenged to another at the Careforce Church in Victoria. At this stage it will be held on Sunday April 1st about 6.00 p.m. The captive church service attendees will be the audience. The auditorium seats 900 people and once again John Perkins will venture into the breach against one Allen Meyer, an evangelical. More information on this when it comes to hand but Melbournites should keep their calendars free around that time to support our side in a sea of “happy clappy” religious folk. The topic is yet to be decided but our suggestion is that it revolves around the book, *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins.

South Australian members of the AFA have reported a breach of protocol by the school chaplaincy system regarding their daughter and a letter has been sent to the Education Minister, Jane Lomax-Smith. The letter can be viewed here: <http://www.atheistfoundation.org.au/subsa.htm>

A country town in Victoria produced a quintessential example of how religious education, especially in rural climes, takes precedence over good sense and ethical behaviour where Atheist children find themselves at the blunt end of religious prejudice. A six-year-old girl attending a government school has been ostracised and worse because of the dismal attitudes of the faithful.

One instance occurred during a religious education class. The parents had signed an opt-out form, but the child was

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made to sit at the back during the indoctrination process.

At the end of the session all 'good' little Christian kiddies received a candy-cane lolly but she did not. This was a devastating experience for her and the parents were understandably outraged and asked us to help formulate a letter to the Principal and other relevant persons.

This can also be viewed on the AFA website at <http://www.atheistfoundation.org.au/subregistry.htm>.

A new year has begun for humanity but the Universe hasn't noticed. The difference between Atheists and religionists is that they think it has.

Until we meet again,

David



ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

**The AGM
of the
Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc
will be held on
Wednesday
21st March 2007**

All members are welcome to attend.

**For venue details ring
(08) 8835 2269**

The Science of Religion

By John Warren

In 1946 Maurice Cornforth wrote:

“The rapid and brilliant development of modern natural science seems definitely to confirm and justify the materialist view of the world. The natural explanation of all things, which such ancient thinkers as Thales or Democritus or Epicurus could establish only speculatively and in very general outline, is being established scientifically and in ever-growing detail and comprehensiveness by the advance of natural science during the past 300 years.”

Continued investigations in almost six decades since those words were written have continued to confirm Cornforth's statement. Every phenomenon and every thing in this world of ours is the result of the enormously complex interaction of physical, understandable, entities.

That includes religion and all other aspects of human behaviour.

There have been attempts, including that by the late Stephen J. Gould, a founding Skeptic, to keep religion and science apart and he, in particular, regarded them as belonging to two separate non-overlapping magisteria to which he gave the acronym Noma. That approach was no more than an attempt to isolate and protect religious belief from the ever-expanding revelation of the workings of the real world which is gained by scientific investigation.

The science of neurophysiology has provided a much clearer understanding of the link between the world around us and the world of comprehension inside us than was available to Cornforth's great thinkers of the past.

Our connection to the outside world can now be seen as the result of the ebb and flow of chemicals and electricity in the body's nerve system and, in particular, in the multitudinous interconnections between the cells of the brain. The light, heat, sound waves and touch of our environs provide the stimuli to generate a picture of the external world in our mind and all our interactions with the external world are determined by our responses to that image. Fortunately for us the image is usually correct. If I see a chair and sit down in it and it keeps me off the floor then it is truly there. In that way I repeatedly confirm the correctness of my image as I go about interacting with the other objects of my world.

Unfortunately the formation of the image can also go wrong. The chemicals of drugs upset it; physical damage to the brain upsets it and sometimes something innate in the mechanism of the brain distorts it.

There are vast numbers of reports in the literature of psychology, sociology and neurology of what the mind ‘sees’ or ‘hears’ when the image does not correspond to external reality. All the apparitions and voices which are the stock-in-trade of the religious visionaries have been more or less duplicated in other people as a result of brain disturbances arising from natural causes. How can one assess whether the image is a true representation of the external world? Again, as with the chair, only by attempting to manipulate or use the external world as pictured by the image.

Images are held or being generated in the brain all the time. When we are asleep we have dreams ranging from the ephemeral to ‘lucid’ dreams of such intensity that it takes some time after waking to recognise that the experienced image was in fact a dream. Even awake some people apparently experience startling images in their minds. Some believe that they have actually met aliens; been operated on by them; have been taken into their spaceships.

The images some people have had of being contacted by aliens are accepted as no more than brain disturbances because there is never any acceptable physical evidence and the idea is quite inconsistent with all we have otherwise confirmed about the speed of light and the distance to the nearest star system. Indeed, if the image of alien contact in one person's brain were to be accepted widely as evidence of the real presence of aliens there would be widespread panic and the mobilisation of massive defence forces. That reaction doesn't happen: the report is ignored, it is imaginary.

Why then do other reports of startling visions gain acceptance? They have no more physical evidence of their reality than that of the aliens. All the evidence points to the fact that the image in the brain arises from its response to an external physical input or from the internal interactions between the various processes involved in 24-hour metabolism.

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There can be no physical evidence of an incorporeal god or anything else which is incorporeal, that is, emits no light or sound, and cannot be touched. The image of a god does, however, exist in the human brain and it is represented by humans in pictures, sculptures and words.

How, without any physical reality on which it could be based, have those images of God or gods taken hold in the human brain?

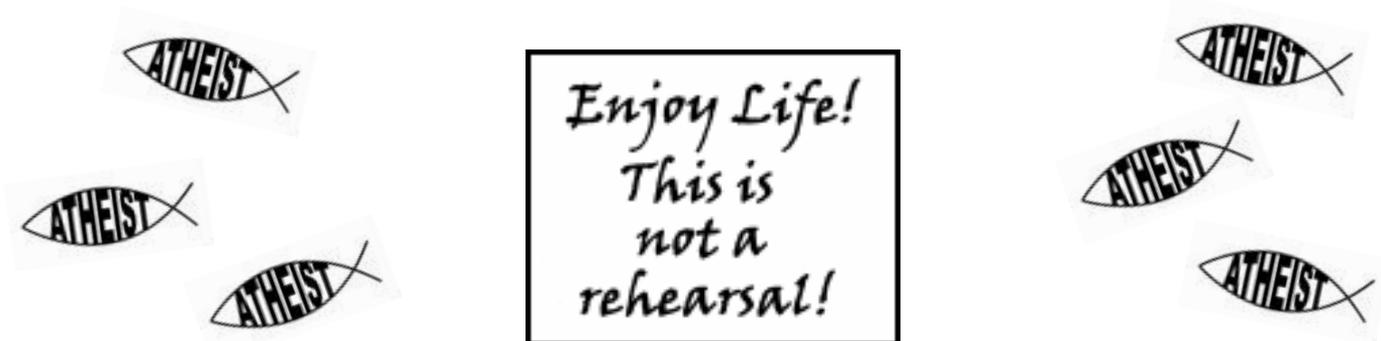
The scientific groundwork for an answer to that question was laid in 1890 when J. G. Frazer published the results of his anthropological study of magic and religion in his book *The Golden Bough*. With an overwhelming collation of data Frazer showed that the idea of God had an evolutionary history. It all started with the earliest human beings attempting to control their environment by magic. If you want rain then splash water around. If you want to have success in the hunt then dance the desired result or draw the imagined successful scene. It was not a great jump to believe that the things that humans could not control, but which happened anyway, were controlled by even more powerful but unseen humans. These became the spirits or gods. Indeed the earliest of these super-humans were very human, had families and exhibited all the characteristics of normal humans such as anger, revenge, love and ambition. Truly the gods were conceived in the image of humans.

The people who could tap the power of the gods were, for that reason, very powerful members of the community. They were the medicine men and witchdoctors: they also evolved along with the society in which they lived.

As Frazer commented from his studies of culture in Africa, "here the evidence for the evolution of the chief out of the magician, and especially out of the rainmaker, is comparatively plentiful". From simple magician to chief and on to king or queen the role of conduit to the gods gave great secular power to the chosen individuals. Their commands, formulated from their own human desires, were given with all the awesome majesty of the gods. We have more or less passed the stage of the absolute monarchs who had that second-hand authority but the priestly caste still retains the same power over a great mass of the people. Their special raiment, ceremonies and incantations to their particular god betray their origin as magicians and witchdoctors but their authority is increasingly being contested as the transparent human base for their edicts conflicts with the real living needs of their subjects. It is very hard to maintain that God says no to condoms in the face of AIDS.

Once scientific investigation reveals, as it has done, the natural evolutionary origin of religion and its gods and its role in society as well as its confinement to our brain activity, the veil of mystery has parted. The 'agnostics' can now make up their minds. God exists but only as a product of the evolving mind.

Far from science and religion being separate magisteria they are in fact separate aspects of the one human endeavour to control the world in which we find ourselves. The idealist path of belief in the supernatural led through magic to religion and God and a dead end of endlessly interpreting and re-interpreting words to adjust to the changing demands of society. The materialist path led from experience and testing of the natural world through science to unending understanding and real control. ♣



Life after Death – fact or fiction?

By Harry Edwards

The concept of an afterlife is comforting to those apprehensive about the inevitability of death. One reason why books and lectures on the afterlife are popular is simply because most people would like to believe in the concept. Anything that appears to be evidence is of course welcomed and accepted by believers without question. Unfortunately the so-called evidence is very tenuous to say the least.

There is one incontrovertible fact. That is, when we die the vast majority of us are either buried or are cremated. For the purpose of this article other methods of disposal such as embalming and cryogenics are such a small percentage that they can be discounted.

In the case of burial the body decays and is consumed by other organisms. In the case of cremation the body is reduced to ashes. In either method of disposal, the brain, the vocal chords and any other means of physical or mental communication cease to exist. To suggest, therefore, that communication after death between the deceased and the living is possible presupposes that something independent of the physical body must exist: an entity of some sort – a soul or a spirit, something that is still able to function and communicate.

When asked to define the nature of a soul the usual reply is “a spiritual entity defined as that which is not matter.” Many people, predominantly religious, believe that human beings possess a vital principal and that this accounts for life, intelligence and personality. However, life, intelligence and personality are not substances or distinct entities in their own right; they are the result of physical processes occurring within the body, and when the body dies, they cease. The idea that somehow a disembodied ‘soul’ will outlast the body and continue after death is both fanciful and unreasonable.

The existence or otherwise of an afterlife remains a constant source of contention between believers and non-believers. Victor Zammit is a lawyer who has written and lectured extensively on the subject and promotes himself and his book on www.victorzammit.com

In his book, *A Lawyer Presents the Case for the Afterlife*, he writes, ‘My training as a lawyer taught me that in ALL circumstances without exception, NEVER to believe anyone, anywhere, anytime and any place unless I am presented with irrefutable, hard core evidence that what is being stated and expressed can be independently substantiated. There is NO other way to deal with the truth, the whole truth.’

Some of his ‘evidence’ includes reiterating the myths about long dead mediums who, during their lifetimes, were exposed as frauds or subsequently confessed to being such.

Although Zammit claims a neutral stance, he devotes his entire dogmatic, critical and sarcastic efforts to promoting psychics and encouraging belief in an afterlife by claiming to have irrefutable scientific evidence in support. He offers a prize of \$1 million to anyone who can prove otherwise. The conditions are such however, (Zammit being the sole judge) that it is not surprising that there have been no takers. I publicly challenged him to debate the topic but was dismissed as being intellectually inferior. Inferior I may be if academic qualifications be the criteria, but if it comes down to reaching an objective conclusion based on ALL the available evidence then I’m sure I could give him a run for his money.

To amuse myself, I’ve gone through his list of scientists, luminaries and intellectuals to see what he says they offer as irrefutable scientific evidence. His technique appears to be much the same as that employed by the former Creation Science Organisation and other religious fundamentalists – half-truths, out-of-context quotes and by the omission of contrary material. Typical of the ‘evidence’ offered is the approbation attributed to Albert Einstein.

Zammit would have us believe that when Einstein prefaced a book written by Upton Sinclair entitled *Mental Radio*, he endorsed Sinclair’s findings on telepathy. Einstein’s brief inclusion in the book is also frequently mentioned in the literature of parapsychology as evidence that Einstein believed in psi phenomena. In the American edition, the preface reads as follows:

“I have read the book of Upton Sinclair with great interest and am convinced that the same deserves the utmost consideration, not only of the laity, but also by the parapsychologists by profession. The results of the telepathic experiments are carefully and plainly set forth in this book and stand surely far beyond those which a nature investigator holds to be thinkable. On the other hand, it is out of the question in the case of so conscientious an observer and writer as Upton Sinclair that he is carrying on a conscious deception of the reading world; his good faith and dependability are not to be doubted. So if somehow the facts here set forth rest not upon telepathy, but on some unconscious hypnotic influence from person to person, this also would be of high psychological interest. In no case should the psychologically interested circles pass over this book heedlessly.”

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The experiments detailed in Sinclair's book suggest that telepathy between the living is a fact. Therefore, communication between the living and the dead is also possible. Ergo an afterlife. However, far from endorsing Sinclair's findings Einstein did the very opposite. In a letter to Dr Ehrenwald dated 13 May 1946 on a totally unrelated matter, Einstein writes (in reference to Sinclair's book):

"I prepared the introduction to Upton Sinclair's book because of my personal friendship with the author, and I did it without revealing my lack of conviction, but also without being dishonest. I admit frankly my skepticism in respect to all such beliefs and theories, a skepticism that is not the result of adequate acquaintance with the relevant experiment, but rather a lifelong work in physics."

Einstein goes on to say:

"Moreover, I should like to admit, that, in my own life, I have not had any experiences which would throw light on the possibility of communication between human beings that was not based on normal mental processes."

Einstein therefore, was *not* convinced about the reality of telepathy and frankly admits his scepticism regarding mental communication between human beings. That he was also doubtful about the existence of a 'soul' is summed up in a letter of 5 February 1921 to a Viennese woman:

"Since our inner experiences consist of reproductions and combinations of sensory impressions, the concept of a soul without a body seems to me to be empty and devoid of meaning." (146 *The Quotations* Alice Calaprice)

Elsewhere in his book and on the internet, Zammit also links quantum mechanics with an afterlife. According to a documentary shown on SBS, on 21 November 2005, Einstein spent his dying years disproving quantum mechanics. This would not endear him to those who believe that there is such a connection.

I would greatly appreciate any input from readers who would like to take up a rational cudgel against the spreading of superstitious beliefs. Doing a little research into some of the individuals quoted by Zammit (scientists, writers, mediums, historical and public personalities), apart from being an interesting and educational exercise would be sure to show that he has a myopic view of the *whole* truth. The latest blurb on his website extols those allegedly practising materialisations – he actually *witnessed* them with his own eyes.

You can't argue with that for evidence can you?!

“QUOTES”

“Man is a religious animal. He is the only religious animal. He is the only animal that has a true religion - several of them.”

- MARK TWAIN



“The most curious social convention of the great age in which we live is the one to the effect that religious opinions should be respected.”

- H.L. MENCKEN



“Reserve your right to think, for even to think wrongly is better than not to think at all.”

- HYPATIA



“Many people would sooner die than think. In fact they do.”

- BERTRAND RUSSELL



“For me, it is far better to grasp the Universe as it really is than to persist in delusion, however satisfying and reassuring.”

- CARL SAGAN



“Man will never be free until the last king is strangled with the entrails of the last priest.”

-DENIS DIDEROT



“Prayer has no place in the public schools, just like facts have no place in organised religion.”

- SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENT

“THE SIMPSONS”

My Path to Unbelief

By Nigel Sinnott

This account was first written in response to an appeal published in *The Freethinker* (London) for September 1990. Some copies were circulated in typescript, but the text was not published until it appeared as an article in the Freethought History Research Group's *Journal of Freethought History* (London) in 2006.

I cannot be sure whether nonconformists are born or made, whether they are shaped by their genes or their environment, but I can say with reasonable accuracy that I showed signs at an early age of being difficult and different.

When my uncles were so rash as to take me fishing, I protested and demanded that the fish be returned to the water. After witnessing a goose being killed in a slow and cruel manner, I went through a series of vegetarian 'phases'. (I am now a vegan.) I loathed most sports, and team games in particular. I was gifted in certain areas, but non-competitive, and liked the things most children hated, such as Latin and Greek. My contemporaries enjoyed cowboy films; mine was the dissenting voice (very much so in the 1950s) in support of the Amerindians.

My conscious development appears to have been shaped by the printed word, and by illustrated books in particular. I was charmed by the writings of Beatrix Potter (*Peter Rabbit*) and Alison Uttley (*Little Grey Rabbit*, illustrated by Margaret Tempest). I spent a fair time in the home of my maternal grandparents and there acquired books left behind from the 1930s: they included *The Children's Encyclopedia*, edited by Arthur Mee, which, though imperialist and orthodox, did wonders for a youngster's imagination; and *The Science of Life*, by H. G. Wells, Julian Huxley and G. P. Wells. Even before I could read properly, I would ask my mother to explain the captions of illustrations in *The Science of Life*. It fired my love of natural history and my respect for the scientific method. More than fifty years later, I still consult this work with a sense of awe.

At the age of eight, in 1952, I was sent to boarding school in that home of lost causes (most of them élitist and unsavoury), the city of Oxford. Christ Church Cathedral School was a seedy, cramped, often cold institution in Brewer Street. It was originally a choir school, but also took non-choristers, like me, and a few day boys.

I loathed the place, and was dreadfully homesick. My solace was the small, dingy library where I discovered the books of Grey Owl (the nom des bois¹ of Archie Belaney), pioneer environmentalist, and lover of Canada's trees, lakes, wilderness and the beaver.

Next door to the Church of England Cathedral School was Campion Hall, the Jesuit seminary; and this, of course, attracted my curiosity.

If my mother was at home during the afternoon, she would often turn on the radio and listen to Woman's Hour, and during school holidays, if I had nothing better to do, I would sometimes follow it as well. The programme carried a regular serial, and one of them caught my attention: it was about a young lad who wanted to become a Catholic, and who pleaded with his mother for permission to do so.

The radio serial about the convert to Catholicism, the proximity of my school to Campion Hall, Cardinal Wolsey's effigy in the school dining room, and stories I heard from the history of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries all combined to turn me into an ardent romantic reactionary: a Jacobite and a would-be Catholic.

Having decided that I wanted to become a Catholic, I then gave Christianity some serious thought. I had plenty of opportunity for this as I was required, when at school, to attend the Cathedral for prayers every weekday morning and twice on Sundays. The numerous monuments aroused my interest in heraldry, but the services for the most part bored me witless, except for occasional, hilarious sermons by the elderly Christ Church eccentric, Canon Jenkins.

While meditating on my allegiance to Christianity I eventually ran into difficulty. I had at first no problem understanding the concept of a creator god, God the Father, or that he could have an earthly son, Jesus (supposedly of Nazareth), with a beatified human mother, the Virgin Mary. But the concept of the Trinity — God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost — began to trouble me. The first two entities seemed reasonable enough; but what was the purpose and rationale for God the Holy Ghost?

I eventually came to the conclusion that I could not in conscience believe in the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Ghost. Thus began my path to apostasy. For some months I remained a closet Christian heretic — a binarian, if you like; but eventually — over a period of six months to a year — my disbelief in the Holy Ghost led me to start questioning the concept of God the Father as well. I came to the conclusion that I could not believe in this either.

By this time I was about ten and a half years of age. Being a proto-atheist and a Jacobite was a rather unstable ideological mixture, but eventually circumstances resolved it. I tried discussing my religious doubts with one or two other boys: they were either dismissive or unhelpful. One told me he had discussed my views with a master (possibly the headmaster, but I cannot be quite sure now) who had commented: "Oh, Sinnott's only saying he's an atheist just to be different." Now Sinnott did like being different, but he also resented his integrity being impugned!

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One afternoon I was wandering round a sort of common room where there were a couple of scrubbed kitchen tables. On one of the tables I noticed a couple of books: I picked them up and started to go through them. One was a children's book, and fairly new at the time. It was an evangelical publication, and dealt with a child who had Jewish and Arab friends. The child asks why Judaism and Islam should not be treated on a par with Christianity, and the book set out carefully to ridicule this concept.

Then I looked at the other book. It turned out to be a classic piece of nineteenth-century anti-Semitism, complete with a lurid steel engraving of a Jewish patriarch, with a knife, putting to death an adolescent who had converted to Christianity.

I was outraged by what I saw and decided that Christianity was not only false, but nasty to boot.

About a fortnight later I was back in the solitude of the library. I had a penchant for history, and enjoyed reading about wars and battles. While browsing I came across a small stack of dog-eared back numbers of the *Illustrated London News*. Some were ten years old: here was history as it happened. I started leafing through an issue from (April?) 1945. There, spread before me, were graphic photographs of British troops using a bulldozer to fill mass graves after the liberation of the concentration camp at Belsen. Most of the emaciated corpses were Jewish. Now I knew to what loathsome depths anti-Semitism had led the human race.

I might, perhaps, have ended up as just a lapsed Christian or a drawing-room agnostic; but my experience of anti-Semitism served to strengthen my resolve to be not just a passive unbeliever, but a militant atheist. The process was completed a little while later by another literary find.

It was a warm, summer afternoon. Lessons were over, but the rough, dusty, asphalt playground did not appeal to me. I used to spend a lot of my time drawing — particularly battles and sailing ships — but on this occasion I decided to read. I got out a textbook with which I had been issued and started to go through it. It was a poetry anthology called *The Dragon Book of Verse*, and I found many of the poems enjoyable. Then I found myself reading Lord Macaulay's "Naseby"!

The words — put into the mouth of a Puritan soldier — rolled over me like an avalanche, and my mouth fell open in astonishment and delight.

*Down, down, for ever down, with the mitre
and the crown,
With the Belial of the Court and the Mammon
of the Pope;
There is woe in Oxford Halls;
there is wail in Durham's stalls!*

*The Jesuit smites his bosom;
the Bishop rends his cope.*

I read and reread the poem, then looked for another one by Macaulay: it was "Horatius", and describes how a desperate republic produced three volunteers who succeeded in denying Tarquin's army entry to Rome.

*Hew down the bridge, Sir Consul,
With all the speed ye may;
I with two more to help me,
Will hold the foe in play.
In yon strait path a thousand
May well be stopped by three.
Now who will stand on either hand
And keep the bridge with me?*

*Stout Lartius hurled down Aunus
Into the stream beneath:
Herminius struck at Seius,
And clove him to the teeth:
At Picus brave Horatius
Darted one fiery thrust,
And the proud Umbrian's gilded arms
Clashed in the bloody dust.*

I had felt so timid and desperately alone: who was I to question the wisdom of my learned elders? But now I had heard, across the valley of history, the clear, proud, angry, fearless notes of the bugles of revolt; and I knew I must seek them out!

The little boy who was once a Jacobite sympathiser and an aspirant Catholic went to bed that night tired and excited. He slept soundly as a convinced republican and militant atheist. He awoke refreshed, and still of the same persuasions.

I left Christ Church Cathedral School in 1957, but was then sentenced to another five years' boarding at Denstone College, atop a windy hill in Staffordshire. It had been founded by Canon Woodard in the 1870s for "the Christian education of the sons of the middle classes".

I was a convinced atheist when I arrived at Denstone. Five years of muscular Christianity, petty regimentation, and mindless official brutality and bigotry did nothing to make me revise my opinions.

Confirmation classes started at Denstone when I was about 14 years of age. I knew the time had come for me to make a formal stand. Whom should I tell first? I decided on a parent, rather than the school, so I spoke to my mother. She was a right-wing agnostic, the sort, I suspect, who regards religion as not necessarily true but

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good for keeping the working classes docile. Her reaction was "Don't be so ridiculous! You've got to be confirmed: you've been baptised!" I remained intransigent, so she consulted my father. He was a harsh, cold man and a sincere Anglican. He made no effort to press me into being confirmed but tried, with rapidly diminishing success, to persuade me to accompany him to church in the holidays. When I got back to school I had no trouble in dropping confirmation classes. The chaplain, ironically enough, was one of the few tolerant voices in the place and even (shock! horror!) voted Labour.

The chapel services at Denstone were many and long. I resented the time I was forced to waste at them. (I refused to sing.) On several occasions I found I could partially escape the boredom by inclining my head and listening to the chirpings of sparrows nesting above. I appreciated the birds but, alas, others did not. One afternoon as I walked past the chapel I found a workman busy clearing out all the nests high up in the walls of the building. A wheelbarrow was piled to overflowing with debris and dead fledglings. I was appalled by this needless barbarity. Here in Australia the sparrows are more than welcome to scabble about in the garden, and from my study I watch with pride the blackbirds nesting on top of our kitchen window.²

I left Denstone in 1962. As I was driven out for the last time I swore eternal enmity towards the Church of England. A couple of months later I came across, and immediately joined, the Oxford University Humanist Group.

My return to Oxford, however, was very short-lived³, and the beginning of 1963 found me in the London area, working in that splendid creation of nineteenth-century science, the Herbarium and Library of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. Later that year I joined the Ethical Union and the Rationalist Press Association, and started to read up on humanism. Humanism was very much in fashion at the time, but I have to admit that the more I read the less satisfied I became with its anthropocentric aspects and some of its vague verbosity. I was probably searching for something with less pussyfooting and more pounce.

Finally, at the end of 1963, I found what I was looking for in the form of the Freethinker and the National Secular Society, and promptly subscribed to both.

Endnotes

- 1 "Name of the woods", a pun on nom de plume, pen-name.
- 2 This was correct in 1999, but when writing I now look out on a lawn, trees, a road and houses across the street.
- 3 Within days of arriving at Brasenose College, Oxford, I developed severe depression, a mood disorder that has afflicted me in varying degrees for the rest of my adult life.

DEBATE

Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc and Careforce Church Mount Evelyn Victoria

**Topic: 'RELIGION IS NOT
A DELUSION'**

**Where: Careforce Church
89 Monbulk Road,
Mount Evelyn 3796**

When: Sunday 1st April 2007

Time: *6.00 PM* – 7.30 PM

AFA Public Relations Team Member
Dr John L Perkins
will debate
Careforce preacher
Allen Meyer.

A comfortable well-equipped 900 seat
auditorium will be the venue.

Note - The religious service starts at 5.30 PM.
All the best seats will be available at that time.
Latecomers may find only lousy ones left. Be early, a
small dose of religion will not kill you.

This is a unique experience to enter the
mind of evangelical Christianity.

**DON'T MISS
THIS OPPORTUNITY**



Faith alone not enough to save His planet

SMH 6 /12/ 06

It was most refreshing to read that Australia's religious leaders have finally realised that their god is not omnipotent (Saving the Earth can't be left up to God, faithful warned, SMH 5 Dec). The more than a quarter of Australians (2001 Census) who do not have faith in a paradise beyond this planet, welcome their conversion to common sense and hope we can now all work together to secure a future on this, our only home.

Michael McGrath, Public Relations [NSW]

Atheist Foundation of Australia

Manly Vale

Church clout grows

Canberra Times 3/01/07

The Federal Government announcement, via Tony Abbott, of \$51million going to Catholic-controlled pregnancy counselling services is an alarming continuation of religious intrusion in the political/social sphere. This is on top of a \$90million impost for the ill-conceived Australia-wide chaplaincy program.

There already exists property rate exemptions, taxation benefits, private-school funding and other privileges being pilfered from the communal purse.

This growing religious ideological push is unrepresentative of the population, a recipe for social divisiveness and a blueprint for increased inequality.

Tony Abbott has succumbed to a well-honed faith-based infant indoctrination process and needs to recognise that delusional thinking should be kept as a private matter between consenting adults. It must not be used to form public policy for a secular political system.

Contracting religious organisations to fulfil government welfare or other responsibilities can do naught but carry a heavy unhelpful bias.

David Nicholls,

President

Atheist Foundation of Australia

(An edited version of the above letter also appeared in The Adelaide Advertiser)

Church and state

Canberra Times 7/01/07

David Nicholls, president of the Atheist Foundation (Letters, January 3), bewails the supposed influence and privileged taxation position of religious organisations and suggests this is unrepresentative and a threat to our political order.

Leaving aside that Christians still outnumber atheists by a huge margin, the largest social welfare organisation in the country outside the Federal Government is Anglicare.

The welfare arms of the Catholic, Uniting and Salvation Army churches are also very significant welfare providers. I do not know the size of the Atheist Foundation or whether it has much of a social welfare arm, or indeed mission, but I suspect it probably is a relatively small group and provides little or no welfare effort in the community.

Even if we include nominally non-religious or inter-denominational welfare organisations, such as the Smith Family, under an 'atheist' banner, there would still not be many real atheists out there caring for their fellow Australians.

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POETRY

The poem *The New School Prayer* was sent to the AFA hoping we could counter with a verse of our own. And being the obliging organisation that we are — we couldn't resist.

The New School Prayer

Now I sit me down in school
Where praying is against the rule
For this great nation under God
Finds mention of Him very odd.

If Scripture now the class recites,
It violates the Bill of Rights.
And anytime my head I bow
Becomes a Federal matter now.

Our hair can be purple, orange or green,
That's no offense; it's a freedom scene.
The law is specific, the law is precise.
Prayers spoken aloud are a serious vice.

For praying in a public hall
Might offend someone with no faith at all
In silence alone we must meditate,
God's name is prohibited by the state.

We're allowed to cuss and dress like freaks,
And pierce our noses, tongues and cheeks.
They've outlawed guns, but FIRST the Bible.
To quote the Good Book makes me liable.

We can elect a pregnant Senior Queen,
And the 'unwed daddy,' our Senior King.
It's "inappropriate" to teach right from wrong,
We're taught that such "judgments" do not belong.

We can get our condoms and birth controls,
Study witchcraft, vampires and totem poles.
But the Ten Commandments are not allowed,
No word of God must reach this crowd.

It's scary here I must confess,
When chaos reigns the school's a mess.
So, Lord, this silent plea I make:
Should I be shot; My soul please take!

Amen

*"If you aren't ashamed to do this, please
pass this on."*

*Jesus said, "If you are ashamed of me, I will be
ashamed of you before my Father."*



Soon I'll Sit Me Down In School

Soon I'll sit me down in school
Where science and facts are 'gainst the rule
And teachers never dare deny
That there's a god up in the sky

If evolution then is taught
A teacher's life with fear is fraught
Disputing soon will be a crime
That we result from smart design

Our forbears fought to make us free
Of dogma, cant, hypocrisy
The law must quickly close the gate
On those who would indoctrinate

Demanding proof of gods and such
Offends the silly men who clutch
At faith and dogma, fear and cant
and treat a child like a mindless ant

By telling us kids that it's not good to be
Glad and Gay and blithely guilt free
These pundits of sin and experts in gloom
Are bringing depression and feelings of doom

We've freedom to reason and argue and ponder
And be individuals that look, think and wonder
And society's better if there's no sad con-flikt
And that's why religion we'll never inflict

We elect to our councils, who's best for the job
Be it a girl or a boy or a Greenie called Bob
Values and morals, I must here explain
Are ancient and common to all men who're sane

No more are girls condemned to die,
In backstreet abortions while parents sigh
We approach our lives with sanity
For goodness springs from humanity

I'm worried now I must confess
Religion makes our brains a mess
So leaders hear our heartfelt plea
Keep schooling sec-u-lar and free

by - *Mongerel Doggerel* -
Poetaster Laureate





The 'power' of prayer was once again shown to be the colossal failure that it is. On 20 December, searchers including airplanes from the US military gave up looking for the two remaining missing climbers on snow-covered Mt. Hood in Oregon. A third climber was found dead a few days earlier. There was great media interest in the event with a constant bombardment of live TV reports, many of which featuring the deeply religious families of the missing climbers always urging the audience to "pray harder". One of the devout missing climbers was quoted as once saying when he climbed the mountain, he "felt closer to

god". Well, apparently god didn't give a damn for these 3 men or their families since he provided no info on where to find them. Of course, I'm sure this tragedy comes under the "god works in mysterious ways" category, and "They're in a better place now" claim.

Usually, here in the US, we hear this nonsensical religious 'reasoning' after a tornado or hurricane destroys an entire neighborhood or town, only to have the few survivors thanking god for sparing their life; even if their house is no longer standing. What's really amazing is how these survivors will, on many occasions, say their faith in god has *increased* in the wake of the tragedy! Hurricane Katrina in 2005 was a prime example of that phenomenon. As I recall, a poll at the time indicated that 80% of the people affected said their faith in god *increased* in the aftermath of the storm!

Could this possibly be due to the survivors, now more than ever, hoping the Christian scheme of salvation is true, because that's the only way they think they will see their loved ones again? Now, if they were to reject God and Company as false, any hope of being reunited in heaven would be dashed.

Is an Atheistic trend developing in the US? According to a recent Harris Poll, 42% of US adults are not "absolutely certain" god exists. Only 34% felt this way just 3 years ago.

If this were true, it has to be the greatest rate of rejection of god belief in US history, I would think! Are we Atheists, who now benefit greatly from an on-line forum, actually getting people to change? Then again, can you really believe the polls? Just when you think "hey, this is really great news", along comes this: An Ipsos poll of 1000 adults conducted 12-14 December, asking a variety of questions about predictions for the new year, found that 25% believe that Jesus Christ would return in 2007! The so-called "2nd coming" now has a 365-day time frame according to a *quarter* of the US population!

I'm sure it's been no secret in Australia what happened in the recent US congressional elections. Apparently, the voters were so upset by all the corruption, sex scandals, and mismanagement of the Iraq war, that there was a house cleaning of near 'Biblical proportions'. The good thing was many of the Bible-thumping crowd got kicked out. The Rev George Bush will no longer have the stamp of approval that he enjoyed for the first 6 years. With a divided government, and Democrat leadership in the important congressional committees, the appointment of religious zealot judges along with any Republican attempts at stopping stem cell research and other scientific endeavors will be cut off quickly. It could turn into 2 years of a stalemate between the Bush White House and a Democrat controlled Congress, with little getting done.

One last item as we go to press: Could there be some significance here? At the end of his carefully crafted speech to the country announcing his plan to send over 20,000 more troops to Iraq, George Bush did NOT ask god to bless them, or the USA! There was no mention of god at all. My wife and I reacted in amazement! Bush, to our knowledge, has always ended speeches with a plea to his imaginary friend. Does he finally realize that religion IS the problem?

Bill

A HISTORY OF FREETHOUGHT

By Donald G Ellis

First, let me explain why I use the terms Freethought and Freethinker and let me define those terms. There are many labels hung on the non-orthodox (those who depart from the religious norms). Such labels are atheists, agnostics, freethinkers, humanists, non-conformists, unbelievers, heretics, infidels, rationalists, sceptics, protestants, etc, most of them denoting a particular and sometimes narrow field of view. Sometimes those labels are hung on us by ourselves and sometimes hung on us by others.

Heretic was a label popular several centuries ago; I doubt that it was a self-adopted label because, as Thomas Aquinas the great medieval theologian puts it, the sin of unbelief is greater than any sin which occurs in the perversion of morals, and heretics should be exterminated from the world by being put to death after the third offence.

At this point it is interesting to note that the pagans labelled the early Christians as heretics because this new grouping of people rejected the popular and traditional gods of the time. What, then, describes this collective group of atheists, non-believers etc?

A convenient term is Freethinker which means (Concise Oxford Dictionary) "a rejecter of authority in religious belief" and, by allowing that to be even a partial rejection on some narrow point, and by taking a wide definition of the words 'religious belief', we can cast a wide net and call ourselves Freethinkers. Thus, choosing our own terms of reference, we can trace Freethought and Freethinkers back through a long history spanning 26 centuries, back to the Chinese sages such as Lao Tse and Confucius, who taught love and the brotherhood of man, without linking such virtues to supernatural deities. By the standards of his day, Confucius was agnostic and a rationalist. His moral system was Do not unto others what you would not have done unto yourself. He rejected the Taoist canon of returning good for evil which says:

**If you reward EVIL with GOOD, with what will you reward goodness? - and said instead
Reward GOOD with GOOD and EVIL with JUSTICE.**

The arrogant assertion of being a custodian of Absolute Truth, has been responsible for so much bigotry and persecution throughout history, and was alien to the Confucian outlook. Long before empiricism and rationalism were intellectually formulated, Confucius encouraged an outlook, which was humble before the facts of experience, tentative and tolerant in drawing conclusions. He insisted that men should think for themselves. This represented a breakthrough from the dictates of the ruling emperor and priest clique. Hence I think that we are justified in thinking of Confucius as one of the very earliest recorded Freethinkers.

From early China, let us jump to Greece and Rome of just a few centuries later and we feel more at home, for it is on the literary, artistic and philosophic works of ancient Greece that so much of Western culture is based. It is in those works of ancient Greece that the focal interest is Man. The Greek philosopher Protagoras wrote: Man is the measure of all things and he also wrote: of the gods I cannot say whether they exist or not. But in their culture there was no inference that man was all-powerful. On the contrary, they were much aware that life was transient and uncertain. Homer likens the life of man to that of leaves; nevertheless it was not the shadowy-beyond-death scene that interested them but the affairs of men in this life, in this world.

In his lifetime, Euripides was reviled as an atheist. It would have been dangerous indeed, in an age which resented the impiety of Protagoras and Socrates, to have publicly denied the existence of the gods. Euripides did the next best thing. In his plays the gods appeared in person but they were detestable. His contempt for popular superstition could not be hidden. To Socrates, Greek medicine was remarkably empirical; he was guided by observation and rejected supernatural explanations of disease. Aristotle, who saw the unity of man and his spirit, rejected the current religious idea of the dualism of body and soul and personal immortality. He dealt with one of the most difficult problems that confronts

Don Ellis 1926 - 1990

"Donald Geoffrey de Vere Ellis had a long association with freethought movements and was a member of the **Rationalist Assoc of Sth Australia** before the name-change to the **Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc** in Oct 1970.

He was Treasurer for many years, re-drafted the Constitution and made his services available for non-religious funerals and naming ceremonies.

Don was involved in the formation of the **South Australian Voluntary Euthanasia Society** and was an office-bearer.

He recognised atheism as the logical foundation for a satisfying life of service."

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secular morality, namely unless there is an after-life, what motive is there for our behaviour in this life?

By the standards of his time, Euripides was truly a Freethinker. He attacked some of the most cherished social conventions, namely the degraded status of slaves and women. So we can see that over two thousand years ago there were thinkers who have denied the relevance of the supernatural to human life. During many periods of human history, however, it was dangerous for a person to deny the gods, so such denials have not been very common or else they have been expressed satirically. The wrath of the godly is terrible, even if the wrath of the gods is debatable.

We come now to an interesting facet in the history of Freethought.

In Margaret Knight's book *HUMAN ANTHOLOGY* the list of contents reads:

Lao Tse	6th Century BC	Cicero/Lucretius	1st Century BC
Confucius	5th Century BC	Seneca/Pliny the Elder	1st Century AD
Thucydides	4th Century BC	Plutarch/Epictetus	1st Century AD
Mencius/Epicurus	3rd Century BC	Marcus Aurelius/Celsus	2nd Century AD

Thirteen names in one book over a span of 5 to 7 centuries; yet the next entry after the 2nd Century AD is Montaigne of the 16th Century. There is a break of 1300 years during which the Western world has not recorded very much at all in the way of Freethought or Freethinkers.

One must look to the Islamic Middle East to such names as Al Biruni 973-1050 AD. He was an astronomer, historian, botanist, poet, pharmacologist, geologist, philosopher, mathematician, geographer and humanist — a man who, because of his views, had to keep moving from court to court seeking new patrons. Where do we find notable freethinkers in Christendom? Well, there are some recorded in the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries and interestingly enough some of them were right in the bosom of mother church. One was the Abbé [Jean] Meslier 1664-1729.

Meslier was appointed priest in the champagne province of France and he was a vigorous campaigner against the social injustices of his day. He was in frequent conflict with ecclesiastical and civil authority but even that did not prepare his parishioners for the discovery after his death of manuscripts entitled *My Testament* in which he made a scathing denunciation of Christianity. It was after his death because, as he said, I did not wish to burn until after my death.

I quote from *My Testament* one extract which has been translated and abridged. It is entitled *The Abbé's Apology to his Flock* -

“It was not from cupidity that I was led to adopt a profession so opposed to my convictions: I obeyed my parents. I would have enlightened you sooner if I could have done so with safety. You are my witnesses that I have never exacted the fees which attach to my office as curate. I discouraged you from bigotry and I spoke to you as seldom as possible of our wretched dogmas. I had to carry out the duties of my office but how I suffered when I had to preach to you those pious lies that I detest in my heart! A thousand times I was on the point of breaking out publicly and opening your eyes but a fear stronger than myself held me back and forced me to keep silence until my death.”

Erasmus of Holland was another such freethinker from within the church; he was a Rotterdam Augustine monk who espoused the view that man stood in direct relation to god without the need of an intermediary - not a popular view of the day. It was a Christian view on a religious topic, not an atheistic pronouncement but, for its day and age, it was a freethought view, inasmuch as it went against the prevailing religious authorities' views and probably helped to pave the way for even more departures. On the grounds that Erasmus was a rejecter of religious authority (to return to our dictionary definition), I think we can label him a freethinker.

An entire lecture could be devoted to the Italian Renaissance and its subsequent spread across Europe but here I will mention only one person, Leonardo Da Vinci, who, in his younger days, with other young radicals, narrowly escaped death for publishing pamphlets attacking the church.

The eighteenth century was the first century after the Middle Ages in which it was relatively safe for European thinkers to declare publicly their scepticism about the supernatural. Famous sceptics of that time included Voltaire and Thomas Paine (who were actually deists), Diderot and Hume.

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The 19th century produced many distinguished atheists and agnostics. By that time they were starting to be known by those terms - such names as John Stuart Mill, Charles Darwin, Thomas Huxley, George Eliot, Swinburne, Marx etc. It was Huxley who coined the term 'agnostic' and who later defended Charles Darwin and his theories against the attacks of the established church which couldn't abide the new idea that man was not a special creation. Charles Darwin was raised as a Christian but was led to doubt and to agnosticism during his voyage on the Beagle.

In 19th century England Freethinkers' associations, secular societies, rationalist associations and other groups, critical of the claims of established religion, flourished. Some of the more unorthodox Christian groups such as Unitarians and Universalists had close associations with these early freethinking groups, especially in the USA where the famous American atheist lecturer, lawyer and politician, Robert Ingersoll, frequently spoke to Unitarian congregations. Later in the 19th century this alliance of Unitarians with freethinkers and rationalists gave rise to the Humanist movement in the USA.

We must remember that the thinkers of the 18th and 19th centuries were not familiar with the knowledge and ideas which we now accept as commonplace; they were continually toying with new concepts - the earth moves around the sun; the world may be infinitely old and not specially created for humans; humankind may have actually evolved from other forms of life: ideas which had to be carefully worked over and thought through.

Darwin, for instance, wrote of the voyage on the Beagle -

“During those two years I was led to think much about religion. Whilst on board the Beagle I was quite orthodox but later I had gradually come to see that the Old Testament with its manifestly false history of the world, with its Tower of Babel, the rainbow, burning bushes etc as signs and from its attributing to God the feelings of a vengeful tyrant, was no more to be trusted than the sacred books of the Hindus or the beliefs of the barbarians.”

Darwin also wrote -

“Although I did not think much about the existence of a personal God until a considerably later period of my life, I will give here the vague conclusions to which I have been driven. The old argument of design in nature, as given by Paley, which formerly seemed to me so conclusive, fails, now that the law of natural selection has been discovered. We can no longer argue that, for instance, the beautiful hinge of a bivalve shell must have been made by an intelligent being, like the hinge of a door by man. There seems to be no more design in the variability of organic beings and in the action of natural selection, than in the course which the wind blows. Everything in nature is the result of fixed laws.”

That was written by Charles Darwin in 1839 and was probably read by Robert Ingersoll a few years later when, in 1876, he wrote-

“Would an infinitely wise, good and powerful God, intending to produce men, commence with the lowest possible forms of life; with the simplest organism that can be imagined and, during immeasurable periods of time, slowly and almost imperceptibly, improve upon the rude beginning, until man was evolved? Can the intelligence of man discover the least wisdom in covering the earth with crawling, creeping horrors that live only upon the agonies and pangs of others? Who can appreciate the mercy of so making the world that all animals devour animals; so that every mouth is a slaughterhouse and every stomach a tomb? Is it possible to discover infinite intelligence and love in universal and eternal carnage? What would we think of a father who should give a farm to his children but before allowing them to take possession should plant upon it deadly shrubs and vines; should stock it with ferocious beasts and poisonous reptiles, and take pains to put a few swamps in the neighbourhood to breed malaria? Yet this is exactly what the orthodox God has done.....”.

They are thoughts which perhaps we take for granted nowadays but in those days to think and preach such ideas was to be branded a freethinker and sometimes to have to suffer for it, as Ingersoll suffered at the hands of the superstitious in America. It was Ingersoll who published what was probably the first recorded freethought creed. This creed, which represents a big breakthrough of over 100 years ago, is as follows -

“We are not endeavouring to chain the future but to free the present. We are not forging fetters for our children but we are breaking those our fathers made for us. We are the advocates of inquiry, of investigation and thought. This of itself is an admission that we are not perfectly satisfied with all our conclusions. Philosophy has not the egotism of faith. While superstition builds walls and creates obstructions, science opens all the highways of thought. We do not pretend to have circumnavigated everything and to have solved all difficulties but we do believe that it is grander and nobler to think and investigate for ourselves than to repeat a creed. We are satisfied that there can be but little liberty on earth while men worship a tyrant in heaven. We do not expect

(Continued on page 21)

to accomplish everything in our day but we want to do what good we can and to render all the service possible in the cause of human progress. We know that doing away with gods and supernatural beings and powers is not an end. It is a means to an end - the real end being the happiness of man...”

If he had kept quiet about this unbelief Ingersoll could have had the office of Governor of Illinois - it was offered to him on this conditions but he refused to compromise his beliefs, saying It is a magnificent thing to be the sole proprietor of yourself.

The Enlightenment of the 18th and 19th centuries was basically led by freethinkers and in this phase of our history the affairs of humankind began to be conducted in a more reasonable and dignified manner. It was an era of the beginnings of social reforms when the division grew between those who supported organised religion and those who opposed it. This state of affairs became further accentuated in the 19th century through the Utilitarians and Radicals. With the rise of scientific rationalism, such names as Charles Darwin, Thomas Huxley, Charles Bradlaugh and Marie Stopes were openly challenging the beliefs imposed on people by religious authorities largely with State backing.

It was Charles Bradlaugh who made it possible for an atheist to sit in the British Parliament. Declared ineligible either to take the oath or to affirm, he still won three separate by-elections. After a general election and change of government, a new Speaker allowed Bradlaugh to take the oath and assume his seat. He later introduced legislation permitting freethinkers to affirm in all cases where an oath was otherwise required. This was another significant break-through for freethinkers.

Marie Stopes, who gave women the beginnings of control over their own fertility and hence direction over their own lives, was vilified by churchmen and churchwomen.

This brings our condensed history up to the 20th century where we find such names as Bertrand Russell - mathematician, philosopher, writer, scholar; also Sir Julian Huxley of United Nations fame and who is a grandson of Thomas Huxley who defended Darwin against his detractors in the church. There are others - no lesser figures than Somerset Maugham and Albert Einstein who, in his essays titled *SCIENCE AND ETHICS*, wrote: “Scientific statements of facts and relationships indeed cannot produce ethical directives. However, ethical directives can be made rational and coherent by logical thinking and empirical knowledge. It is the privilege of man's moral genius, impersonated by inspired individuals, to advance ethical axioms.” Amongst other names which spring to mind are Jacob Bronowski (*Ascent of Man*) and Alex Comfort.

So we have traced a long history of Freethought and Freethinkers through two and a half thousand years; not in a continuous unbroken line but in tenuous links drawn together by thinkers of one era who have inspired those of a later period. The repeated emergence of the human spirit cannot be dominated by irrational forces requiring blind unquestioning obedience.

Many of those I have mentioned were deists and some were theists but without the collective strivings of these men and women whom I call freethinkers, even though some did not veer very far from the narrow path, I do not think that we would have travelled as far as we have to the present day.

Innovative thinkers have forever been concerned with promulgating the good life; Confucius, Socrates and Moses were such men. Their vision of the good life made such a deep impression that it continued to mould the character of countless generations. But where Confucius and Socrates rested their claims on reason instead of supernatural authority, Moses spoke as the mouthpiece of a deity and we can distinguish in those early times the beginnings of two different cultures; one religious and one secular; one based on submission to religious authority, the other based on a human's need to question and reason for her or himself. Totally different attitudes, yet somewhat similar purposes. Humankind everywhere has similar purposes.

Humankind everywhere has similar problems and the number of answers is limited - not to commit murder, not to steal, not to bear false witness are universal prohibitions because they are essential to social order. But the freedom from which non-religious people claim to choose their own standards imposes the responsibility for giving reasons for our choices. We must each ask ourself — What is the good life? And the answers given by the great freethinkers of the past are a rich source of material on which to draw because they all reinforce the central contention of freethought that we must all seek out knowledge and then use reason to work out solutions to problems through human effort and not bow down to religious authority.

I think that as freethinkers (or whatever label we hang upon ourselves) we have a responsibility to acquaint ourselves with these past thinkers and their works so that our lives may help perpetuate their memory. ♣



The cartoon is one of many in the booklet/magazine

LUCY'S LORE

by member

David Giles.

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CHRISTIANITY CLAIMS ANOTHER VICTIM

by **Bill Power**

I am trying to feel just a bit sorry for the Rev. Ted Haggard. For more times than he can possibly remember, he's asked his God not to lead him into temptation and look what's happened. Not only that, but his frequent and not unreasonable request to be delivered from evil seems to have fallen on deaf ears as well.

Despite nearly two thousand years of being beseeched by countless millions of his believers to "lead us not into temptation" and with a fair measure of praise thrown in, God continues to let them down.

Several decades ago some believers must have decided that God's infinite goodness would surely not allow him to be so whimsical as to lead them into temptation and the passage, despite having been accepted as the gospel truth for a couple of millennia, needed to be retranslated as "save us from the time of trial". Now even if this translation was divinely inspired, it is clearly at odds with the original divine inspiration. Ted's church has stuck to the original translation.

But wait! Maybe God didn't lead Ted into temptation at all and Ted just kept wandering into it all by himself. But then again, you would think that God ... Oh never mind. Why couldn't Ted just follow the "Just Say No" dictum?

So I am a bit sorry for Ted - his mind was scrambled by religion. And his devotees, whose minds Ted has helped to scramble as well, will cast around fruitlessly for explanations and meaning and will, no doubt, talk of forgiveness and God's plan and continue praying to be delivered from evil. ♣

For those who do not know who Ted Haggard is, a little information from Wikipedia will help.

Ted Arthur Haggard is an American evangelical preacher. Known as *Pastor Ted* to the congregations he has served, he is the founder and former pastor of the New Life Church in Colorado Springs, Colorado; a founder of the Association of Life-Giving Churches; and was leader of the National Association of Evangelicals from 2003 until November 2006.

In November 2006, he resigned or was removed from all of his leadership positions after allegations of homosexual sex and drug abuse were made by Mike Jones, a former male prostitute. Haggard acknowledged some, but not all, of the allegations.

(Continued from page 15)

More importantly, in his zeal to criticise those of a religious persuasion at all costs, Mr Nicholls is missing a fundamental point.

The mainstream churches have long earned some taxation and local rates relief because their not-for-profit welfare and charitable activities save every taxpayer far more than the amount of taxation revenue supposedly forgone.

The same argument could be mounted for the Anglican and Catholic school systems and, perhaps, for the law-abiding social coherence and community stability engendered by church-going generally.

The problem with religion and with atheism is when extreme positions are adopted.

By his own words Mr Nicholls has fallen into this trap.

Neil James, Wanniasa

Giving atheists a go

Canberra Times 10/01/07

A few corrections to the assertions made by Neil James (Letters January 7, p16) are sorely needed. The Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc is the largest group of its type in Australia.

It is a voluntary-run, non-profit, philosophical organisation and not a philanthropic one although it does donate to worthy causes. There is no evidence that atheists are less generous in giving than the religious.

In fact, the largest donor in all of history is the atheist Bill Gates (over \$10billion). He is not alone.

The main religions in Australia have amassed enormous tax-free wealth in cash and property.

For example, revenue in 2005 for the Catholic Church was \$16.2billion, Uniting \$2.4billion, Anglican \$2.03billion, Salvation Army \$642million and Baptist \$606million.

How or where this money is spent or hoarded is unknown to the public as it is unaccountable. It is against the findings of the recent study by Dr Gregory Paul that religion brings with it "law-abiding social coherence and community stability".

The opposite is true with the more religious a society, or parts of a society, the greater are the number of dysfunctional incidents of rape, murder, teen pregnancy and violence.

I am afraid it is Neil James who has fallen into a trap. He has joined the throng of religious people who cannot abide any investigation or criticism of the 'secret' religious force working to have greater control of our secular democracy.

David Nicholls,

President

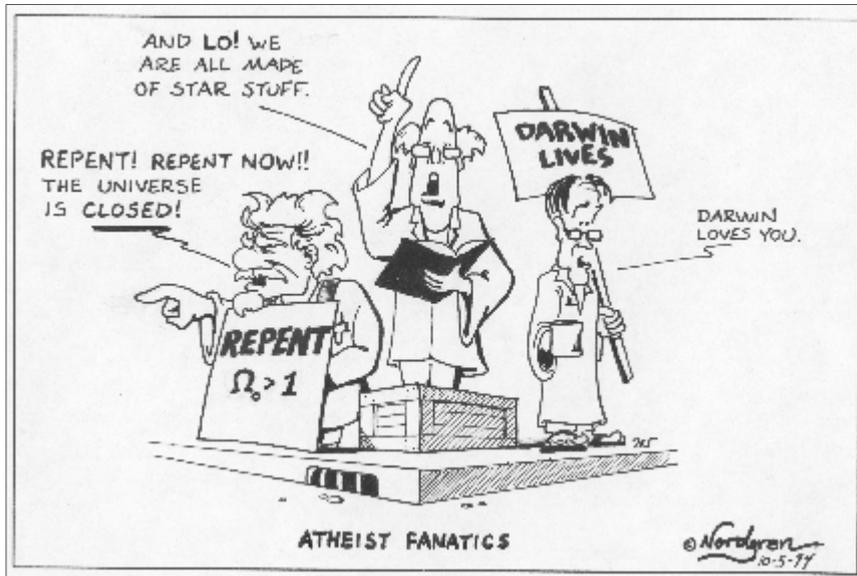
Atheist Foundation of Australia

The Courier Mail of January 4th, informed us that Pat Robertson's god told him there's definitely going to be a terrorist attack killing millions, and the worst that can happen is they will go to heaven. I wonder what the best would be? I seem to recall that George Bush's god told him to go to war in Iraq, where he would win quickly and easily. Let's hope Mr. Robertson's god is as accurate as his president's.

Rigby Taylor, Public Relations [QLD] Sunshine Coast



HUMOUR



Four Catholic ladies are having coffee together.

The first one tells her friends, "My son is a priest. When he walks into a room, everyone calls him 'Father'."

The second Catholic woman chirps, "My son is a bishop. Whenever he walks into a room, people say, 'Your Grace'."

The third Catholic woman says smugly, "My son is a cardinal. Whenever he walks into a room, people say, 'Your Eminence'."

The fourth Catholic woman sips her coffee in silence. The first three women give her this subtle "Well...?"

She replies, "My son is a gorgeous, 6'2", hard-bodied stripper... Whenever he walks into a room, people say, 'Oh my God...!'"

A man joined the priesthood.

The order he joined could not speak for seven years. Then they could only say two words.

The first seven years passed and they went into a small room. His two words were "too cold".

The next seven years passed and they took him back into the small room and his two words were "bad food".

The next seven years passed and they took him back into the small room and his two words were "I quit".

Good they said, "all you have done is complain."



Moses parting his hair

CHAPLAINCY ISSUES..... (Of the unexpected kind)

From one of our members comes this little story.

Bronwyn is a part time teacher's assistant at one of the state schools. She was summoned to the principal's office recently, and he began the conversation with the question of whether or not Bronwyn had a particular religion. When she replied that no, she was an atheist, there was a surprising response.

It seems the Principal wanted the Federal Government's grant of \$20,000 to employ a chaplain at the school, and he wanted Bronwyn to take the job. The only requirement was an admission of being a religious adherent and the job was in the bag.

Bronwyn relies on the part time assistant teacher's role for her main income, so needless to say the opportunity to get some additional hours was quite tempting. We are pleased to report that our heroic member was not prepared to compromise her principles for cash.

However, the episode does tend to show up the Government's scheme for a bit of a sham, first because some cash strapped schools are going to take it up to get the dollars rather than for the primary reason of providing 'moral' counselling to school children, and second because it is obvious that the job of chaplain does not require any particular training, knowledge or skills in counselling.



GUESTBOOK COMMENTS

Thought I'd share with readers
the best and simplest answer
I've heard to the question,

'Why do you not believe in god(s)?'

'It's just common sense.'
- Margaret

Bethlehem or Birmingham?

'Tis the season for shopping centres to place a nativity scene centre stage for children. Has anyone, anywhere, ever spotted a nativity set-up that had the baby Jesus's ethnicity right?

The one in Bankstown Square must really throw the locals: Jesus appears decidedly British, possibly even albino British.

Ray Smith BLACKTOWN

SMH 26/12/06



DARWIN DAY - www.darwinday.org - FEBRUARY 12
An International Celebration of Science & Humanity

Archaeologists Discover Missing Bible Parchment -
“God Actually Did Create Adam and Steve!”

This parody was brought to you by
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**Fundamentalist-Orthodox Coalition
 in State of Disarray**

In Jerusalem, news of the discovery that God created Adam and Steve hit like a bombshell at the headquarters for the “Joint Faith Committee to Throw Stones and Make Death Threats,” fracturing a recently formed coalition of right-wing Israelis, ultra-Orthodox Jews, fundamentalist Muslims and evangelical Christians opposed to Jerusalem's 2006 Gay Pride events. A meeting called to discuss the archaeological find quickly degenerated into rival groups of stone-throwing coreligionists.

“Clearly the hand of the Zionists is behind this outrage,” announced former co-chair Sheik Ali bin Wazir, head judge for the Islamic Sharia Courts.

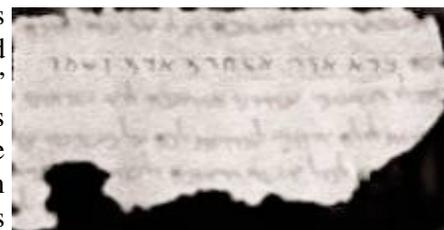
“This is just another example of Islamic terrorism,” shouted former co-chair Rabbi Natan Shamir, a prominent ultra-Orthodox leader. “You’re all going straight to hell,” barked Rev. Frank Smythe.

The fighting paused briefly to allow committee members to approve a Joint Resolution condemning all archaeologists as “enemies of g-d,” after which the participants all dashed outside and stoned each other to death. ♦

Jerusalem, November 15, 2006 Renowned biblical archaeologist Ronald Casing told the WWE that he was as shocked as anyone else upon discovering proof that God created man and... man! “Like so many others of my generation, I grew up with the story of Adam and Eve, but after finding the lost biblical fragment, I had to reconsider not only my prior beliefs, but my evidently unholy and sinful marriage of 13 years to my wife Jane.”

Casing discovered the biblical remnant in an underground cave just south of Jerusalem. “There was no doubt that it was authentic. The language and style of writing matched other early biblical documents. It even had God's unmistakable signature, and was notarized by Angel #26.” While a number of religious leaders seemed to take the discovery in stride, even expressing relief that this new find will end their faith’s respective bans on gay clergy, the realization that God created two men in his own gay image sent millions of fundamentalists and their religious leaders into a complete uproar (see related stories).

Meanwhile, a group of leading male theologians announced that since it was a ‘guy thing’ after all, perhaps it's time to downgrade the whole apple-biting incident from a major ‘sin’ to a ‘slip-up.’ ❖



Part of discovered parchment that reads “BaraAni Elohim AdamvSteve”, which translates to “I God Created Adam and Steve.”

**Pope Peeved at Claim of God’s Creation
 Reminds Faithful “I Call the Shots Around Here”**

In a terse 500-word encyclical, the Pope denounced the discovery as a “threat to the traditional family,” despite the clear sign of God's hand on the parchment. “Yes, I have seen photos of the parchment,” he told WWE reporters, “and I have always based my life on the principle that facts should never get in the way of beliefs. I see no reason to change that now.” When asked about reports that many Church members have already embraced this new discovery, the Pope flew into a rage, “I’m the infallible one around here. I decide what’s scripture, not some #@%#!#@!! archaeologist. If anyone doesn’t like that, we’ve got ways to deal with heresy.” In an apparently unrelated statement, the Vatican's Committee to Restore Church Tradition announced the reinstatement of the Inquisition. †

**Rev. Phelps Breaks Ranks
 Accepts Discovery As Valid**

Upon hearing news of the amazing discovery, Reverend Fred Phelps, the controversial anti-gay crusader, shocked followers by renaming his organization “God Hates Breeders,” announced he was an unrepentant heterosexual and urged followers to stone him to death. His last words were, “We must always follow biblical law, no matter who it hurts,” and “**Aaarrghhhh!**”

Former Devout Denounce “Unmanly” Discovery - Flee Faith in Droves

Rejecting the newly uncovered evidence of humanity’s “original gayness”, large numbers of fundamentalist Christians, Jews, Muslims and Hindus chose to abandon their respective faiths, forming a new, even more explicitly heterosexual religion. “I didn't spend my whole life denouncing homosexuals to start worshipping a girly-man deity,” said the new faith's leader Rev. Sun Myung Moon, who announced that the new religion was to be based on a more ‘manly’ supreme being. “We’re calling it “Gibsonism,” said Rev. Moon, “named after the great bigot.... I mean pro-Christian, pro-heterosexual actor Mel Gibson.” “We had discussed worshipping the Marlboro Man, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and especially Charlton Heston,” explained Rev. Moon, “but hey, Chuck may be a ringer for Moses, but Mel once directed Jesus, and you can't beat that!” ♣

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for the ongoing objectives of the Foundation.

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THE AUSTRALIAN ATHEIST

All contributions are subject to Editorial approval.

The subject matter herein need not be taken as the official view of the
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