

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.

ATHEIST FOUNDATION OF AUSTRALIA INC

EST. 1970

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

I am always curious as to how otherwise seemingly well educated and intelligent people can be taken in by religion. Perhaps childhood indoctrination is just so powerful that nothing can overcome it. There is one group of the religious that peaks my curiosity in this regard more than any other, and that is theologians.

The on-line encyclopedia, Wikipedia, defines theology as follows: **Theology** (Greek θεος, *theos*, "God", + λογία, *logia*, "words," "sayings," or "discourse") is reasoned discourse concerning religion, spirituality and gods. Theologians attempt to use rational analysis and argument to discuss, interpret, and teach on any of a myriad of religious topics.

To be a theologian I imagine would require a fairly high level of intelligence, which is why I find this group of people so strange. I recently read one definition of theology that went something like "theology is like a blind man looking for a black cat in a dark room that isn't there, and finding it", and that about sums up the way I used to look at it, namely that theology is a bit weird.

But after reading some of the statements made by noted theologians, cited in Richard Dawkins' new book, *The God Delusion*, I have come to the conclusion that some of these people are not just weird, they are either mentally deranged, or have arrived at a way to reconcile their religious beliefs with reality without becoming mentally deranged.

There is this bit of theological reasoning from the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, to clear up the 'mystery' of the Trinity:

"In the unity of the Godhead there are three Persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, these Three Persons being truly distinct one from another. Thus, in the words of the Athanasian Creed: 'the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God, and yet there are not three Gods but one God'.

And if that is not enough to make you question the sanity of these people, how about this from the Oxford theologian Richard Swinburne, as "he seeks to justify suffering in a world run by God":

"My suffering provides me with the opportunity to show courage and patience. It provides you with the opportunity to show sympathy and to help alleviate my suffering. And it provides society with the opportunity to choose whether or not to invest a lot of money in trying to find a cure for this or that particular kind of suffering...Although a good God regrets our suffering, his greatest concern is surely that each of us shall show patience sympathy and generosity and, thereby, form a holy character. *Some people badly need to be ill for their own sake, and some people badly need to be ill to provide important choices for others.* Only in that way can some people be encouraged to make serious choices about the sort of person they are to be. *For other people illness is not so valuable.*" (Words in italics are my emphasis).

Dawkins goes on to describe this as a "grotesque piece of reasoning", and follows up with another quote from Swinburne, when he attempted to justify the Holocaust on the grounds "that it gave the Jews a wonderful opportunity to be courageous and noble".

From another source (*The Quotable Atheist*, by Jack Huberman), here is one of my favourites: The theological faculty of the University of Paris, the leading medieval university, discussed seriously whether Jesus at his ascension had his clothes on or not. If he had not, did he appear before his apostles naked? If he had, what became of the clothes?

It's a very strange world we live in.

Dennis

Letters to the Editor

I have been reading the exchange of correspondence on the subject of Chaplaincy. Thank you for your intelligent input to this issue.

Isn't it disgusting that, in a nation that claims to be enlightened, mythical notions are still allowed to be taught as historical fact. In the long term, this can, in no way, be beneficial to a developing society. History has proven that beliefs in ancient myth has a tendency to retard a society and produce dependency, which then, of course, produces subservience - probably the main aim of those who promote religious teaching.

I believe any form of evangelism should be closely monitored, to ensure that it does not ultimately have control of society: Surely, enough evidence exists to show the disruptions that this causes. Tax-payer's money should not be used to promote any form of evangelism in schools, as it is the antithesis to intellectual development and the capacity to reason. Kenneth.

I have been an atheist since the age of about 13. I would appreciate you enrolling me as an associate member first up. I will join later. Many of my friends are atheists, but because of the peer pressure of the god-botherers, prefer to stay silent. Not me though. I have six grandchildren, and have been told in no uncertain terms by my daughters (their mothers) to keep my mouth shut regarding my views on religion. I had a funny time though with my two eldest grandsons when I told them there was no such thing as god - they took my statement straight to their school the next day and did that cause an uproar! My daughters have forgotten that I refused religious "teaching" to them when they were in High School. That caused a lot of comment then, too. I have had a lot of hilarious times with the Believers, especially when they prove themselves to be absolute dopes regarding their supernatural being, and generally end up calling me - in a friendly way - a bloody Commo.

Cheers. I'm pleased to finally be in contact with totally rational people who are not frightened to say where they stand. John O

Thanks for giving me the email about the show on SBS about Madalyn Murray O'Hair. I have just this minute finished watching it and I thought it was very enlightening! She is one person who I wish I could have met in my lifetime.

I was saddened to see that at the end of the program that she (and her family) are buried in an unmarked grave. I would like to suggest that in co-operation with the American Atheists, we pool money from our members to give her a fitting headstone or monument. I feel that she not only deserves it, and although she will never know about it, it will highlight and publicise to peoples everywhere how important and revered we thought her life was worth.

It will send the message that not everyone thought of her as "Americas most hated woman".
Cheers, Linda H

Dear Everyone in Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc,

Have just finished reading yet another publication of THE AUSTRALIAN ATHEIST. You guys and girls are doing a good job there. Finally something else worth reading and very helpful in explaining fact from fiction to others not yet in the reality world.

Today I still ponder at my 51 years in this world and look back to my younger days brought up in the religion of imaginary minds. Didn't mind some of it, good fiction stories but most of the time I was only interested in science.

My parents were pretty practical but unsure and maybe a little afraid of the unknown so I set out to question, seek and find out what is true and what is not. From the age of 12, after many years of cruelty at the hands and mouths of Christians I soldiered on and was an Atheist. Never faltering to this day I considered myself quite brilliant in defeating

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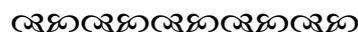
religion, though a lot of people would not consider me brilliant in anything - just someone who survived, worked, married, had children and observing life around me. I have tried to teach my children to seek science and facts as much as they can. I married a man who was not religious, yet a good man. We found public schools and battled on, sometimes alone, very poor, but with a lot less cruelty to our children.

I may or may not join your Foundation for various reasons and the case may be the same for my children, but I just wanted to say thanks for being there and giving us a choice and a voice and a few good words explaining the facts from fiction that sometimes eludes us.

Don't ever give up. Well done everyone for your contribution on a world we call planet earth that I for one am still surviving in.

Thinking of you always for real.

Dorothy



COMMENTS ON THE MAGAZINE

Firstly and most importantly, congratulations to you and the team for your fine efforts re putting together the new magazine. I read it this morning with enthusiasm, and must say I am impressed. - George

You certainly did a very good job of the magazine, it is excellent. - Glennis and Brian

I received my new re vitalised newsletter and am totally envious of its upmarket appearance and thrilled for you/us. Knowing how painful the birth pangs would have been I do congratulate you for your hard work, commitment to our cause and achievements in general along with El Presidente David. - Mary

The new mag looks great! - Dale

Congratulations to all concerned in producing the new mag format. It will prove to be a great promotional asset. One point I would ask the committee to consider and that is in future issues replace the brown map of Australia with an irreverent cartoon along the lines of those on page 23 & 24. Getting a chuckle even before opening a mag creates curiosity to see more. - Harry

It arrived today – all glossy and smart. You deserve all the accolades bestowed on you by Dennis and David...well done. The cover is exactly right you're a smart chick. I once had a hand in producing the school Magazine so am aware of the time it takes and the fussiness. Well done! Enjoyed Nigel's bit and the long piece about freethinkers, especially. - Peter

I was pleased with the new format and with the articles. Well done to all those involved with the change. - Julian

Congratulations on the new look THE AUSTRALIAN ATHEIST. You've done us proud! - Linda H

Like the new format. - Graham

Congratulations and thanks to all concerned for the new look THE AUSTRALIAN ATHEIST. - Robert

Keith and I send our highest congratulations to you and Dennis. The new magazine is EXCELLENT and we hope you receive heaps of bouquets. - Brenda and Keith

Congratulations to all concerned with the new look magazine. It will undoubtedly create favourable impressions. - John

Greetings,

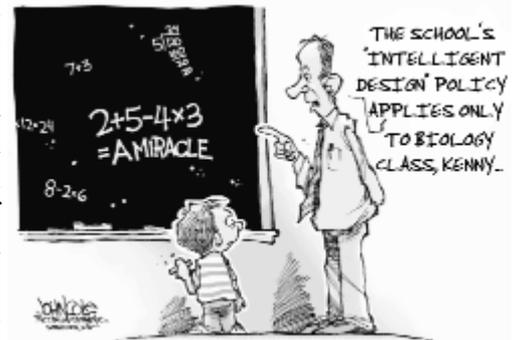
HERETICAL HAPPENINGS

Keeping you in the know

The God Delusion by Richard Dawkins has certainly shaken the foundations of religion possibly more so than any other book ever written, excepting for the myriad of sacred religious books, that is? The Bible or books of all religions are their own undoing although it appears to be a point missed by the faithful who do not read them or are selective in doing so. *The God Delusion* contains all the pertinent arguments showing the way evolution works in passing on information to each new generation. Repetitious lessons sanctioned by adults maintain the level of required knowledge for survival. Basically, it appears, any information treated in this manner forms an instinctive or instinctive-like understanding of its correct status in later years. As simple as this explanation is, it seems to have touched a nerve of acceptance in a growing number of people and keep your eyes open for the phrase; 'Religion is mental child abuse', used by Richard Dawkins, the AFA and others, as that is a conclusion hard to deny.

However, religion is hardly likely to come tumbling down overnight just because its mainstay is delusional thinking. For example, the debate to be held at the Careforce Church, Mount Evelyn in Victoria on April 1st, will supply ample proof of that. On this subject, the AFA has been informed that the interest shown is very large and tickets will have to be sold to limit people showing up and having no where to place their bottoms. The tickets will be quite cheap at \$5.00. Purchase details are on page 26 in the advertisement for the event. In collaboration with the Careforce Church representative, Gordon Kappelhoff, it has been agreed that the ticket money be donated to the Melbourne Children's Hospital. If you are going to support our valiant AFA member, John Perkins, or to learn about the other side at the coalface, then I would advise to act quickly in purchasing your ticket. A good night out and support for a worthy cause seems like an excellent combination which will be hard to beat.

Speaking of good combinations, the Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc has donated money, books, magazines and T-shirts to an admirable cause at the University of Adelaide. A final year science student, using the university club scheme, intends to start a 'Student Atheist Society'. The intrepid and keen student, Ashleigh Brook, (now a member of the AFA) sent out a call for assistance via the web and the AFA answered willingly. The Club will get its kick-off at the University's Orientation Week from February 19th – 23rd. It may come as a surprising bit of information, but of the many clubs at the University, the largest and most organised just happens to be of the Christian Evangelical kind. There is no greater need in the halls of learning for there to be an alternative voice to religious nonsense for students. We wish Ashleigh luck, and folks, expect to hear more of this group as time goes by.



In 2008, the Cambridge University Press is publishing an encyclopaedia of Australian religions as part of an Australian Research Council initiative. The Centre for Immigration And Multicultural Studies at the ANU's Research School of Social Science, via its Director, Dr James Jupp, has requested a 1,000 word essay from the Atheist Foundation of Australia on 'Atheism in Australia'. Although this aligns us with religions which Atheism is not, the presence of the AFA amongst many contradictory 'faiths' will stand out as a reasoned way to view existence. This task has been completed and forwarded to Dr Jupp.

I sincerely thank our Public Relations Team member, Peter Taylor for his ideas and help on this matter.

Until we meet again,

David

University of Adelaide Godless Group

At the *University of Adelaide* there are about a dozen different religious groups, although when walking around the campus you are only likely to run into two of them. Both of these groups are Christian groups, very vocal and seemingly very well funded. In the past there have been various secular and agnostic societies at Uni, but not for a long time. At the end of last year I was falling asleep and I thought "Wouldn't it be great if someone started an atheist club at Uni to show the students and the community that there are people who prefer a more rational approach to life?"

Of course, until I am given evidence otherwise, I will assume that there is no being that is able to read my thoughts and act on them, so I did it myself. In the space of two and a half weeks my idle thought went from being a good idea to a club with a small core of dedicated students, a collection of dirty looks from some of the religious groups, and sixty-four members!

Orientation week runs for four days on campus, with clubs able to rent stalls to advertise to new and returning students. The religious groups traditionally have a strong presence there, but this year there was also a stall for the non-believers. Tentatively called *godless*, the atheist club attracted a lot of attention from students who were happy to see an alternative to the Evangelical Union (more on them soon!), staff who were impressed and willing to help out in the form of lectures, and of course, believers who were convinced that: we were bad, amoral creatures; we just haven't considered all the evidence for God's existence; or that we were going to hell.

The first group of people were silenced easily by offering chocolate or hugs (If you are ever trying to start a Uni club bring *Fantails*, and badges promoting hugging atheists).

The second group stayed for a while to argue their case with us, before either leaving when we didn't back down, when they'd run out of things to say, or on a few occasions being led away by their friends after they started actually listening to our views. As for going to hell, the best arguments are ones that can fit on a T-shirt, in this case a smiley face and the words "Smile! There is no hell" (We also sold several home-made T-shirts with the Darwin fish symbol saying "We have the evidence. We win" and in doing so I think we may have kick-started an anti-ID movement, before ID has really started here yet)

The Evangelical Union (usually just referred to as EU) is the main Christian group on campus, with sermons every week and advertising everywhere you look. They are part of a nation-wide organisation which has representatives in most if not every university in Australia, and in turn is part of a huge international organisation (The International Fellowship of Evangelical Students) The EU has a large member base and it would seem a rather large budget. I asked one of the members at the end of O'week and was told they signed up about 150 students in three days, compared to our 64 members in four days. I was informed by the members of the philosophy club (as they have members in common both with the atheist club and the EU) that the EU had spent some time that week discussing the atheist stall and the people running it. I can only assume we must be doing something right.

The student radio also challenged myself and a representative of the EU to an on-air debate, which consisted of two people a side and half an hour to prepare. Although the topic had more to do with politics than beliefs or lack thereof it was an interesting debate. Equally as important, we won, and we won't stop celebrating that point for a while.

I do need to point out that the stall during O'week, and the club in general wouldn't be anyway nearly as successful as it was without the assistance of the Atheist Foundation of Australia. I was asking for help on a few atheist internet mailing lists when Lee Holmes approached me about the AFA offering some support, and a few days later I met with her and David Nicholls and received a box full of books, T-shirts and badges (I actually received a further batch of badges midway through O'week as they were incredibly popular. I'm told we started a hugging epidemic in some parts of the campus. We didn't see the various religious groups offering any similar kindness). They also supplied the money to rent the stall, and huge amounts of advice and encouragement. I cannot thank them and the AFA enough for all the support they have given me in starting this club and I hope to be able to report to them about all the success the club has in the future.

Ashleigh Brook

THE MESSIAH

By Keith Cornish

Every year Christians celebrate Easter and recall the gospel stories of how Joshua (Jesus) was arrested, tried, killed, Entombed and 'rose' again. However, there are aspects of the story that should be examined more closely, including the background of the Hebrew people. They were, from time to time, dominated by powerful nations, including the Persians, Greeks and Romans. The Jewish prophets foretold that a descendent of King David would liberate them and become their king. This 'anointed one' was the Hebrew 'messiah' or 'christ' in the Greek language. How would Jesus Messiah sound as a name?

Over the centuries many aspired for this honour and during the Roman occupation a large number were crucified for their attempt, including the Joshua (Jesus) of the gospels where he is referred to as preaching about the imminent coming of the kingdom of Yahweh, whom he claimed to be his father. Two gospels give contradictory genealogies tracing his line back to King David and then completely destroying this crucial evidence by declaring that Jesus had a 'virgin' birth. When he was judged and condemned by the Roman court his cross carried the wording "King of the Jews". Exit one more 'messiah'.

In those times the current culture of the Egyptians, Greeks and Romans had many gods who died and came back to life again, so why not Jesus? Whether he was of the same substance as the god Yahweh took nearly three hundred years to be resolved by a council called by Constantine and held at Nicea. It was affirmed that he was of the same substance by the majority and those who disagreed were banished. Of the sixty gospels apparently available then, only four were selected and the others were, where possible, destroyed.

Now let us examine again the story of the post-resurrection. The gospels give five accounts of the reappearance of a risen messiah but only to his disciples and this is strange indeed. They were already convinced that he was the promised messiah (christ) and they knew what he had been preaching. The only people who needed to know his true identity were those who were involved in his arrest, trial and crucifixion and he never confronted them. How much different would the subsequent two thousand years have been if he had confronted those authorities and demonstrated that now they had no more power over him. He could come and go at will, doors and walls were no barrier, present one moment, vanishing the next. Confronting those who challenged his status and authority would be the obvious and rational thing to do and it was not done. Why? Surely that would have profoundly changed their viewpoint and, subsequently, the world. There would be no divisive religions and definitely no sceptics or atheists - instead of which he only appeared to his uneducated close disciples, one of whom had to touch his unhealed wounds to be convinced that he was the same person. How long before a 'spirit' body becomes perfect? Maybe the physically afflicted remain so for ever and ever.

The gospels specifically mention decomposing bodies returning to life and even people arising from graves and walking into Jerusalem and that takes a lot of credulity to accept. Could it have been that he did not die and had the same physical body that they all knew? Could it be that the resurrection story was concocted by deluded people for a purpose? Even the President of the USA claims that he had divine direction to attack Iraq. Being an atheist has much in its favour when deciding on the evidence.



From New Scientist Magazine **I don't believe it**

The first four letters you printed on the "Beyond belief" conference (9 December 2006, p24) invoke the "brilliant insight" that atheism is itself, belief. This is rubbish, and *New Scientist* should not be promulgating it.

An atheist simply does not believe in any gods. By definition, this is not a belief. Just as nakedness is not a way of getting dressed; sleep is not a technique for paying attention; sunlight is not a kind of shade (nor even its opposite); atheism simply means that one has no religious beliefs.

Even to call it "non-belief" is perhaps misleading. After all, when you're feeling comfortable you don't call it "non-pain".

Many believers literally cannot imagine that atheism is possible.

But millions of us enjoy it - all day, everyday.

Roy Sablosky Takoma Park, Maryland, US



The Need for Secular Multiculturalism

By Dr John L Perkins

It seems that religion is on the rise and secularism is on the wane. If so, we are heading in the wrong direction. Secularism is the ideal on which modern civilisation was built. Secularism means more than just the separation of religion from state institutions. It has often implied that affairs of state are too important to be subjected to the whims of ancient myths and superstitions. For this reason, it has allowed scientific progress to take place, with all the technical and economic benefits this has brought. In addition, secularism was an often effective solution to centuries of religious conflict in Europe.

Despite this legacy, the benefits of secularism have apparently been forgotten and must perhaps be painfully relearned. In the 19th century, public schools in Australia were founded on the principle that education should be “compulsory, free and secular”. These days are long gone, but the sectarian consequences of our over-indulgence of religious schools will be felt well into the future.

Internationally, the economic backwardness that strict religious adherence could engender was also at one time well known. This is why Atatürk, the victorious general at Gallipoli, abolished the Caliphate and imposed secularism on Turkey. The Turkish constitution robustly mandates secularism and excludes any religious influence on legislation. By contrast the 2005 Iraq constitution defines Islam as the main source of legislation. No country with such a constitution is an effective democracy and this is not coincidental. If religious laws are not amendable by the elected legislature, then real democracy is impossible. Hence the attempt to install democracy in Iraq is now a futile exercise. With its current constitution, Iraq is doomed to sectarian strife, oppression and endless economic and social deprivation.

It is not only Iraq that has seen the demise of secularism. Almost everywhere, politicians seem to be overtly propounding their religious credentials. This is despite the fact that populations have become less religious. The explanation for this paradox lies largely in the nature of globalisation and multiculturalism in the context of the conflicts between Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The abandonment of secularism, at least amongst political elites, has complex causes, but the effects are becoming increasingly dire. How have we come to this position? The nature of multiculturalism, and how it has been implemented, has a lot to do with it.

When societies were more culturally homogeneous, religion could more easily be criticised, since cultural sensitivities were less threatened. As we became more ethnically diverse, the ethos of multiculturalism was highly successful in fostering tolerance and in assisting the advancement of minorities. The acceptance of cultural diversity certainly does help in fostering social cohesion. However religions are cultural phenomena, and multiculturalism has had the adverse effect of placing religious cultural beliefs beyond question, shielding them from the rational assessment that they need, and to which they were previously exposed.

The effect of multiculturalism applied to multiple religions has led to a postmodernist psychology in which all forms of cultural belief are deemed to be equally valid and equally true. However, since contradictions indicate falsity, this hypothesis of multiple inconsistent “truths” is inherently nonsensical. We thus have a widely adopted protocol that is fundamentally absurd. This is creating a dysfunctional mentality that is socially destabilising. At its worst, we have reached an Orwellian state where politicians are apparently able to successfully construct “the truth” to be whatever suits their purpose. “Reality based” policies are seen as just one of many possible alternatives.

Regarding religion, this situation is compounded by the fact that Islam poses challenges for multiculturalism in a way that other preceding cultural phenomena did not. Part of the motivating force behind this is undoubtedly the severe injustice that has been meted out to Palestinians over many decades. This has fostered a legitimate and understandable sense of grievance and resentment amongst Muslims globally. However, a significant difficulty also lies in the fact that Muslim aspirations for governance by sharia law are inconsistent with democracy. Regrettably, as a result, we see an increasing tendency for ethnic separatism amongst Muslim minorities in Western countries.

Such sectarianism is, of course, the antithesis of multiculturalism. The solution is not to abandon multiculturalism but to secularise it. Why should this be a problem? Two hundred years ago secularism was successfully advanced as a rational solution to sectarianism, in view of the fact that a literal interpretation of religion defied credibility. Since then, scientific

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knowledge has advanced to the point where we can now rule out any rational possibility that the supernatural contentions proposed by religions are anything more than mythological. That the god-deluded populace denies this is merely symptomatic of the problem.

Some people have claimed that secularism should not criticise the delusory nature of religion, but merely seek to mitigate its symptoms. This approach is not working. In the context of multiculturalism, the god delusion is the prime source of the disconnection from reality from which many others follow. The delusion arises from habit and socialisation, but such things are amenable to change given sufficient motivation and opportunity. The debacle that religion has led to in the Middle East now indicates the dire need for a revival of secularism.

At its 2005 conference, the International Humanist and Ethical Union passed a resolution in support of "comprehensive secularism". The first two parts of this were the impartiality between religions and the separation of religion from state institutions. These are essential elements, but a third component is also necessary. This is a preparedness to intervene to protect human rights from violation by religious assertions and injunctions.

The practice of comprehensive secularism must be applied to multiculturalism. This means accepting the value of cultural heritage, but without suspension of rationality and with the explicit recognition that myths are myths. People naturally react defensively when confronted with their delusions. The practical experience of multiculturalism should be an advantage in dealing with this, in that all cultural myths should be treated with equal incredulity. Internationally the advancement of comprehensive secularism will have profound benefits.

Humanity faces severe challenges that threaten global civilisation. In response we must summon all our capabilities of reason and rationality. The solution is secular multiculturalism, with its ethical principles based on the universal values of compassion, honesty, freedom and justice.

Dr John L Perkins is a Melbourne economist, an AFA Public Relations Team member, and is President of the Secular Party of Australia.



My Twenty Years Fight in Australia by Joseph Symes

(Originally published in *The Freethinker* in 1906)



JOSEPH SYMES was born in Portland, Dorset. He joined the National Secular Society in 1876, was made a vice-president in 1877, and was regularly re-elected until his death. Symes probably started writing the story of his "Twenty Years' Fight" on board ship while returning from Australia to England. Despite the title, he in fact spent 22 years in Australia, from 1884 until 1906. His narrative was published as an article in nine instalments in *The Freethinker* from September to November 1906. At that time the paper was edited by George William Foote, its founder in 1881 and second president (1890 - 1915) of the National Secular Society. Joseph Symes died in London on 29 December 1906.

The booklet edited by Nigel Sinnott is available for \$3-00.

THE FREETHOUGHT BOOKSHOP

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Open Thursdays between 4.30 PM ~ 7.30 PM

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

National Dinosaur Museum
Nicholls ACT 2913

Hello,
I visited your museum on the 10th of February earlier this month and for several hours thoroughly enjoyed the displays of the prehistoric world. However, after moving on to your museum shop area I noticed a book for sale with the title "By Design: Science and the Search for God" written by Larry Witham. The reason this book struck my eye is that the first part of the title, "By Design," seemed to hint that the book promotes the idea of "Intelligent Design". After reading the book's blurb, and a quick browse through some of the pages, I suspected that the author had nothing critical to say about the incorrect notion of Intelligent Design to explain the origins of life, but rather seemed to be slanted toward Intelligent Design's claim of being a legitimate scientific theory.

You might be aware that Intelligent Design (ID for short) is a religious idea, disguised to look like science, which attempts to undermine the biological fact of evolution by natural selection. You might also be aware that the world-wide scientific community states unequivocally that Intelligent Design is not science, and that many reputable scientists label it as "Pseudoscience" or "Junk science" http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Intelligent_design.

Naturally, I was a bit surprised to see a book which gives credit to this pseudoscience available for sale in a museum whose displays are strong evidence for the evolution of life on earth, and for sale in a museum even containing a display on the chemical origins of life and naturalistic (as opposed to religious or metaphysical) origins of our universe and solar system.

However, I wanted to be sure about this book so I returned home to research the book on the internet. As I suspected, I found the book cited favourably on several Intelligent Design websites, such as the *Access Research Network Website* (an organisation promoting Intelligent Design www.arn.org), and the *Design Inference Website* <http://www.designinference.com>, a website on the writings of William A. Dembski who is a prominent ID promoter and author.

I also found out that Mr Witham's book is criticised by some for being very sympathetic to supporters of ID http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/by_Design and is criticised for being supportive of Intelligent Design itself <http://darwin.bc.asu.edu/blog/2004/04/29/michale-behe-as-research-scientist/#more-25>, also <http://recurd.blogspot.com/2006/02/larry-witham-idflack.html> - these last two links are authored by people belonging to the "Panda's thumb" weblog, which is affiliated with TalkOrigins.org, a website that explores the creation/evolution controversy from the mainstream scientific viewpoint that evolution is responsible for the earth's present biodiversity). It seems to me that the book, and author, likely support the unscientific ideas of Intelligent Design.

I do not know if you are aware that the book probably favours the un-evidenced religious viewpoint of ID, but because your museum is entirely based on science, and exists thanks to the work of countless palaeontologists, biologists, and other scientists throughout the last few centuries, I must make this recommendation that such a book should be reviewed by a reputable evolutionary or origins biologist to see if it does favour the unscientific viewpoint of Intelligent Design, and that if the book does favour this incorrect and misleading viewpoint, it should be removed from display and sale at the museum because it would be a threat to the integrity of science.

Also, since I did not look at every book in the museum shop, I recommend any other items possibly promoting unscientific viewpoints like Intelligent Design be reviewed for their appropriateness in a museum of natural history and science.

Thank you sincerely.
Colin Healey

Hi Colin,

Thanks very much for your email, and the amount of effort you took to research before contacting us. It is heartening to

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see others so concerned about the message people are allowed to receive in regards to scientific fact and deluded ramblings (ID).

The book, "By Design", was put in the shop because it was described to us as an exploration and discourse of the history and current climate of the science-religion debate.

We believe that you cannot ignore the arguments against evolution (no matter how moronic), you must clearly and thoroughly discuss it, because, after a few minutes of debate any rational people will see the failings of Intelligent Design, Creationism and all the rest.

Now that you have alerted us, we have reviewed the book. It does not just fail to provide counterarguments to theories, it actively undermines science with incredulous statements and misquotes.

I am happy to say, it has been removed and will never be in the shop again, and if anyone asks of it, we will demonstrate its fallacious reasoning and intense stupidity.

Thanks for helping us remove this aberration from the museum. I also would like to say that, if at any time you want to come back to the museum and introduce yourself, I would love to have a chat!

Thanks again,

Anthony Jurd
National Dinosaur Museum

Anthony,

Thanks very much. I hadn't actually read the book myself so it was good that you properly reviewed it, though I was quite suspicious.

I am so glad the integrity of science and natural history is upheld by the unbiased rationality of people such as you, and I will inform everyone I know of the professional standing of the museum. Thanks for inviting me for a chat, I will pop in on a day I am not busy.

Colin Healey



A father is in church with three of his young children, including his five year old daughter. As was customary, he sat in the very front row so that the children could properly witness the service. During this particular service, the minister was performing the baptism of a tiny infant. The little five year old girl was taken by this, observing that he was saying something and pouring water over the infant's head. With a quizzical look on her face, the little girl turned to her father and asked, "Daddy, why is he brainwashing that baby?"

**Texas' State Constitution,
Article 1 Section 4**



"No religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office, or public trust, in this State; nor shall any one be excluded from holding office on account of his religious sentiments, provided he acknowledge the existence of a Supreme Being."

FROM THE INBOX
Emails of the Month

Hello,

I'm trying to understand atheist beliefs but I have some questions I was wondering about.

I know atheism is based on facts and hard evidence rather than unproved assumptions. Do atheists traditionally believe in the Big Bang Theory?

If so I was wondering do you all have "hard evidence" to prove the Big Bang happened?

Did the Big Bang create the first cells or did they already exist?

I have read many writings that people used moon rocks to date the Earth at approximately 4.6 billion years old assuming they were created at the same time. How can such an assumption be made because no was there to see it?

If evolution is constant then isn't it possible that cells could evolve and dinosaurs could arise once more or species that were extinct could come back? How come we have not yet seen the next stage in human evolution, the new species that arises from us?

I know it is common in atheism to use BCE and CE instead of BC and AD but if the story of Christ is not real what is the reason for the distinction between BCE and CE and how come it is still based of the time that would have been the birth of Christ?

What if God created us with free will? What if the choice to acknowledge him or believe in him must be of free will? What if there was no direct evidence left of his existence for a specific reason? What do atheist believe happens after death? A long sleep or complete non-existence?

If morals are something that was stumbled onto in the course of evolution, then wouldn't "right" and "wrong" be subjective?

If we all have the same destination after death of being recycled into the environment no matter how "good" or "evil" we are then what is point of pursuing any particular course or what is the point of having any hope if justice does not exist? (because we all know that justice in man's hand is a joke)

Well these are some of the things I ponder, if you could assist me in answering these questions I would appreciate it.

Thank you.
Phil

Hi Phil,

Thank you for your email.

I just want to correct something in your opening sentence. Atheists do not have beliefs. Once something is known it is no longer a belief. Atheists simply accept the fact that there is no evidence for anything supernatural.

Similarly, atheists do not traditionally 'believe' in the Big Bang theory. The Big Bang theory happens to be the current scientific model for the emergence of the universe. Atheists accept it in the same way they accept other scientific theories. viz., that it provides an accurate description of the real world and is widely supported by the available evidence.

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In fact the theory is so well supported by the evidence that it can explain, in precise detail, how all the elements were generated, including the explanation for their relative proportions, and how the general structure of the universe and solar systems such as the one we live in evolved from a time just a fraction of a second after the big bang.

No, the Big Bang did not create the first cells. This had to wait for the formation of our solar system, then enough time for the earth to cool down and for the conditions to be right for life to get started.

I was not in Asia at the time of the recent tsunami that killed thousands of people, but of course I am able to accept the available evidence that it occurred. In the same way although no human was around when the earth was forming, I am able to accept the scientific evidence about how it occurred. There are a number of methods for dating the age of the earth, all based on sound scientific principles, and I see no reason to doubt them. By the way, I see that you also accept the scientific method as being sound, otherwise you would not be using a computer to send us an email. Did you ever stop to think that the same scientific methods that enable you to have a computer, use a mobile phone, watch television, have your goods laser scanned at the supermarket checkout and fly in an aircraft from one country to another are the same methods that are used to develop theories such as the Big Bang theory for the formation of the universe? The principles used to build a computer are based on quantum theory. Of course it is 'only' a theory, but it seems to be doing a good job don't you think?

I'm not sure what you mean by evolution being constant. Certainly evolution is an ongoing process. It is highly unlikely for all sorts of reasons (scientifically explainable), but not impossible, that a species like the dinosaurs would evolve again, and the same is true of other extinct species. How would it be possible to see 'the next stage' of human evolution? That would require being able to see into the future. Like all other species we are continually evolving, we are at a particular 'stage' now and may be at some other 'stage' in the future, and the same is true of all other species. Of course the human species has gained some control over its own evolution, through its intelligence and scientific understanding, and we are no longer subject totally to the forces of nature.

Our current calendar, which is now essentially in worldwide use, is of course based on the date for the supposed 'birth of Christ'. Since changing the calendar to some other base date would require a massive and concerted world wide cooperative effort, which is hardly likely to take place regardless of how sensible that may be, we are stuck with the current situation. Using BCE and CE at least recognizes that we are not tied to ancient superstitions and myths.

It is interesting I think to see how Christians use this argument about free will. It is mainly used because they have no other way to reconcile a supposed omniscient, omnipotent god of goodness with a world that is filled with pain, misery and suffering. But this argument does not hold - this god still supposedly created a world that would become filled with pain, misery and suffering, and knew that it would, free will or no free will. And why is such a god so keen on having people believe in him, under the threat of suffering? Surely you would think such a being would value honest questioning of all things rather than belief under duress?

There is no direct evidence for the existence of leprechauns. However I do not waste any time pondering if that is for a specific reason. Similarly I do not waste any time pondering why there is no direct evidence for the existence of a supernatural being. I simply accept the fact that there is no evidence.

Naturally when someone dies they no longer exist as a conscious entity, since their brain along with all their other organs no longer function. I had no consciousness before I was born, and will have none after I die. I see no problem in accepting that.

'Right' and 'wrong' are based on the collective needs of society, and without the development of rules for 'right' and 'wrong' on this basis we would simply not have continued to exist. It is not too difficult to grasp really - anything you would not like done to yourself is also not good to do to your fellow human.

The point of pursuing a particular course in life is to try to bring happiness and fulfilment to yourself and your loved

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ones, whilst not inflicting suffering on anyone else, and if possible to bring the same things to others. That seems a reasonable 'hope' as far as I am concerned.

Regards,
Dennis
Public Relations Team



Why don't you get a MUCH more visible "in your face" profile on TV and the media in general? And WHY is the word "atheist" virtually banned or seldom used on TV?

And why don't you ATTACK the DISGUSTING Pope and the CRIMINALLY rich Catholic paedophile church regularly ... even daily ... nay ... hourly ... continually, especially considering the FACT that there is NO god/s, the bible is absolute shit, as is Jesus etc?

And WHO do I give an atheist vote to? a vote for Howard is a vote for the moron and nepotist Costello, and Rudd was described as an intellectual and committed Christian ... these terms are mutually Exclusive.

Geoff

Hello, Geoff.

It's great to hear from someone as disgusted as I am at the political and religious landscape.

I'm donating some of my time to answering letters such as yours, writing to politicians, church leaders, newspapers and so on, as well as contributing my membership subscription and a couple of articles to the Atheist Foundation of Australia website.

What are you doing?

If you have written to newspapers yourself, you will know that they print only about one percent of all letters received. They treat letters from the Atheist Foundation of Australia no differently to those from other Australians. Frequently we put out press releases on the topics you suggest as well as other areas of religious abuse such as religious education, the treatment of women, gays and so on. If we are lucky these find a place in a newspaper. As often as possible the president is interviewed on Radio... but it is very difficult to get one's voice heard.

Last year the Atheist Foundation of Australia ran a successful series of TV advertisements about religion and oppression that aroused much interest.

The Atheist Foundation of Australia is entirely a voluntary, non profit organisation. All office holders and contributors are volunteers, some, such as the president and treasurer and web editor and magazine editor, put in more hours than most people do in a full time job – and all for free.

We would love to be more 'in your face' on TV, radio etc... but are you aware of the cost? We depend solely on members' subscriptions for money, and they barely pay for the magazine and office running costs. There are no government assistance packages for atheists. Unlike the churches, we don't get tax exemptions or any handouts.

So, as you feel strongly, I hope you are doing your bit to send the message to the world, and will join the Atheist Foundation of Australia as a symbol of your support. Because unless organisations such as ours have broad based support from the people we are trying to give a voice to, we cease to have validity.

Peter
Public Relations Team



A BIBLE STORY

HUMOUR

God said, "Adam, I want you to do something for me."
Adam said, "Gladly Lord, what do you want me to do?"
God said, "Go down into that valley."
Adam said, "What's a valley?"
God explained it to him.
Then God said, "Cross the river."
Adam said, "What's a river?"!
God explained that to him, and then said, "Go over to the hill....."
Adam said, "What is a hill?"
So, God explained to Adam what a hill was.
He told Adam, "On the other side of the hill you will find a cave"
Adam said, "What's a cave?"!
After God explained, he said, "In the cave you will find a Woman."
Adam said, "What's a woman?"
So God explained that to him, too.
Then, God said, "I want you to reproduce."
Adam said, "How do I do that?"
God first said (under his breath), "Geez.....!"
And then, just like everything else, God explained that to Adam, as well.
So Adam goes down into the valley, across the river, over the hill, into the cave,
and finds the woman.
Then, in about five minutes, he was back.
God, his patience wearing thin, said angrily, "What is it now?"
And Adam said,
"What's a headache ?"



"That's me, there"



It's always a pleasure to report a win for our side; and that's the case this month! After several years of creationists running the Kansas State Board of Education, their anti-evolution science curriculum was repealed by the newly elected board after a hotly contested election. Amazingly, the old guidelines even contained anti-science rhetoric pointing out such cases where scientific theories had been abused in the past by the Nazis with their forced sterilization programs, and the 1932-1972 Tuskegee Alabama syphilis study, where government health officials ran secretive experiments on poor black men with the disease.

The one fly in the ointment is that local schools will still make the decisions as to what is actually taught in their classrooms. The State Board will only provide the final test guidelines. What will happen if a fundamentalist teacher(s) insists on teaching creationist nonsense and just pays lip service to evolution in an attempt to appease the State Board? "Remember kids, evolution is only a theory, so don't forget Noah and his real cool ark". After all, what's more important from a fundy's viewpoint, good grades and a successful career, or an eternity at the right hand of their imaginary friend in the sky? One thing we know for sure, the creationists will not stop trying to get their mythology back into the classroom. I'm sure the situation in Kansas will have to be revisited from time to time. At least we won the battle...for now!

Here's a story that actually took up one third of a page in our local newspaper, *Hernando Today*, earlier this week. It wasn't found on the religion page; rather it was on page 2 of the *Health Today* section. The setting was rather unlikely; Temple Beth-David here in Spring Hill. It was sponsored by Hadassah's annual "education" presentation. The topic was angels, and the full house was treated to a dissertation on the subject by a local Catholic priest! That kind of surprised me, because I never thought that Jews were still into this type of folly. I figured that most Jews outgrew the angel concept many years ago.

I always gave Jews a bit more credit; not having succumbed to the Jesus story, not going door to door peddling their doctrine, and never appearing on TV shouting Moses! Moses! Or be healed in Moses' mighty name! Jews don't bomb women's health care clinics, and so far, I know of only one rabbi who was caught trying to molest a child. So what the hell are Jews doing wasting time with a storyteller from the Catholic Church, an organization that has brought mankind...well, ah..just fill in the blanks! Come to think of it, maybe they were amused as much as I was about the alleged attributes of angels and just humored the priest.

From the newspaper article, did you know that: "You don't pray to angels. You pray to god, who may send an angel to bring an answer. Angels have a hierarchy and the first order is the Seraphim. Cherubim are second. The third order includes Archangels, who carry god's messages to humans and look after the affairs of humankind." (So then could John Howard and George Bush be Archangels?)

More snippets from the article: "Angels are thought to be asexual. They have no bodies anyway. They're said to be able to assume any form that the situation requires. Bad angels are fallen angels who have rejected god's authority. They are called demons. People need to be wary of bad angels who travel in many guises." (Maybe they're referring to some AFA members here!)

Yes, religion is sometimes amusing if we can temporarily put its harmful attributes aside. The day when the angels Gabriel, Michael, and Moroni are placed in their proper historic context; right next to the "angel" Superman, can't come soon enough for me!

Bill

Dark art of religious wedge politics

By Emily Maguire

In his much quoted and discussed essay in last October's *The Monthly*, Kevin Rudd wrote that “a Christian perspective should not be rejected contemptuously”, and this is fair enough. We live in a pluralistic society and should respectfully listen to and debate all ideas regardless of their religious or philosophical origins.

Often, however, Christians like Rudd demonstrate a double standard by treating non-religious viewpoints with disrespect, if not outright contempt. Even as they call for tolerance when it comes to their own beliefs, they accuse the rest of us of being amoral. When they concede us godless types any values, they insist we got them from Christianity.

Tony Abbott did exactly that last week when he wrote in the *Herald* “the faith-inspired basic ethical precept of Western civilisation, to ‘treat all others as you would have them treat you’, tempers the tribal instinct to ‘look after your own’.” Now, to “look after your own” may be a “tribal instinct” but the opposite of religiosity is not tribalism. How insulting to assume that the irreligious have no ethical system, no values or morals acting to “temper” our base instincts.

And how arrogant to claim that this particular precept - “to treat all others as you would have them treat you” - is “faith-inspired”. The ethic of reciprocity is found in almost every known philosophical, religious and ethical system. It certainly pre-dates Christianity with Plato, Socrates and Confucius, among others, having taught versions of it.

Abbott also attacked “relative” secular values, claiming that without Christianity as a guiding force “justifying fundamental values becomes a much bigger problem”. Again, this is nonsense. All value systems - even religious ones - are constructed and changeable but this does not mean morality is relative. There was a time when Christian values allowed you to beat your recalcitrant wife. Keeping slaves, too, was once considered moral and godly. At another time, attending public stonings was perfectly moral.

As our understanding of humanity changes, so do our values. This is as it should be. Our willingness to listen to new ideas and consider new evidence is the best hope we have of avoiding hubris, insularity and group-think. A commitment to treating all comers as equally deserving of respect and consideration (but not all ideas as equally meritorious or moral) is a guarantee of an inclusive, pluralistic civilisation.

John Anderson, at a Christian forum at Parliament House last August, invoked the classic argument against non-religious values: that they cause murderous totalitarianism. “What is a secular value system?” he asked, before answering himself: “I could argue the extreme case, that a secular value system gave us World War II via Nazism.”

Christian supremacists love to bring up Nazi Germany, Maoist China and Stalinist Russia. Society without religion, they say, is evidently hell on Earth. Well, no. A society in which people are not allowed to worship or not, pray or not and believe the same thing as the leader or not is hell on Earth. A society in which the government openly supports one type of person over another - white over black, Muslim over Christian, Catholic over Protestant, for example - is hell on Earth.

A society in which religion is kept well out of public institutions while being practised freely in private is a society in which every citizen can feel truly equal in the public sphere. It's a society in which a person's morality is judged by action, not belief, and respect is due to those who contribute to the greater good of all people, not just those who believe in the same deity.

But, claim some anti-secularists, religious people are the backbone of our charitable and social service organisations; without their calling to serve the needy our society would be worse off. It's true that many of our great social service organisations have Christian origins, but it is a mistake to think that all of those devoted to helping the disadvantaged are religious. Armies of non-believers work in both paid and volunteer positions caring for the homeless, the disabled, the poor and the ill. In any organisation devoted to social justice and environmental sustainability you will find many people who would describe their values as being secular or humanist rather than faith-based.

This is an important point: many religious and irreligious want the same things when it comes to improving the

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conditions of life for their fellow human beings. A harmful, unnecessary divide is created when someone claims their reason is the only truly moral one.

This is a particular problem when a politician is responsible for the sanctimony. Rudd is on a self-declared mission to reclaim Christianity from the right, which would be fine if he were the elected leader of a Christian organisation. As leader of a secular party and potential leader of our nation he should be talking about the values that unite those on the left, not the specific faith from which some of them derive these values. Why create a chasm between those who are working for essentially the same end: a more just and compassionate world? Why emphasise your religious faith - something that separates you from others with the same goal - when you could be emphasising your commitment to social justice?

Religious conviction does not make a person morally superior. It doesn't even make a person moral. What does, funnily enough, is acting morally. All people concerned about the state of the nation should contribute to public debate and serve as examples in the community. It serves no one and progresses nothing to alienate your allies by denigrating their moral integrity.

Emily Maguire's latest book is *The Gospel According to Luke* (Brandl & Schlesinger).

The article first appeared in The Sydney Morning Herald on 13/1/07

<http://emilymaguire.typepad.com/>

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Letter to a Christian Nation; by Sam Harris.

xii, 96, (2) pp. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006

(also Bantam, 2006, \$32.95).



Reviewed by NIGEL SINNOTT

This is a deceptively small work of literature. The introductory "Note to the Reader" and the main text (not including endnotes) occupy about 95 pages measuring only 184 mm by 110 mm, filled with fairly large, clear type.

But size is not the same as significance. After all, "Little Boy" was an early atomic bomb. And *Letter to a Christian Nation* is quite a weapon too. Boxing is a sport of which I have never approved, but it provides the best metaphors I can think of for describing this book.

Sam Harris comes roaring out on the attack against American religiosity in the first page, and delivers at least one heavy, well-crafted blow on each page until he reaches the final paragraph. If the first duty of an opposition is to oppose, well, the author might be accused of many things, but certainly *not* of short-changing his readers!

In the first paragraph of the "Note to the Reader" we have: "Christians generally imagine that no faith imparts the virtues of love and forgiveness more effectively than their own. The truth is that many who claim to be transformed by Christ's love are deeply, even murderously, intolerant of criticism."

And the last paragraph of the main narrative ends with similar pugnacity: "Nonbelievers like myself stand beside you, dumbstruck by the Muslim hordes who chant death to whole nations of the living. But we stand dumbstruck by *you* as well — by your denial of tangible reality, by the suffering you create in service to your religious myths, and by your attachment to an imaginary God. This letter has been an expression of that amazement — and, perhaps, of a little hope."

If you have read this far, you will realise that you will either love or loathe Sam Harris's book. Small calibre it may be, but otherwise it is high-velocity, long-range, armour-piercing, high-explosive stuff. The author is not a man who pulls his punches!

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Just to reinforce my point, here is another sample, from page 25: “Indeed, religion allows people to imagine that their concerns are moral when they are highly immoral — that is, when pressing these concerns inflicts unnecessary and appalling suffering on innocent human beings. This is why Christians like you expend more ‘moral’ energy opposing abortion than fighting genocide. It explains why you are more concerned about human embryos than about the lifesaving promise of stem-cell research. And it explains why you can preach against condom use in sub-Saharan Africa while millions die from AIDS there each year.”

Its small size makes this book easy to carry around for quick reference, so it is invaluable “ammunition” for argumentative, rusted-on atheists.

The copy I have is the Knopf (New York) edition, but in Australia a Bantam edition, subtitled *A Challenge to the Faith of America*, and with an introduction by Richard Dawkins, may be more common in bookshops. Reviewing the Bantam edition in *The Age* (Melbourne, 24 February), Steven Carroll described it as “a stand-and-deliver attack on the perceived irrationalism and hypocrisy of faith”, but concluded that “it’s most doubtful that too many believers will be swayed”.

Well, maybe. I will certainly watch out for more reviews of *Letter to a Christian Nation* and read them with interest. The important breakthrough is that full-on attacks on mainstream religion are now appearing in general bookshops and are being reviewed in the national press.

I am wary of prophecy, but I would expect Sam Harris’s book to be ignored and avoided as much as possible by the religious right and conservatives. Religious liberals and the leftish not-so-orthodox will probably say they quite agree with this and that, even if some passages are rather, well, “over the top”. But I await some purple prose and high-pressure rage from the sort of post-modernists who paint any criticism of religion or of oppressive customs as “racism”. And a few decades ago I used to encounter from time to time the right-wing, reverent agnostic, who regarded religion (usually Christianity) as “good” for keeping the working classes and the not-so-wealthy docile and submissive, and deeply despised atheism and freethought as uncouth, ill-mannered, ill-educated and a threat to order and privilege. If there are any right-wing, reverent agnostics still standing today I think their lack of swaying, when they see this book, could be quite entertaining.

Letter to a Christian Nation contains the odd anachronism, such as speaking against slavery “in the United States in the year 1775” (p. 87), but is otherwise well written and elegantly printed. Those of a sceptical, suspicious nature may wonder how on earth so many cogent and high-powered arguments against conventional religion could be packed into such a small, slim volume without divine assistance. Indispensable!

A 21ST CENTURY RATIONALIST IN MEDIEVAL AMERICA

Essays on Religion, Science, Morality, and the Bush Administration.

By John Bice

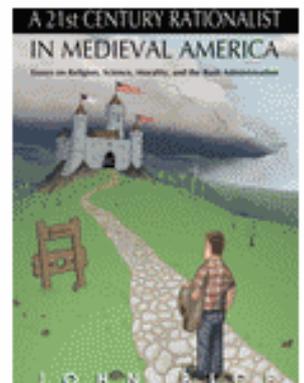
Reviewed by Lee Holmes

Upon hearing that John Bice’s column in ‘The State News’ Michigan, was ending, I wrote to him expressing my disappointment. He subsequently contacted me about his upcoming book.

I was delighted and honoured to be then asked by John to read his book to offer an opinion for a back-page blurb. Having been a fan of his essays in ‘The State News’, I was fairly certain I would enjoy a whole book full of his opinions. I wasn’t disappointed!

“Absorbing, depressing, funny, sad, sarcastic, witty, and disturbing. A fantastic read. Although about the USA, the book is perfectly suitable for Australian and British readers. Well... anybody in fact.”

Lee Holmes, Atheist Foundation of Australia



Paperback copies will be available in Australia. Contact Head Office for pricing and shipping costs.

Rising numbers of nonbelievers increase popularity of atheism

John Bice

During my absence from the Opinion Page, it seems that atheism has gone somewhat mainstream. Richard Dawkins is enjoying well-deserved success with his brilliantly constructed appeal to reason and clear thinking, *The God Delusion*, a New York Times best seller. Sam Harris also is on the best-seller list with the diminutive book *Letter to a Christian Nation*, an uncommonly concise destruction of familiar Christian canards.

Those are just two examples from a flood of books on the subject, and more are coming. As Richard Bernstein observed in *The International Herald Tribune*, “When a figure of the scientific stature of Richard Dawkins writes a book called ‘The God Delusion’ and the book climbs onto the New York Times best-seller list and stays there, for 14 weeks so far, you know something significant is taking place.”

One encouraging aspect of the new popularity of atheism is that a growing number of people are abandoning their religious faith in favor of an evidence-based view of the world. The Official Richard Dawkins Website (www.richarddawkins.net) features “converts’ corner,” a collection of previous believers who have renounced their faith.

In addition, to the dismay of many Christians, a somewhat amusing Web site called *The Blasphemy Challenge* (www.blasphemychallenge.com) has given away hundreds of free DVDs of *The God Who Wasn't There*, in exchange for individuals posting a video of themselves publicly “denying the holy spirit.” Although most Christians would undoubtedly have no qualms about publicly denying Isis, Thor, Ra, Shiva, Mithras or thousands of other imaginary beings, many believers in the equally imaginary “holy spirit” are quite upset by this admittedly silly promotion.

These stories are nice, but the most important accomplishment of this wave of atheistic sentiment is the disruption of the long-standing and unjustified cultural taboo against publicly criticizing religious belief. As the writer Douglas Adams pointed out, “If somebody votes for a party that you don't agree with, you're free to argue about it as much as you like. ... But on the other hand, if somebody says, ‘I mustn't move a light switch on a Saturday,’ you say, ‘Fine, I respect that.’

Cultural critic H.L. Mencken similarly noted, “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.” Regrettably, theocratic Christians and insufferable self-anointed moral elitists have taken advantage of this excessive deference, and have become increasingly preoccupied with imposing their faith-based views on everyone. The excellent book, *Kingdom Coming: The Rise of Christian Nationalism*, by Michelle Goldberg, nicely details the disturbing trend.

In recognition of the growing popularity of atheism, which religious fundamentalists have greatly aided in fostering, I've compiled a short list of splendid books related to the subject of rationality and religious criticism. Of course, these books aren't for everyone; respect for evidence-based reality and reasoned arguments is necessary to get much out of them. As Dawkins correctly points out, especially devout believers, whom he refers to as “dyed-in-the-wool faith-heads,” are immunized by religious faith against such argumentation.

As a simple test, ask yourself if you agree with the following statements:

1. The earth is less than 10,000 years old,
2. Every word of the Bible is supernaturally inspired, literally true and free from contradiction or error,
3. Communion wafers and wine transubstantiate into the body and blood of Jesus,
4. Evolutionary theory is unsupported by evidence.

If you agree with any of those statements, you're likely too blinded by faith to be reachable. You may as well stop reading now and go back to inspecting your cinnamon bun for a likeness of the Virgin Mary.

For everyone else, my top 10 recommended books are:

1. “The God Delusion,” Richard Dawkins,
2. “The Demon-Haunted World,” Carl Sagan,
3. “Atheism: The Case Against God,” George H. Smith,
4. “Why I Am Not a Christian,” Bertrand Russell,
5. “The Blind Watchmaker,” Richard Dawkins,
6. “Letter to a Christian Nation,” Sam Harris,
7. “The Varieties of Scientific Experience,” Carl Sagan,
8. “Misquoting Jesus,” Bart D. Ehrman,
9. “Why People Believe Weird Things: Pseudoscience, Superstition, and Other Confusions of Our Time,” Michael Shermer,
10. “Tower of Babel: The Evidence against the New Creationism,” Robert T. Pennock.

10 Myths - and 10 Truths - About Atheism

Sam Harris:

This sums up many of my reasons for atheism and what lead me into the enlightenment of atheism...

Sam Harris | December 24, 2006 | The Los Angeles Times

SEVERAL POLLS indicate that the term "atheism" has acquired such an extraordinary stigma in the United States that being an atheist is now a perfect impediment to a career in politics (in a way that being black, Muslim or homosexual is not). According to a recent Newsweek poll, only 37% of Americans would vote for an otherwise qualified atheist for president.

Atheists are often imagined to be intolerant, immoral, depressed, blind to the beauty of nature and dogmatically closed to evidence of the supernatural.

Even John Locke, one of the great patriarchs of the Enlightenment, believed that atheism was "not at all to be tolerated" because, he said, "promises, covenants and oaths, which are the bonds of human societies, can have no hold upon an atheist." That was more than 300 years ago. But in the United States today, little seems to have changed. A remarkable 87% of the population claims "never to doubt" the existence of God; fewer than 10% identify themselves as atheists — and their reputation appears to be deteriorating.

Given that we know that atheists are often among the most intelligent and scientifically literate people in any society, it seems important to deflate the myths that prevent them from playing a larger role in our national discourse.

1) Atheists believe that life is meaningless.

On the contrary, religious people often worry that life is meaningless and imagine that it can only be redeemed by the promise of eternal happiness beyond the grave. Atheists tend to be quite sure that life is precious. Life is imbued with meaning by being really and fully lived. Our relationships with those we love are meaningful now; they need not last forever to be made so. Atheists tend to find this fear of meaninglessness ... well ... meaningless.

2) Atheism is responsible for the greatest crimes in human history.

People of faith often claim that the crimes of Hitler, Stalin, Mao and Pol Pot were the inevitable product of unbelief. The problem with fascism and communism, however, is not that they are too critical of religion; the problem is that they are too much like religions. Such regimes are dogmatic to the core and generally give rise to personality cults that are indistinguishable from cults of religious hero worship. Auschwitz, the gulag and the killing fields were not examples of what happens when human beings reject religious dogma; they are examples of political, racial and nationalistic dogma run amok. There is no society in human history that ever suffered because its people became too reasonable.

3) Atheism is dogmatic.

Jews, Christians and Muslims claim that their scriptures are so prescient of humanity's needs that they could only have been written under the direction of an omniscient deity. An atheist is simply a person who has considered this claim, read the books and found the claim to be ridiculous. One doesn't have to take anything on faith, or be otherwise dogmatic, to reject unjustified religious beliefs. As the historian Stephen Henry Roberts (1901-71) once said: "I contend that we are both atheists. I just believe in one fewer god than you do. When you understand why you dismiss all the other possible gods, you will understand why I dismiss yours."

4) Atheists think everything in the universe arose by chance.

No one knows why the universe came into being. In fact, it is not entirely clear that we can coherently speak about the "beginning" or "creation" of the universe at all, as these ideas invoke the concept of time, and here we are talking about the origin of space-time itself.

The notion that atheists believe that everything was created by chance is also regularly thrown up as a criticism of Darwinian evolution. As Richard Dawkins explains in his marvelous book, *The God Delusion*, this represents an utter misunderstanding of evolutionary theory. Although we don't know precisely how the Earth's early chemistry begat biology, we know that the diversity and complexity we see in the living world is not a product of mere chance. Evolution is a combination of chance mutation and natural selection. Darwin arrived at the phrase "natural selection" by analogy to the "artificial selection" performed by breeders of livestock. In both cases, selection exerts a highly

(Continued on page 23)

non-random effect on the development of any species.

5) Atheism has no connection to science.

Although it is possible to be a scientist and still believe in God — as some scientists seem to manage it — there is no question that an engagement with scientific thinking tends to erode, rather than support, religious faith. Taking the U.S. population as an example: Most polls show that about 90% of the general public believes in a personal God; yet 93% of the members of the National Academy of Sciences do not. This suggests that there are few modes of thinking less congenial to religious faith than science is.

6) Atheists are arrogant.

When scientists don't know something — like why the universe came into being or how the first self-replicating molecules formed — they admit it. Pretending to know things one doesn't know is a profound liability in science. And yet it is the life-blood of faith-based religion. One of the monumental ironies of religious discourse can be found in the frequency with which people of faith praise themselves for their humility, while claiming to know facts about cosmology, chemistry and biology that no scientist knows. When considering questions about the nature of the cosmos and our place within it, atheists tend to draw their opinions from science. This isn't arrogance; it is intellectual honesty.

7) Atheists are closed to spiritual experience.

There is nothing that prevents an atheist from experiencing love, ecstasy, rapture and awe; atheists can value these experiences and seek them regularly. What atheists don't tend to do is make unjustified (and unjustifiable) claims about the nature of reality on the basis of such experiences. There is no question that some Christians have transformed their lives for the better by reading the Bible and praying to Jesus. What does this prove? It proves that certain disciplines of attention and codes of conduct can have a profound effect upon the human mind. Do the positive experiences of Christians suggest that Jesus is the sole savior of humanity? Not even remotely — because Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims and even atheists regularly have similar experiences.

There is, in fact, not a Christian on this Earth who can be certain that Jesus even wore a beard, much less that he was born of a virgin or rose from the dead. These are just not the sort of claims that spiritual experience can authenticate.

8) Atheists believe that there is nothing beyond human life and human understanding.

Atheists are free to admit the limits of human understanding in a way that religious people are not. It is obvious that we do not fully understand the universe; but it is even more obvious that neither the Bible nor the Koran reflects our best understanding of it. We do not know whether there is complex life elsewhere in the cosmos, but there might be. If there is, such beings could have developed an understanding of nature's laws that vastly exceeds our own. Atheists can freely entertain such possibilities. They also can admit that if brilliant extraterrestrials exist, the contents of the Bible and the Koran will be even less impressive to them than they are to human atheists.

From the atheist point of view, the world's religions utterly trivialize the real beauty and immensity of the universe. One doesn't have to accept anything on insufficient evidence to make such an observation.

9) Atheists ignore the fact that religion is extremely beneficial to society.

Those who emphasize the good effects of religion never seem to realize that such effects fail to demonstrate the truth of any religious doctrine. This is why we have terms such as "wishful thinking" and "self-deception." There is a profound distinction between a consoling delusion and the truth.

In any case, the good effects of religion can surely be disputed. In most cases, it seems that religion gives people bad reasons to behave well, when good reasons are actually available. Ask yourself, which is more moral, helping the poor out of concern for their suffering, or doing so because you think the creator of the universe wants you to do it, will reward you for doing it or will punish you for not doing it?

10) Atheism provides no basis for morality.

If a person doesn't already understand that cruelty is wrong, he won't discover this by reading the Bible or the Koran — as these books are bursting with celebrations of cruelty, both human and divine. We do not get our morality from religion. We decide what is good in our good books by recourse to moral intuitions that are (at some level) hard-wired in us and that have been refined by thousands of years of thinking about the causes and possibilities of human happiness.

We have made considerable moral progress over the years, and we didn't make this progress by reading the Bible or the Koran more closely. Both books condone the practice of slavery — and yet every civilized human being now recognizes that slavery is an abomination. Whatever is good in scripture — like the golden rule — can be valued for its ethical wisdom without our believing that it was handed down to us by the creator of the universe.



Life after Death – fact or fiction? Part 2

by Harry Edwards

My article, *Life after Death – fact or fiction* (Jan-Feb THE AUSTRALIAN ATHEIST), introduced Victor Zammit, a lawyer who, via lectures and the print and electronic media, encourages belief in the concept of an afterlife. He claims to have irrefutable scientific evidence that has not been made public. Reading his book, *A Lawyer presents the case for an Afterlife*, and perusing his website, his ‘irrefutable evidence’ appears principally to be a compilation of biographies and anecdotes. Zammit tells us that the revelations, experiments, investigations and experiences of these past and present luminaries, mediums and believers, have in some way, directly or indirectly been connected with the subject of an afterlife and provide the scientific evidence for a life after death. A closer examination and a little research into his subjects however, lead one to an entirely different conclusion.

In the first article I dealt with one of Zammit’s subjects, Albert Einstein, whose views no doubt would be unquestionably accepted as valid by the scientifically illiterate. Because Einstein was a scientific genius and is reputed in some circles to have endorsed belief in an afterlife, *ipso facto!* Selective quotations are Zammit’s preferred distraction. When all relevant passages are made available for analysis however, and an objective conclusion sought, Zammit’s so called ‘scientific evidence’ dissolves like salt in water. In the case of Einstein, he did *not* conduct any experiments nor provide any scientific evidence; he is erroneously alleged to have endorsed the experiments of another.

Among Zammit’s luminaries we have Sir William Crookes, FRS, OM (1832-1919). An English chemist and physicist, who discovered the element thallium and invented the radiometer and the spintharoscope. A former president of the British Society for Psychical Research (1896-9), Crookes is described in his obituary as ‘largely self-educated’; a process which combined accurate observation, fast learning and the invaluable ability to examine possible connections between the data of different disciplines. However, when it came to make and test connections between psychical phenomena and physics, his articles on the subject in the *Quarterly Journal of Science* between 1871 and 1874, caused considerable controversy. The British Association flatly refused to publish one of his papers. Oddly enough, Crookes’ membership of the Society and his interest in the paranormal is not significant or important enough to be mentioned in either the Encyclopaedia Britannica or Chambers Biographical Dictionary.

Crookes believed in the claimed psychic powers of Florence Cook, the Fox sisters, Eusapia Palladino and Mary Showers – all proven frauds. In the case of the latter, he tried to hush up the fraud so as not to damage the ‘cause.’ In 1871, Crookes was so impressed with Kate Fox during a séance held in London that he wrote in *Researches in the Phenomena of Spiritualism*. P.88:

With a full knowledge of the numerous theories which have been stated chiefly in America, to explain these sounds, I have tested them in every way that I could devise, until there has been no escape from the conviction that they were true objective occurrences not produced by trickery or mechanical means.

On October 21, 1888, Margaret Fox made a full confession of her fraudulent activities with this opening statement in the *New York World*.

“There is no such thing as a spirit manifestation. That I have been mainly instrumental in perpetrating the fraud of spiritualism upon a too-confiding public many of you already know. It is the greatest sorrow of my life ... When I began this deception; I was too young to know right from wrong.”

The blunders made by some of the more eminent members of the SPR, particularly Crookes, have been revealed in later confessions. In Trevor Hall’s detailed study, *The Spiritualists: The Story of Florence Cook and William Crookes* published in 1962, he reveals that the young medium Florence Cook and Crookes were both accomplices and lovers. In one of Crookes accounts, detailing a materialisation by Miss Cook of a spirit form by the name of Katie King, (*Researches into the Phenomena of Spiritualism*. P.124), Crookes attests that:

“The materialisation was a perfect model of a living human being, who possessed a heart and breathed, moved, talked, and apparently had her own recognisable character and personality.” Crookes says, “Katie’s height varies; in my house I have seen her six inches taller than Miss Cook. Katie’s neck was bare last night; the skin was perfectly smooth both to touch and sight, while on Miss Cook’s neck is a large blister, which, under similar circumstances, is distinctly visible and rough to touch. Katie’s ears are unpierced, whilst Miss Cook habitually

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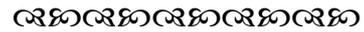
wears ear-rings ... Katie's lungs were found to be sounder than her medium's, for at the time I tried the experiment Miss Cook was under medical treatment for a cough."

A simple common-sense explanation for this fiasco would be that 'Katie' was a third party acting the part. Personally I find it difficult to comprehend which is the more extraordinary – Miss Cook's brazen deception, William Crookes' gullibility or the uncritical acceptance of this episode as a true representation of spirit manifestation. It also begs the question – if it were possible for a spirit to materialise and take on its original

earthly form why don't the dead simply come back to life?

Given that Crookes could be so easily fooled by fraudulent mediums, any suggestion by Zammit that his findings are 'scientific evidence' for communication with the deceased can be dismissed with impunity. Zammit makes a common mistake – the assumption that it's not possible to fool a person with an academic or scientific background.

Conclusion: Sir William Crookes provided no irrefutable scientific evidence to support the concept of an afterlife.



Letters to the Papers

It is not so much that Tony Abbott has opinions on ethical matters identical to those of the Catholic Church, (I'm no zealot, says Captain Catholic, *Advertiser*, February 12th) it is his blind acceptance that they and he are correct in their beliefs. It is more that his surety is so great, he is willing to impose arbitrary values on the whole population, dismissively brushing aside rational arguments for the betterment of society.

Tony Abbott is exhibiting all the hallmarks of being religiously deluded. Religious delusion is not recognised in oneself, a point Mr Abbott should seriously contemplate.

David Nicholls
President
Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc

The report of an intended fusion between the Anglican and Catholic faiths at the highest levels (*Advertiser* February 20th) is alarming news for the Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc.

Our efforts in accommodating the already droves of people now departing mainstream religion in favour of Atheism, keeps our organisation humming at a rapid pace.

It is apparent that a small dose of secular education combined with recent world and localised antics, showing religion in "less than favourable" light, are tough arguments to beat. One can only imagine how frenzied will be the media fracas when the inflexible view hits the unbending opinion.

Bishops from both sides wildly brandishing their 'true' interpretation of scripture has made more Atheists than has common sense.

David Nicholls
President
Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc

Catherine Deveny, (*The Age* February 21st) irreverently to some, articulated extremely well the thoughts of many in the article, 'I'm sort of an atheist for Jesus'. The breath-of-fresh-air style treated religion in a manner no different from any other subject. It does not take a rocket scientist to recognise the planet could do with an exceedingly large dose of this kind of observation on a regular basis.

The main religions have imposed a self-protection mechanism on the whole of society whereas any critical examination, satirical scrutiny or negative comment is viewed as grossly unacceptable. In other locations this would evoke violence on a massive scale egged on by overtly zealous and bigoted leaders. There is no doubt that the Australian counterpart response will encompass outrage, anger, threat, derision and a whole host of other 'niceties'.

The ever-growing interference of religion in politics makes it imperative that it lose its untouchable and non-negotiable status. This must be immediately rescinded in favour of all pious proclamations being subjected to proper investigation by the same methods employed for secular issues.

David Nicholls
President
Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The AGM
of the
Atheist Foundation
of
Australia Inc
will be held on

Wednesday
21st March 2007
at
Eastwood Community Centre
95 Glen Osmond Road
EASTWOOD SA
commencing
7.30pm
All members are welcome
to attend.

Special Motion for 07 AGM:

That the subscription fees be raised for
Single from \$20-00 to \$25-00 pa
Double from \$25-00 to \$30-00 pa
Five Year Single from \$85-00 to \$105-00
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Is faith in God a step into the irrational?
Is life nothing more than
chemistry & physics in action?*

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OBITUARY

Rhys Watkins

In THE AUSTRALIAN ATHEIST, (Jan - Feb 07) member Rhys Watkins wrote a letter about his cancer diagnosis and impending treatment. We sent his magazine as per usual.

A few days later we received a letter from his wife June, thanking us for his copy but that there was no need to send any more. Rhys had died on 15th December 06.

David (President) wrote to June sending our sympathy to all of his family. Another letter was received telling us the story of the last couple of months of Rhys' life.

Just as we had been notified of Rhys' death a writer from the USA re-contacted the AFA with details of her upcoming book, GODLESS GRIEF. Many of our members have contributed to the book with personal stories.

Cathe Jones (the author) wanted to make sure all the names were spelt correctly and that no-one had been missed from the list. As Rhys was one of the contributors I replied to Cathe informing her that he had died.

Cathe then decided to DEDICATE the book to Rhys.

He'd probably be chuffed, embarrassed and highly amused at this gesture. Vale Rhys.....

ATHEIST FOUNDATION OF AUSTRALIA INC

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I/We agree with the Aims and Philosophy of the Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc and hereby apply for Membership.

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It would be appreciated if members and friends made provision in their wills
for the ongoing objectives of the Foundation.

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We welcome original articles, book reviews, letters to the editor, quotes and snippets for possible inclusion in

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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