

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

We recently received an email question asking if the world would be a less violent place were it not for religion. The question was answered admirably and in great detail by Peter from our Public Relations Team. Here is another way to look at it.

Suppose that at some future date we had to abandon the Earth and look for other planets for survival. There are at least three good reasons why this might happen: environmental damage, such as global warming, population density exceeding that for which the earth's resources can provide, and nuclear war. The idea of the human race finding another planet to live on is not new and with the enormous distances involved is no easy feat either. Carl Sagan suggests a method for populating the galaxy using comets in his book *Comet* (Chapter 19, 'Stars of the Great Captains').

Let's suppose that the time has come to abandon the Earth, that a means to do this has been developed, and that not one but two suitable planets have been identified. Suppose also that, since the world's major civilisations are all dominated by religious types, that a decision is made to take the opportunity to get rid of the trouble-making atheists once and for all. All atheists will be sent to Planet A, while the rest will go to Planet B.

Planet A will be governed by the AFA (The Atheist Foundation of Planet A), whilst Planet B will be governed by a body made up of Catholics, Lutherans, Anglicans, Baptists, Evangelists, Fundamentalist Christians, Eastern Orthodox Christians, Pentecostal Christians, Methodists, Shi'a, Sufi, Kharijite and Sunni Muslims, Scientologists, Mormons, Orthodox and Conservative Jews, Rastafarians, Buddhists, Hindus, Quakers and Restorationists, amongst many others.

Now which planet do you think is more likely to have a problem with violence? In Iraq they can't even get two different types of Muslims to agree on anything, mainly because they are too busy killing each other. Can you imagine the debate over laws relating to same-sex unions, voluntary euthanasia, abortion, what clothing is acceptable for women, which days should be public 'holy day' holidays, sex education, teaching evolution in schools, which books can be published, and so on?

The best atheists could hope for would be that the two planets were on opposite sides of the galaxy!

And on the subject of violence in religion, Muslim apologists are forever making the point that Islam is a religion of tolerance, peace and justice. I cannot help but comment on two recent incidents that demonstrate clearly that this is not the case. The first was the report of a trial for the gang rape of a 19-year old in Saudi Arabia. The perpetrators (seven of them) got jail sentences ranging from two to nine years. There is some justice there. The victim was sentenced to 200 lashes and six months in jail! Her 'crime': being in the car of a man who was not her relative at the time of the rape. The original sentence for this 'crime' was 90 lashes, increased on appeal. For his trouble her lawyer had his license to practise law confiscated. The victim was eventually pardoned, but only as a result of world-wide pressure.

The second concerns the British schoolteacher who was arrested in Sudan for the 'crime' of allowing her students to give the name Mohammed to a teddy bear. Although the teacher was sentenced to 'only' 15 days jail, and eventually pardoned after intervention by a Muslim member of the British House of Lords, plus some international pressure, the possible sentence faced was a year in jail and 40 lashes. Hundreds of Muslims took to the streets to demonstrate, many calling for the death penalty, and one in particular was shown on television saying he would personally do the beheading!

These events are not the actions of extremists, who are normally singled out as not representing true Islam. They are the direct result of Sharia law, the legal embodiment of all that Islam stands for.

Dennis

Letters to the Editor

Just some feedback on the lecture given by Dr Mobbs today at the NSW State Library on Dawkins' *The God Delusion*. All I can say is that it was very lightweight. The speaker was clearly Christian, struggling hard to beat back the deluge of logic and common sense that Dawkins wields. He took issue with three points only from the book:

That Atheists are discriminated against;

That the philosophical proof of Thomas Aquinas of Gods existence is unsound and —

That Religion is bad for us.

Apart from the fact that the delivery was rambling and hard to follow, his first point set me offside. He denied vehemently that Atheists were discriminated against in any form. To back this up he stated that they started the First, Second, Vietnam and Korean wars and killed 8000 priests in the 1930s in Spain. (He conveniently forgot about the Crusades, the Inquisition, Henry VIII, Iran, Iraq etc). He said that Dawkins complains in his book that the Taliban destroyed the thousand year old statues of Buddha in Afghanistan but he *knew* that there “was not an atheist alive today that wouldn't gladly bomb Mecca or the Vatican”.

Fortunately your faithful representative was allowed to ask a question at the end which was just as well as I was about to explode. I started by saying that I for one was an atheist who would never sanction the destruction of religious symbols such as Mecca as I believed that we should keep them as symbols of human folly for future generations such as my son. He had stated that God invented the theory of evolution. I told him that as humanity had become more educated we had pushed back the explanations of the universe that religion had given us and that Darwin's work was a critical step in this process. I was incensed that God was taking credit for it!

After the talk there was a very interesting discussion between myself and three other atheists on the steps of the library. One of them was wearing an Australian Skeptics polo shirt with “committee” emblazoned on it. They were unaware of the existence of the Atheist Foundation of Australia and now have the contact details.

All in all a stimulating couple of hours.

Cheers

Dr. David Smith



I have seldom read such pseudo-scientific clap-trap as in the article by Colin Healey. (THE AUSTRALIAN ATHEIST Number 6, Nov–Dec 07) The only way all of us are governed by laws of physics is in the Newtonian sense of classical mechanics, which deals with the macro or corporal world. For example, I might choose to commit suicide by employing all three of Newton's Laws, leaping from an aeroplane wearing a parachute that I do not intend to open; or, I might use a motorcycle and ride—without a helmet—into a solid brick wall at 100 km per hour. In both cases I make a choice as to the means to an inevitable end, as determined by classical—not quantum—mechanics. I make the choice governed by the state of my mind at the time of decision. At that moment, the only law of physics to which I am subject is that to which I am always subject—in the corporal sense—due to the Earth's gravitational field. This inviolable constraint I can even make a conscious decision to use for my own “end” (see above).

What about neurochemistry then? The very term tells us that we have left the world of physics and entered the realm of chemistry. Chemistry is the science of atoms and molecules* and brain chemistry the science of mainly complex organic (and psychoactive) molecules. The quantum mechanics of the constituent electrons have now about as much influence on events as whether I am wearing clean underpants riding the motorcycle that I choose to crash.

Drop a pellet of potassium into your cup of tea. Beware the explosive result. Inhale some chlorine—and be dying for new lungs. Ingest potassium chloride. It's essential! Yet the salt has exactly the same number of subatomic particles as its constituents. In blood, these ions are separated and free to roam, vital to our biochemistry. Yet take too much and we enter the field of legally sanctioned homicide: the electrolyte is now in sufficient concentration to disrupt the

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electrical signal to the heart. Our choice.

Yours sincerely,
Gus Burston.

PS On page 50 of *The Atheist Manifesto*, Michel Onfray uses the term *free choice* in his argument that choice is not free. I agree with him because his use of the qualifier *free* is crucial to his reasoning. Of course we have choice, but is it really free or is it partly determined by our genes, culture and experiences—including past hurts? The quantum physics allegory of so serious a topic may pass as “satire” but it is ill-conceived. Please note that in my tongue-in-cheek riposte I do not use the adjective *free*, because I believe that *free will* is a concept rather than an actuality.

Editor’s footnote

* **Chemistry.** Science of the elements & compounds & their laws of combination & behaviour under various conditions (*C.O.D.*, 5th edn., 1964).



Dear Dennis,

The photographs were taken on 10 December at the monthly Brisbane Atheist Meetup Group held in the Community Rooms in Brisbane city in which I had the pleasure of hearing the views of the Atheists of Australia.

I feel grateful to Mr Murali, who posed the idea of an email interview and to you for your kind follow up by introducing my thoughts through the Magazine, THE AUSTRALIAN ATHEIST.

You may think of providing a space for a photograph in the Magazine along with the article, if you deem fit. My grandson could not succeed in sending the photo copies to Mr Martin Rady to whom I had assured a copy of the photograph. If it suits your convenience you may please help me by providing the copy to him.

May I suggest that a copy of THE AUSTRALIAN ATHEIST carrying the interview article to Kalaignar M Karunanidhi the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, Chennai, India. It will enthuse him to extend his co-operation to the Atheists in the State in their programs. The Chief Minister is an Atheist to the core and a beacon of light to other States.

During the rest of my stay here I think I will be able to benefit from the good aspects of Australia, as I wade through my stay.

With warmest regards to you and your Staff and salutations to the President.

Yours truly,
M.V. SOMASUNDARAM



Dear David,

Thank you for sending me the copy of THE AUSTRALIAN ATHEIST Number 5, Sept-Oct 07. I found it very interesting and informative but rather lacking in humour.

I noticed especially the ideas from John Dillon. I was amused by his idea (page 15) of inserting a note in each Gideon Bible he encounters and I will follow his suggestion. At the same time I will not be sticking anything to the relevant Bible as suggested in the stickers on page 26 although I like the wording. I don’t like defacing books in any way and the intention behind the Gideon Bibles is benign and charitable from the originator’s point of view. I prefer to let the reader decide.

I cannot agree with his complaints (page 4) regarding the insurance advertisement where a householder claimed to be

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an atheist mistaking the salesman to be a doorstep evangelist. John's main complaint seems to be that the householders were dishevelled and obviously intoxicated. Having attended many all-night parties in my youth I had no objection to this portrayal of atheists.

I thought the ads were clever and funny, making a play on both the universal objection to doorstep evangelists and our human ability to react to something on the basis of our assumptions rather than reality.

The statement implied that claiming to be an atheist was a viable real life option; was a refreshing surprise in my view. I cannot remember this happening before except in documentaries. This is a far cry from times when my claim to have no religious belief was met with disbelief or outright hostility.

I hope that the atheist movement retains its sense of humour, I hope that we never take ourselves as ridiculously serious as the Christians in 'Atheist Eve' (page 14). Surely we do not want to invent a "sin" of "atheist blasphemy" if anyone suggests that any atheists are other than our own idea of pure of heart, mind and lifestyle practices.

The ads denigrate doorstep evangelists and portray atheism as a viable belief option; they compelled me to get off my butt and finally look up the Atheist Foundation on the web and do my small bit to promote atheism as a socially acceptable alternative philosophy to any system of religious beliefs. They were also very funny.

Please find enclosed my completed membership application.

Yours sincerely
Jocelyn



Dear David,

I was delighted to read your letter to the *Sydney Morning Herald* of 24 December 07. I am an early member of the Humanist Society of New South Wales—many years ago—but I still, at the age of 84, burn with the desire to see the demise of all religions.

I thought your point about the Hebrew word for young woman was splendid. People have to realise how concocted the whole Christian apparatus has been. Human beings need role models, someone to look up to, to worship. What's wrong with a fellow human, I say? One can still admire Jesus Christ as a great role model, not only for his time, but even today, as others have been over the years, even thousands of years before Christ.

Unfortunately all people are not born equal, and it is almost politically incorrect to say so. But unless genetics does some improbable things, they never will be. So we always have to acknowledge that some people lack the capacity or strength of intellect to appreciate the kind of logic in your great letter.

I see many encouraging signs of the secularisation of Western society, even amongst all the other rubbish springing up. Certainly, since I was a child, one reads and hears many critical appraisals of, not only the Christian religion, but other faiths. Even 10 years ago there was little criticism, let alone discussion.

I notice in today's *Herald*, in his Christmas address at St. Andrew's Cathedral, Dr. Jensen is quoted as saying there had been many atheistic attacks on Christianity". He added: "Our problem with God is not that he is invisible or that he does not exist. The real problem is that we wish that he did not exist." Who is the man talking about? It infers that believers wish they did not believe!

I was so pleased your letter was published. Good on the *Herald*!
All the best for 2008.

Sincerely
Michael



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Dear David,

From the heart, I cannot thank you adequately for the support, reassurance, and encouragement given me by your splendid letter of response to George Pell in yesterday's *Herald*. Everything you said, everyone needs to know about, become aware of, and take hope and courage from. You have run rings around George, giving him no comeback; and for all of us who are not under George's thumb, it will be business as usual and onwards and upwards, thanks on this occasion, to your letter.

Congratulations, and thank you again,

Jen



Meditations on Morality

by Peter Taylor

I've often been told that morality stems from religion; that without religion people would murder, rape, steal and cheat. It matters not to the purveyors of such drivel that there's not a skerrick of proof in support of their contention: they need to believe it in order to justify their faith. Instead of responding with a contemptuous snort, as I ought, I counter their inanity with reason and logic, on occasion offering myself as an example of a moral being unshackled by religion—not always with resounding success.

These blanket statements usually come from adherents of one of the monotheistic cults derived from ancient Judaism; Christianity or Islam. As it is always useful to know the enemy, I once took a close look at their faiths but found little to inspire confidence in their moral authority. Their holy books and eyewitness accounts of what it was like to live in their theocracies provide tales of slavery, infant mutilation, subjugation of women, human and animal sacrifice, war, genocide, tortures, murder, rape and theft; nothing I could construe as morally elevating, which made me curious. Where do they get their "holier than thou" attitude?

Most secular ethicists agree that moral, (socially acceptable) human conduct is the product of thousands of years of survival. Thus a moral act in its most basic form is one that assists in the preservation of the species. Murder, rape, theft and cheating one's fellows will not contribute to human survival and are therefore immoral acts. There's nothing religious or "god given" in that—merely common sense.

A few minutes more thinking led me to the conclusion that modern Jewish, Christian and Islamic moral codes can be divided into two main categories:

(1) Natural or evolutionary morality. Anthropological studies of humans who lived long before civil societies, or any form of organised religion involving supernatural deities emerged, show that hunter-gatherer tribes embraced values such as kindness, generosity, consideration, affection, honesty, hospitality, compassion, charity, humour, gentleness, egalitarianism, listening, respect for the elderly, love of children, diligent respect for the land, plants and animals—all behaviours that derive from necessity. This moral code ensured human survival and, although it has no basis in religion, remains more or less intact, having been incorporated into the moral codes of modern religions.

(2) Political morality. When humans began to gather in towns, organised religions in their quest for power invented additional moral codes based not on the survival of humanity, but on the survival of the religion. This non-survival moral code decreed that innate, natural human behaviour was immoral except in certain circumstances decided by the religious bosses. It was a stroke of genius that made sinners of everyone and instilled deep-seated feelings of ineradicable guilt that, with the threat of an afterlife in heaven or hell, proved to be a weapon mightier than the sword.

Examples of non-survival-based so-called morals are: Women are not equal—they must obey men; sex outside marriage is a sin; homosexuality is a sin; eating too much is a sin; masturbation is a sin; worshipping any other god is a sin; not worshipping god is a sin; using god's name in vain is a sin; thinking "wrong" thoughts is a sin; not cutting off your foreskin is a sin; envy is a sin; desiring material possessions is a sin; discarding the religion you were born into is a sin, sleeping too much is a sin; not working hard enough to make a profit for your employer is a sin... The list is long and has nothing whatever to do with morality, but everything to do with manipulation through guilt. (Never forget that the big three monotheistic religions are primarily political organisations intent on

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gaining temporal power through mysticism and dogma instead of physical force—although they are perfectly prepared to use that if required, and have done so, and are doing so, with disastrous results for those caught in the crossfire.)

What I find especially bizarre is that, despite their guilt-inducing moral code, Jews, Christians and Muslims continue to adore ancient con-men like Abraham, who was a slave owner, a bigamist, indulged in animal and human sacrifice, led his tribe on orgies of rape, pillage, arson and war, committed genocide, and probably incest, and lied about his age.

Ethics is the study of morality and asks questions such as how moral values should be determined; what morals people actually abide by; what is the fundamental nature of morality, including whether it has any objective justification; how moral capacity or moral agency develops and what its nature is. As most ethicists carry emotional and religious baggage from their own upbringing, their conclusions should be treated with scepticism.

Evolutionary biologists, who in my opinion understand more about the subject than ivory tower ethicists, assume that moral codes are a product of evolutionary forces; founded on behaviour that aided survival and reproduction. Our present moral complexity, as represented in the proliferation of laws, is due to the increasing need to avoid disputes and injuries; to cope with increasing group size; and to increase national prosperity. But this has nothing to do with religion.

The great tragedy of humanity is that, having invented their own self-serving set of additional “morals”, religions then claim *they* are the source of all the “natural” ones as well! The upshot is that ignorant politicians lump all morality together and take purely

religious, non-survival moral codes into consideration when making laws!

It seems reasonable to expect that having imposed their perverted value system on society, religious adherents would at least abide by it. But they don't. “You may not kill,” bleat priests, imams and rabbis while blessing troops as they leave to kill opponents in foreign countries in order to shore up supplies of oil or subdue dissent. “Obey god's commandments,” shrill the fundamentalists on their way to murder gays, abortion doctors and adulterers. “Do not steal!” exhort the priests while pocketing billions of dollars of state hand-outs and refusing to account for, or pay tax on, the gigantic profits made by their commercial enterprises—knowing full well that by doing so they are stealing from honest taxpayers.

Over the centuries, non-religious communities have adopted acceptable moral codes, proving the falsity of the notion that without religion there would be no morality. The so-called Golden Rule—*treat others as you would like to be treated*—has been embraced by secular humans since the dawn of time, but ignored by religions if it interferes with their goals. The eightfold path of Buddhism and the ancient Egyptian code of Ma'at each embody concepts of truth, order, and justice while addressing metaphysical questions such as, “How should we live?”

Certainly, whatever is wrong with Western culture, there are no religious remedies for it, for they have all been tried.

Good and bad are subjective tags we place on actions according to our circumstances; and I've come to the conclusion that it's pointless to argue with people who are unable to view things with a modicum of objectivity, and who ignore scientific advances. When morality becomes an article of faith, not reason, then we are dealing with insanity.

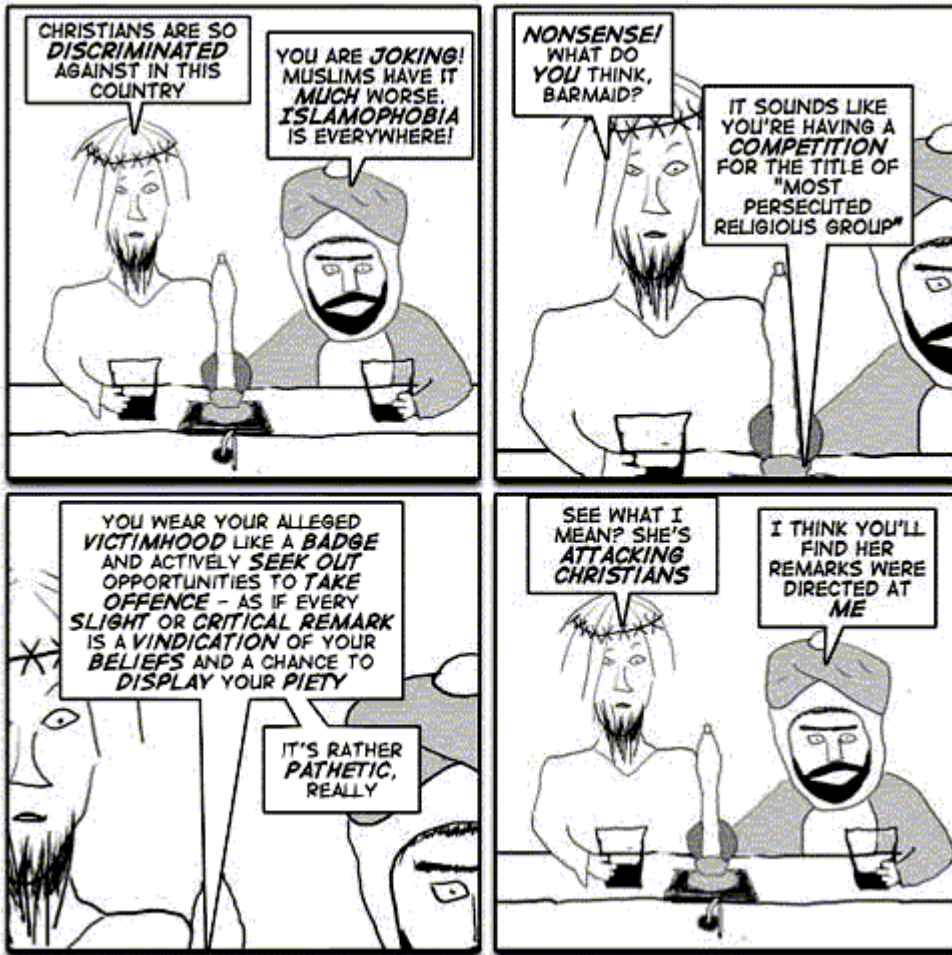
You find as you look around the world that every single bit of progress in humane feeling, every improvement in the criminal law, every step toward the diminution of war, every step toward better treatment of the coloured races, or every mitigation of slavery, every moral progress that there has been in the world, has been consistently opposed by the organized churches of the world. I say quite deliberately that the Christian religion, as organized in its churches, has been and still is the principal enemy of moral progress in the world.

~ *Bertrand Russell*



ATHEIST FOUNDATION FORUM
<http://www.aussieatheist.com/forum/index.php>



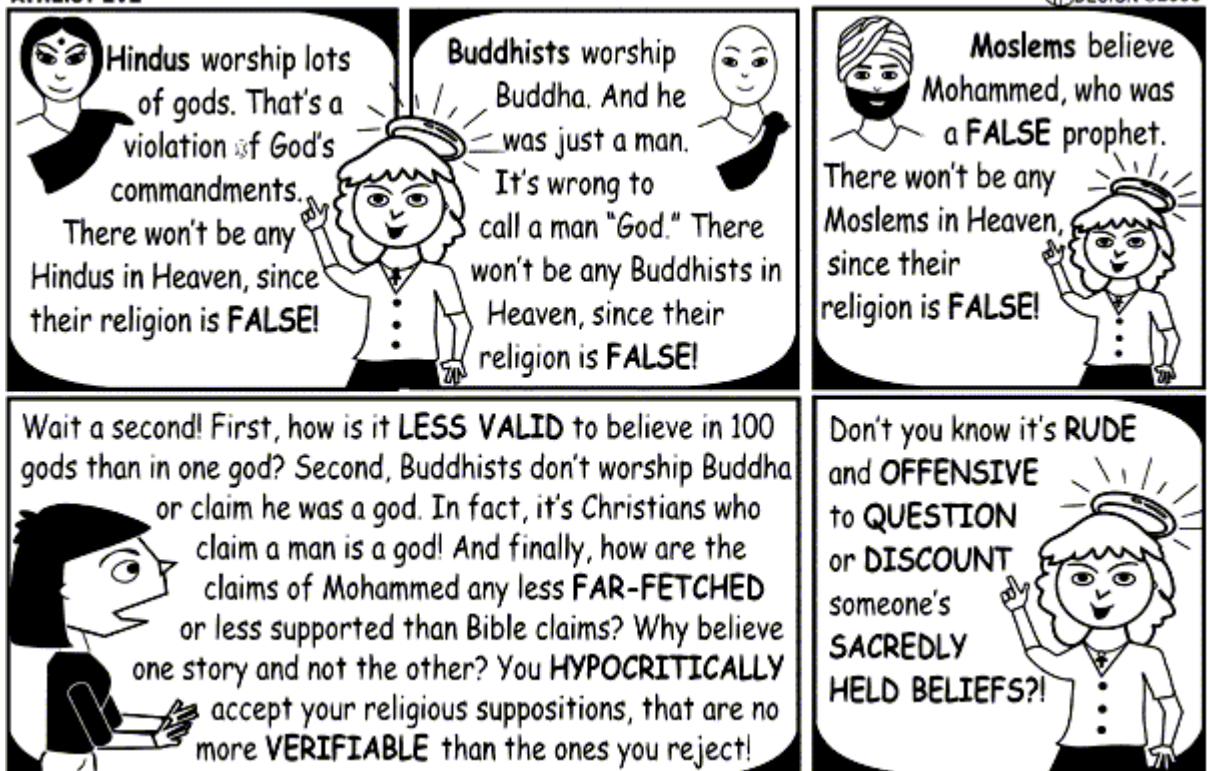


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INTERVIEW — Nikesh Murali

talks with M V. Somasundaram.

Q. Thanks for agreeing to do the interview at such a short notice. Tell our readers a bit about yourself.

I am M V. Somasundaram and I hail from the state of Tamil Nadu in India. I was born in a town called Villupuram about 37 km west of Pondicherry, a former French colony. By birth I am a Hindu. The oldest classical language, Tamil, is my mother tongue. I married in 1958 and have two daughters and two sons.

I have a Masters degree in History and Teaching from Madras University. I have 26 years of teaching experience and was a principal of a school for six years.

Q. What brings you to beautiful Australia?

I have come to visit my eldest daughter and my grandchildren and will be staying in Australia for a period of six months. I came to know of the Atheist Foundation of Australia from the internet and contacted them to see how atheism was faring in Australia and to find out about the extent of influence blind faith exerts on Australian society. I also wanted to share some ideas about the history and current status of atheism and rationalism in India.

Q. From speaking to you over the phone and perusing the internet links that you sent me, I understand that atheist and rationalist movements initiated by the Tamil populace has carved a unique place for itself in Indian history. Please give us some of your insights into this and also tell us a bit about your personal hero Periyar E V. Ramasamy and how he inspired you to take up the cause of rationalism?

A system known as *varnashrama dharma* (the ancient caste system which has compartmentalized people in different rungs of the ladder of the society in unequal terms) gained even more popularity during the British rule. The Brahmins who claimed to be the custodians of the *varnashrama dharma* insisted on their supremacy and through scriptures and rituals propagated superstitions and oppressed people from the so called "lower castes".

E V. Ramasamy, widely known as Periyar spearheaded the self-respect movement in Tamil Nadu. Periyar considered the Dravidian (South Indian) society as one enslaved in the trance of self forgetfulness. He made it his life's mission to free it from the shackles of Hindu

scriptures and dubious rituals nurtured by the Brahmin community. With this aim, he started an organization in 1924 called the Justice Party and was soon branded as the leader of a little gang of atheists by his detractors.

Periyar later founded his own non-political organization known as Dravidar Kazhagam and propagated his ideology through the slogan:

"There is no god: no god at all;
he who invented god was fool;
he who propagated god was scoundrel;
he who worships the god is barbarian."

Many youngsters and students were attracted to Periyar's vision, his words and the movement. I was one such twenty-year old, who devoured everything about the movement through newspapers and magazines and later started attending meetings and conferences. I have been associated with the movement from 1960 and have taken an active role in spreading rationalist ideals through writing articles and translating pieces for the organisation's magazine and also touring and disseminating our ideas across Tamil Nadu.

As a teacher I was able to kindle the flame of the spirit of enquiry among my students.

Q. What is the present state of atheist and rationalist movements in India?

We still suffer from the bane of the wretched caste system and, even though India is a secular state, it is unfortunate that political parties often manipulate people in the name of religion. With India's rising status as a world power things are slowly changing. A highly educated population is slowly denouncing superstitions and meaningless rituals in favour of humanist values. Organisations like the Dravidar Kazhagam are working relentlessly to encourage people to develop a rationalist outlook towards life. Tamil Nadu is proud to have an atheist chief Minister Mr M Karunanidhi .

Q. How has your association with the Periyar movement influenced your thinking and way of life?

It has deeply informed me about the value of human life and the need to stem the corrupting influence of religion on society.

Q. You recently published a book. Tell us about your tome and what inspired you to write it.

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My book, *The flower that rest on the petals* (published in Tamil), is an attempt to examine the rationalist beliefs of our first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and is written in the form of a conversation between Nehru and children. It was my maiden attempt at writing a book and I am glad that the response from the critics was really good. It was released on 15 June 2007 in Chennai at a function presided over by the former Vice Chancellor of Annamalai University and released by the Tamil Nadu government higher education minister Mr. K Ponmudi and addressed by Dravidar Kazhagam President, Mr Veeramani. I have always been interested in Indian political history and the role that Nehru played in creating a secular India and this prompted me to work on the book.

Q. What are your first impressions about Australia and Australian society? What do you hope to take home from your stay Down Under?

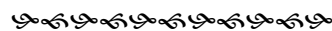
I think some of the highlights of life in Australia as I have experienced it are as follows:

- Less pollution.
- Clean and hygienic surroundings.
- Good transportation facilities, well maintained roadways.
- Polite, friendly and active people who have a good work ethic.
- An environment that fosters both intellectual pursuits and sports.
- Peace and harmony and great diversity which are gifts of a multicultural society.

On the other hand I saw too many smokers and I hope they realize the dangers in pursuing the habit. Also it is a real shame that the newspapers carry a section on

astrology which I think is against the spirit of scientific thinking.

I will certainly carry the good wishes of the Australian people and share it with Indians, but it will be a difficult task for me to share the wishes of 20 million Australians with the 1.1 billion population of India. I will try though.



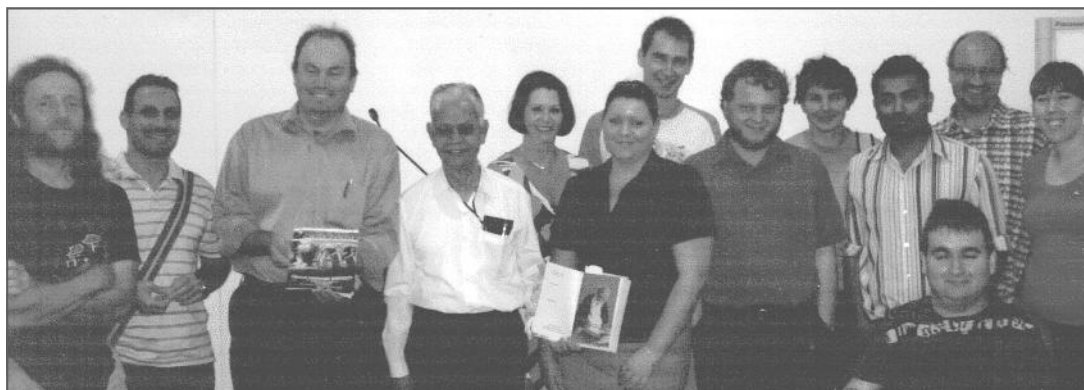
Here are some internet links that will provide more information and background on some of the topics, movements and individuals discussed in this interview.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/E._V._Ramasami_Naicker
<http://www.countercurrents.org/dalit-periyar280603.htm>

Nikesh Murali has published several collections of poetry online with international publishers. His works have been translated into seven languages and featured at international book festivals including the 29th FERIA del Libro festival held in Buenos Aires. They have appeared in anthologies, journals and magazines all over the world. His poems and short stories have won and have been short listed for several major writing contests. He was nominated for the Pushcart Prize in 2007 by Shalla Magazine. He was awarded the IFLAC-MCA Bilingual Club Poets for Peace award in 2006.

He has completed his Masters in Journalism from Griffith University, Gold Coast, Queensland, for which he was awarded the Griffith University Award for Academic Excellence in 2005, and his Masters in Teaching from James Cook University in Townsville, Qld. He is working on his first collection of short stories. He can be visited online at:

<http://www.nikeshmurali.com/>



M V. Somasundaram meets with Australian Atheists in Brisbane.

Religious Artefacts

by Harry Edwards

In THE AUSTRALIAN ATHEIST – NUMBER 5, I dealt with miracles. Because these allegedly divine manifestations are often associated with religious artefacts I believe it would be appropriate therefore to mention some of them.

The belief in the efficacy of certain religious relics was born of another belief—that the emissaries of Satan who possessed the bodies of the afflicted produced diseases and that God's will was considered manifest through miracles and saints. God's intermediaries were the apostles, prophets and martyrs. Any earthly remains of their person or objects with which they came into contact became sacred, and were thought to be endowed with supernatural powers. It was believed that in some mysterious way the virtue in a holy hair, a piece of wood, or the bone of a saint would drive out the demon and effect a cure.

In the early part of the second millennium and up to the middle ages humans lived in perpetual fear of natural phenomena which were put down to the intervention of God. In a spiritual age when ignorance was the handmaiden of faith, belief in miracles prospered and for political reasons the Church fathers decided that they were necessary to propagate the faith.

Although relics were sought after and venerated in Roman times, by the eleventh century they were commonplace. The list is both long and macabre—splinters from the true cross, Christ's blood, seventeen foreskins (all allegedly his), the crown of thorns, baby teeth, hair clippings, the bones of Mary Magdalene, a phial of Mary's milk, her scarf, St Peter's tooth, the head(s) of John the Baptist, a finger from the hand of the apostle Thomas and countless bones allegedly belonging to a large number of assorted religious luminaries. The relics, originally intended as an aid to devotion, soon became objects of worship in their own right, as did the ornate caskets that contained them. Shrines were built to house the caskets and became Meccas to which the faithful beat a pilgrims' path.

From the very beginning the Church realised the value and power of relics and commercialism took over, swelling the coffers of many an abbey, church and monastery.

The bones of martyrs and other holy persons were so treasured that a traffic in bogus relics was created.

Notwithstanding that most relics were spurious, they were well sought after even to the extent of murder and

theft. The bones of St Foy at Agan, France, for example, were stolen by Armisdus, a monk from Congues, who spent ten years planning the caper, and when the crusaders plundered Jerusalem in 1099 to recover the Holy Sepulchre, a horrible massacre of Muslims and Jews ensued. In 1204 Constantinople too was submitted to a merciless pillage resulting in the dispersal of the spoils.

The above represents but the tip of the iceberg but, while a comprehensive list is beyond the scope of this article, some of the more bizarre and revered encountered during my travels are worth a mention.

St Francis Xavier was canonized in 1622, and what's left of his mortal remains rests in a silver casket in the Basilica of Bom Jesus in Old Goa, India. I use the word remains in the literal sense as the poor fellow's body has been dismembered unmercifully by both lay and ecclesiastical relic seekers since he was laid to rest in 1552. A Portuguese lady who wanted a relic of the saint bit off one of his toes, and in 1615 part of his right hand was cut off and sent to the Church of Gesu in Rome. In 1619 the remaining part of the hand was removed and sent to the Jesuits in Japan. From time to time parts of the intestines have also been removed and distributed to various places around the world. Ironically, the remains of St Francis are now the subject of a court case. A local family is claiming that the body is not that of the saint at all, but one of their former ancestors.

Heads seem to enjoy a certain status among believers. The reliquaries for the heads of Saint Praxedes and Saint Sebastian, together with the relics of Saint Stephen, are still cherished and represent some of the most valuable artefacts in the Vatican's collection.

St Catherine, born on 25 March 1347, was the twenty-third child of a religious fanatic Jacomo Benincasa. Her convictions drove her to change the pattern of European history. She lived in a period when religion and politics were inextricably entangled and when the tide of rising nationalism had yet to break the unity of Christendom. Under these circumstances a religious fanatic was able to exert considerable influence on events. At the age of five she was extremely devout and had a vision of Christ enthroned above St Dominic's Church in Siena. By the age of twelve she had considered and rejected marriage and pledged herself to perpetual virginity. However, because she had for a short time been tempted to try and win a husband she became riddled with guilt. Accusing herself of vanity she frequently flagellated until the blood ran. At sixteen, following another vision, she

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became a tertiary among the Daughters of Penance of St Dominic's Order of Preachers. As the demands made of her were not enough she shut herself up in her father's house for three years accusing herself of entertaining the foulest temptations. Another vision at the age of nineteen, in which she saw herself betrothed to Christ himself, rewarded her pains and vigils.

Driven by inner prompting, visions and voices, she became well known in Siena for the trances into which she frequently fell. At such times she was totally insensitive and her limbs became stiff and cold. She explained that because she was so full of Christ her senses stopped working. Her catatonic fits reached a peak in 1370, when she lay as though dead for four hours, then wept for two days explaining that she had seen the hidden things of God and was now forced back into the prison of her body.

During an outbreak of plague in the summer of 1374, Catherine nursed the sick and comforted the dying, and enthusiastically called for a crusade against the Mohammedans to free the Holy Places in Jerusalem. Another mystical experience occurred on 1 April 1375, when Catherine received the stigmata. No one ever saw the five wounds until after she died and their invisibility was explained by saying that she had especially requested it. Her part in trying to convince Pope Gregory XI and other rulers in Europe of the need for war resulted in an agony of confusion of her part in it.

On 30 January 1380 she suffered a stroke, her "demons" blaming her for the part she had played in causing a split in the Church. She was struck by paralysis and died on 29 April 1380.

Buried in the Minerva Church at Rome, her head was removed and carried to Siena where it may still be seen, perhaps one of the most repulsive, although one of the most venerated of all Christian relics.

In hindsight, Catherine can be seen as a remarkable example of religious ecstasy, which can now be explained in terms of the morbid psychology of hysteria.

Given that at Holy Communion participants eat and drink the "flesh and blood" of Christ, it is only natural that blood is as high on the list of venerated relics as decapitated heads.

For example, in Naples since 1389 every few months a sealed phial of the solid blood of St Januarius, when handled by priests, turns to liquid before the faithful who venerate it. Up until 1992, this "miracle" has remained unexplained. Reporting their discovery in *Nature*, scientists explored the tendency of certain gels to turn to liquid when stirred or vibrated and to return to

the solid form when allowed to stand. This is known as thixotropy, and it appears to be what occurs in the holy blood relic of the mediaeval saint. Investigating the claim, Dr. Luigi Garlaschelli and his colleagues at the University of Pavia, Italy, have come up with a scientific explanation for the mystery of the clotted blood. To reproduce the effect, Garlaschelli's team mixed calcium carbonate (or chalk) into a solution of water of hydrated iron chloride and used dialysis to transfer the chemical products across a membrane into distilled water. In mediaeval times, parchment or animal gut would have worked equally as well. By adding a pinch of common salt, a dark brownish 'sol' was formed which set into a solid gel. Gently shaken this gel turned into liquid. Then when left to stand, the liquid solidified. The researchers concluded: "The chemical nature of the Naples relic can be established only by opening the phial, but a complete analysis is forbidden by the Catholic Church. Our replication of the phenomenon seems to render this sacrifice unnecessary."

Another phial of "holy" blood can be seen in the cathedral at Bruges, Belgium. The caption in four languages explains:

The relic of the holy blood is found behind the tabernacle of this altar. According to tradition, Derick of Alsace, Count of Flanders (1120–1168), founder of this chapel of St. Basil and the Holy Blood brought the relic to Bruges. The rock crystal phial, which contains the coagulated blood, is preserved in a glass cylinder adorned with golden crowns, and this has remained intact since its arrival in Bruges as testified by historical data from as far back as 1250.

The city of Bruges is intimately connected with the precious relic that is in its safekeeping. Without interruption during the centuries, this treasure has been venerated, and through it, the person of our Lord. That is why people come here, not just to see the relic, but also to pray.

There is no mention of from where or from whom the blood originated or why Derick of Alsace thought it was worth bottling.

Last and not least is possibly the most famous of all relics, the Shroud of Turin. Alleged to be the burial cloth of Jesus Christ, it was first drawn to public attention in 1898 at Lirey, in France, by the widow of a Knight, Jeanne de Vergy. It was photographed for the first time and the negatives revealed in much greater detail and form the faint original impression of a figure on it. In the 1970s, a group of scientists investigated the cloth and although some were convinced of its authenticity, others questioned the "blood stains" which

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were found to contain hematite and vermillion, substances used by mediaeval artists as a red pigment. In 1989, carbon dating methods put the probable date of the shroud at between 1260 and 1390, settling the question of whether or not it was a forgery once and for all. Despite this, it still continues to attract the faithful as a holy relic.

The idolatry, veneration and dependence on holy relics demonstrates a failure to understand the natural laws of nature and attests to the ignorance and superstitious nature of people— unfortunately still prevalent in many societies today. While religious artefacts were used mainly to ward off the evil effects of malignant forces and to manifest miracles, others were held to bring good luck. They take many forms: rings, necklaces and bracelets in a variety of materials ranging from gold and precious stones to humble plastic beads. Others are carved replicas of animals, insects and birds in wood, stone and ivory. I recall as a child I carried a rabbit's foot for good luck and my mother's purse was never without her lucky miniature brass leprechaun.

While charm and "good luck" bracelets in Western society are still popular, they tend to be decorative rather than to have mystical properties or a protective function. In less advanced societies however, faith in amulets and artefacts persist.

Curious to know just what some people would buy if they thought it would bring them good luck, I wrote the following letter to a local newspaper. It was published in the *Manly Daily* on 8 August 1994:

I have a pet chook that answers to its name, cheeps like a canary and sits on my shoulder like a parrot.

Inevitably while observing the world from its perch, it leaves a calling card on my shoulder which, when according to a meticulously kept record and collation with subsequent events, has proved to be a precursor of good luck.

Over the past few weeks I have won lotto, received a large order for my recently published book and money long owed to me has been returned.

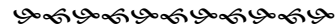
My son on whose shoulder the chook also perches has had similar luck.

Believing this extraordinary run of luck is more than coincidence, I had the chook's feathers read by a palmist and an astrologer check its horoscope. A 'past lives' reader then advised that the chook was a reincarnated philanthropist.

Convinced that I should spread the good luck around I have decided to sell the chooks calling cards.

Anyone interested in purchasing my lucky chicken poo at \$10 per 5 gm should send me a money order together with a SAE as soon as possible. I don't know how long this will last and constipation could ruin everything.

Believe it or not – within days I received two orders!



IN THE NEWS

Priest who committed suicide for rebirth cremated

Raipur: A three-day "miracle" drama in Chhattisgarh's industrial town of Raigarh ended on Monday afternoon after a Hindu priest, who had committed suicide promising to return to life within 72 hours of his death, was cremated.

Hundreds of people had laid siege around the body of 25-year-old Manoj Baghel, who ended his life on Saturday by consuming poison at a temple in Raigarh, about 200 km northeast of state capital, Raipur. Baghel had claimed that he would come back to life.

"The miracle drama is now over as the people, who had surrounded the body of the dead priest to witness the rebirth, handed over the corpse to the police for post-mortem on Monday afternoon," Superintendent of Police in Raigarh, J K Thorate said.

The people had surrounded the temple where the body was kept in a locked room and were refusing to hand it over to the police, expecting the priest to come back to life by late Monday evening.

"They lost all hope of rebirth of the priest," the police officer said. The police have registered a case of suicide.

Thorate said after post-mortem, the body was handed over to the priest's father, Ram Prasad Baghel, a farmer, who cremated his only son.

The young priest was rushed to a district hospital after he consumed poison. He was then referred to a private hospital where he died. Baghel's relatives later brought his body back to the temple, where a huge crowd had gathered to witness the "rebirth miracle".

'Christian God is not to blame'

Religion has been unfairly blamed for conflicts around the world in recent years, but Christians should remember the benefits of their devotion, Sydney Catholic Archbishop George Pell has said.

In his Christmas message, the archbishop reminds Christians that the birth of Jesus is a symbol of helplessness and hope.

"Christians believe that the almighty God has visited us, not just through prophets, saints and humanitarian heroes, but through sending his son to be born of a virgin in Bethlehem..." Cardinal Pell has said.

"Babies are vulnerable, more helpless initially than any of the animals.

"So too was the son of God, but every birth inspires hope, even when it is only hope against hope."

The archbishop has said God and his believers are not to blame for the world's wars or crimes and Christians should remember the benefits of their devotion.

"...God has been attacked angrily here and there in the English-speaking world and believers have been accused of causing most of the wars and crimes in history," Cardinal Pell has said.

"This is an exaggeration as the moral monsters of the twentieth century Lenin, Stalin, Mao and Pol Pot were atheists and Hitler bitterly hated Jews and Christians.

"But all believers have to acknowledge the downside of their long story, while asking that their positive contributions are also recorded."

In July, more than 500,000 Christians will descend upon Sydney in celebration of World Youth Day and a papal visit.

Cardinal Pell has said followers would travel much further than Mary and Joseph did for the birth of their baby son Jesus in Bethlehem.

"I ask you all to welcome them into your hearts and perhaps, as at the Olympics, into your homes," he said.

"As we celebrate again the birth of the helpless newly-born Christ child, we should remember the sick and the sad, the lonely and the angry and reach out to help them."

■ See page 16 to read David Nicholls' response to George.



Dawkins to lecture in US Bible Belt

Richard Dawkins, the scourge of pseudo-science, Christianity and homeopathy, is to step up his campaign for rational thinking with a series of high-profile lectures deep in the heart of the American Bible Belt.

The Oxford University professor travels to the US next year as part of his battle to promote evolutionary theory in the face of a backlash against the concept in the world's most-advanced industrial nation.

He is to address a series of 2,000-seater venues in the American heartlands. The tour will coincide with the publication of his best-seller *The God Delusion* in paperback in the US in January and act as a prelude to a series of global events to mark the bicentenary of Charles Darwin in 2009.

Professor Dawkins has charities in his own name on both sides of the Atlantic to promote reason and science. He has said that it is in the US, where 50 per cent of the population believes the universe is less than 10,000 years old, that the Enlightenment is most threatened.

However, he said he did not expect audiences to be too tough on his atheist beliefs and that many thanked him for speaking out. "The Bible Belt is a lot less monolithic than it portrays itself. I have a feeling that there is rather a large groundswell of people who agree with me," he said.

By Jonathan Brown *The Guardian* - 24 December 2007

Letters to the Papers

Sydney Morning Herald 24 December, 07

Dear George,

May I suggest a few alterations to your Christmas sermon (As reported in SMH 23/12) to bring it in line with reality?

- One of the main tenets of the RC Church is that Mary was a virgin. The Hebrew word in Isaiah was *alma* which means young woman. The Greeks mistranslated this word into virgin. The Hebrew for virgin is unmistakably *bethulah*.
- Religion may not have been the cause of most of the wars but most of the wars have been fought between differing religions.
- Were the nine million deaths of the Crusades the result of a crime or war? Remember, that number was a quarter of the population of Europe.
- The militaristic despots of the 20th Century were tyrannical dictators. Freely chosen Atheism has nothing in common with them.
- Hitler was a Catholic as were many of his henchmen in a Christian Germany. The centuries of vilification of the Jews, by Christianity, was the prime cause of the holocaust.

Is the same method of slander now to be directed at Atheists, in the hope that one day such propagandist nonsense will catch on?

And finally George, did you get this all so wrong through wilfulness or ignorance?

David Nicholls
President
Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc

Instead of taking heed of history's brutal lessons of command by monarchs and despots, many flavoured by religion, James Jack (Letters December 27) wishes to prolong these faulty systems of governance. Undoubtedly, the most important contribution to the lot of humankind has been the recent introduction of secular democracy. Other mortal ideologies or scriptural laws enacted by the mistaken, the insane, and the deluded have delivered nothing but immeasurable strife to the planet.

It certainly is a bit more than rich, for folk, intent on maintaining harmful theocratic traditions, to preach they have the only way. A New Year's message to them is that they are not the solution, but a well-evidenced part of the problem.

Informed public opinion working in a democratic system is the only method that guarantees the safety net of pluralism in any society. All other methods beg the return of arbitrary injustice and oppression.

David Nicholls
President
Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc

How Bernadette Scadden, (SMH 17/12/07) can make a connection between objections to the World Youth Day rally and Atheists accepting prescribed holidays, is indeed a masterful stroke of creative thinking.

Easter and Christmas were once pagan festivals forcibly hijacked by Christianity. Therefore, on those days, one is really paying homage to Eostre, Mithra and a plethora of ancient gods.

Do Atheists care which myth is an excuse for a day off? Heck no!

David Nicholls
President
Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc

Pope Benedict has an appalling lack of knowledge regarding Atheism. Confusing Atheism with faulty and often opportunist attempts to rectify the horrendous injustice allowed and promoted by Christianity over two millennia, is blatantly deceitful.

Despotic regimes and people, in the name of one ideology or another, have created mayhem down through history. The reason is simple. Religion has supplied subservient populations willing to follow any messiah or system, which promised release from its unjustly harsh and oppressive rule. Lack of effective democratic process allowed despotic tyrants to gain power under the guise of a variety of banners. Democracy was not one of them as the thousand-year Papal orchestrated Dark Ages confirmed.

In the modern world, the greatest threat to the democratic safety net is theocratic meddling in affairs of state. People freely choosing Atheism have recognised this and are reacting against rampant political faith-driven intrusion.

Atheists are merely attempting to demonstrate the nexus between childhood religious indoctrination and dysfunctional societies and countries. There is no repression or violence, implicit, inferred, promised or otherwise in this process. The same cannot be said of our religious counterparts.

David Nicholls
President
Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc



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

Charles Darwin

as a

Symbol for the Celebration of Science and Humanity

Celebrations are an important part of every culture. They provide a tradition and a common bond to be shared among those who make up their culture, permitting them to experience a meaningful connection to one another and to the principles to which they subscribe. Unfortunately, most celebrations are based on ancient traditions that are relevant to only a specific country or culture, and they have often been, and continue to be, the source of serious conflicts.

At this juncture in history, the world has become so small and interdependent that we need a Global Celebration to promote a common bond among all people. The *Darwin Day Celebration* was founded on the premise that science, like music, is an international language that speaks to all people in very similar ways. While music is both intellectual and entertaining, science is our most reliable knowledge system, and it has been and continues to be acquired through human curiosity and ingenuity. Moreover, evolution via genetic variation and natural selection, introduced by Darwin, has become the central organizing principle in biology. In addition, evolution also plays a central role in astronomy and cosmology, where it refers to the way that stars, galaxies and the entire universe 'change over time.' To study biology while neglecting evolution would be like studying physics without Newton's laws that govern the universe or chemistry without the periodic table. Clearly, Darwin himself has become an internationally acclaimed figure, whose influence on progressive modern thought continues to be both profound and pervasive (Ernst Mayr, *Darwin's Influence on Modern Thought, Scientific American*, July 2000).

Current research in the field of genetics, including that on the human genome, has conclusively shown that all humans are essentially identical and that we are genetically related to all other living things on this planet. Thus an enlightened view of genetics is one of unity and equality among all humans and also one that fosters a deeper sense of respect and appreciation for all life. Today the validity of Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection rests in our understanding of the molecular mechanisms of genetics. Therefore, we conclude that Charles Darwin is a worthy symbol on which to focus, in order to build a Global Celebration of Science and Humanity that is intended to promote a common bond among all people of the earth.

From the Darwin Day website.

<http://www.darwinday.org>

Song of the Young Paleontologist

(Sung to the tune of MY FAVOURITE THINGS)

Trilobite, burrows, and Cephalopoda,
 Corals and worms and lamellibranchiata,
 Echinoderm skeletons made out of rings -
 These are a few of my favorite things.

Asteroid impact and classification,
 Isotope dating and bioturbation;
 In the Triassic the birds got their wings -
 These are a few of my favorite things.

When the clam bites, when the shells sink,
 When I'm feeling sad,
 I simply remember that most are extinct
 And then I don't feel so bad.

Darwin, Lamarck and genetic mutation,
 Gradual changes and quick punctuation;
 DNA bases all bound up in strings -
 These are a few of my favorite things.

Protista and Ediacara fauna,
 Eukaryota, Pangaea, Gondwana;
 Vema, a monoplacophoran, clings -
 These are a few of my favorite things.

When the sharks bite, when the polyps sting,
 When I'm feeling sad,
 I simply remember that most are extinct
 These are a few of my favorite things.

By **Alexander Volokh** This poem appeared under the title *Song of the Young Paleontologist*, in **Science** (3 December 1993; vol. 262, p. 1551).



Meeting Jesus

by Dr. David Smith

I met Jesus last week. Or at least a poor, unwell patient who thought he was the Son of God. The disconcerting thing for me was that he looked like the images that adorn Christian art. He was tall, fair, had piercing blue eyes and a very regal manner. He had long fingers that he used gracefully to express himself. He was quite serene and utterly convincing.

His spell came undone because he was a certified paranoid schizophrenic. My interaction with him was in a busy Sydney Emergency Department where he had been brought for assessment by the community psychiatric crisis team. As an emergency doctor I was asked to see if there was anything else going on before he was whisked off to the local psychiatry ward.

Later that weekend, I dragged out a DVD copy of my favourite movie, Monty Python's *Life of Brian*. The unwilling Brian, branded as a Messiah by a ragged bunch of followers, rejected by his mother and girlfriend gets crucified for his troubles.

I started to think about schizophrenia in the context of the Jewish society two thousand years ago. We know now that the incidence of the disease is about one per cent in present-day Australia. It is not a modern disease. Mental illness has been around since humanity began. What would the effect of a schizophrenic such as I had just met be on such a group of people? We know that they were oppressed, illiterate, poor, superstitious and desperate. Their state of health in many ways was appalling. Diseases such as leprosy, plague and tuberculosis were rampant. Medicine was extremely primitive by modern standards and psychiatry would not be invented for many centuries.

How would someone with this disease—that we know existed then—be regarded by the average person in the street then? The movie gives us many clues. He would be taken at face value for what he says and does. People would listen and believe. Human nature allows us to believe others if we want to. If we are sufficiently vulnerable or needy we will believe the most unbelievable things. Suicide bombers are evidence that this is still the case today. If the person is convincing, plausible within your own framework of beliefs and says some things that sound true, then you will believe. Once you believe those initial things then the rest must be true too. Once there are a few of you, then the group has a common set of beliefs and people gain strength from each other. Leaders emerge who can control others, gain benefit either through money or power or both and hey presto! We have a religion.

What defines a schizophrenic? “... *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) IV* is the standard reference text used by modern psychiatry around the world. It defines and describes all psychiatric conditions for diagnostic standardization. With regard to Paranoid Schizophrenia, it lists several major and minor symptoms and signs that need to be present for the firm diagnosis to be made. Amongst others, there are: delusions of grandeur or influence, hallucinations or voices telling the patient to do, think or say things, ideas of superhuman powers.”

If we assume that the Bible actually tells the story of Jesus, and there is considerable evidence that it does not, and that the behaviour described actually occurred, then we can see that he fits a number of the criteria for the disease.

1. Delusions especially of control. That he is the son of God is hard to beat.
2. Hallucinations. That he hears God and talks to him.
3. Thought insertion. That God tells him to do things.

Now we only need one or two of these “major” criteria to make the diagnosis. Additionally, he was in his twenties when he emerged as a significant historical figure. The third decade is the peak age of onset of schizophrenia.

Were there mind altering drugs involved? Who knows? The twentieth century does not have a monopoly on the use of hallucinogens. They have been around for millennia.

As for walking on water, turning water into wine and rising from the dead, these sound as plausible as a virgin birth.

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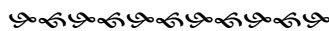
However, these claims are more likely to come from the followers who surrounded the poor psychotic man than from reality. In the current age of science, reincarnation is, like all religion, a throwback to a time when we were all more vulnerable.

So what would happen to such a man in this day and age? The Mental Health Act would take care of him, his cerebral dopamine receptors would be rebalanced by modern drugs and maybe he would return to some level of function in the community (back to carpentry?), with frequent relapses and remissions. Just like thousands of others in our country.

How does a mentally ill man change history then? Watch the movie and find out. For me the most telling line is uttered by the character played by John Cleese who says:

“I know you’re the Messiah, Lord. I should know, I’ve followed a few.”

The rest is history.



MEDIA RELEASE

The brutal censorial death of Benazir Bhutto, those around her at the time and the horrendous injuries inflicted in the name of politicised religion, once again reveal the intractable disease of the mind caused by childhood faith-indoctrination.

This is not a problem specific to any one nation; it is part and parcel of the combination of human nature and circumstance. Whether it is the Christian George W Bush told by a god to decimate Iraq or a puppet of the Islamic creed killing randomly, the end-result only varies by available method.

The spectre of nuclear weapons in the hands of dissembled and rearranged minds intent on introducing a particular ideology at any cost is now an alarming closer reality. How long will luck be the arbiter of this dangerous game played out in the name of hyper-active imagination?

Will the driving forces of childhood programming coupled with the trepidation of our eventual demise, be a self-fulfilling prophesy for a large part, or all of humanity in one horrific moment of gratuitous madness?

David Nicholls

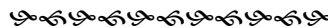
When I was a kid I used to pray every night for a new bicycle. Then I realised that the Lord doesn't work that way so I stole one and asked him to forgive me.

Greetings

No doubt the change of government was mainly due to the public reacting against the right-wing arrogance over many years of the Liberals. The overly zealous religious connection demonstrated by Abbott, Andrews, and Costello, and to a lesser degree but still obvious by Howard, Downer, and Nelson, made many people aware of the negativity associated with church-state alliances. It is still an unknown factor as to how many other parliamentarians allowed their own faith, or the falsely exaggerated perception of the population's faith, to influence decision making.

The good news is that the fanatical religious vote represented by the Family First party, did not increase significantly. The bad news is that Steve Fielding (Family First) will sometimes be in the position of holding the balance of power in the Senate.

A variety of reasons caused the severe ousting of the Howard government and religion was only one of them. However, if Rudd and the new team fail to recognise the negative significance of pandering to a vociferous minority of agenda-driven ultraconservative religious folk, then they too will sow the seeds of their destruction. Time will tell.



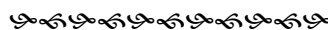
The AFA received an e-mail outlining a television program on ABC 2, in children's viewing time, which was upsetting to the writer. The show has the title of *Angelmouse* and is a cartoon of seemingly innocuous content. The character is a mouse sent back to earth as an angel to perform tasks for "you know who". On successful completion, Angelmouse regains his halo.

The AFA therefore corresponded with the ABC's Audience Liaison Officer and then with the Department of Audience & Consumer Affairs explaining the following points:

- The show is for very young and impressionable children.
- "You know who" is obviously the Christian god; the name *Angelmouse* and the regained halo support that notion.
- Most adults do not accept super-heroes are a reality but many do believe in the existence of a god etc thus giving support for the idea as being true. Promoting a particular religion is against the ABC charter. Programs depicting supernatural themes require a PG rating.

The ABC rejected the AFA concerns and denied they were promoting a religion. The complaint is now in the hands of the Australian Communications and Media Authority awaiting for independent assessment. The instruction to the AFA is that this may take a number of months.

On the face of it, the AFA appears to be attempting to destroy a program most likely loved and enjoyed by many kiddies. Mean old pedantic Atheists stopping harmless fun! That is an opinion that denies indoctrination of the young is an actual effective procedure. By itself, *Angelmouse* would be ineffective in promoting a religion but in combination with social expectations, it is definitely a part of the mind-shaping processes. To bring the point home, the AFA has asked what would be the result if instead of receiving messages from "you know who", the cartoon characters were a hypothetical *Mufti-Mouse & Koranic-Kangaroo*, taking orders from "the one who is great". ("the one who is great" is a common reference to the Islamic god, Allah) Would the ABC program it for young children? And would an Islamic country show its audience *Angelmouse*? To drive the nail in a little further, the AFA asked what would be the response if the theme was Satanic. Again, time will deliver an outcome.



The 2011 Census may seem a long way off but the Bureau of Statistics is asking for submissions regarding alterations to the existing questions or indeed, reasons for any new ones. The Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc has made a submission that challenges the question on religion. We have supplied the opportunity for it to be countersigned by other secular organisations and prominent people. How many eventually countersign the proposal will indicate whether or not secular groups are capable of working in necessary unison for a common goal. "What is the person's

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religion?" This presupposes the person *has* a religion and when this is immediately followed by a list of the main religions, it creates a situation where the religion of baptism may be automatically inserted instead of a present stance. The problem of having children under the age of 14 is also addressed. Under 14s make up 20 per cent of the total population and skew the results. Many adults find their thoughts on the religious question difficult enough. To expect children with immature minds, who really are only parroting their parents' beliefs, to be classified as a particular religion can only distort the data. Let us hope the Australian Bureau of Statistics, after many persons and organisations have asked for change to the question over the years, finally see justification for a revamp. Times have changed and we now live in a community of many faiths and also none and the Census question on religion should reflect that fact.

Until we meet again,

David

Reassuringly Rational

An Atheist Response to Fear

By Paula Kirby

Like a particularly persistent bluebottle fly, one question has been buzzing round my head these last few weeks: why do atheists and theists seem incapable of communicating with one another?

Time and again, we rationalists believe that our position has been expressed clearly and cannot possibly be misunderstood, yet, time and again, we find that it has been—and that it has aroused a degree of hostility that takes us by surprise and makes some of us despair of ever getting our message across. Richard Dawkins' book *The God Delusion*, for instance, is written with a courteous yet unmistakable clarity and is a beacon of both reason and reasonableness. How could anyone misinterpret it? How could anyone mistake it for a hysterical and bigoted rant? It seems impossible. And yet, as we all know, it is misinterpreted—grossly so.

Until recently, I've tended to interpret this as cynical behavior on the part of believers, a way for them to reject the book without having to engage with its arguments. But now I'm beginning to wonder. Is it possible that this response has its roots not in cynicism but in fear? "This idea struck me forcibly the other week, when Dawkins' new television series, *The Enemies of Reason*, was broadcast in the United Kingdom. I was quite taken aback at the hostility of many of the reactions it engendered, even from people I would have expected to belong to our natural constituency. Their comments followed a pattern: first, they claimed that Dawkins was "shooting fish in a barrel" and that he had treated only the most extreme and ridiculous examples. Having thus established to their own satisfaction that Dawkins' criticism was over the top,

the complainants then "came out" as fans of alternative medicine (in principle at least), and, before we knew it, we had a full-scale outbreak of "Science is scary, don't touch it with a bargepole." What's really bizarre, though, is that, having thus demonstrated that they were *precisely* the sort of people that the program was trying to enlighten, they chose to believe that it was really just aimed at complete and utter nutcases and not people like them at all.

Is this not precisely the same kind of reaction that we see on the part of the religious? "Oh, Richard Dawkins just sees the fanatics—but I'm not one of them, so his comments don't apply to me." "Yes, well, we *all* wish the fundies would crawl away and keep quiet—you don't need to be an atheist for that." And, just as with the alternative therapy fans, the next stage is that, having convinced themselves that the issues raised don't apply to them, they move on to "But *my* religion is a force for good" and away they go.

In both cases, I am struck by how utterly indifferent these people are to the fact that their beliefs have been shown—clearly, unmistakably, courteously—to be unsubstantiated by anything resembling proper evidence.

Most of us, I would suggest, are atheists because we can find no evidence to support belief in a god or gods. Most of us, I would further suggest, would revise our position if such evidence were to become available. To us, what matters is the truth or otherwise of any given claim, and so, naturally enough, we couch our arguments in those terms. I don't believe in God because there is no evidence to suggest such a being exists; I don't go to alternative therapists because there is no evidence to suggest that they do any good. What, matters to me is not what I'd like to be true but, quite simply, what is true. It seems such an unassailable position to take, doesn't it? Yet, like a scene in a

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horror movie, we launch these rational arguments at the advancing phalanx of believers and then watch in appalled disbelief as our arguments bounce straight off again with all the impact of a paper plane against a charging rhino.

Has the time come for us to review our tactics? So far we have been concentrating on the issue—truth—that seems most convincing to us. But we're not the ones who need to be convinced. What to us seems like the only question in town is apparently pretty secondary to many others. *Whether or not* alternative therapies actually work, many people find them more appealing than scientific therapies. *Whether or not* there really is a god, many people don't want to cope with their lives without the hope that there is one.

More and more, I'm beginning to think that, for many people, the question of God is one of hope rather than belief. Without that hope, they would find life an intolerable burden. There's no evidence to support that hope? So what? That's not the issue. They believe in God for the same reason they buy a lottery ticket. Do they really, deep down, believe they're going to win the jackpot this weekend? No, of course they don't. Nevertheless, just knowing that they *might* is often enough to keep them going through a week that may otherwise be very grim. Are they remotely put off by statisticians pointing out that their chances of winning are so infinitesimal as to be virtually zero? No, of course not. That lottery ticket in their pocket gives them a glimmer of hope, something to daydream about, something that offers just the slightest chance of escape from whatever it is in their lives that grinds them down.

We see the same process at work in religion. Observing the endless stream of attacks on *The God Delusion*, it is clear that the response isn't a calm exposition of why the claims of religion might be *true*. Instead it boils down to how much harder life would be without belief to cling to. *The truth (or otherwise) of the religious belief is almost irrelevant*. To us that seems incomprehensible, preposterous, almost obscene. But just look at the shrillness of believers' responses. It reminds me of nothing more than the piercing shrieks of a small child sent to bed without her favorite teddy bear. It's more than protest: it's sheer terror.

I know plenty of Christians who are neither stupid nor fundamentalist. When asked why they believe, their replies tend to fall into three categories:

- "How could there be any meaning to life if there wasn't a god?"
- "I can't get my head round the idea of everything just stopping when I die—all that experience, all that knowledge: it can't all just disappear, it can't all be for nothing."
- "My faith gives me so much strength, I don't know how

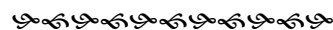
people manage without it."

To those of us who pride ourselves on facing up to the truth and just getting on with life, this seems extraordinary. I can honestly say I don't have a great horror of death—in its nonviolent forms it seems such a natural part of life. Equally, I don't feel remotely put out that my life doesn't have any cosmic purpose. Its purpose is what I make of it—I don't need ancient texts or frisky vicars to make sense of it for me. *But*—those of us who feel able to look life in the eye and say "Bring it on" should not underestimate how daunting that prospect may feel to others.

Many people cling to their beliefs for the same reason that many people stay in abusive relationships: because they are scared of having to face life on their own. The fear of life without ultimate meaning, of life that's ended by death, or of life that has no guaranteed happy ending, is so great and so deeply rooted in many people that when we point out—truthfully—that life *has* no ultimate meaning and *does* end with death and that there is no force greater than ourselves in control of our destiny—they regard us as some kind of aberration, less than fully human. Of *course* atheists seem scary to them: if we can face the prospect of our own demise so coolly, why should we care about theirs? How can someone who can handle the reality of mortality be in possession of the full range of human emotions, like love and joy, compassion and fear?

We know we can, and we know their fears are unfounded, even bizarre. But just look at the responses elicited by *The God Delusion* and see whether you can't detect in them something of what I suggest.

If I am right, this presents us with a challenge: if people reject atheism because they feel unable to deal with its implications, rather than because they're not convinced by its arguments, where do we go from here? There can be no retreat from reason, science, and evidence, but until we can also convince the religious that a life without faith is worth living and, just as important, that it is possible to live it without being either sub- or superhuman, I suspect our reason-based arguments will continue to fall on deaf ears. If we want to be heard, being rational may not be enough: we may need to be reassuring too.



Paula Kirby lives and works in the Highlands of Scotland. She is an enthusiastic atheist who is particularly interested in how former Christians deal with the transition to non-belief. She is currently researching a book on this subject.

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“QUOTES”

I can't embrace a male god who has persecuted female sexuality throughout the ages; and that persecution still goes on today, all over the world.

~ *Amanda Donohoe*

Kill a man, and you are an assassin.
Kill millions of men, and you are a conqueror.
Kill everyone, and you are a god.

~ *Jean Rostand*

If god created us in his image we have certainly returned the compliment.

~ *Voltaire*

Man is certainly stark mad: he cannot make a worm, yet he will make gods by the dozen.

~ *Michel de Montaigne*

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.

~ *Stephen Roberts*

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

of the
Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc
will be held on

Wednesday
19th March 2008
at 7.30pm

Eastwood Community Centre
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All members are welcome to attend.



A year ago when the Democratic Party was swept into control of the House of Representatives and the Senate, those of us worried about the direction our country was headed were elated. Finally, the Bush administration would not have a rubber-stamp Congress to advance their right-wing agenda. Of course, the reverse had been true too; Bush would invariably sign into law any bill promoting religious “values”, etc, authored by the Congress.

What has happened in the meantime is not exactly what many of us had in mind. Despite challenges to the Bush policy in Iraq, the cowardly Democrats ultimately knuckle under to Bush’s demands and give him whatever he wants. Now, it seems as the Demos have *totally* lost it when they allowed an “Ain’t Christianity Great” House Resolution to come to the floor and pass it by a wide margin. As most of you are probably aware, the USA has a *lot* of problems, the most serious being the Iraq war which has killed many thousands, and is costing our country over \$US 2 billion a week. The Social Security system is in trouble and needs to be resuscitated so it will be available for future generations. The country’s infrastructure needs a massive and expensive restoration. The health care system is joke. So what happens? Enter House Resolution 847 passed on 11 November. Instead of working on any of the above aforementioned serious problems, here’s what the Democrat controlled House of Representatives passed:

Whereas Christmas, a holiday of great significance to Americans and many other cultures and nationalities, is celebrated annually by Christians throughout the United States and the world;

Whereas there are approximately 225,000,000 Christians in the United States, making Christianity the religion of over three-fourths of the American population;

Whereas there are approximately 2,000,000,000 Christians throughout the world, making Christianity the largest religion in the world and the religion of about one-third of the world population;

Whereas Christians and Christianity have contributed greatly to the development of western civilization;

Whereas the United States, being founded as a constitutional republic in the traditions of western civilization, finds much in its history that points observers back to its Judeo-Christian roots;

Whereas on December 25 of each calendar year, American Christians observe Christmas, the holiday celebrating the birth of their savior, Jesus Christ;

Whereas for Christians, Christmas is celebrated as a recognition of God’s redemption, mercy, and Grace; and

Whereas many Christians and non-Christians throughout the United States and the rest of the world, celebrate Christmas as a time to serve others:

Now, therefore, be it *Resolved*, That the House of Representatives -

- (1) recognizes the Christian faith as one of the great religions of the world;
- (2) expresses continued support for Christians in the United States and worldwide;
- (3) acknowledges the International religious and historical importance of Christmas and the Christian faith;
- (4) acknowledges and supports the role played by Christians and Christianity in the founding of the United States and in the formation of the western civilization;
- (5) rejects bigotry and persecution directed against Christians, both in the United States and worldwide; and
- (6) expresses its deepest respect to American Christians and Christians throughout the world.

The resolution passed by a vote of 372 to 10 with only 9 Democrats having the guts to vote no. 40 members were not there to vote. Those who voted no will probably be portrayed as homosexual, godless child molester-devil worshipping Atheists when they run for re-election the next time!

By the time you read this, the first 2008 Presidential primaries may be over. On 3 January, the convoluted, antiquated, farcical Iowa Caucus takes place. So far, 2 of the Republican candidates have featured crosses in their TV ads. (Huckabee, a preacher and former governor, and McCain a US Senator) One of the candidates, Mitt Romney, is a Mormon, so the question of certain Latter Day Saints beliefs has come under scrutiny. Is Satan actually a brother of Jesus? Is Mitt

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really a Christian? The Republican Party continues to be in love with religion. Damn the torpedos! Full speed ahead! What a friend we have in Jesus!

I wonder how many of you would have trouble answering a favorite poll question that seems to always get asked when the subject of religion comes up: *How important is religion to you in your daily life?* Once again, the Gallup organization asked this question in a recent poll. This time, I just *had* to send them this comment:

I think a poll question that you use, along with most other polling services, needs to be rephrased or

clarified. The one where you ask about religion being "important in your life". As an Atheist, religion is VERY important to me, because I am constantly aware of how religion continues to divide our country, the world, and constantly meddles in scientific research, etc. I think you are attempting to ascertain a person's degree of religiosity by asking this question, but unless you attach an appropriate disclaimer such as "This question was asked of persons expressing a religious belief", the results may be skewed more positive. Yes, "god" is VERY important to me, an Atheist, but not in the sense you may be looking for!

Bill

Parenting Beyond Belief – *On Raising Ethical, Caring Kids Without Religion*

Edited by Dale McGowan. Amacom Books, New York, April 2007



Just what I needed! In the midst of conflict with a State Primary School over religious instruction and at a time when I was wondering if it would be easier to just give in and let my kids attend, Dale McGowan's book fell into my hands. What a read! I've read a few atheist books and, due to the nature of my work, literally hundreds of parenting books (including some with a very Christian bent—ugh!), but none of them came close to the relevance of this book to my life. You won't find lame advice here on how to deal with toddler tantrums, cracked nipples or explosive poos, but you will find highly readable essays that explore many facets of parenting without religion, and living with it.

There are no solutions given; in fact, many essays offer opposing views. One is all for Santa Claus, while another won't let him in the house. The ongoing theme, however, is a discussion on how to raise good, ethical children who can think for themselves despite growing up in a world full of myths and superstition. The contributors include Richard Dawkins, Julia Sweeney, Mark Twain and a host of other well known and not so well known secular types. The editor has managed to produce a book that does not denigrate religion outright, but gives a collection of thoughts and experiences from a wide range of authors on the unique problems faced by the unbeliever when parenting—from dealing with religious mother-in-laws, to creating your own ceremonies and establishing supportive communities.

Despite the fact that this book referred mostly to parenting in the USA (where religion is not allowed in schools by law, and where everywhere else in the country religiosity is rampant), it is still relevant to the Australian landscape. There are no clear-cut answers to the problems faced, but plenty of opinions, tips, experiences and insights to consider and use to shape my own parenting philosophy and response to situations I face.

Reference lists follow each topic, and make interesting reading themselves. Of particular interest are the lists of children's books available tackling a range of topics, from evolution and creationist myths from a multitude of religions, death in a secular context. I'll certainly be searching for them at my local library.

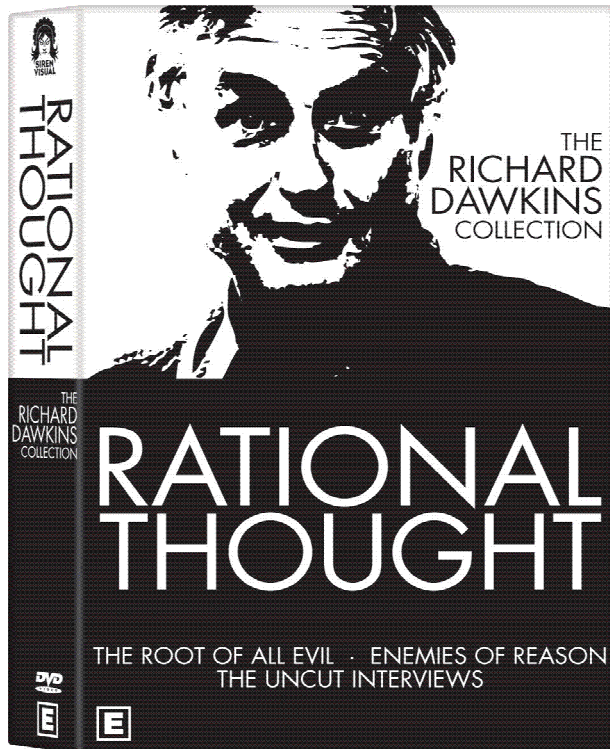
Probably the most significant thing I drew from *Parenting Beyond Belief* is that I am not on my Pat Malone. There are plenty of others out there facing the same dilemmas and coming up with their own unique solutions. Despite our numbers, atheist parents had previously been pretty much ignored. This book remedies that gap, a gap I did not realise was so big until I after I read it. This book is the sort that I would read again, and is great value for money. Not a difficult read, but plenty of it and it promotes further thought. As my bedtime read, it took over a month to get through when my normal fodder takes less than a week.

To sum up: it should be an essential part of a parenting library.

Julie Boxsell

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