

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.

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ATHEIST FOUNDATION OF AUSTRALIA INC

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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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OPINION

Some interesting news: there really is an Ark! But before getting on to that, I see that creationism is in the news again. It has been reported (The Age, 25 February) that generous funding from the previous Howard government has helped religious schools to flourish. Many of these schools teach creationism alongside or instead of evolution in *science* classes.

Suppose for just a moment that the creationists are right: that the universe was created about 6000 years ago and that there was a great flood that covered the whole world. What would we expect to find?

First, geologists would be amazed to discover that the oldest rocks they can find on earth are only 6000 years old. Samples from the moon would give the same result. Counting ice layers would show that no layer of ice was deposited more than 6,000 years ago. All forms of scientific dating, including radiocarbon dating, potassium-argon dating, uranium series dating, fission track dating and thermoluminescence dating would all reach the same conclusion. Scientists would also find overwhelming evidence from geological, geochronological, geomorphic and soil science investigations of a major flood occurring at the same time in every location all over the world.

Astronomers would find that the observable universe was quite small. Any light (or other electromagnetic radiation) reaching the earth could only have come from objects no more than 6000 light years away, so our universe would consist of a relatively small number of stars, none more than 6,000 light years away.

Fossil evidence would show quite clearly that there was no evolution of species. All fossils would occur in the same strata at the same time, coinciding with the great flood event. Dinosaurs, rabbits and modern humans, along with somewhat human-looking ape-like beings, all fossilised together.

Following the overwhelming scientific evidence that the universe, together with the Earth — replete with all its people, animals and plants — were created in a single event only 6,000 years ago, and that all living species were saved from a subsequent world-wide flood, scientists would accept the fact that the Bible was an accurate record of historical events and a massive scientific enterprise would be undertaken to find the Ark.

What do we actually find? We find absolutely no evidence, not one single scrap of it, to support any of the above. Creationists continue to seek out isolated examples of things that they consider to be supportive of their position, while ignoring the overwhelming evidence against. And of course there is no ark, at least not of the biblical type. The ark to which I referred at the start has been built in Norway and is designed to preserve the world's most important food crop seeds in the event of a global catastrophe. The facility was built at a cost of \$9.7 million, using modern machinery and technology, and consists of a trident-shaped chamber carved into the permafrost of an Arctic mountain. It can hold up to 4.5 million batches of seeds. This makes an interesting contrast with the biblical Ark, supposedly built by one man and his sons, using primitive building methods and limited resources, but big enough to hold samples of all living things (including all species that ever lived)! It is of great concern that our education system now allows the existence of schools that are churning out thousands of adolescents whose heads are filled with such ridiculous nonsense.

PS: Many thanks to Dr Richard Doyle from the Public Relations Team, from whom I have borrowed some technical phrases.

Dennis

As Lee Holmes is now producing and editing THE AUSTRALIAN ATHEIST we have decided to name Dennis Southam's contribution OPINION.

Lee and Dennis

President's Report to the AGM March 2008

It is not the intention of this speech to give a detailed account of what has transpired in running the AFA since the last AGM, other than outlining some of the reasons we are going from strength to strength.

However, I would like to mention people, groups and events, both past and present that combined, keep the secular clock ticking robustly. The flagships of the AFA are our website and bimonthly magazine, managed tirelessly by Lee, with the help of Dennis. The AFA forum, initiated and managed by Sean, has supplied a necessary place where Atheists can congregate cybernetically. Then there is the dedicated Committee of Management, the outstanding professionalism of the Public Relations Team, and a special mention must go to Bill Henry, our insightful correspondent in the USA, submissions to governments, media interactions, letters to print editors, interviews with various magazines, cooperation with other groups and AFA Member contributions, both financial and in kind. These have combined in making our organisation one to which we should all be proud to belong. I will single out though, because it is a recent occurrence, that the AFA has just aided University of Queensland in setting up the Freethought and Rationalist Society to combat the ever-present religious intrusion into our highest educational structures. Last year we likewise aided the Adelaide University Godless Society.

What a difference can a year make! Atheism, from being a subject only discussed between consenting adults, has exploded onto the world stage as a topic worthy of consideration, and become an idea of unequalled fascination, not achieved in preceding years. Bishops, pious social commentators and even the man in the Vatican, sensing the rise and rise of Atheism, have made serious forays in attempting to persuade the public mind that we are the source of all evil. Surprisingly, vilification from the pulpits and in the press has been largely ineffective in convincing the faithful that Atheism is a threat to the good order and security of the human race.

What we have on our side is that there is no sign of Atheism in the travesties, mayhem, death and destruction, which ravish the planet. In newspapers and on television the media daily portray a continual catalogue of atrocities and irrationalities, enacted in the name of religion or carried out for the sake of some religious ideal or other. There is never a depiction of Atheists in these reports for the simple reason that Atheism threatens no one, nor does it use violence, coercion or words from ancient literature to support ghastly and brutal actions. The words of Denis Diderot sum up the aforesaid very succinctly: "The philosopher has never killed any priests, whereas the priest has killed a great many philosophers."

I muse over the following people, some who have had mention before at various times, to place on the public record, in one location for the sake of posterity, an acknowledgement of their freely given and valuable assistance to the AFA and to Atheism in general and to demonstrate an appreciation for their efforts.

It is apt and appropriate, considering the changing role of the AFA from one of obscurity to muffled prominence, in recognising the remarkable and enduring perseverance, to coin a hackneyed phrase, of the "founding fathers", of the Atheist Foundation of Australia Incorporated. Keith & Brenda Cornish kept the AFA on track through many decades of public apathy. Keith, who died in 2007, was president of the AFA and producer, and editor of *The Australian Atheist* magazine during this long time of mental stagnation of the communal mind. Keith missed the rapidly growing impact of Atheism on the world, and that is very sad. Brenda, an equal stalwart of reason, has survived Keith and now lives in the South Australian town of Gumeracha.

The other member of this hat-trick is Joe Stanley. Alone, Joe published *The Atheist Newsletter* for more years than anyone can remember. He donated a quite expensive photocopying machine to the AFA, for which we are extremely grateful. Only recently retiring from the Committee through ill health, Joe still takes an avid interest in the Foundation.

With no intention of missing any names of people who rode the quiet seas of social denial for so long, concerning the negativity of religion in civilisation, it would be remiss of me not to mention those bearing the distinct appearances of having always been part of the organisational furniture.

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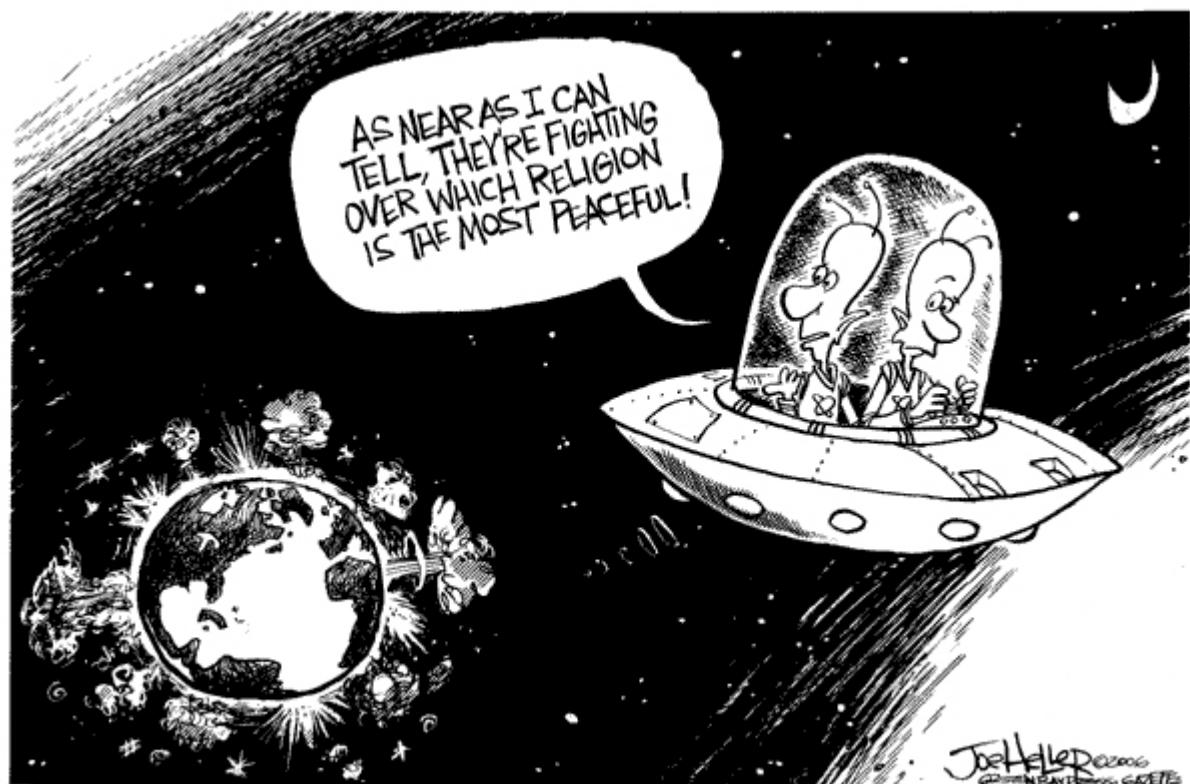
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Vice president Lyn Longo, or president of vice, as Lyn prefers, along with supplying her beautiful home for decades, which is quite a while folks, to accommodate AFA meetings, brings to the committee the valuable insights of a school teacher. Lyn's knowledge of the state education system is invaluable in the understanding of young minds and of old bureaucratic prejudice. Honorary Secretary Karen Joyce has faithfully and dutifully recorded the minutes, seemingly since time immemorial, added insightful comment in discussion and only missed meetings for the gravest of reasons. Dean Dowling is another part of the "old guard", resolute in fighting the irrational "war on drugs", staunchly in opposition to religion's hold on society, and generous donor of money to worthy causes. Dean knows more bible quotes than does the most ardent fundamentalist. The last member of this elite group is Bob Creek. Bob endlessly battles against religious intrusion in the Mount Compass state school and has become a well known character in the area. His take-no-prisoners attitude and dry sense of humour have endeared him into the hearts of all on the committee.

Nigel Sinnott, "our man" in Melbourne, has supplied forever to the AFA editors, news clippings, articles from around the globe and interesting tidbits, which can only be defined as voluminous. Nigel has also taken on the role of proof reader for *The Australian Atheist* magazine. Many, many more of our members, far too numerous to record in this short space; have added immeasurably to the whole.

With all the sincerely I can muster, I would like to thank those mentioned and indeed, every member of the organisation, for helping to make the Atheist Foundation of Australia Incorporated, an exceptionally successful and expanding disseminator of a necessary idea, whose time has finally arrived. Our position today, although at the beginning stages, was unimaginable only a few years ago.

Thank you.



Letter to the Editor

Last word (for the moment) on free-will.

I would like to postulate a *hypothetical*. Two identical male twins are born in 1919; one is reared in Bavaria and the other in Sicily. They are both indoctrinated from infancy in the appalling nonsense (even worse then, than now) that is the Roman Catholic creed. Both become policemen - and therefore can legitimately carry pistols - and marry in the same year. They wish to surprise their wives (it is their tenth wedding anniversary) by obtaining special dispensation from their boss to take the afternoon off. *You already know where I'm going with this, don't you?*

Which cop is more likely to fire his gun upon catching his wife in *delitto flagrante*?

Would anyone seriously argue that the Italian has the same "free" will as the German? If you concede that he has not, you must jettison the qualifier - *free* can no longer be justified.

The cultural factor in our lives is a cogent influence, and that prevailing in Sicily in 1953 can hardly be over-stated. The Sicilian cop has far less choice: will he be able to live with the shame of being said to have *no balls* (*essere senza coglioni*) if he does not exact instant retribution?

Gus Burston

FROM THE INBOX

Emails of the Month

I have always been agnostic (I am only 17) but recently my biology studies have led me towards atheism. I'm now terrified of dying, and can't see any point in life if it will only be taken away and I'll fall into oblivion. Can you offer any advice?

Adeline

Hi Adeline.

Congratulations on having the courage to question the existence of gods, and for realising that there aren't any. That was the hard part – the rest is easy.

Are you terrified of dying early, of dying painfully, or simply of dying itself? I assume the last one, because reasonable care and attention to health will usually take care of the first two.

It may help to swap the words 'no-longer-living' for dying, dead and death. All living things depend, at least in part, on the no-longer-living carcasses of previous life. A butterfly dies; is consumed by bacteria and fungi; a cabbage uses some of this for fertilizer; and you eat the cabbage – thus the butterfly has become a tiny part of you. In that way one could say that life is 'eternal'.

Religions, to their discredit, have taken this natural

cycle of life and perverted it into a fanciful tale of eternal supernatural life. They insist that after physical life stops, an invisible but conscious part of humans will be judged, then sent either to be tortured for eternity in burning hells, or bored senseless sitting in the clouds with everyone you'd never want to associate with on earth. I reckon that after the first billion years you'd be begging for annihilation. It's utter nonsense, of course, but it keeps people fearful and obedient because it satisfies, in the worst possible way, natural curiosity about what happens when life stops.

I wonder if remnants of this horrible tale remain lodged in your head and are causing the fear you feel when thinking about no longer living. Childhood conditioning lasts for life, so it would be unusual if you didn't sometimes have residual fears about what will happen then. Remember, every living thing stops living eventually. There can be no life without death – just as there's no up without down. Rocks don't die – but neither do they live. Not-living isn't terrible: we've all done it for the millions of years before we were born. And after we stop living we'll simply be in that state again.

Naturally, you don't want to die now; there are too many things to do. But for most old people who have no irrational religious fears, dying after a reasonably long and satisfying life can be a relief. Human bodies aren't machines; they wear out; physically if not mentally, after about eighty years. Aches and pains take the gloss off activities and eventually for everyone there will come a time when they're ready to relinquish

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the burden of body, for the ‘dreamless sleep’ of no longer-living – returning to the state they were in before birth. It’s poetic in a way.

You have another seventy years of living to do. That’s an immensely long time. Seventy years ago no one believed space travel would happen; few people had cars; transistors hadn’t been invented – nor had plastic bags. Many children used slates in school instead of paper, which was very expensive. In seventy years you will be patting the heads of your great-grandchildren, smiling benignly while quietly hoping they don’t stay too long as you’re getting tired. Why not wait till then to wonder about stopping living? It’s amazing how life and experiences change the way we look at things.

By worrying about death now, you are spoiling your youth. When I got my first car I was constantly fearful it would break down – so much that I never enjoyed driving. Stupid! Worrying about death now is the same thing. Enjoy living — now! Too many people become old feeling unsatisfied with their lives because they haven’t done what they wanted, or foolishly thought there should be more to life than merely living. There isn’t. The life we have is the only life we’re going to get, so to spoil it by worrying about what comes next would be silly. And you aren’t silly. Plenty of wise men and women over the ages have told us how to find happiness – but few people listen. Instead they listen to the sellers of false dreams who tell them happiness is to be found in a bottle of Coke, a new car, a boat, a face-lift, a larger house, more money than they can spend: or they believe the religionists who declare it is sinful to desire happiness — we should be miserable on this earth, so that after death we can be happy for eternity!

You are at the age when humans are the most vulnerable emotionally. That’s why armies recruit eighteen year-olds, because it’s when we feel the most passionate about ideals such as patriotism and, unfortunately, religion. Your fears and worries about death are normal, but it’s too far into the future to bother about. You’re young – make the most of it: it doesn’t last long!

This is an interesting topic and affects more people than you realise. So thanks for making me think, and if you have the urge to ask more, or disagree with anything I’ve written, feel free to e-mail us again.

Best wishes,
Peter
Public Relations Team

H
ello!

I am a 16-year-old, passionate atheist of about a year now, although it feels much longer because I always doubted what my parents told me about “God and the World”. As a child I once asked where God himself came from and received a short, angry response informing me there are some questions regarding God that believers are forbidden to ask.

I was wondering, what is the estimate of atheist numbers in Australia and the world? I do understand that there are numbers of atheists who do not wish to “come out” for fear of discrimination etc, like myself. However, I’d like to feel a part of something, with Australians who share my views.

Kamil

After David’s response Kamil replies:

Dear David of the AFA,

Thank you for your kind and thoughtful reply, it cheered me up considerably. (Is it okay to respond?) Thank you also for your statistics: they will generate more pride in me to celebrate what I think, instead of being ashamed of it – as I feel sometimes when religious friends think I must be less caring because of my godlessness (typical faith-based thinking). I feel hurt by this but do not push my views at all, as some of my religious friends begin to do! One Christian friend has even tried converting me a few times!

Do not worry, I *placate* my parents: I pray, and wear the hijab etcetera. They have noticed a change in my “faith” as I grow up, and are angered by it. Just for some background: my mother “knows” homosexuals will burn in hell; that wearing perfume or flowers in the hair put the devil in my Aunty (my uncle, a Doctor, attributed her uncharacteristic and hallucinogenic behaviour to her new medicine, which she was taking too much of, yet he still called in a sheikh to banish the devil from inside her.) My mother also believes not praying will cause various types of cancers; that cinemas are houses of debauchery, and non-believers are amoral and disgusting individuals, who are almost as bad as lesbians. She called me a w-word for prostitute when I wore a *matching* set of *plain* clothes at home “Who are YOU trying to impress-ss?” — and proceeded to accuse me of “putting it on for [my] father”

Yeah, I know.

Nevertheless, I respect their and others’ beliefs,

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appreciating that they would very possibly sever emotional ties with me if I “came out”: yes, even at my age. (My 18th birthday is going to be an eventful one!)

Thank you again for your thoughtful kindness, I feel a glowing pride being part of atheists everywhere such as yourself and the people of your organisation, because there’s one thing, only one thing left that people like my parents do not have control over: my mind. And I am utterly grateful for it. I am a committed evolutionist, and think the Big Bang is the most probable theory for the origin of the universe because of evidence such as cosmic background radiation etc. Although I was religious most of my life, I frequently seriously doubted the claims of my parents. I distinctly remember when I was eleven, after feeling that God wasn’t really up there that day; lying awake at night in the foetal position, weeping and pleading for God’s forgiveness for my “sins” under my breath, and for him to “please not let me burn for hundreds of years”, I eventually tired myself out after nearly an hour of this and, completely exhausted, fell asleep.

This is just a slight affect religious indoctrination has on children. In some developing countries, there are children at this age and slightly older who are taking up arms for their beliefs.

Non-believers Unite!

Kamil

David asked if it would be O.K to print her letters in the Atheist Foundation of Australia magazine.

Dear David

YES!! Most definitely yes! How incredibly exciting! Mind you, I’ve just been reading a book on the Hubble Telescopes’ images, so I already feel inspired and excited. Just think, there are gaseous clouds out there, millions of light-years long and wide, and black holes as big as our Solar System, creating and destroying thousands, millions of stars. Wow! That makes me feel so much better. That, and your offer! Full steam ahead! A hard copy of the magazine would be fantastic, as long as the envelope isn’t obvious, though.

Thank you, this is the first time I’ve genuinely smiled in years!

Thank you so much!!

A breathless Kamil.

David asks about the significance of Kamil’s 18th birthday, mentioned in the second email...

Dear David,

Oh-h-h, yes. I usually have some strange train of thought at any given point in time and space on most things. It’s just that sometimes I accidentally type it out; to others’ confusion. With reference to the 18th birthday, I was implying that it will be the time when I will reveal what I *truly* think to my parents, and will promptly have to leave to make a life of my own, on my own terms. I will also have to say goodbye to any connections I have made in the Muslim community, and even those I have made in the neighbourhood, with shopkeepers, in the suburbs I grew up in etc., because I will probably only be able to come back when those people and places have changed, and most probably re-changed. It’s a sad thought, really. Sometimes I feel as if I’m living on a clock, waiting. Waiting for each passing second, minute, hour, day, month and only a few years when I will have to come to say goodbye to all that, at least for some years, minimum.

I meant that my “coming out” would be greeted by shock, revulsion, anger and very possibly emotional detachment from my father. My parents will almost certainly remind me that “they’re getting on in years”, and rhetorically ask me about “who will pray and look after their souls when they die” – as they sadly ask me every so often now. I’m getting a gulp in my throat just typing it out. And so in my email I made light of what will potentially be quite a painful situation.

Thank you for your consideration with the envelope of the magazine, I was thinking of giving you my *school address*, as that may be easier; but I just remembered my Dad opens the mail! Actually, this whole disguising of the envelope process reminds me of a novel I recently read; *Blind Faith* by Ben Elton. It tells the story of an intelligent man who lives in a post-apocalyptic London after “The Great Flood”, caused by the melting of Arctic icecaps, but which is seen as God’s vengeance for the secularisation of society. A fierce religion, worshipping “The Love” maintains rigid control over this decaying, disgustingly self-indulgent, ignorant society. It’s a great book: funny, revolting, terrifying (The Church has coerced the main character to name his daughter “Happy Meal”), but also inspiring.

Your emails always make me feel better about what is usually a bleak day. But, you’re the President of the Foundation, so you’ve probably get better things to do than type out emails to teenagers!

Get back to me on that one.

Even warmer regards,
Kamil

IN THE NEWS

From *The Age* (Melbourne), 6 May 2008.

Taxpayers' sacrifice to the churches

Nick Renton.

Our constitution makes it clear Australia is to be a secular society. In particular, section 116 provides that "The Commonwealth shall not make any law for establishing any religion or for imposing any religious observation..."

Yet the spirit — even if not the letter — of that section is breached by the Government and all state governments in many tax provisions.

One example is in division 50 of the Income Tax Assessment Act 1997.

This gives non-profit organisations complete income tax exemption privileges if they fall into one of several specified categories (having regard to an organisation's sole or main purpose).

Quite understandably, these categories include charitable, scientific and public educational institutions. But they also include religious institutions.

It must be remembered that any tax concessions to some taxpayers are inevitably at the expense of all other taxpayers. In this connection, the inclusion of religious institutions is rather disconcerting, as it always involves cross-subsidisation.

Why, for example, should the adherents of Religion A pay to provide a benefit for the adherents of Religion B? Even more so, why should non-believers be made to pay for the churches of believers?

Of course, to the extent that religious organisations carry out genuine charitable or educational activities, they should be entitled to the same tax regime as secular non-profit organisations doing similar work — but purely religious activities should be regarded as quite different.

To make the problem worse, as shown below, some cults have quite surprisingly received official recognition as "religions".

Furthermore, the annual cost of the tax concessions to churches is hidden from the community.

The question of whether Scientology is a religion was considered by the High Court of Australia more than 20 years ago in *Church of the New Faith versus*

Commissioner of Pay-Roll Tax (Vic.) 1983 154 CLR 120. To the astonishment of many observers, the court held that it was a genuine religion.

Justices Mason and Brennan say at page 148:

"47. It follows that, whatever be the intentions of Mr Hubbard and whatever be the motivation of the corporation, the state of the evidence in this case requires a finding that the general group of adherents have a religion. The question whether their beliefs, practices and observances are a religion must, in the state of that evidence, be answered affirmatively. That answer, according to the conventional basis adopted by the parties in fighting the case, must lead to a judgement for the corporation."

Mr Justice Murphy says at page 162:

"48. Conclusion. The applicant has easily discharged the onus of showing that it is religious. The conclusion that it is a religious institution entitled to the tax exemption is irresistible.

"49. The Commissioner should not be criticised for attempting to minimise the number of tax exempt bodies. The crushing burden of taxation is heavier because of exemptions in favour of religious institutions, many of which have enormous and increasing wealth."

Religious bodies benefit from tax concessions at all levels of government.

Federal exemptions apply to income tax, fringe benefits tax and the goods and services tax. State government exemptions cover land tax, payroll tax, stamp duties and car registration fees. And local government bodies give exemptions from municipal rates. In addition, concessions apply to some water and power charges.

The land tax exemptions cover not only church buildings but also church-owned commercial properties.

Some municipalities in Australia are home to more religious institutions than others, so the [way?] rate subsidies hit some owners and occupiers varies.

The fringe benefits tax exemption creates an undesirable loophole. It enables eligible employers to pay lower wages (being amounts subject to income tax in their hands) and to compensate employees by means of higher fringe benefits (which are then tax-free to employers and employees).

Section 57 of the Fringe Benefits Tax Assessment Act 1986 gives total exemption to fringe benefits given to employees who are religious practitioners. As there is no cap to this in the legislation, some churches use

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Why worry about words?

By Ian Macindoe

The *Macquarie Dictionary* (2nd Edition, 1991) defines *atheist* as “one who denies or disbelieves the existence of God (or gods)”. It also defines *disbelief* as “refusal or inability to believe”. It seems that atheists, at least as far as this dictionary is concerned, are defined in terms of their lack of belief or refusal to believe. But why must we be defined in terms of negative, as if there might be some virtue in belief?

In recent years, I have taken to calling myself a *rational secularist*: a critical thinker within a context of reason and a non-superstitious worldview. This is a bit richer than merely calling oneself a non-believer, although the latter serves for brevity and is more satisfactory to me than atheist.

The basic distinction, it seems to me, between a religious person (using “religious” in its broadest sense) and an atheist or rational secularist or non-believer is that the former takes a basic stance of “faith and belief” while the latter’s stance is one of “thinking and scepticism”. This overcomes the common mistake that some make of juxtaposing religious people against scientists. There is no doubt that it is possible to be religious and also be a scientist (that is, one who applies the scientific method to the study of, and the search for, accurate knowledge of some aspect of a subject). If a religious scientist took a scientific approach to all aspects of life, he or she would think of the world in terms of theories, hypotheses, tests or experiments, sceptical conjectures, the search for non-confirming evidence, and reasoned and critical thinking about all things. In practice, however, religious scientists apply these scientific processes only to the narrow fields in which they practice science; in what is usually called their “spiritual life” they take a distinctly non-scientific stance, believing in whichever religion or other belief system they are caught up in. Their mental life is compartmentalised, which seems to bother them not at all.

I think it is good practice, which I try to apply in my own life, to avoid words like “believe” and “faith”, using instead words like “think”, “consider”, “probable”, “possible”, “likely”, “unlikely”, “perhaps” and so on. It is true that such a careful use of language can lead to a somewhat stilted style of speaking or writing; yet it circumvents the very language that atheists may deplore in believers.

Certainly well-known atheists, such as Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens, employ the word “belief” in referring to their own thought processes,

although I have not detected any instances of their claiming to have “faith” in any position they have taken. In the wonderful introduction to his book *The Portable Atheist: Essential Readings for the Nonbeliever* we find Hitchens writing:

“Some things can be believed and some things simply cannot. I *might* choose to believe that Jesus of Nazareth was born of a virgin in Bethlehem and that later he both did and did not die, since he was seen again by humans after the time of his apparent decease. . . [S]uppose that I grant the virgin birth and the resurrection. The religious still have all of their work ahead of them. These events, even if confirmed, would not prove that Jesus was the son of god. Nor would they prove the truth or morality of his teachings” (p. xix).

To say “some things can be believed” in this context can be recast as “some things can be thought likely”. So, for example, it is perfectly reasonable for a non-believer to say “it is likely, from the historical record, that a man now known as Jesus of Nazareth lived some two thousand years ago in those parts of the Middle East described in the New Testament, and that he came to be referred to as Jesus Christ, inspiring a religion (springing from Judaism) that became known as Christianity”. This is a far cry from saying “I believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God” – or any other similar nonsense.

So, there is a generally recognised difference between “belief” in the sense of “a rational probability” and “belief” in the sense of “faith”. Nevertheless, since our language affects the way we think about matters, and certainly affects how others interpret what we say, there is some advantage (to my way of thinking) in avoiding the “faith” words such as “believe”.

To return briefly to the subject of science and scientists, Christopher Hitchens comments that, as distinct from the position of Dawkins on the role of science, he sees “no special reason to credit ‘science’ as the father or godfather of reason . . . Even today, there are important men of science — admittedly in a minority — who maintain that their findings are compatible with belief in a creator. They may not be able to derive one from the other, or even to claim to do so, but they testify to the extreme stubbornness with which intelligent people will cling to unsupported opinions” (p. xxi).

A sceptical attitude, rather than a scientific one, appears to me to be the core and essence of the non-believer’s stance. By contrast, the believer adopts the core stance of “faith” which, by its nature, pays little or no heed to evidence, rationality or a sceptical

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and critical examination of positions purporting to be an accurate interpretation of the real world. However, as noted above, a believer may employ all these intellectual tools in contemplating matters to do with the natural world, but reserves the “right” to abandon those same tools in order to believe in highly improbable ideas that are supernatural or frankly superstitious.

The other aspect of the typical believer is that there is generally an uncritical acceptance of authority, whether that be a written authority (the Bible or Koran, for example) or a human authority, such as a pope or ayatollah. Basic positions taken by such authorities are not to be questioned or challenged by believers. Critical thinking is not encouraged, except “around the edges” (meaning in the interpretation or questioning of minor details of faith). Genuine criticism of or independent ideas on the basics (e.g. the existence or otherwise of a supreme being or principle) is generally regarded as heresy by the authority and invites negative consequences for the person expressing such views.

In a discussion of religion recently, a friend stated that his belief is useful to him because it gives him reassurance and comfort when faced with stress. His criterion for his faith is “usefulness” (in helping him with emotional matters). I, on the other hand — and I’d be interested to know if this is typical of other non-believers — use the criterion of the highest probability of a statement being correct, incorrect or

indeterminate in an understanding of the reality of our world. Observation of the natural world leads me to think that certain matters are more or less probable; my understanding of how science works leads me to accept as likely many matters which cannot be directly experienced via the senses; my understanding of psychology leads me to consider the possibility of certain concepts about the human condition as being plausible. But they all are weighed against the likelihood that they approximate reality in the material world we all inhabit. Those things for which we lack a rational and/or scientific explanation are simply “unknown”. I have no problem with saying “we do not yet know the explanation for such-and-such”. I have no need to create some kind of explanation, no matter how bizarre. I can comfortably live with the ambiguity of not knowing.

The existence of supernatural forces or entities (such as gods, ghosts and goblins) seems to me to be extremely unlikely, and I see no evidence for their existence. However, my friend is not much concerned with the most accurate understanding of the real world (the highest probability criterion), but with “usefulness”. To him, his religious beliefs are useful even if they are not an accurate picture of the real world. He just thinks that the highest probability criterion is not very important. While I find that difficult to understand, I accept it.

I am happy for others to follow their religious beliefs if they find them useful, as long as, they do not try to impose their beliefs on my freedom of thought or action; nor should they put them forward as “truth”.

IN THE NEWS

(Continued from page 9)

remuneration packages that consist of nil salary and 100% fringe benefits.

The use of such a device can also have the undesirable effect of creating an unwarranted entitlement to social security benefits.

There is no such thing as a free lunch. All cross-subsidisation naturally results in higher taxes for the rest of the community.

Some churches conduct commercial operations within their tax shelters. To that extent they enjoy a tax subsidy at ordinary taxpayers’ expense.

But, apart from that, lower overheads also allow them to charge lower prices than commercial competitors, thus giving an unfair trading advantage.

To illustrate, the Seventh-Day Adventist Church runs

the Sanitarium Health Food Company, which makes many popular food products.

Tax concessions that are automatically available are in any case a very inefficient way to pass wealth from one section of the community to another.

A system of targeted grants, awarded on the basis of some objective criteria (including efficiency and accountability) and subject to some defined overall budget cap, would be much more appropriate.

Australia believes in the separation of church and state. It would thus be highly desirable to do away with all unfair tax concessions to religious institutions that are now available.

It is perfectly proper in a democracy for members of a particular faith to support it out of their own pockets, but it is quite immoral for such funding to be extracted compulsorily from other citizens.

The new masters in Canberra should use the budget to adjust these long-standing anomalies.

Nick Renton is an actuary and the author of about 70 books.

SUBMISSION

Subject: Rights of the Terminally Ill (Euthanasia Laws Repeal) Bill 2008

27 March 08

Peter Hallahan,
Committee Secretary
Senate Legal and Constitutional Committee

Dear Mr Hallahan,

The overturning of the 'Rights of the Terminally Ill Bill' in the Northern Territory at the instigation of Kevin Andrews was a reprehensible display of bigoted religious ideology forced onto the population against their wishes under the guise of the legal technicality of it being a territory and not a state.

The repealing of this act is a must to uphold that all citizens of Australia are equal before the law, whether residing in a state or territory.

- Kevin Andrews, operating within the conservatively blinkered Howard government, forced an unpopular and undemocratic decision on the Northern Territory inhabitants. Since then, Australians are waking up to the disturbing fact of interference of religion in politics on many fronts. MP's risk a voter backlash such as that which ousted the previous Liberal Coalition if there is a continuation of disrespect for the majority in their justified demands concerning the introduction of a system of Legal Voluntary Euthanasia.
- No one is immune from ending up in a position where assisted death is the only option in relieving terrible suffering.
- Religious leader's resistance to the introduction of any system of Legal Voluntary Euthanasia throughout the world has its basis only in dogma. Their stance is faith driven and does not encompass ethical consideration, a cornerstone of secular democracy.
- A recent poll in the extremely religious USA on the CNN web site demonstrated in excess of 80% of the respondents agreed with Legal Voluntary Euthanasia for those in unremitting pain because of a terminal illness. Polls in Australia have results likewise numbered.
- Switzerland has a system of Physician Assisted Suicide. The Netherlands, Oregon and Belgium have laws in place to assist those in need of a peaceful death. There is no evidence existing, which is unpolluted, suggesting these laws are not effective and working as intended thus disproving the much touted 'slippery slope' scenario.
- Governments responsible for not introducing a system of Legal Voluntary Euthanasia are to be condemned for the suffering produced. Citizens have to travel overseas to obtain a painless death. Others who cannot afford have no other option than ending their lives at their own hands, sometimes brutally and with unpredictable results. Others leave it too late and die in pain with all dignity lost.
- The public, as with other autonomous parts of their lives, want Legal Voluntary Euthanasia available. Verification is in the many attempts to have it introduced by various Bills before legislative bodies throughout Australia and New Zealand in the previous decade.
- Apart from the one Northern Territory experience, parliamentarians allowing religion to influence their vote have stymied all efforts in the introduction of compassionate regulation.

(Continued on page 13)

- Politicians who personally oppose the introduction of a system of Legal Voluntary Euthanasia on religious grounds have no right in a secular democracy to impose those views on the majority. They must abstain from voting or join the priesthood and work within a theocracy to further their religious agenda.
- It should be no secret that some people from religious quarters have distorted evidence to make a bogus case for the opposition to introducing Legal Voluntary Euthanasia. Politicians swayed by this propaganda are duty bound to make further independent investigation to justify those specious claims.

Yours sincerely,

David Nicholls
President
Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc

From *The Courier Mail*, Brisbane, 26 April 08

Atheists versus bishops in euthanasia row

Michael Madigan

The atheists have declared any politician using religious grounds to oppose euthanasia should abstain from voting or “join the priesthood”.

The bishops say the compassionate response to a dying person is to care for them as best we can.

Greens senator Bob Brown wants to re-instate Northern Territory’s euthanasia laws allowing NT, the ACT and Norfolk Island to make laws to help terminally ill people die.

Former Liberal MP Kevin Andrews led a private members’ Bill in Parliament overturning the NT legislation in 1997.

Both the Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc and the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference are among 1001 submissions to a Senate inquiry examining Senator’s Brown’s proposal.

The atheists have called Mr Andrews’ overturning of the Bill a “reprehensible display of bigoted religious ideology”.

“Governments responsible for not introducing a system of legal voluntary euthanasia are to be condemned for the suffering produced,” they said.

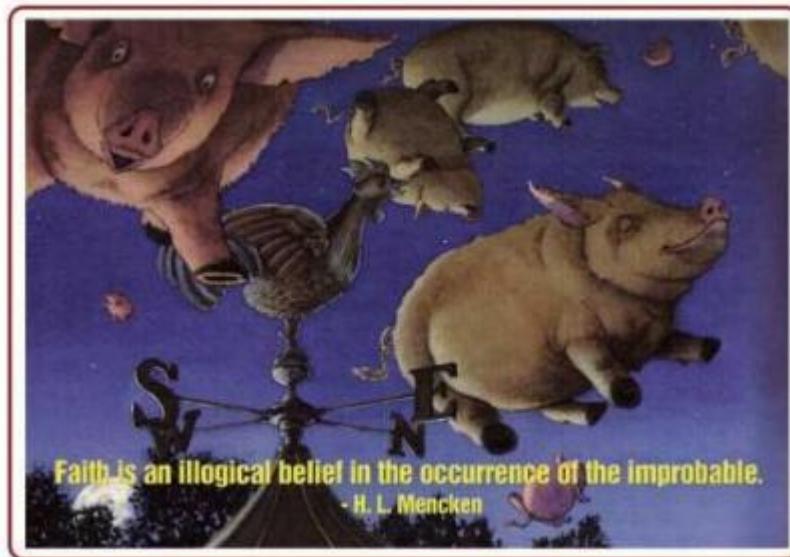
The bishops’ submissions contends: “There is a compassionate response to terminal illness and that is good palliative care.”

Changing the law back will only put pressure on the terminally ill to end their life, the bishops’ submission contends.

“They will feel pressure to consider whether ‘for the sake of the family’ or ‘for the sake of society’ they should request euthanasia.”

The Senate Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs conducting the inquiry is expected to report back on June 23.

For more posters on Religion, War, Politics and other issues visit...
<http://picasaweb.google.com/billbumley>



Atheist Foundation of Australia
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T-Shirts, badges, stickers, hats, mugs, bags and much more.

**Atheist Foundation
of
Australia
Inc**

**Cogito, ergo
atheistus sum!**



GLOBAL WARNING:
Religion is
another emission.



*Deliver us from God,
forever and ever,*
Amen.

**Stop child
abuse now!**
20 centuries of
religion is enough.

PAMELA BONE
27-2-1940 — 26-4-2008



Pamela Bone: A woman to remember, words that will live on

From *The Age*, 2 May 08

A while ago, walking along a river bank in the country, I discovered the meaning of life in a piece of cow dung.

In that dried disc was sprouting a tiny forest of fresh green shoots, the seeds the animal had eaten, starting a new life cycle, reaching for the sun. For a moment I understood. Life exists, I thought, because it can. But only for a moment. Then, I thought, why can it? Why is there something and not nothing? And why is there this something instead of some other something?

Years before this I had what you might call a Road to Damascus experience in reverse.

It happened like this: I was in my kitchen, while outside the house my little girl was playing with our dog. I heard the squeal of car brakes, a dog's yelp, a child's scream. As I ran I prayed, "please God, please God". As one does. But even as I ran, something in my head said: "No use. There is no God. Whatever has happened has happened."

The worst had not happened. The dog ran onto the road, was hit by a car, and in its dying agony bit my daughter, who had run after it. She still has the fine scars on her cheeks.

That was the last time I prayed. To be honest, I had been wavering in my religious belief for some time before. But from that day, in my heart I knew. Now, I do not believe something outside of myself was talking to me. (Who? God, to tell me he doesn't exist? Satan, maybe?) It was, of course, my own voice. People who are not mentally ill know that any voice in their head is their own voice.

But while my heart knows, my mind doesn't. I don't know if God exists. I have no feeling that one does, but I don't know. And neither does anyone else.

Religious belief (where it is not held merely out of habit) is a matter of deep intuition, not knowledge. One person's deep intuition tells them there is a God, another person's tells them there isn't. Why is it, then, that the people who hold the former belief have been allowed, for so long, to claim the high moral ground?

I don't mind at all if people believe in God — though some believers seem to mind quite a lot that I don't. I respect their beliefs. What I do mind is the assumption of many that they are better people because they believe; that faith itself is a virtue and that, therefore, a lack of faith is immoral or, at best, to be pitied.

The unsuccessful American vice-presidential candidate Joseph Lieberman declared before the US election that "we should not indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion". The British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, made a similar statement recently. These sentiments are an insult to the 5% of Americans who have no religion, or the 40% of Britons, or the 30% of Australians.

Moreover, they are as little based on any empirical or scientific evidence as they are common.

There is no proven correlation between morality and adherence to any organised religion. Indeed, some might say the opposite correlation applies. I don't. It is impossible to weigh up paedophile priests, packed churches in Rwanda before and after the genocide, the extremism on both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, against the vast amount of good that is done in the world by people who are acting out of religious motives.

Yet the question, "Where are your humanist or atheist organisations working to help the poor?" is in a way nonsensical. World Vision is a Christian organisation. Amnesty International, Oxfam, Médecins Sans Frontières and countless others have members who may or may not be religious. But whether they are or not has no relevance to the work of the organisation.

You (unbelievers) can't believe in any force higher than yourselves, it was said to me recently. Not true. I believe in plenty of things higher than myself: that oak tree outside my window, for one example; and every single child who

(Continued on page 16)

comes into the world, new and hopeful. I just don't believe in a supreme supernatural being, that's all.

There is no evidence that those who believe in God are kinder, less interested in making money, or more moved by art, or music, or the beauty of the world. There is no evidence that they are either better or worse people. When a third of the population does not hold to any religion, is it not time the bluff that religion is necessary to morality was called? Support for this view comes from a perhaps surprising source: Richard Holloway, Bishop of Edinburgh, argues in his book *Godless Morality* that religion and ethics should be kept separate.

Morality is an evolved, human construct, and those moral imperatives that are permanent and universal, such as the one against murder, are held on moral, not theological, grounds.

I don't know the meaning of life. I believe it has the meaning we give it. It is wrong to describe people without religious faith as unbelievers. Atheism is the belief that no God exists; agnosticism is the belief that we do not know.

These are beliefs. And are equally valid and deserving of respect.

Published in The Age, 24 March, 2001.

So much to miss, and even more to remember

Letters to the Editor *The Age*, 29 April 08

Atheism has few friends in the media who are willing or able to proclaim clearly, proudly and concisely secular ideas as a matter of urgency for humanity. The few who burst forth with unsettling concepts demonstrate a necessary beacon of independent thought, because they can.

One such person was Pamela Bone. With a passion born of understanding and a fierce determination resulting from witnessing large and small-scale horrors, she reported it all with a humour defined by the need to remain sane in an often all-too-insane world. Pamela Bone projected thoughts onto paper as inspired artists represent every minute and important detail on canvas.

We will miss the cutting wit, the intelligent comment, the reasoned appraisal and, most of all, we will miss knowing that somewhere out there Pamela Bone is no longer working at making the world a better place for everyone.

Goodbye Pamela, we will not meet again. Your impact on all that is good lives after you. Your example begs imitation. Your life was more worthwhile than most of us can dream of equalling. Thank you for being on our side so effectively. Your blink in infinity is over. It will not be forgotten.

David Nicholls
President
Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc

*The AFA received the following letter.
There was no return address or identifying name. It was signed but unfortunately the signature was illegible.*

Dear David
Pamela Bone hypocrisy

The Age newspaper in Melbourne today [2 May] published your letter following Pamela Bone's death.

You will also be aware that her funeral service is to be held at an Anglican Church in Malvern. The vicar of that church says it is "in response to a pastoral care request" from Pamela herself!

The front page of The Age on Monday says: "An avowed atheist, she once opined — on pondering whether

(Continued on page 17)

belief might come to her in her final moments — that ‘if God exists, I do not approve of him.’”

Is all this not amusing? The champion of atheism and humanism asks to be buried from the Anglican church. What a fool she has made of all of you and what a fool she has also made of the female vicar of the church. Pamela Bone was only interested in the promotion of Pamela Bone and the manipulation of those around her.

God bless your naivety.



*The following excerpts are from articles in *The Age* and *Sunday Age* about Pamela’s decision to be “sent off” from a church. They were written by Jo Chandler (a senior *Age* writer) and Louise Adler (chief executive and publisher of Melbourne University Publishing).*

... As it turned out, to those gathered at her funeral under a bluestone Anglican spire in Malvern yesterday — much to their consternation, and apparently her surprise — Pamela Bone, Unbeliever, did bequeath a final, controversial opinion piece this week. A portion of it was published in the order of service. And putting aside for a moment her widely acknowledged humility it was, just this once, all about her.

“It may seem hypocritical, after I have spent so many years of my life in journalism writing columns about the harm done by religion, to want to have a funeral in a church,” Bone declared to her mourners, many looking perplexed in the dim of ecclesiastic leadlight.

“However, I love old hymns, religious poetry, church spires,” she declared. “I am a cultural Christian ... the church belongs to us all.”

The Reverend Dr Colleen O'Reilly said that Bone told her she “believed that the good things of religion can be had without religion, but she was beyond arguing. She simply wanted ... to agree to disagree with those who felt otherwise.”

Dr O'Reilly said that Bone faced death without a sense of God, though reluctant to let the question go. She “valued Gertrude Stein — ‘there ain’t no answer, that’s the answer’, and she settled for that on the parting comment on her search”.

It seemed some of the questions that so preoccupied Pamela Bone were fought out to the last, over her casket. And in this instance, she would be denied the last word. “May Pamela rest in peace,” said Dr O'Reilly. “And rise, surprised, to glory.”

— Jo Chandler (3 May)

Devotees of Pamela Bone’s column in *The Age* will remember that she was a passionate secularist. The idea of a higher power ordering our social relationships contradicted all that experience had taught her about living.

So why, as Pamela lay dying, did she resolve to have her public farewell performed in an Anglican church? Her husband, Jurgen Nelles, has given me permission to quote from her email on the subject:

“I am an atheist, in that I don’t believe in God. Yet I also admit that I don’t know whether God, some higher being, or whatever else you might call it, exists ... My position remains that I don’t know, that no one really knows ... I believe in people, that’s all I know.”

... Some readers may be convinced that Pamela had the blessed relief of a deathbed conversion, reconciliation with her “real” self as a believer. That would be a travesty of her memory.

Her “cultural Christianity” was an acknowledgement of connections to increasingly obsolete traditions...

In that modest church in Malvern on Friday afternoon, Pamela gave her friends the gift of a final column on how to accommodate life's contradiction. In her dying, she once again urged us to think hard and live fully.

— Louise Adler (4 May)

Comment:

Pamela Bone was entitled to regard herself as a “cultural Christian”, just as Catherine Deveny is entitled to describe herself as a “cultural Catholic”. But may I say, as one who has been an atheist, freethinker and secularist for half a century, that I do not regard myself as a “cultural” Christian of any sort.

— Nigel Sinnott

Religion is bad news for women by Voula Papas

I am fortunate enough to have been befriended by the late Pamela Bone, a journalist for *The Age* and *The Australian*, who has been writing tirelessly about the plight of women in Islamic societies and the damage done by religion. I spoke to her a few days before she died — she remained an atheist to the very end — and she said that she hoped that I would keep on the case. I promised that I would continue to speak out and write about atrocities against women perpetrated in the name of God and tradition. Anybody can pick up a Bible or Qur'an, commit unspeakable horrors and then claim to exercise “freedom of religion”: there is ample misogyny in both religious books.

Every time I pick up a book on Afghan women it reads like a summary of atrocities! The Taliban was the most misogynist regime ever recorded. When they came into power they imposed *sharia* – Islamic religious law based on the Qur'an – and they targeted women with brutality. Women were under house arrest and were forbidden to work, all girls' schools were closed and any woman caught outside of her home without a male relative was beaten or killed for adultery. Women's health was particularly affected, women were not allowed to be treated by male doctors and women doctors were no longer permitted to work. Girls were, and still are, married off very young: their only role in life is to bear children, cook and clean.

In Pakistan, under *sharia* law, women can be jailed for having been raped, with the onus of proof being on the rape victim to provide four adult male witnesses to the crime.

In Jordan, the Islamic Action Front has stated that tougher punishments for honour killings would be detrimental to the family and will contribute to the abandonment of morals in society.

However, Islamic countries do not have the monopoly in oppressing women. El Salvador and Nicaragua under the influence of the Catholic Church have enacted the most restrictive abortion laws in the world. Abortion is forbidden even when the pregnancy is a direct threat to the woman's life. Women and their doctors can face up to 30 years imprisonments for having an abortion. As a result of the law, many doctors are reluctant to treat women suffering from miscarriages, ectopic pregnancy or the effects of a self-induced abortion.

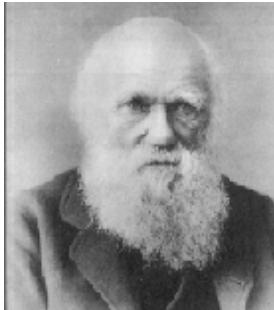
In the Philippines, under pressure from the Catholic Church, public hospitals and clinics are not allowed to provide any form of modern contraception. The only method permitted by the Church is periodic abstinence. It is estimated that around 400,000 illegal abortions take place in Philippines every year. According to the World Health Organisation, up to 68,000 women die every year in the developing world from the effects of unsafe and illegal abortions. In Africa, the Church is on an anti-condom crusade despite the fact that in some parts of the continent up to 40% of the population is infected by HIV/AIDS.

In the USA, a country priding itself on its individual freedoms, democracy and free speech, religious and “pro-life” zealots are working hard to impose their morality not only on American women, but women all over the world. The first thing George W. Bush did upon being elected president was to reinstate the Reagan administration's Global Gag Rule. This means that organizations which receive USAID are forbidden to advise about, refer for or discuss abortion or lobby for its decriminalisation. In addition, funds for contraceptives and condoms have been restricted. The Bush administration has been spending millions of dollars to promote “abstinence only” education in the US and overseas and pro-life organisations are also opposed to contraceptives.

The Relevance of Darwin Day

By Dr John Perkins

Charles Darwin was born 199 years ago today (12 Feb. 08), Darwin Day, on the same day as Abraham Lincoln. After his voyages on HMS *Beagle* (1831-36), following much deliberation, Darwin published his seminal book in 1859. The original title was *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection; or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*. A cumbersome title perhaps, which was shortened in the 1872 edition.



The life of Darwin, perhaps understandably, is not celebrated as much as Lincoln's, which in the US is honoured with President's Day. In Australia, however, we do honour Darwin with the name of a capital city. Palmerston was renamed Darwin in 1911 by Andrew Fisher, the first Labor Prime Minister.

While Darwin's achievements were significant, he was probably not the greatest scientist that ever lived. The feats of creative inspiration by Isaac Newton and especially Albert Einstein would seem to lay a far more legitimate claim to that title. Developed with the assistance of his wife Mileva Maric, Einstein's cosmology was light years away from the flat earth cosmology of the Bible and the Koran.

So why should we celebrate Darwin Day? The reason is that, unlike any other major finding in science, the validity of Darwin's contribution is not popularly accepted. The concept of evolution is not particularly inaccessible, and it is highly relevant to understanding the human condition. Yet it is not accepted. Why?

Evolution is rejected because it contradicts the creation myths of the major religions. As soon as *The Origin of the Species* was published there were calls by the religious to uphold creationist fundamentals, which is where the term "fundamentalist" originated. The calls have been effective. Surveys today show that sixty per cent of Americans still believe in creation and reject evolution. The proportion is presumably much higher in the Islamic world as the Koran also contains the biblical six-day creation, and the Koran cannot be contradicted by Muslims without incurring threats or punishment.

The continued widespread rejection of evolution in favour of cherished cultural myths demonstrates like nothing else the power of religion to orchestrate mass delusion in defiance of reason and evidence. It is important therefore to celebrate Darwin Day, to promote science over superstition, reason over religion. The extent to which religion now injects an increasingly dysfunctional and divisive force into multicultural global society is what makes promotion of the celebration of Darwin Day necessary and desirable.

I leave the details of Darwin's contribution to evolutionary biology for others to elucidate. I prefer to focus here on the reasons for the popular rejection of Darwin, the consequences of it, and possible solutions. This is the major relevance of Darwin Day today.

Explaining what causes the mass rejection of the overwhelming evidence that supports the existence of the process of evolution is a task more suited to psychologists than philosophers. It seems that it arises from a socialised loyalty to cultural beliefs that result from little or no attempt to objectively evaluate truth criteria.

"Faith is a rejection of reason and it is faith that is now the prime motivator of the violence that threatens the world with peril."

Sigmund Freud sought to explain belief in the monotheistic concept of a god, the invisible man who lives in the sky, as arising from an infantile projection of a father figure. Tamas Pataki, in his book "Against Religion" also seeks to explain religious belief as a fulfilment of emotional needs. Pataki draws comparisons between the fundamentalists of the major religions and provides psychological explanations of the observed behaviours. Like Freud, he sees the need for psychological attachment as the motivating factor. The god must be perceived as something like a person, in order to fill the psychological attachment need. Hence the god must be a "Him" rather than an "It".

Pataki finds Richard Dawkins in *The God Delusion* somewhat weak on the issue of psychological motivations. Evolutionary factors may provide clues to an innate propensity, but not to the specific nature of beliefs. Socialisation and indoctrination can explain the transmittal of beliefs but not their persistence. The key, according to Pataki, is to understand the concept of psychoanalytical narcissism and how religions fulfil subconscious emotional needs.

Religious groups are like "support groups for self-deception", Pataki says. Religions are hostile to reason because they claim to provide a general explanatory system. Reason undermines this claim.

(Continued on page 20)

Believers are unable to distinguish between belief and knowledge, that is, they cannot effectively entertain the possibility that their beliefs could be false. It is a failure of insight with delusional characteristics and arises because their thought processes “have been abducted by unconscious wishes”.

Like Pataki, Al Gore also laments the general lack of capacity for public reason, particularly in the United States. He does not lay the blame entirely at the feet of religion as is clear from the title of his book, *The Assault on Reason: How the Politics of Fear, Secrecy and Blind Faith Subvert Wise Decision Making, Degrade Democracy and Imperil America and the World*. This is a remarkable book, for what the author is saying, and especially for the author who is saying it.

Gore argues that it is fear that robs the mind of reason, and that fear has been cultivated for political gain. Because fear is a primeval driver, deep in the brain, it can be used to push policies that appeal to basic instincts, with *post hoc* rationalisation substituting for reasoned debate. Manufactured fear then drives people to faith, subverting traditional US ideals, leading to the betrayal of human rights, disastrous foreign misadventures in the so called “war on terror”, and perversely further imperils national security.

Gore’s analysis of the dire consequences of political fear campaigns is stunning, but his identification of the root cause is wrong. Like all religious believers, he is not quite able to achieve the clarity of perception that is possible once it is recognised that religions are simply mass delusions. It is not fear that drives people to faith but faith that drives people to fear, and faith that mobilises fear to the delusional ends. As George W. Bush said, he invaded Iraq because his god told him to.

Faith is a rejection of reason and it is faith that is now the prime motivator of the violence that threatens the world with peril. The celebration of Darwin Day provides an opportunity to fly the banner of reason in defiance of the prevailing trends. Of course we should use every available opportunity to promote reason, humanist values and secularism.

Secularism is the forgotten solution to religious conflict. It is not inherently anti-religious. Although

religious groups may resent the implication that secularism is a slight upon their beliefs, some may grudgingly admit that secularism may be good at keeping the peace between religions and also in providing a guarantee of religious freedom.

Most religious people however, are unlikely to strongly advocate secularism, even though as minorities they may benefit from it. Further, non-religious people may hesitate in strongly advocating secularism, for fear of offending religious people. Stronger action is now needed by those who are able to advocate reason and secularism.

A greater popular understanding of the nature of religious beliefs may help us to overcome some of their most divisive consequences. By being aware of our psychological motivations, we need not be slaves to them. Secularism is the best way that this project can be advanced politically. The International Humanist and Ethical Union has adopted a three-part definition of “comprehensive secularism”. This consists of impartiality between religions, separation of religion from the institutions of state, and protection of human rights from religious doctrines and practices.

We observe perverse trends in the world today regarding secularism. In Muslim countries, only Turkey’s rigorously secular constitution provides a (somewhat shaky) bulwark against creeping Islamisation. In the United Nations, human rights standards are under threat by those that seek limitation of freedom in order to advance religion. In Christendom (the “West”), church attendances are declining, the “no-religion” population is rising, yet separatist religious schools are increasingly being indulged with state support and funding.

Almost two hundred years after his birth, and a hundred and fifty years after the first release of his major work, Charles Darwin would have been astounded to know that a day in his honour is being globally celebrated. He would be even more astounded to know why the celebration is necessary. Technological advancement has not yet brought similar advancement in popular reason and enlightenment. May we always continue to celebrate his work. May we also continue to promote science in the cause of reason and humanism in the pursuit of universal secular values, based on the principles of compassion, honesty, freedom and justice.

Gods are fragile things; they may be killed by a whiff of science or a dose of common sense.

— Chapman Cohen

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An elderly man walks into a confessional.

The following conversation ensues:

Man: 'I am 92 years old, have a wonderful wife of 70 years, many children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren.'

Yesterday, I picked up two college girls, hitchhiking. We went to a motel, where I had sex with each of them three times.'

Priest: 'Are you sorry for your sins?'

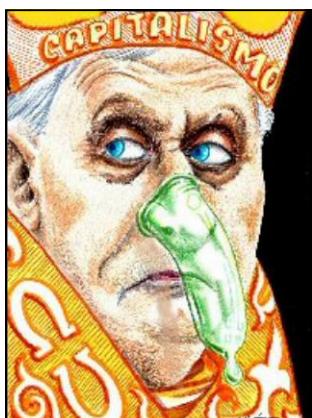
Man: 'What sins?'

Priest: 'What kind of a Catholic are you?'

Man: 'I'm Jewish..'

Priest: 'Why are you telling me all this?'

Man: 'I'm 92 years old I'm telling everybody.'

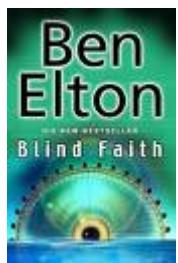


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Book Review



Blind Faith

by Ben Elton.

Transworld Publishers Limited, 2007

Reviewed by Peter Taylor

For people already critical of religion, writers such as Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens and Phillip Adams provide a battery of well-reasoned arguments in support of atheism. However, argument is pointless when people of faith feel no need to defend their beliefs. Paula Kirby (THE AUSTRALIAN ATHEIST January – February 08) says “being rational is not enough – we must be reassuring as well”. I suggest that we also need to stimulate the imaginations of believers and help them to *see* the social consequences of religion-based governance. A good story like *Blind Faith* can subvert the religious conditioning that prevents questioning of dogma, by allowing readers to imagine and identify with the hopes, fears and lives of people inhabiting a world ruled by religious edicts rather than reason.

Ayn Rand wrote several philosophical treatises expounding the virtues of laissez faire capitalism. Her ideas were ignored until she put the same ideas into the novel *Atlas Shrugged*. This lengthy tale set the imaginations of the world alight, brought Reagan and Thatcher to power, and heralded the end of the all too brief era of governments with a social conscience.

Ben Elton is a satirist. His brilliant exposé of global contamination, *Stark*, was made into a film set in Australia. *Gridlock*'s warnings have been ignored so now Brisbane traffic is also gridlocked every rush hour. *Dead Famous* takes apart Reality TV with devastating humour, and *Blind Faith* takes us on a nauseating, tragi-comic ride through the chamber of horrors that is the inevitable upshot of all theocracies. If I encountered a wavering Christian who dismissed the dangers of religious interference in law-making, I'd probably suggest they read this rather than the sometimes clinical arguments of Dawkins *et al.*

The novel is set in London half a century after the ice caps have melted and drowned much of the planet. Religious leaders insist it was society's denial of God in favour of science that caused God to send such a dreadful punishment. Naturally, because theocrats deny reason, logic and argument, their rule recognises no argument but force. In this post-apocalyptic world a moral act is anything that increases the power of the church. Parish “confessors” terrorise their flocks with threats of violence if they deviate from the correct path – a path that demands blind faith in laws that require everyone to expose every sordid detail of their private lives and bodies to everyone else via ubiquitous video links that run day and night; cameras and monitors being literally everywhere – including bedrooms and bathrooms!

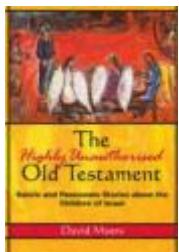
All disease prevention is banned because disease is the loving God's punishment for sin. Thus, thousands of children die of preventable childhood diseases; and when the few illegal vaccinators are discovered they are tortured and crucified or burned at the stake for attempting to pervert God's will. Citizens who desire privacy are suspected of plotting subversion and suffer exposure, ridicule, and worse. The human body – God's supreme creation – is required to be exposed, not hidden under clothes, and medically enhanced in praise of the loving creator. Religious mania grips the land. All the usual arguments for and against secularism are presented, but in a context that brings them vividly to life.

Elton is a master at extrapolating current situations to absurdity, warning us to mend our ways before it is too late. The truly awful society he describes is a logical extension of the “western world” today: escalating religious fundamentalism; fat, self-indulgent citizens who can deny themselves nothing; surveillance cameras becoming the prime tool of law enforcers. Anyone familiar with the internet knows that Jerry Springer and his ilk have been

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superseded by a plethora of blog and “facebook” sites where ordinary people expose both body and mind in excruciatingly personal detail through text, photographs and live video, receiving support and encouragement and similar responses from millions of equally disturbed, lonely, anonymous individuals whose main contact with humanity appears to be an internet keyboard and webcam.

Blind Faith is witty, horrifying, and very readable. The victimised “hero” believes humanity will one day again be free of religion. Personally, I doubt that a well-established theocracy today could ever be dislodged. It took one and a half thousand years to dismantle the papal and protestant dictatorships in Europe. Today’s “intelligent” electronic surveillance systems would make it impossible to unseat any dictator determined to hang on, so we had better make sure our state remains both secular and democratic.



The Highly Unauthorised Old Testament: Satiric and Passionate Stories about the Children of Israel

by David Myers
UCQ Press \$29.95

Reviewed by **Bill Bottomley**

It's a most enjoyable satirical take on the Old Testament and biblical absurdities, with accounts of the Garden of Eden from the viewpoint of Eve, of God's troubling psychiatric condition from the viewpoint of Satan, and refreshingly different angles on the main events of early Jewish history in general.

I chuckled all the way through it.

In retelling the stories of the great prophets, patriarchs, kings, judges, generals, seers and martyrs, author David Myers sees not only the tragic and heroic dimension of this epic history, but concentrates on the all too human aspects of character flaws and deadly sins. This leads to a focus on comedy and satire as a welcome escape valve from the pressure of the Jewish mission. It is this unprejudiced blend of religious epic with fresh post modernistic perspectives, comedy and satire that makes this such a great read. David calls it a ‘bible for dissidents, dissenters and undecided’s’ in order to make it clear that he is not a ‘true believer’. But even he gets inspired by figures like Jacob, Saul, David, Elijah and Job - men who strove to their very utmost and sometimes beyond the limits of human endurance to fulfil the divine mission that had been loaded onto their shoulders by a demanding Yahweh.

He hoped and prayed that there wasn't an afterlife. Then he realized there was a contradiction involved here and merely hoped that there wasn't an afterlife.

— Douglas Adams, *The Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy*

I'm sure many of us Atheists roll our eyes whenever we hear that old Christian phrase "How do I know? 'Cause the Bible tells me so". It appears to be true, that in this one instance, the Bible *will* tell us who is going to be the next President of the USA! As I write this in late April, the Republicans have decided on Senator John McCain, whose policies appear to be remarkably similar to George W. Bush, who has just sunk to an all-time low in the polls; lower than *any* President since that question has been asked. McCain wants to continue the Iraq war, has little understanding of the poor economic situation facing the country, and above all, he is another anti-abortion zealot. This last "quality" is what will give him a sizeable portion of the vote come November. The Democrats have appropriately named him McSame.

You would think that given the anti-Republican/Bush sentiment, it would be an easy time for Democrats this year. Notice I said, "you would think". With over 80% of our population's brain cells clogged with the plaque of religious faith and fable, the ability to think is very elusive for most voters. On the Democratic Party side it will most likely be Barack Obama who gets the nomination. At this time Senator Hillary Clinton, last year's odds-on favourite to win, looks like a very long shot, barring any last minute Convention upheaval. But in either case, it's the Bible who will tell us who will be the next US President!

Let's start with the Book of Job, where that wicked bloke Satan gets into a pissing match with God, claiming that if faithful servant Job is forced to endure all kinds of tragedies in his life, he will turn away from His Divine Almightiness. God, (isn't he supposed to be the "good guy" here?) proceeds to inflict all kinds of disasters on Job and his family, but true to his faith, Job hangs in there and keeps God as his best buddy and rejects Satan.

With that story in mind, let's look at who's running for US President today. John McCain, a 71 year old white man, who's pro-Iraq war, anti-abortion, opposes embryonic stem cell research, and — *wait!* That's all we need to hear! McCain gets the GOP (Grand Old Party) nomination! Yes, he does sound like another George W. Bush; that guy with the 69% disapproval rating.

OK, now for the Democrat. This should be easy! Barack Obama? He's for stopping the Iraq war,



pro-choice, wants to get the country on the track to an affordable health care and insurance system, etc. He's a black US Senator from Illinois. *Wait!* Did you say he's *black*? According to the Bible, our National Book, he has the Curse of Ham, which *all* black people have. Just go to Genesis 9 verses 20 to 27 for the complete story. This is what

lead to and justified the enslavement of blacks centuries ago, and has continued to be an influence on those who subscribe to many of the fundamentalist Christian denominations today. The Mormons were especially involved in the Curse of Ham business until comparatively recently when, little by little, their church President du jour would get a "revelation from God" easing the ramifications of the Curse somewhat. I'm not sure, but I think today black men can actually achieve higher office in their church.

Obama not only has the Curse of Ham to worry about. Now he has the Curse of Wright, his former church pastor Jeremiah Wright, whose fiery sermons, some with apparent un-American overtones, have created a "guilt by association" problem for the Senator.

OK, so Obama can't pass the Bible test, but how about Hillary Clinton? Ooops, there's 1 Timothy 2:12 in her way: "But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence." Damn, that was fast! Both Demos shot down by the Bible.

If the Democrats had come up with a *white* man who was running on a similar platform(s) as Obama and Clinton, he'd probably be ahead by at least 15 to 20 points by now. But now, depending on current polls, it's pretty much a toss-up. Polls show that by a wide margin Americans are fed up with what's happened over the last seven years and want a Democrat to become president in January. *But* when you plug in the names Clinton or Obama versus McCain, it evens out or McCain sometimes leads. When the post primary voting results are analyzed, it appears that the "Bradley or Wilder Effect" is happening. Bradley and Wilder were two blacks that ran for governor in California (1982) and Virginia (1989). In both cases, the polls showed them to be well ahead. Bradley narrowly lost and Wilder's nine point lead evaporated to just a half point win. This poll-skewing occurs because white voters won't admit they will not vote for a black, or, they will claim to be "undecided" until they

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get into the election booth. We've seen this effect in most of the primary elections this year. Obama, in states with large white majorities, winds up with fewer votes than polls indicated. I think that if Clinton runs against McCain in November, you will see a similar effect, where a sizeable number of voters would never admit to pollsters that they would not vote for a woman for President.

My prediction? Even though Americans are sick and tired of the war, the bad economy, the high cost of health care, and the Republican policies of the last seven years that got us here, they will be like our

fictional Bible hero Job. They will once again vote against their best interests here on Earth, to stay faithful to the Party of God and remain on track for their treasures in Heaven. To them, other things are important: Stop killing babies! Stop the "homosexual agenda"! Stop teaching *evolution*! God said it, I believe it, and that settles it.

Welcome to 21st century America! I sure hope I'm wrong, but can you say President McCain?

Bill

MEDIA RELEASE

Australia - guilty by supportive association

There is a growing disquiet amongst Atheists concerning the looming Catholic World Youth Day. Atheists are rightfully upset that secular governments are spending lavishly on supporting a particular belief system, which demonstrably is no better in its historical and present political and social context than any other.

A huge wooden cross back-dropped by a macabre 'sacred' corpse and an elderly bloke in flowing robes, surrounded by a plethora of costumed priests and bishops, provides a false impression of the deeper negative implications.

Even though numerical Catholicism in the Western world is in a plummeting free-fall, its destructive influence in developing nations is growing alarmingly. Parts of Africa, Asia, South America and the Philippines suffer tremendously under the well recorded heel of irrational and compassionless Vatican dogma.

President of the Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc, David Nicholls said. "Australian support for this superstitious entourage makes it a guilty party in the religious oppression of millions of people on a scale never before witnessed by humanity."

David Nicholls
President
Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc

All men are born with a nose and ten fingers, but no one was born with a knowledge of God.

— Voltaire

Visit from a member in the USA

Hi to my fellow atheists Down Under!

My friends call me Fiery and if you belong to the AFA Forum you will know me as Fiery Ewok. (What do you mean you don't belong to the AFA Forum? Seriously, join immediately! There are some *awesome* people over there!) In fact, it is because of the high calibre of people on the Forum that I have the opportunity to come to Australia for the month of June.

This is a bit all over the shop, so let me try and set it in order for you. I became an atheist about ten years ago. It wasn't until I began looking around the Internet and found www.EvilBible.com that I really lost my guilt over not believing. I started my blog as a way to meet like-minded people and through it met Sean the Blogonaut — an ace fellow if ever there was one. Sean got the Forum up and running a bit later and I immediately joined up, figuring that, as an American on an Aussie forum, I might perhaps bring a unique perspective, as opposed to being just another chick on an American forum.

It didn't take long for friendships to begin blooming and my charm and fascination with Australia to begin. I eventually struck up a rollicking friendship with Protium, another Forum member (seriously you should really just join, you are definitely missing out!) and team leader for the Perth Atheists Meetup group. We gradually got to know each other and in doing so discovered a delightful and enduring friendship. He has invited me to spend a few weeks with him and his wife in Perth, because that's just the kind of swell guy *he* is. Well that and he wants me to be guest speaker at his next meetup, but we'll get to that in a moment.

I will be in Australia for the month of June and have the opportunity to see Perth and Melbourne: truly the opportunity of a lifetime! And it all came about because I was feeling isolated as an atheist living in middle America and decided to dip my toes in the Internet and see if I got any nibbles.

H'mm! The analogy seems to have run amock there.

The point is that I will be at the Perth Atheists Meetup on Monday 3 June at 3:00 p.m. and will give a short (?) 30-minute talk about growing up Lutheran, becoming an atheist, and religion and home schooling in the United States. Oh, yes, did I mention that I also am a secular home-schooler? If being an atheist wasn't enough to isolate me from my fellow Americans, being a secular home-schooler certainly took it the rest of the way.

Hey! If you happen to be in Perth on 3 June stop round and get your picture taken with the seppo! *snerk* For more info you can head over to <http://atheists.meetup.com/650/calendar/7910120/>.

Good folks, good times, and I hear there's going to be beer! ☺

See you on the Forum!

— Fiery

Editor's note. Just for you good people who may not be savvy with the terms.

Seppo / Septic tank - an American (rhyming slang for yank)
from *Dictionary of Australian Slang*

Snerk - A combination of a sneer and a smirk.
from *Urban Dictionary*

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

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