

# 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 full development of their potential as human beings.

To promote atheism.

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We welcome original articles, book reviews,  
letters to the editor, quotes and snippets for  
possible inclusion in  
**THE AUSTRALIAN ATHEIST**  
All contributions are subject  
to Editorial approval.

The subject matter herein need not be taken as  
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## OPINION

In Australia it has been said that minimising tax is a national pastime. Of course it is everyone's obligation to pay only the tax that they are legally obliged to pay. No one likes to pay tax, but we all understand that it is necessary, and when occasionally the very wealthy are caught out avoiding their tax obligations we resent it, because we are footing their bill.

However, help is at hand. If you want to legally minimise your tax, down to almost zero, there is a very simple way to do it. Just profess a belief in a supernatural being and set up a "church" to advance the belief in your supernatural entity. Then you qualify for various tax exemptions. That's right, in Australia you can get rich by believing in the supernatural. And you don't have to prove anything. After all, if you had evidence for something it would no longer be a belief, and there has never been any evidence for the supernatural, ever.

The science fiction writer and founder of the church of scientology, L Ron Hubbard, was alert to the money-making potential of religion, and supposedly at one time said something to the effect that "I'm going to invent a religion that's going to make me a fortune. I'm tired of writing for a penny a word." He was reportedly worth at least US\$200 million some years before his death. In Australia religious organisations are wealthy, and they got that way with the help of our political masters and with the complicity of certain members of the legal system. Their wealth stems from tax exemptions, and that is possible because (a) we don't have separation of church and State and (b) although our constitution was intended to ensure separation of church and State it has been interpreted to mean only that the State cannot establish a state religion, i.e., it cannot discriminate between religions. The tax exemptions are then made on the basis of the charitable works carried out.

It can be argued that the charitable works performed by religious organisations justify the tax exemptions, otherwise this work would have to be a State matter. But this misses the point that whereas the money trickling into secular charities is used only for charitable works, the money pouring into supernatural charities is not only used for charitable works, it also props up an enormous bureaucracy, huge real estate holdings and investments, and funds the indoctrination of the young that keeps the whole thing going.

Then there is the tax holiday afforded to businesses that are run by religious organisations. Sanitarium Health Food Company, for example, is owned by the Seventh Day Adventists, and had revenue of \$266 million in 2004. It pays no tax. The commercial money-making activities of a supernatural charity are not considered separately from its charitable activities.

I have a suggestion for any of our members who may be Pastafarians. You have a golden opportunity to become the Trojan Horse of the Atheist Foundation, and to make a lot of money at the same time. You already have a well-publicised belief in a supernatural being. Now you need to scrape together enough money to buy, or simply rent, a suitable building. There are a number of disused churches available; one of them would do nicely. Nominate someone to be the minister and arrange to pay them a small salary, and undertake some charitable works. Now you are ready to make a fortune. You can start collecting donations, applying for Government grants, opening some Government funded schools, the purpose of which is education of course, not indoctrination, starting up some money-making charitable organisations and begin a few commercial enterprises in a tax-free environment. And because of the nature of Pastafarianism there are some tremendous synergies in getting into business. Spaghetti manufacture comes to mind immediately of course. Just think of the advertising possibilities! On what grounds could the Taxation Commissioner reject your claims? Pastafarians have as much evidence for the existence of the Flying Spaghetti Monster as other religions have for their deity. (i.e., none). And since the constitution has been interpreted in such a way that the government cannot discriminate between religions, they can hardly reject tax exemptions for Pastafarians just because their religion may seem a little odd to some. Scientology qualifies after all, and their "religion" is based on a belief that aliens came to earth in spaceships millions of years ago to dispose of their galaxy's surplus population by burying their frozen bodies in volcanoes and blowing them up with nuclear weapons. This makes Pastafarianism look almost sane.

I have been reading the excellent book by Max Wallace called *The Purple Economy*. It covers in great detail the issues I have mentioned above and many others. My favourite quotation from the book is that from Sir Richard Bourke, an early Governor of New South Wales, who apparently stated in 1833 that he looked forward to a time when churches would "roll off State support like saturated leeches". One hundred and seventy five years later the "leeches" are well and truly saturated, "bloated" may be a better word, but they are still hanging on.

*Dennis*

# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Dear Lee

Please find enclosed a cheque for my renewal as a full member of the AFA.

As I approach my 72nd birthday, I find I spend a little more time each day wondering about the afterlife. As one gets older, an eternity in “heaven”, rolling around on puffy clouds in the company of rosy cheeked cherubs, all of whom are first-rate harpists, doesn't seem all that bad — albeit a bit boring.

But, the AFA keeps me focused.

It keeps my sense of logic and realism intact.

Several other similar organisations don't do that and their publications are more boringly antiseptic and academic than the angelic harpists.

However, THE AUSTRALIAN ATHEIST is different, I can't wait to get my copy and I always settle down with a glass of my favourite vino and totally, *totally*, immerse myself in every article.

It's a great, living publication and I thank you for it.

Well done,  
**Noel**

Dear Lee

I should say first that I'm on your side. Like Richard Dawkins, I believe in the primacy of Science and regard belief in God or any other supernatural being as a delusion but I have decided not to renew my subscription to the *Atheist Foundation* for several reasons.

First, I'm not impressed by the intellectual level of the publication which seems to me to be too populist, as is Dawkins's book *The God Delusion* (*The Blind Watchmaker* was much better.) Sigmund Freud dealt more effectively with the question of religious faith in *The Future of an Illusion* and other works.

Second, granted that religious belief is an illusion, the victims of that illusion should be treated with compassion and not contempt.

Lastly, it seems to me, that the *Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc* fails to distinguish between religious fundamentalism and the more enlightened view of religion such as that of Bishop John Shelby Spong who are well on the way to a rational view of reality but haven't quite got there.

I had considered contributing a series of articles on great heretics, starting with the greatest of them all, Jesus of Nazareth, but have reluctantly come to the conclusion that this would be a waste of time.

I wish the Foundation well but suggest that you would be more effective in the cause of atheism if you were a little more understanding of the views of religious people.

Yours sincerely,  
**Ian**

(Continued on page 6)

(Continued from page 5)

Hello Ian,

Thanks for your email. I thought it proper that, as the president, I should respond to your thoughts, as I am ultimately responsible for the direction of the AFA.

There was an assumption after the enlightenment took hold, a rational evaluation of nature would see the complete demise of religion. This did not eventuate. The reason this expectation did not come to fruition is that the assumption is false that logical argument is effective against those holding views emotionally.

Dawkins et al, and this includes the *Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc*, have attempted to show the nexus between indoctrination by parents and culture, aided by evolutionary propensities, as the driving force which keeps religion alive. Many see this as an attack on religion instead of, as it is, a more than compelling explanation of the phenomenon. Because it is so convincing, religious persons are now in the position of having nowhere to hide and so irrational attack is the outcome.

Dawkins and others are therefore labelled unjustifiably as fundamentalists, populists, etc. in an attempt to discredit them. Unfortunately, this kind of *ad hominem* behaviour is catching to the point that even some non-religious persons are swayed to accept what I class as very unreasonable categorisations.

The intellectual arguments in support of Atheism or for the non-existence of a god have all been thoroughly examined ad nauseam and are now secondary to exposing the emotional mechanisms generationally nurturing religion. Demonstrating the inadequacies resulting from accepting propositions only on faith is a part of this process.

The AFA reflects the above in its publications, which by the way are only available to AFA members. We are very mindful of not unduly upsetting religious folk on the personal level, and in fact, our *Public Relations Team* constantly offers that advice to those having problems with religious parents, friends, acquaintances and work mates. Religious persons are victims, as you say, and we promote that view consistently. Nevertheless, religion is the cause of much mayhem and we do not shy away from pointing that out.

Religion is interfering in local and international politics to such an extent that the AFA is duty bound to make the public aware of the consequences of taking no action. The AFA cannot sit back promoting only intellectual argument when people are actually suffering and dying in their millions because of Vatican disapproval of condoms, victimising of lesbians and gays, oppression by religion of women — half of the world's population, and where countries with religious leaders and populations have or wish to have nuclear weapons and where people in unremitting pain with a terminal illness are denied voluntary euthanasia. The list is more extensive than this.

Upsetting the sensibilities of religion is different from making personal attacks on religious people. The AFA is involved in the former but is vehemently in opposition to the latter. It is religion which has made its own bed. If anything, world-wide Atheism has been remarkably subdued and civil in combating the enormous misery created in the name of one god or another.

Ian: as an individual Atheist, it is totally up to you if you wish to disengage yourself from our methods in the battle for minds and for the survival of the planet, but the AFA will push on regardless. I wish you all the best.

The kindest of regards,

**David**

Dear Lee and Dennis,

Firstly congrats. on your superb magazine THE AUSTRALIAN ATHEIST which I assiduously read from cover to cover and is the main reason for my new "Born again" status.

(Continued on page 7)

(Continued from page 6)

For most of my 78 years it would be fair to describe me as an atheist bigot, willing at all times to employ satire and sarcasm in most of religiously orientated discussions I got involved in.

I was convinced that ridicule was the best way to go until I became a member of AFA. I am learning never to allow my emotions to subsume reason, and conduct myself accordingly. Only on the rarest of occasions and under intense provocation do I ever use the word boofhead.

Sad to say and harder to admit I recently lapsed back to my truculent ways after I read Bill Henry's article in THE AUSTRALIAN ATHEIST, Number 9 concerning a survey conducted throughout the Bible Belt area of America that asked responders to list the ten most odious groups of people in the world. Atheists were nominated the penultimate villains, only one shade better than Al-Qaeda.

Kindest regards to you and the team. ("Lang may your lums reek") [Scots: Long may your chimney(s) smoke]

**John T**

**H**i Lee

I received the latest issue of THE AUSTRALIAN ATHEIST. Thankyou: great as always. You and Dennis do a terrific job.

I had another letter published in the *Sydney Star Observer* (See Page 15 for Colin's letter) today to make a point. It was in response to the previous week's front page story of a young American guy who was here with some ratbag missionary lot. (They try to get the Christian message to youth with hip-hop music and are called Island Breeze – *really!*) He was dismissed because they found out he was gay — *duh!*

I'm very pleased they placed it first on the topic. There were six other letters on it. They were all concerned with discrimination, being "un-Christian" and so on. Mine was by far the best and the only anti-religious, pro-secular one.

I worry about gays who cling to religion, or just go along with it.

**Colin**

**H**i,

I've been a member for a number of years and would like to thank you for being there. It helps to know you're not alone when you live in a community that sees atheism and skepticism as alien concepts.

I thought you might be interested in some of my artwork. See Page 14.

**Roger**

**D**ear Lee,

Please find enclosed payment for membership plus a donation for your excellent organisation. The work you guys do is just fantastic and I wish the organisation a long and productive future.

Cheers

**CG**

# HERETICAL HAPPENINGS

## Keeping you in the know

Greetings,

I know you are all tense with excitement as the *Catholic* World Youth Day draws ever nearer. The media will be awash with Pope-yarns, Pell-ditties and assorted anecdotes from lesser ecclesiastical beings, all proclaiming the event to be a milestone in the history of the Roman Catholic Church especially in Australia.

Of course, there will be no evidence supporting supernatural claims made by the Catholic Church or satisfactory reasons given for the assertion it is the one true religion. Instead of proof, the organisers of the event will provide a corpse or two, a giant wooden cross and plenty of mumblings at incense-permeated altars by men in frocks.

We may not need a lot of effort to counter this mammoth display of government spending and hyped-up religiosity. Going by letters to the editor in many newspapers, taxpayers are already showing concern at the lavish expenditure of their money on what many class rightly as superstition. The restrictive disruption to the lives of ordinary Sydneysiders has also created an irate response.

The AFA has made its own modest objection by placing a cartoon of the event in selected papers on 18 July 08. The cartoon is on page 8 of this issue. Our cartoonist, Rebecca, on instruction from the Committee of Management has captured the essence of the occasion with considerable flair. We congratulate Rebecca, as it was not an easy task to fulfil.

By the way, if you are not saving your AFA magazines for posterity, a helpful idea is to dispose of them in public places. Leaving them in doctors' and dentists' waiting rooms, shopping malls or, as some members have done, donating them to a local library is far better than placing them in the rubbish or recycle bin.

Sydney member of the AFA has had his thoughts on Catholic World Youth Day recorded on film along with some religious counterparts. Alan Conradi agreed to take on the mission and a fine performance he gave. You may view Alan's contribution at, <http://www.news.com.au>. Well done, Alan!

Here is a first for the AFA. The *Wollongong Advertiser* has agreed to roster us with various religious folk to contribute to a column called "Rise Up". We hit the streets on the 18 June with a circulation of about 100,000 copies. This came about because Simon, an AFA member living in the area, contacted Lorraine Bennett, the editor, pointing out that the "Rise Up" column always had a religious content. Simon suggested evening the score with a piece from the Atheist Foundation of Australia. This set the wheels in motion and thus we are now in print. The AFA is indebted to Simon for his initiative, which may set an example for others to follow. An extract from Simon's letter to Lorraine, the editor of the *Wollongong Advertiser*, is on page 14.

The editor said "It needs to be a positive story, without criticism of other religions," and gave us a limit of 300 words, so an extended version of the article appears on page 16. Online Opinion also published it on 8 July 08. <http://www.onlineopinion.com.au/>

As for World Youth Day, well folks: will the serious failings of the Catholic Church receive adequate investigatory treatment by the media? Or will we simply be subjected to mammon-driven front-page sensationism? This is a question only time will answer.

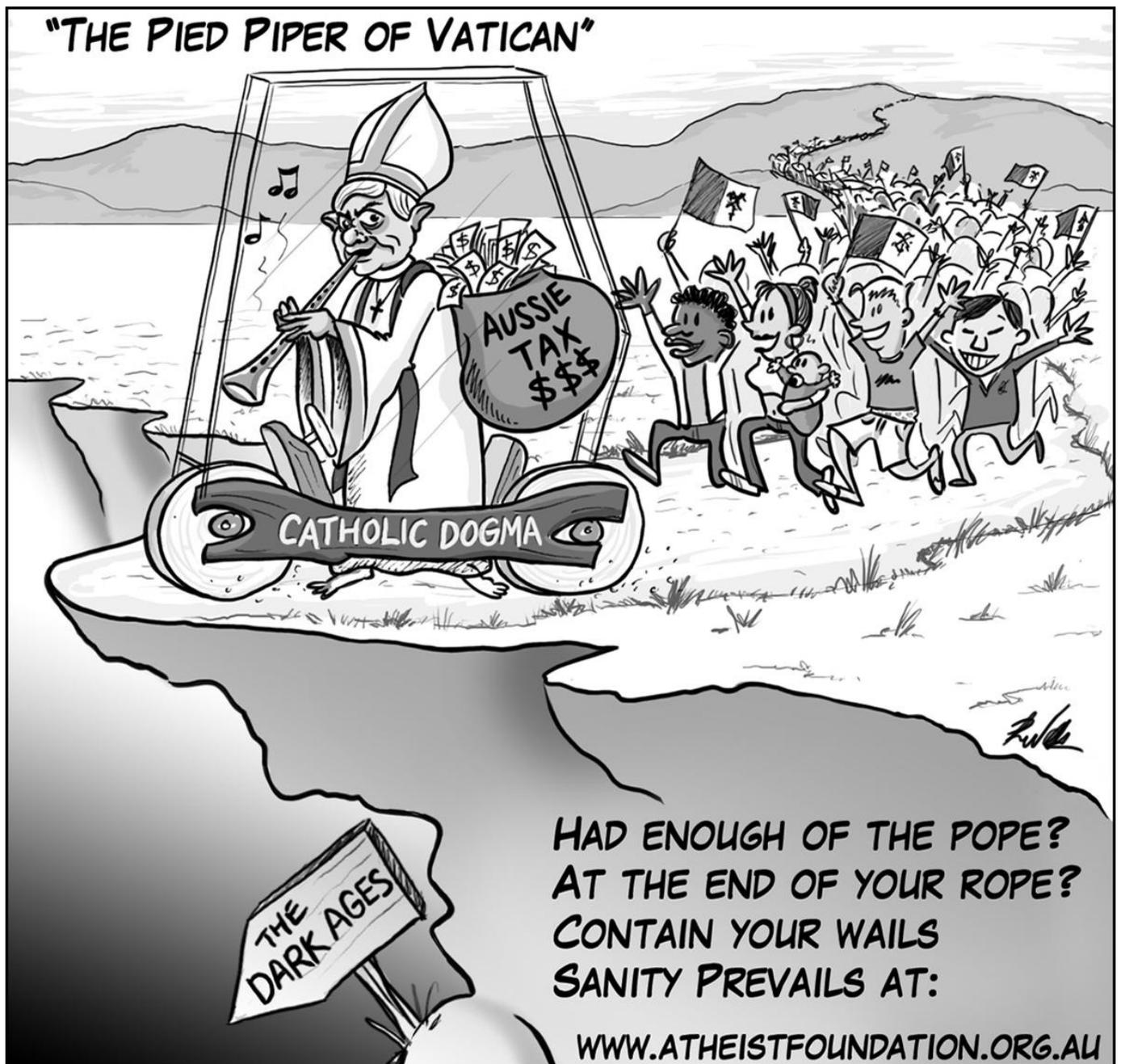
Until we meet again,



**Stop Press:** Reports in the media indicate there will be stringent regulations limiting protest rights at the Catholic World Youth Day event, greater than at the APEC conference. As this is a direct attack on freedom of expression, the AFA has joined the 'NoToPope Coalition'. The AFA fully endorses the Coalition's peaceful protest. All citizens have the democratic right and more importantly, the responsibility to demonstrate dissent openly to objectionable government action. Talkback radio and letters to the editor pages exist for those wishing to vent their spleen. Maybe this is one of those occasions!

# CATHOLIC WORLD YOUTH DAY

In response to the Pope's visit to Sydney for  
[CATHOLIC] World Youth Day,  
the  
Atheist Foundation will place this cartoon in  
*The Australian*  
*Sydney Morning Herald*  
and  
*The Age*  
on 18 July 08.



# FLINDERS GODLESS - WHAT WE'VE BEEN UP TO.

Since contacting the Atheist Foundation of Australia on 27 March this year for assistance in starting an atheist society at Flinders University in South Australia, it has been all go. I would like to thank sincerely the AFA for the help of materials and encouragement offered so freely.

I think the group, now named Flinders Godless, has come together quite well. We have around twenty paid-up members. Two of our members are staff from the humanities school. One of them is a senior lecturer in philosophy, and another a research fellow in sociology. I hope to attract some more staff members from the science faculty next semester.

We have held one event so far (and several meetings to set up the club), which was a talk on "Theistic Cosmologies" from Dr George Couvalis. For many of us, it was our first taste of philosophy. We look forward to the presentations that we have lined up for the next semester, including; presentations from our humanities and science faculties, as well as off-campus speakers.

I hope that, once we become more established, we can book the restaurant on campus and have a dinner or presentation night with two or three speakers.

We have been invited to a "Multi-faith Youth Forum" in October, where we will hopefully be the voice of reason in the debates of "Does God exist?" and "Religion and Science". My confidence in discussing these issues has increased greatly since joining AFA, and Flinders Godless and I am especially excited about the prospect of representing the "no faith" group at the multi-faith forum.

We've also had our first taste of controversy. For World Environment Day all clubs on campus were able to have a stall. As it turns out, we were the only non-environmental group that applied. The organiser of the event wasn't going to let us hold our stall, citing "none of the other religious groups have a stall". In the end she gave way, and with our "One life, one planet" poster we had a stall selling reusable shopping bags. Each bag had one of the badges donated by the AFA on them, either "Godless ☺" or "Have you hugged an atheist today?". In the end, the day was a bit of a non-event, but we signed up some members and had an interesting discussion with someone of the Baha'i faith.

We also have a documentary called *The God that Wasn't There*, which we have permission to screen. This will be our first event open to the whole

university. We hope to generate some discussion, as well as a small profit.

With books donated by AFA, we have opted to start up our own library, rather than donate them to the Flinders University library. We decided that this would be the best way to give members access to these books. I think that this is going to work well, as we have the books donated by AFA and also books borrowed from members.

Any profits made by the club will go into enlarging our permanent library. Obviously, our book list will change from year to year as students leave, but currently we have the following:

*End of Faith* - Sam Harris (from AFA)  
*Letter to a Christian Nation* - Sam Harris (from AFA)  
*The God Delusion* - Richard Dawkins (from AFA)  
*Atheist Handbook* - Nikesh Murali (from AFA)

*God is Not Great* - Christopher Hitchens  
*Breaking the Spell* - Dan Dennett  
*Why I am not a Christian* - Bertrand Russell  
*Blind Watchmaker* - Richard Dawkins  
*Extended Phenotype* - Richard Dawkins  
*Unweaving the Rainbow* - Richard Dawkins  
*Climbing Mount Improbable* - Richard Dawkins  
*Atheist Manifesto* - Michael Onfray

We look forward to enlarging this library, as a focus of the group is to expand our knowledge.

We are also looking into purchasing a portable hard drive for electronic resources. I think that this will be a great way of collating electronic resources, including articles, websites and film clips to share.

I can't wait until next semester. I think that we've set ourselves up really well and will be able to increase our numbers and hold some cross-campus events with the Adelaide University Godless. Campus needs the presence of an atheist group in combating the ever-lurking intrusion of religion into higher education.

With thanks,

**Dylan Irvine**  
**Flinders Godless President**



# LETTERS TO THE PAPERS

## Preaching propaganda

*The Age 19 June 08*

Catherine Deveny is correct. Who does the Catholic Church think it is fooling?

Well, a good guess is it knows exactly what it is doing. Educated democracies shunning mother church is a decades-long, irretrievable phenomenon. Therefore, the Church must bolster its image in developing nations where it is in ferocious battle with evangelical Christianity. There lies its numerical strength and an unlimited pool of minds ready to succumb to its unachievable promises.

What better way than demonstrating to under-privileged nations, who look up to Australia with awe at our opulence and lifestyle, that here, Catholicism is strong and vibrant. Australian governments have been lulled into the plot by providing enormous sums of money for Catholic World Youth Day and allowing for the disruption of normality to our largest city. To complete the charade, as many people as possible will be bussed in from afar to make up the numbers for a good showing. The filmed end product, with all the hoopla and fanfare, will make a convincing case that Catholics have the answers for personal, political and social success.

Overall, this is a brilliantly executed plan for producing propaganda, from a country with single-digit numbers of bums on seats each Sunday.

**David Nicholls**  
**President**  
**Atheist Foundation of Australia**

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In his article, 'Let the sufferers decide their fate', David Kelly accurately identified the religious hierarchy and not a majority of the ordinary person of faith which are the main opposition to introducing a system of legal voluntary euthanasia. There is no precedent based in ethics where the imposition of a narrow view which creates greater harm than good, is moral.

Churches are forever attempting to involve themselves in our bedrooms, our schools, our taxation system, our government and our end of life choices. It is time to halt this insidious slide into theocratic rule. Victorian parliamentarians are obliged to act on behalf of a well informed voting public.

They have no mandate to implement the supposed will of one of the many alleged gods. There is no quandary here. Those not wishing assistance in dying have a right to linger. Others in desperate need of voluntary euthanasia also have a right and that is to die with dignity.

The law must support both these rights.

**David Nicholls**  
**President**  
**Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc**

**ATHEIST FOUNDATION FORUM**  
**<http://aussieatheist.com/afaforum/>**

# GOD'S LOVE ON SHOW IN BURMA AND CHINA

## RECONCILING THE IRRECONCILABLE

By Charles Cornwall

How do you reconcile the irreconcilable? Just ask the Christians – those people who believe the unbelievable. Christians believe the following: there is a god who has existed for all time; this god is omnipotent (can do anything, including intervene in nature and the affairs of the human race); is omniscient (knows everything – including the future) and omnipresent (is everywhere at the same time). This god made everything there is – the universe, the galaxies, this world with all its physical laws and every living creature including humans. And everything god made was good. Finally, this god is a god of love. How do Christians know all this? Their textbook (the Bible) tells them so. There are innumerable supporting verses. I won't waste space quoting any, but believe me, there are many. I speak as one who knows. In a former life, before I saw the light, I studied theology and was an ordained minister.

The question I now want to ask Christians is this: how in the name of all that is logical can the notion of a god, with all these attributes, be reconciled with the recent natural tragedies in Burma and China? I stress *natural*. The countless thousands of dead, injured, orphaned and homeless came about, not as a result of human activity (e.g. war), but by the forces of nature obeying the laws of nature as set in place by god – this god of love. What a hideous, grotesque demonstration of god's so-called love!

When challenged on this score, Christians usually trot out the following pat answer: God is not to blame for the sufferings of humanity, everything god made was good; it is humans themselves who are responsible — for disobeying god's laws. In short, all the pain and suffering of the world is due to sin. This answer does not stand up to intelligent scrutiny for the following reasons.

One: While it is self-evident that much of the world's suffering is the result of human perversion and barbarity, natural tragedies, like the recent cyclone in Burma and earthquake in China, have nothing to do with sin or human activity. As already observed, they occurred as a result of nature obeying the laws of nature that god (according to the Biblical account) set in place before he created human beings.

Two: Even if, for argument's sake, the tragedies of the world were due to sin, god knew in advance what was going to happen. This makes god responsible for them. As Bertrand Russell said, "If I were going to beget a child knowing that the child was going to be a homicidal maniac, I should be responsible for his crimes" (*Why I am Not a Christian* p. 31).

Three: While many of the calamities to befall the world are the result of human activity, not all, by any stretch of the imagination, have resulted from evil or malicious intentions. Very many, in fact, have resulted from human fallibility, imperfect knowledge and the inability to understand at the time the action was taken (even with the best intentions) the long-term consequences, e.g. global warming. Let us remember that humans, with all their fallibility, are supposedly the creation of god. Is not god, therefore, responsible for the results of those actions taken in ignorance? Furthermore, is it a demonstration of god's love to allow humankind to suffer as a result of actions taken in ignorance when this omnipotent god could intervene? What would we think of an earthly father punishing his child who, in ignorance but while trying to help, pulled up the vegetable seedlings instead of the weeds? According to the Bible we are supposed to model ourselves on our "Heavenly Father" in our love for others. Yet no loving earthly father would willingly allow his child to suffer as a result of an action taken in ignorance.

Clearly, the attempt to reconcile the notion of a benevolent deity with the pain and suffering of the world defies logic. When Christians are confronted with the above counter arguments a frequent retort goes something like this, "God knows what he is doing. It's not for us to question him." or (the ultimate cop-out) "God moves in a mysterious way his wonders to perform." So far as I am concerned, I agree with Bertrand Russell, "The world in which we live can be understood as a result of muddle and accident; but if it is the outcome of deliberate purpose, the purpose must have been that of a fiend."

# SUBMISSION

## Response to the Hon. Wayne Swan's Press Release number 36 regarding Australia's future tax system.

### Edited quotes from the press release: -

\* "The Rudd Government will conduct a comprehensive review of Australia's tax system to create a tax structure that ...reflects the realities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century...."

\* "...Australia's hard working taxpayers are entitled to a tax system that is as fair and efficient as possible and this review will help to achieve that goal."

\* "...Raising revenue should be done so as to ....provide equity..."

While the Atheist Foundation of Australia does not have the expertise to comment on the efficiency of any proposed tax regime, we are aware of some of the 'realities' of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and able to comment on the fairness or otherwise of proposals.

### 1. The reality:

- Section 116 of the Australian constitution reads: "*The Commonwealth shall not make any law for establishing any religion or for imposing any religious observation.*" This does not refer directly to taxation, but the intention is clear – it was intended that Australia should be a secular state.
- Most Australians are more or less secular in outlook and not actively religious.

### 2. Fairness:

- Fairness demands that no individual or group is granted tax exemptions at the expense of other taxpayers. The only fair system is one in which everyone shoulders the burden of taxation.

### 3. Equity:

- Equity requires that no individual or organisation, business enterprise or social club is given an unfair advantage. At the moment, religious practitioners, religions and religious enterprises are not required to pay income or land tax. This fails any reasonable test of equity and fairness, and by favouring, and therefore encouraging religion, makes a mockery of the notion that Australia is a secular state.

As Mr. Justice Murphy of the High court of Australia noted more than 20 years ago in the case of *Church of the New Faith versus Commissioner of Payroll Tax (Vict.) 1983 154CLR120*: "... ***The crushing burden of taxation is heavier because of exemptions in favour of religious institutions, many of which have enormous and increasing wealth.***"

### 4. The review panel:

- Given the fact that religions are so favourably treated by taxation laws, it would be unethical for Mr. Greg Smith of the *Australian Catholic University* to have any part in the review of taxation. His conflict of interest is so enormous that for the process to have credibility, he must either resign

(Continued on page 14)

or be asked to step down from the review panel.

## 5. Discussion:

- Everyone has the right to choose to participate in religious activities. Many people derive benefit from the social and mental support offered by religion and church attendance. However, attending church is one of the least popular activities indulged in by Australians. Hundreds of other more popular activities and clubs offer similar services to their members. The RSL, CWA, Theatrical societies, spiritualist societies, sports clubs, literary groups, bridge and chess clubs, hang-gliding groups, model aeroplane clubs, philatelist associations... are all pleasant, socially beneficial activities that make people feel happy and worthy in exactly the same way as religion can for some people.
- The time has long gone when religion can rationally expect special treatment. None of the supernatural claims made by religions are tenable because no evidence has ever been provided to prove the existence of any of the thousands of gods religionists have chosen to worship.
- Most importantly, none of the claims made by any religion to moral and ethical superiority can be substantiated.
- The reality is, religion in 2008 is simply another club, valued by its adherents, but of no intrinsic value to society. Indeed, it is all too easy to demonstrate that religion is frequently socially divisive.
- Religion has used its 'special status' to demand a say in the governing of Australia. There is no valid reason for this to continue. Historical precedent is no basis for decisions in Australia today with our multitude of ethnic groups, plethora of religions, and burgeoning number of secular citizens. To favour one group over the other is not only unfair, it is a recipe for social division and civic unrest.
- The non-profit activities of religious institutions should, of course, remain exempt from taxation as in Section 50 of the Income Tax Assessment Act 1997, as long as they can be demonstrated to be charitable organisations, or scientific and public educational institutions. Such exempted religious activity must be accountable. The present taxation system apparently assumes that all religious activities fall into those categories, but this is not the case. There is no reason for secular Australians to subsidise the vast business enterprises, clubhouses and churches of the non-secular minority.
- Commercial enterprises run by religious organisations have an unfair advantage over their secular competitors. No one knows how much tax religious enterprises are avoiding, but it must be in the billions of dollars because organized religions are extremely wealthy. The 2005 profit for the Catholic Church was reported at eight billion dollars; the Anglicans and Uniting around two billion, and the other sects and religions are catching up fast. *The Seventh Day Adventist Sanitarium Food Company* is a glaring example of a religious business with tax-free-enabled lower overheads that allows it to undercut competitors and gain an unfair trading advantage. If the government's intention is to create a fair taxation system, such rorts must be stopped.
- As for personal tax; exemptions on fringe benefits allow religions to pay minimum wages to employees, compensating them with generous tax-free perks. In the case of religious practitioners, some salaries consist solely of tax-free fringe benefits, thus guaranteeing access for the recipients to otherwise unavailable social security benefits as well! In other words, the present taxation regime is encouraging social security fraud.

## 6. Conclusion:

- If the government really believes that religion and state should be separate, and is genuine in its desire for a fair, equitable taxation system, now is the time to do away with all unfair, discriminatory tax concessions for religious institutions.

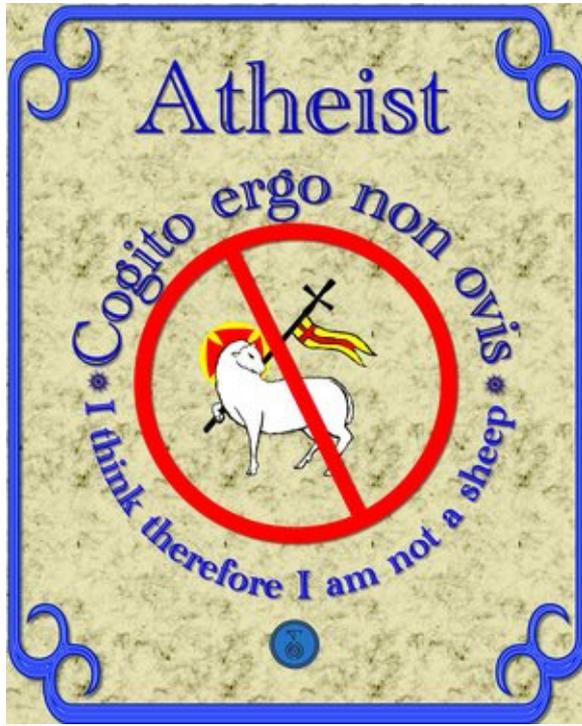
24 June 08

# BITS 'N' PIECES

**ARTWORK BY ROGER**

<http://ranger-roger.deviantart.com>

<http://ranger-roger.deviantart.com/gallery/#Atheist>



## Jesus Christ !

Those called Matthew, Mark, Luke and John  
Wrote about their hero when he'd gone,  
Because, it seems, he never even wrote  
A diary or a letter or a note.  
Nor did he show a deep inquiring mind.  
Did nothing that would benefit humankind.  
Nor speak a word that wasn't better said  
By those before him, or when he was dead.  
He never taught his people how to think  
For themselves, nor ever showed the link  
Between a cause observed and its effect  
But said you must have faith, and not object.  
Simple minded, prejudiced - it's odd  
This figure should be worshipped as a god!  
All those 'true believers' should admit  
They really must have made it up a bit  
In order to create divine disguise  
For future gullibles to idolise.

**Joan Vaughan-Taylor**

**To Wollongong Advertiser Editor**

Dear Lorraine Bennett

I am writing to you regarding the "Rise Up" weekly column in *The Advertiser*. I was wondering if one week it would be possible for an atheist to pen an article? I notice each week that a different religious person is allowed to present their views on the world so therefore in the name of balanced journalism it would be appropriate to provide the other side of the argument. I'm sure the *Atheist Foundation of Australia* would welcome the opportunity to present an article for print. What are your thoughts?

**Simon**



THE AUSTRALIAN ATHEIST magazine on display in the Launceston Library.

If you feel inclined you can take your read copy to your local Library as Phil does in Tasmania.

◀ The Lending Library

The Reference Library ▶



# MEDIA RELEASE

2 July 08

The report, if accurate, of the introduction of new laws to prevent protesters at the Catholic World Youth Day event from expressing opinions of dissent, is a scurrilous attack on the democratic system.

It is a mainstay of democracy that citizens have the inherent right to express publicly their views in a peaceful manner. The denial of this right under the pretext of preventing offence to particular groups is a specious argument.

The intended protest is neither about inciting violence nor offending individuals; it is concerned with exposing the massive harm resulting from religion and in particular the Catholic Church. It is not only a duty but also a responsibility for those who value human rights over personal religious belief to stand up and voice disapproval at such oppressive laws.

David Nicholls, president of the Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc said; “When governments enact laws or police overstep their discriminatory powers in enforcement, against the common good, the obligation upon the public is to react with civil disobedience. Most importantly, each person doing so must evaluate any action they intend and be prepared to accept the adverse consequences.”

**David Nicholls**  
**President**  
**Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc**

**Letter in the Sydney Star Observer, 4 June 2008**

## **Good God**

As a gay atheist I was rather taken aback by the cover story (“Sacked for being gay”) in this week’s *SSO*. The story of young Shane is in itself sad. Why on earth would a gay man be so involved in an organisation (religion) in which his parents have raised him to despise what he is — gay?

But what I find disturbing is reporter Harley Dennett’s assertion that “Stoner, 22, was just three months into his year-long mission, spreading the word of God to local school children through hip-hop music”.

Please — “spreading the word of God”! Phrases of this kind should only be heard in sermons in religious institutions or between consenting religious “dolts”. There is no place for such statements as fact in a terrific gay weekly like *SSO*. It should always strive to use secular language if not being satirical.

We should never lose sight of the fact that religions and their proponents are the most vocal force in condemning us as unworthy, inferior human beings. Screw religion — and don’t get me started on our taxes going to religious schools or the Pope’s big day out, etc, etc ... grrrrr.

**Colin**



**NO POPE  
TO POPE  
COALITION**

**PROTEST THE POPE'S  
ANTI-QUEER  
ANTI-CONDOM STANCE**

**Sat July 19th 2008**

**12 Noon  
Taylor Square,  
Sydney, Aust.**

# ATHEISM: THE DEFAULT ETHICAL POSITION OF HUMANITY

By David Nicholls

Atheism is not another religion. There is no head atheist, chain of command or a supernatural component. It is a private philosophical stance, which unapologetically places ultimate value on the primacy of reason. Atheism does not have churches or celebration days. Atheists are individuals who pay their taxes, donate to charities, and are volunteers in society to the same extent as everyone else. Atheists have family, friends, acquaintances, careers, pets, hobbies etc and although popular rumour has it that atheists have cranial horns and sacrifice babies, this is untrue. Their essential distinction is that atheists have no invisible means of support.

Some people are under the common misconception that atheism equates with Stalinism, Nazism, communism etc. This is, of course, mischievous nonsense designed or used as propaganda for consumption by easy ears. Dictatorial social and political systems result from the tyrannical desires of deranged individuals and accommodating circumstances. Religious and non-religious people alike rightfully despise them and any mayhem these ideologies create.

Freely chosen atheism in democracies is the antitheses of forced compliance with narrow political agendas. In fact, atheism promotes informed decision making as the best possible way of governance. This ensures that to the highest extent achievable in human affairs, there is an assurance of equality, compassion and justice before the law.

Where societies do not rely on well-informed choice, as in authoritarian regimens like fascism, suffering is unavoidable. It is also the case that faith-driven doctrines cause similar predicaments. One needs only to watch the international and national nightly news on television to be convinced. Reliance on ancient literature as a guide to establishing mores is problematical. There are a number of creeds and creeds within creeds, all containing conflicting messages with numerous interpretations inevitably leading to divisiveness, injustice and conflict.

On the other hand, atheism does not endorse acts of violence, encourage others to do so, or attempt to subvert those in disagreement. The explanation is

simple. Reasoned argument and not belligerence is the hallmark of atheism. Atheism is the default ethical position of humanity. It does not slavishly follow a set of immutable 'sacred' rules amongst the many on offer.

We are all born atheists, with a percentage indoctrinated personally or culturally by one of the thousands of religions, which exist or have existed. The brand of religion thus adhered to is overwhelmingly dependant on specific location and tradition.

Atheists have no wish to override properly constructed democracy by aggression, by unrepresented interference in politics or by using pre-existing notions. Atheism considers that the only method to secure positive outcomes is to have full regard for all the available evidence, and not just that in favour of a particular ideology.

This does not mean that atheism is a state of perfection or an infallible inoculation against idiocy. But its majority consensus favours reaching better conclusions more so than by inflexible adherence to fashionable dogma. Unfortunately, it is here where the harm of religion overshadows any good or perceived benefit.

A regrettable product of religion is intolerance of different outlooks, particularly where they do not fit a demanding preordained worldview. Religions tend to compel or attempt to implement their opinions onto whole populations to the detriment of arbitrarily selected groups. It is all very well to have "respect" for alleged revelation, but it is not acceptable to expect others who do not, to live by its dictates.

A study of freely chosen atheism in educated secularised nations demonstrates it to be the mechanism encouraging and nurturing happiness, prosperity, equality, compassion and justice. In contrast, those places on the planet where religion is inseparable from politics or where antiquated religious ideals form the basis for behaviour, the same is not true. Western Europe exemplifies this point very decisively.

Atheism promotes that all persons to be equal before the law, to have fully rounded education availed for everyone, to cast out all kinds of ideological indoctrination, to ensure that religion and politics remain separate identities and that every mature citizen retain the right to choose or not choose a religion without adverse consequence. The imperative of adherence to a religion must be that its practise be a private concern between consenting adults and that any of its precepts, if not conforming to rational conclusion, are not politicised.

*(Continued on page 18)*

(Continued from page 17)

There is no grand plan for an atheist empire. The wider acceptance of atheism does not advantage anyone with large-scale power, kudos or money. Some people see the promotion of atheism as a threat because many religions have dwindling numbers of adherents. This loss of control and thus sway over people's lives and politics is the reason for the frightened panic. Many religious authorities and followers therefore look for the downside of atheism where it does not exist. Wild stories of the immorality of atheism suddenly emerge and become real to those alarmed by the unstoppable rise of a system of thinking repressed for centuries.

Believing in a god or higher force has a history as long as consciousness, which has embedded it deeply in the human psyche. It has evolved from times when limited knowledge of nature had its only answers in supernatural explanations. Fears of the certainty of eventual nothingness, of wishing for a better life, and indeed, of just surviving the next winter, war, drought or famine, powerfully influenced the worldview of our forebears. A few hundred years of scientific discovery is not going to yield easily to thousands steeped in superstition. It is foolish to think otherwise.

There is, however, a hope that a majority of civilisation's numbers will eventually see the emperor of religion has no clothes. We need to look at the immense problems faced by the planet with minds unhampered by faith driven imperatives, many considerably adding to the sum total of misery and strife. The main negative influence is their inherent divisive nature, giving unhelpful support to tribal feelings of *them* and *us*.

The argument that without religious belief, people would have no morals is specious. A brief look at especially other higher animals shows how humans have evolved utilising cooperative traits, which benefit all. Love, friendship, protection of young, mother-offspring relationships, etc all correspond to human behaviour. These characteristics are inherent and if they were missing, we could not have possibly evolved, rather, we would be extinct eons ago. If people need the imagined presence of a god to control aberrant attitudes, one has to wonder how other animals have survived, as they do not have dependency on any supernatural beings for their mores.

The added advantage afforded humans and not other creatures are we can codify and improve upon our inherent helpful propensities as a way of ensuring the controlling of wrongdoing as a matter of law. The observation of parliaments or governing bodies worldwide reveals that the less religious interference,

the better off is its citizens. To suggest that one needs a god for an ethical outlook is really an accusation against those promoting such a position. If a religious person found proof that, a god did not exist, would they suddenly go on a rampage of murder, rape and pillaging. As a high proportion of atheists were once religious and no statistics support such a notion, the answer is, of course not.

On a cautionary note, as stated, atheism is demonstrably the default ethical position of humanity but it does not carry a guarantee of saving the planet. The only definitive statement worthy of consideration, to paraphrase Winston Churchill judging democracy against various political systems, is that as a social advantage, atheism 'is better than the rest'.

A study by Peter Singer & Marc Hauser<sup>1</sup> concluded that choices made by religious and non-religious individuals facing ethical dilemmas are remarkably similar. This is an example of the quandaries confronted:

A runaway boxcar is about to run over five people walking on the tracks. A railroad worker is standing next to a switch that can turn the boxcar onto a side track, killing one person, but allowing the five to survive. Flipping the switch is \_\_\_\_\_. The blank space needs filling in with, "obligatory," "permissible," or "forbidden."

Of 1500 respondents, 90% chose "permissible" even though most, both the religious and the nonreligious could not adequately explain why. For those wishing to know the reason they selected "permissible" here is the explanation: In almost all societies, it is "forbidden" to kill an innocent person deliberately, so it must be wrong to say such killing is "obligatory". In this particular case, however, one or more deaths will occur *whatever* the respondent decides, but fewer will occur if the switch is flipped, so "permissible" is at least the lesser of two evils.

However, in prosperous democracies, statistical evidence of religious sectors in communities or even whole countries, as is the case with the USA, show a clear correlation between greater religious observance and higher numbers of dysfunctional characteristics.

The following extract is from a study by Gregory S Paul.<sup>2</sup>

"In general, higher rates of belief in and worship of a creator correlate with higher rates of homicide, juvenile and early adult mortality, STD infection rates, teen pregnancy, and abortion in the prosperous democracies.

(Continued on page 19)

(Continued from page 18)

The most theistic prosperous democracy, the U.S., is exceptional, but not in the manner, Franklin predicted.

The United States is almost always the most dysfunctional of the developed democracies, sometimes spectacularly so, and almost always scores poorly. The view of the U.S. as a “shining city on the hill” to the rest of the world is falsified when it comes to basic measures of societal health. Youth suicide is an exception to the general trend because there is not a significant relationship between it and religious or secular factors. No democracy is known to have combined strong religiosity and popular denial of evolution with high rates of societal health. Higher rates of non-theism and acceptance of human evolution usually correlate with lower rates of dysfunction, and the least theistic nations are usually the least dysfunctional. None of the strongly secularized, pro-evolution democracies is experiencing high levels of measurable dysfunction. In some cases the highly religious U.S. is an outlier in terms of societal dysfunction from less theistic but otherwise socially

comparable secular developed democracies. In other cases, the correlations are strongly graded, sometimes outstandingly so.”

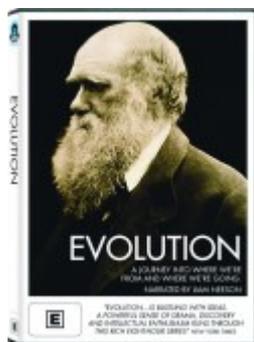
The apparent discrepancy that on the one hand, religious and nonreligious persons make similar ethical decisions and, on the other hand, a study demonstrating religion equates with dysfunction is clearly understandable and one supports the other on investigation of both cases presented. The Singer/Hauser paper dealt with specific hypothetical circumstances unrelated to any particular religion where the subjects used innate abilities. Gregory Paul however, cast a far wider net in statistically correlating dysfunctional societies with various amounts of religiosity.

Evolution has supplied us with the ability to make ethical decisions but religions can interfere with this natural process and produce mayhem.

We fail to heed a lesson of such importance at our peril.

<sup>1</sup> Godless Morality Project Syndicate January 2006  
<http://www.utilitarian.net/singer/by/200601--.htm>

<sup>2</sup> The journal of Religion and Society, Gregory S. Paul  
<http://moses.creighton.edu/jrs/2005/2005-11.html>



## EVOLUTION

Reviewed by Janine Gébert

*E*volution is a seven-part DVD, narrated by Liam Neeson. It is a mix of drama and documentary that explores the impact of Darwin’s theory of natural selection, both in his time and today.

It interweaves and connects the personal and scientific aspects of his life, and how many perceived his ideas as jeopardising the religious and scientific teachings of the time. Darwin was seen by many, including Bishop Wilberforce, as a respectable man with dangerous ideas, who posed a “snub to the clergy and a threat to humanity?”. Because of the personal cost and scientific impact he knew his ideas would create, Darwin delayed the publication of *The Origin of Species* for some time.

It explores why Darwin’s writings about evolution are considered by many to be more important than the discoveries of either Albert Einstein or Isaac Newton. It is Darwin’s work on the evolution of the species that medical scientists and researchers are now applying to the evolution of micro-organisms in the human body itself. The knowledge of how evolution works within our own bodies is now being used to understand and fight HIV/AIDS and the rise of tuberculosis. Darwin’s natural selection theory is being used to help patients fight viruses that have developed resistance to current drugs.

It looks at the issue of “What about God?” and explores the attempts by supporters of Intelligent Design to have their version of creation included in the sciences. A range of views are presented throughout the documentary, including scientists who see no contradiction with evolution and religious beliefs, and those who do. Darwin himself lost his religious faith, but believed faith was a personal matter, neither proved nor disproved by his theory.

This DVD is well presented, and is highly suitable as a teaching tool for senior students, or as informative entertainment.

## QUOTES

I don't believe in an afterlife, so I don't have to spend my whole life fearing hell, or fearing heaven even more. For whatever the tortures of hell, I think the boredom of heaven would be even worse.

*Isaac Asimov*

If one were to take the bible seriously one would go mad. But to take the bible seriously, one must be already mad.

*Aleister Crowley*

Invisible Pink Unicorns are beings of awesome mystical power. We know this because they manage to be invisible and pink at the same time. Like all religions, the Faith of the Invisible Pink Unicorns is based upon both logic and faith. We have faith that they are pink; we logically know that they are invisible because we can't see them.

*Steve Eley*

## IN THE NEWS

### **Man asks court to change his name to 'In God We Trust'**

**4 May 08**

ZION, Ill. (AP) - Steve Kreuzscher wants a judge to allow him to legally change his name. He wants to be known as "In God We Trust."

Kreuzscher says the new name would symbolize the help God gave him through tough times.

The 57-year-old man also told the (Arlington Heights) *Daily Herald* he's worried that atheists may succeed in removing the phrase "In God We Trust" from U.S. currency.

He recalls that the phrase "God Reigns" was removed from the Zion city seal in 1992 after courts deemed it unconstitutional. Zion was founded as a theocracy—by a sect that believed the Earth was flat.

The school bus driver and amateur artist in the northern Chicago suburb says he has filed a petition to change his name in Lake County Circuit Court.

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### **ODD SPOT *The Age***

**10 June 08**

An Israeli rabbi had declared giraffe to be kosher, although observant Jews are unlikely to clamour for such exotic food. It is considered ritually pure because it has a cloven hoof and chews the cud, and its milk form curds. "Indeed, the giraffe is kosher for eating," the rabbi said.





# HUMOUR

**H**ow many atheists does it take to change a light bulb?

Two. One to take out the old bulb and insert a new one; and another atheist to video-record the job so that fundamentalists cannot claim God did it!

**T**he Iranian Ambassador to the UN had just finished giving a speech, and walked out into the lobby where he met President Bush. They shook hands, and as they walked the Iranian said, ‘You know, I have just one question about what I have seen in America .

President Bush said, ‘Well, anything I can do to help you, I will.’

The Iranian whispered ‘My son watches this show ‘Star Trek’ and in it there is Chekhov who is Russian, Scotty who is Scottish, Uhura who is Black, Sulu who is Chinese, but no Arabs. My son is very upset and doesn’t understand why there aren’t any Iranians, Syrians or Iraqis on Star Trek.’

President Bush smiled, leaned toward the Iranian ambassador, and whispered back, ‘because it takes place in the future.’

**Frank and Ernest** **by Bob Thaves**



**A** Catholic priest, an Anglican vicar and a rabbi are discussing their own funerals.  
 “What,” asked the priest, “would you like to have the leader of your congregation say over your coffin?”  
 “Well,” answered the vicar, “I’d like to hear someone say that I played a straight bat in the game of life, that I bowled an honest ball and was a brave team leader. What about you, Father?”  
 “I would like it to be said that I was a saintly and comforting shepherd to my flock. What about you, rabbi?”  
 “Me? Over my coffin? Well, I’d like to hear someone shout: ‘Hey, look! He’s moving!’ “

Just recently, a Pew Research Center poll was released that contained not only a confirmation of what we already know, but some surprising new trends in religious beliefs here in the USA. Some of these trends may just turn out to be quite positive! This was a very large survey with a sampling of over 36,000 people. Many other surveys use a much smaller database: in the order of a thousand respondents or so.



A few of the headline numbers are what we have come to expect from our hi-tech, dark-age population: 92 per cent still believe in god or a universal spirit. Heaven is the place where good people go: 74 per cent; and hell, the destination of bad people like us who don't believe in *their* celestial friends, is believed in by 59 per cent. The fires of hell seem to be cooling somewhat here in the 21st century.

Prayer, perhaps the greatest energy wasting, useless activity of all time, is still engaged in by 81 per cent, who said they prayed at least a few times a month. Interestingly, only 62 per cent said that prayers are "answered at least sometime". I wonder if there were any follow-up questions to that one. I don't know if that question was asked just of the believers or the group as a whole, but what about the 38 per cent that *don't* feel that prayers are answered? Is the Christian god turning a deaf ear to his minions? Prayer is an important part of Christian doctrine, after all.

The surprising headline number to me was that 70 per cent responded that *many* religions could be truth faiths! Say what? That's right, this substantial majority thinks that their own faith is *not* the only path to eternal life. This change in attitude is a far cry from centuries past when Christian zealots would kill each other over trivia such as whether a person could be saved by good works, or by faith in God alone.

The poll also found that 25 per cent of mainline Protestants, Catholics, and Orthodox Christians actually had doubts about the existence of god, and 80 per cent of Catholics said that there was more than one true interpretation of their faith.

This next finding is really strange; I hope you are sitting down for this one: 21 per cent of respondents who identified themselves as atheists said they

believed in god or a "universal spirit" with 8 per cent "absolutely certain" of it. Obviously, these people aren't *really* atheists; their belief in god belies that claim. I'm sure, what we have here, are theists who happened to be mad at their god for some reason, so now claim not to believe in him. Of course, if any sort of tragedy befell them, they'd be the first to be begging for help

from JC and Company! It sure makes you wonder about the rest of this poll's findings when a claim such as this is made. Are any of you members of AFA believers in god? I'm sure the Editor would love to hear from you; I sure would. It would make a rather unique letter to the editor!

Meanwhile, back in the classroom, where the battle to indoctrinate students with creationism and other religious dogma is endless, we have an "eruption" in the state of Ohio. A story from the AP tells us about John Freshwater, a science teacher at Mount Vernon Middle School, who not only kept a Bible and other religious paraphernalia on his desk, but used a high frequency generator to burn the image of a cross on some student's arms in December. Freshwater told investigators he was just demonstrating the device on several students, and described the images as an "X," not a cross. Pictures, however, did show crosses. Freshwater has been under scrutiny for many years because of preaching his Christian beliefs to other teachers and students, and teaching creationism in the classroom.

In a subsequent TV interview on a local station and posted online, Freshwater dodged the reporter's direct questions regarding the allegations, claiming he had been given awards in the past, and that the burned cross was only an "X". He did, however, admit to keeping a Bible on his desk. A student's family has filed a federal lawsuit against Freshwater and the school district, claiming that the cross Freshwater burned on their child's arm remained there for several weeks.

I hope all of you are enjoying the Presidential election circus here in the US. Remember, with about two years down, there's just over four months to go.

Don't miss it!

*Bill*

# THE POWER OF GENTLE PERSUASION

By Kaye Maddison

The darkened hall reverberates to hundreds of young voices chanting in unison.

*Our God is an awesome God  
He reigns from Heaven above  
With wisdom and power and love  
Our God is an awesome God.*

Flashing lights illuminate a cluster of ardent choristers gathered at the front, raising their hands, turning young faces to the ceiling, shrieking the mantra, cavorting in ecstasy. Around the edges of the hall teachers keep a watchful eye on those not entering into the spirit of the occasion.

It is nine thirty in the morning. This is a school assembly. A few minutes later a speaker gives a moving sermon to the now seated students. Afterwards, he invites courageous students to stand, to show they are proud to be Christian.

*Stand if you believe.*

Many of the audience spring to their feet, and yet many do not. Up the back, a teacher quietly prompts the senior students to 'set an example'. A boy in year twelve refuses. He is given a stern directive to stand. He is a leader of the student body. But he does *not* believe. He is here to receive an education in an emotionally safe environment. Private schools are safe. That is why he is here. Private schools are safe.

Eventually, unable to withstand the harassment, this boy stands. As do many others equally ambivalent about these weekly assemblies, in which participation in mob hysteria demonstrates belief.

In time, most of the students become accustomed to the more extreme demands on pupils attending such a school. Regulations based on faith are so common; they begin to seem normal and soon cease to be noticed. Those who continue to feel uncomfortable with such religiosity have no recourse. We'd agreed upon entry to respect and participate in the religious element of our education, thus, our positions were uncertain.

In my seven years I heard hundreds of sermons, many of which contained words of inspiration and encouragement, but they were messages laced with tacit ridicule of the position unbelievers take. Such gentle preaching pounds only very slightly against a person's convictions, but the effect is cumulative, and its

efficacy should never be underestimated. Gentle pressures are the most persuasive, the most enduring, and certainly the most dangerous when exerted upon young minds.

I began to come away from those sermons weighed down with a sense of guilt. I sensed that I was that narrow-minded party alluded to in sermons. I was mistrustful of God. I was suspicious. I was loveless. All these attitudes, indirectly absorbed from school, started to become my own. I saw myself through their eyes, and it haunted me.

It is 2005; I am fifteen. I am inside the school hall. It is evening. The air is thick and the lights are psychedelic. It's late; I'm fatigued by hours of song and dance. A fevered delirium of joy has seized me. Religious belief is not a condition of entry to these extracurricular events. These late night 'concerts', for lack of a more apt description, are of course religiously oriented, and necessitate a certain frame of mind. I had never been to one before. This was my first time.

Before this night I had never felt genuine belief in God. Faith seemed illogical to me. I had come to regard this aspect of myself as a failing: a character flaw that indicated a mistrustful and suspicious person. I had told myself I was scientific, rational; yet self-loathing had grown within even the deepest and coolest of these thoughts. I had come to believe that faith was a precious and fragile thing; something to be cherished and sought after. The school had always presented faith thus, so it pained me horribly that I did not have it.

That night, however, an incredible psychological phenomenon would assail me for the first and only time in my life. As I danced and laughed, my religious ambivalence dissipated and a frightening emotional clarity suddenly struck me. Within an instant, I understood faith. I understood the need for God and how this need precipitated faith. I felt it, strongly, within my gut, my chest. I was finding it hard to breathe. It was so wrought with ramifications I felt physically nauseous. I entered a state of mind never before experienced.

With great trepidation I went outside, seeking isolation. Terrified, I turned my trembling face to the stars, closed my eyes, and prayed. Not as I had numerous times in the past. I prayed for real. My mind was drunk with giddy happiness and such a crushing sense of *certainty*. I closed my eyes and told the silence that I was ready to become a Christian. I was sick of being a lonely,

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suspicious misanthrope. I wanted a sense of comfort and warmth, and my mind no longer needed proof. I would feel the presence of the Lord and know that I would never be alone. I believed it with all my tremulous heart.

Concealed within a prickly bush, I waited, trying to breathe evenly. And I waited. I waited for a very long time. My hands were together; shaking. Somewhere deep inside my being I felt the stirring of deep panic because I was feeling nothing. Nothing at all.

When I opened my eyes I was confronted by a very large, very empty sky.

A student once casually asked me in class if I were an atheist. I didn't have the chance to answer. My frowning English teacher interceded, explaining to the offending student that one should not ask such a question of another in polite company. By his tone, one might have thought I'd been publicly asked if I were an alcoholic...or a criminal.

A relentless stream of dogma surrounded me, not only from compulsory Bible Studies, but even in discussions that kept occurring inappropriately in other classes such as English, History and Science. Prayers were held in the morning, at mealtimes, before exams, and in the afternoon. Scientific thought was accepted, insofar as spiritualism allowed. Darwinism was laughed at; evolution became a theorem of magic, grossly misrepresented as such. Students were to be 'soldiers of God', the school a vessel for His word. Secular teachers were not employed. Secular views were not heard. Prayer was compulsory. Despite never having become a believer, I must have voiced lunchtime prayer more than a hundred times. It did not occur to me to refuse.

Every compulsory sermon, prayer, and bible class became progressively more painful to endure. Eventually, a significant character change was wrought within me as the result of indirect vilification. I wasn't personally targeted by the school, but through their various unintentional machinations I came to believe I was a villainous element; something unholy that tainted the environment. Absorbing the rhetoric that associated unbelief with negative or derogatory states of mind takes a substantial toll over seven years.

I became scathing and sarcastic. I would glare and roll my eyes. I became cruel to my more passive Christian friends: the ones I knew would not fight back. I noticed my negative progression, but the kindness of teachers served only to increase a burgeoning bitterness, even prejudice. As a rational being this horrified me.

The school was, it must be said, clean and safe. There was virtually no bullying, no drugs, no fights. Private schools are emotionally sheltered environments as they are able to trade away problematic students. A sense of elitism is unavoidable; the school thinks highly of itself in relation to other schools.

Within my school another form of elitism was noticeable. I became aware of a subtle segregation. About a third of the students were members of religiously oriented societies outside school that included teachers, parents and students. So they all knew each other. They had a personal distinction as Christians that I, an anomalous entity, did not.

A large number of students were equivocal about the religious elements of our education, but either their desire to join the elite or the process of indoctrination reeled them in. A level of tacit resistance was visible through expressions of pain on a few faces during sermons, bible classes and the like. Like me, they felt alienated and to some extent offended, but we recognised our place and our attitudes left us in an untenable position. The school informs applicants that it supports religious values. Students enter with the knowledge that they are agreeing to be educated within such an environment. We felt that we had no right to feel subjugated. This feeling inhibited our voices.

One year, every day for five days we were subjected to a twenty-minute sermon entitled, "Open Your Eyes" In which the speaker passionately debunked those who "wander blindly into walls, too idiotic, too stubborn, always damaging themselves with their illogical ignorance." I felt personally attacked, and it genuinely hurt.

The situation became so intolerable I began investigating other ideologies to fill a void I'd once believed was designed for God. Like many disturbed adolescents, I turned to the Internet and discovered numerous sites that expressed my anger. But I desired a peaceful medium to reconcile my internal tempest. I arrived, inevitably perhaps, at Agnosticism, the Internet institution which satirically calls itself a Church. I admired its cool approach to the clash of 'belief' and 'unbelief'. I discussed many a philosophical issue on its forums. I considered myself agnostic. About a month later the school administrator blocked access. My screen now accused me of attempting to load an occult web page. I was too ashamed to approach the teacher and be indignant. I had neither the will nor the confidence. I faltered, and never attempted to access the site from school again.

I don't know what would have happened to me had I stayed there for my remaining two senior years. I am

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lucky enough to now attend a good public school: one that is intellectually oriented and secular. Since that transition, I've spent a great deal of time reflecting on the tumultuous effect that school had on me. I read *The God Delusion*, by Richard Dawkins, which calmed my mental unrest. His arguments brought my own psyche into focus for me, and clarified the ambiguities of doubt and fear and the need to believe. I owe incalculable thanks to his powers of articulation. My correspondence with David Nicholls of the Atheist Foundation helped me to explore the finer details of belief and provided the support needed to reach independent conclusions. Many students in my position did not have that luck. They did not know how to seek out that support.

It must be said in fairness, that religious private schools are not deliberately manipulating or alienating their students, yet their comprehensive and relentless process of indoctrination has that effect. If one's identity is inextricably entwined with scientific doubt and rationality, it will be gradually crushed in the religious 'vice' of such a place. In such a situation it's important that a rational non-believer does not acquiesce to this status of a non-entity, but takes up the identity of atheist without shame. They should not feel vilified or allow the school to inspire guilt, and a sense of evil. We are rational beings, and we have rights – especially the right to be respected.

Many kids find themselves within the religious private sector because there are no other reputable schools. Their parents are desperate to provide emotional safety for their children, and do not give much thought to the religious fanaticism that lurks in such places. They want a good education, and they will pay handsomely for it. Unfortunately, emphatically rational 'non-believing' students inevitably find themselves at odds with this environment, and yet see no option but to endure the subtle intimidation.

I allowed them to transform my understanding of 'unbelief'. They convinced me it was a fatal flaw. They did not perceive the damage this did to my self-esteem, and I know many of them would be horrified to read this. It's important that we regard Christianity as a respected belief, but not one superior to our own. They must come, likewise, to respect the integrity of those who lack 'faith', understand it is not a character flaw, and realise how difficult it is to reconcile faith and reason as an adolescent.

Secular students at religious schools should be proud of their candid insights; stand up for their 'unbelief' and, importantly, shouldn't be afraid to abstain from certain activities. Religious schools do not have a right to denigrate atheism, or impose their religion. 'Doubt' is the counterpart of 'faith' - and equally precious. All of us should have the freedom to choose either one.

## Worth fighting for

*The Age* 27 June 08

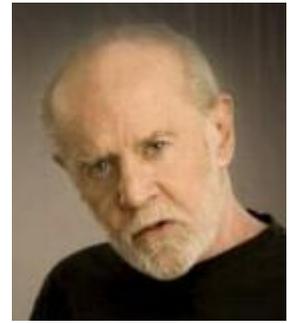
The major legacy of the Howard government is indeed an enormous boost to faith-based schools, as Michael Gawenda suggests (Comment & Debate, 26/6). He also correctly states that there is no constitutional separation of church and state in Australia. This was determined by a judgement of the High Court in 1982.

Gawenda concludes that "the notion that a secular liberal democracy is underpinned by a free and universal secular education for all children ... is now well and truly dead in Australia". This notion has certainly been abandoned by all major political parties but it is not dead. It is a notion that is worth fighting for because it is now more relevant than ever.

Secular values are derided by those with a religious agenda but they remain the basis of a harmonious, non-sectarian society. Such values transcend any religion and are based on the universal principles of compassion, honesty, freedom and justice. These values will never die but they must be defended.

**John L. Perkins**  
**President**  
**Secular Party of Australia**  
**Melbourne**

# VALE GEORGE CARLIN



United States comedian, satirist and free speech activist George Carlin, died on 22 June 08 from heart failure. He was aged 71.

Earlier this year, he was named the winner of the Mark Twain Prize for American Humor.

## QUOTES

I would never want to be a member of a group whose symbol was a guy nailed to two pieces of wood.

I'm completely in favour of the separation of Church and State. My idea is that these two institutions screw us up enough on their own, so both of them together is certain death.

Religion easily has the greatest bullshit story ever told. Think about it, religion has actually convinced people that there's an INVISIBLE MAN...LIVING IN THE SKY...who watches every thing you do, every minute of every day. And the invisible man has a list of ten special things that he does not want you to do. And if you do any of these ten things, he has a special place full of fire and smoke and burning and torture and anguish where he will send you to live and suffer and burn and choke and scream and cry for ever and ever 'til the end of time...BUT HE LOVES YOU.

If this is the best God can do, I'm not impressed.

I've begun worshipping the sun for a number of reasons. First of all, unlike some other gods I could mention, I can see the sun. It's there for me every day. And the things it brings me are quite apparent all the time: heat, light, food, a lovely day. There's no mystery, no one asks for money, I don't have to dress up, and there's no boring pageantry. And interestingly enough, I have found that the prayers I offer to the sun and the prayers I formerly offered to God are all answered at about the same 50-percent rate.

I think it's the duty of the comedian to find out where the line is drawn and cross it deliberately.

## ...AND ANOTHER THING *The Age*, 24 - 25 June 08

George Bush has said, I believe God wants me to be President." Now Robert Mugabe says god appointed him and only God will remove him. Just whose side is God on?

**Chris Burgess**  
**St Kilda**

God gave Robert Mugabe the presidency of Zimbabwe. George Bush invaded Iraq on God's request. Iran's President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, got a message from God to obliterate Israel. Would the real God please stand up?

**Enzo Balbinot**  
**North Balwyn**



## TOM PAINE AWARD FOR EXEMPLARY SERVICE TO HUMANITY

15 July 08

The recipient of the Tom Paine Award, chosen by the Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc Committee, is in recognition for outstanding promotion of ideals conducive to human contentment and survivability.

The AFA finds no persons more fitting in stature and similitude of character, enough to receive this honour in common, than *The Chaser* team.

Various world governments have proclaimed rhetorical wars on terrorism, drugs, poverty, hunger etc. The war on terrorism and drugs in particular have been marketed to frighten populations into accepting lavish spending of money and to render citizens compliant to decrees encroaching on civil liberties and human rights. The immensity of death, injury, destruction and harm produced by these so-called wars outweighs considerably alleged benefit to any society inflicted by them.

*The Chaser* team, seizing the moment, has become a symbol of resistance to the stupidity involved by non-selectively declaring *War on Everything*. The brilliance of their method has brought into the limelight how power-crazed self-righteous politicians can delude themselves and then attempt to fool the public. *The Chasers* have given democracy a deserved kick up the bum with a constant reminder of the fragility of the system.

Not many will ever forget the APEC Summit stunt, where in a fake motorcade they managed to slip past the massive security which had been set up in Sydney for the event. There is nothing so sweet as making the Government and their bureaucracies made to look like buffoons! Long may *The Chasers* reign!

If it were possible for Tom Paine to comment on this award, he would undoubtedly say; "You have all performed above and beyond the call of duty, you have done well. You have shewn that my life was more than worthwhile."



Society in every state is a blessing, but government, even in its best stage, is but a necessary evil; in its worst state an intolerable one.

To argue with a person who has renounced the use of reason is like administering medicine to the dead.

- Thomas Paine (1737 - 1809)

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