

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
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All contributions are subject to Editorial approval.

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

When I was a young lad, I joined the local Scouts organisation as a Cub. It was good fun. I got to wear a nice uniform, learned how to tie knots and do other useful things. Mum and Dad made sure I had enough money in my pocket to buy a chocolate bar on the way home. All my memories of those days are good. It therefore came as a shock to me recently to discover that

the Scouts have a basis in religious belief.

In 'Heretical Happenings', David outlined the situation that led to the AFA becoming aware of the religious nature of Scouts Australia, and the ensuing discrimination.

After reading the email from the unhappy parents of a 10-year old, the AFA did some investigating. Dr. Warwick Bateman OAM, Assistant Chief Commissioner of Scouts Australia, informed the AFA that it is a 'faith-based' organisation and the obligation for Scouts is the following. "While we do not require members to belong to any particular religion we insist that they have a faith, a **belief in God** (*One who is a Supreme Being - a Creator - a Ruler of the Universe*).

The parents explained the particular incident which prompted this email as follows. At the end of each Cub Scout meeting the leader asks the pack to take off their hats, hold them on their hearts and to say the Lord's Prayer. All of the Cubs then say the 'Cub prayer' or 'Cub Promise'. This particular 10-year-old boy didn't remove his cap on the instruction of the leader and was quickly asked if he had a problem with that. He replied, "I don't believe in God so I don't pray". The leader then said he was to remove the cap and that although he had a right to his beliefs he should say the words, as it would not hurt him. He followed the instruction. However, his parents are concerned about his future in the Cubs and Scouts as he enjoys the activity but they do not want him to sacrifice his principles. Obviously, the parents are very proud of their son for his defiance in the face of harassment from the 'authorities'.

I have to admit that before I became aware of this incident I had no idea that the Scouts are a faith-based organisation. (If there was any praying when I was in the Cubs then I have forgotten it, or possibly I was thinking about that chocolate bar while it was going on). I would not be surprised if there are many parents with children in the Cubs or Scouts who are unaware of the religious element. Quite likely many other atheist or non-religious parents just tolerate this aspect, if they know of it at all. They may be more concerned that their kids don't miss out on something which is, after all, very good for their development.

There are two interesting aspects of the policy of The Scout Association of Australia. One is that they don't care *which* god it is that their young members believe in. As long as the children profess a belief (or at least give the impression of belief by mouthing the words) in a supernatural being then that is enough. The second, as quoted from official documentation by David in 'Heretical Happenings', is that the prayer can be "just a rote saying without meaning or real understanding", which makes a bit of a mockery out of the first one. The pack leader who insisted on the recitation of The Lord's Prayer would seem to be in breach of the first of these since it is very specific to one religion and one supernatural being.

The AFA contacted both the Federal Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission and the NSW Anti-Discrimination Board, but as Scouts Australia is a non-profit volunteer organisation that does not involve paid employment, neither organisation was able to assist.

For the parents of this particular boy it is a difficult dilemma. However, their son has shown great courage to stand up for himself, and I am sure he will survive into adulthood without succumbing to this or any other attempt at religious indoctrination. Many others will not.

Dennis

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Dear Lee,

I found Kaye Maddison's "The Power of Gentle Persuasion" (THE AUSTRALIAN ATHEIST July-Aug 08) very moving and was impressed by the mature and independent thinking of one so young.

Kaye's subject, of private schools of religious persuasion and their pernicious influence, has occupied my thoughts a great deal in recent years. Why so? Because, while I am an atheist, two of my grandchildren attended one of these schools for all of their secondary education years.

I must say at the outset that, religion apart, the school in question had many admirable qualities – the high standard of its (secular) teaching (as evidenced by public examination results), its spirit of community and caring for one another, and the absence of drugs, bullying and other excessive behaviour. A couple of examples will illustrate the point.

In one of the school's magazines I read an article by a parent on why she had decided to send her children to this school rather than the local public school. The lady was a dentist who had her consulting rooms nearby. Among her patients were many local school children. She said that it had been her observation over several years that most of her young patients who attended the private school were better behaved, and had better manners and speech than their public-school counterparts.

Another example: when my granddaughter was in her matriculation year she became seriously ill with a painful and incapacitating illness that lasted for months. The school was absolutely marvellous. Teachers and classmates kept in regular touch with her by phone, email and visits. She was able to continue her studies at home by means of the internet and the generosity of spirit of her teachers. Had this not been forthcoming I am sure she would have given up. As it was, the school's support coupled with her determination resulted in her achieving a high mark in her matric results. (Thankfully she is now well again and in her second year at university.)

In all honesty I have to say that I can understand the dilemma faced by parents today who want the best education possible for their children. As Kaye has pointed out, many of these private schools are "clean and safe . . . emotionally sheltered environments" with "virtually no bullying, no drugs, no fights." That is why many parents who are not even particularly religious choose to send their children to private rather than public schools, and pay the price for doing so.

Unfortunately, there is a flip side to all this. In another of my grandchildren's school magazines (liberally laced with religion) was an article written by my own grandson. It was in the form of a prayer in which he confessed, in effect, that to his way of thinking evolution presented a more rational explanation than the creationism taught at his school. However, he believed that what he was being taught at school must be right and so he prayed that God would help him to believe what the school said he should believe rather than what his independent thinking told him was rational! I could have wept. This is an example of the pernicious effect that private schools are having on the minds of our impressionable young people.

Kaye is right when she says, "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." The reality is, however, that the level of maturity and critical thinking that is Kaye's is a rare commodity in young people of school-going age – that is just a fact of life and a fact that private schools exploit.

As I said before, I do understand the dilemma faced by parents today who want the best education possible for their children. What is the answer? I don't know. Perhaps someone can enlighten me.

Thank you Kaye for a thoughtful and thought-provoking article.

Barry

To whom it may concern,

I was raised as one of Jehovah's Witnesses and remained a devout follower until the age of 19. I am now 23, and have spent the last four years slowly unlearning the propaganda I was fed since before I could talk.

In my search for truth I have come to realise that the 'proof' I was offered for the existence of God and the accuracy of the bible cannot hold up to unbiased scientific and logical scrutiny. I have now proved to myself the huge improbability of God's existence, and consider myself an atheist. As you can imagine this didn't go down well with my local congregation. I have been socially cut off by former friends, and even some family members, but this only demonstrates to me the way in which religious organisations seek to manipulate and control their members.

I recently discovered the *Atheist Foundation of Australia* and I would very much like to find out more information about your organisation. I think it is very important for atheists to unite through organisations such as yours. The influence of religion is incredible, and surprisingly it seems to be getting stronger. In my opinion it is only through such unity that we can have the political impact needed to keep religions power in check.

Regards
Cody

Hello Cody,

Thanks for your email and the reflections concerning your past involvement with religion. That you have escaped the mental entrapment of indoctrination from the time of your birth is indeed a lucky circumstance. As you would well know, many others never achieve this breaking with the past.

You are correct in that atheists must unite and stop the brainwashing cycle of religions, not just Jehovah's Witnesses, but also all faiths relying on providing children with only a one-sided story.

The problem with atheists uniting is that most do not have the experiences of a heavy religious upbringing and even if they have, the joy of ridding it from their lives tends to stop further action from happening. Still, there is a large enough body of atheists from all over the world, that in their unity, are making huge



differences, if we judge social changes in the proper light of generational transformation to a saner way of thinking about reality.

It is a sad consequence that former friends and family reject such a move as you have made and I advise that being annoyed at them is not the way to go. As you were once a victim, they still are and it is therefore up to you to endure their anger, dislike or even hatred. This is a cost associated with apostasy but it is small compared to the benefits of now having a free mind.

I wish you well.

The kindest of regards,

David

David Nicholls
President
Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc

Editor's Note

Cody was sent an Associate Member Magazine via email. He has since become a fully paid up member of the AFA.

Welcome Cody!

Gah how can i stop being mad at atheists? i don't hate them because they don't believe in god it's because they tend to be the biggest assholes on the planet. please help me. honestly if it's all true, no morality or absolutes. then can i just kill all humans?

Dear Tobias,

My name is Nigel and I will reply to your questions about anger, atheists and killing people.

How can you stop being "mad at atheists"? There is probably no quick fix to this problem, because I suspect you get angry rather readily with various groups of people, and not just atheists. Time often

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helps, however, as it can gradually bring experience, insight and maturity. “With age cometh wisdom,” as the saying goes. Okay: there are exceptions — not everyone grows old gracefully.

I am not sure what constitutes being “*the biggest assholes on the planet*” in your view. Not believing in God may be what defines atheists, but it seems that this, in itself, is not what upsets you. If an isolated person hates a group of people intensely, the hatred can — I should warn you — be harmful for the hater: can raise blood pressure and lower the immune system. If a group of people share a common hatred, then the group can be harmful: violent or even murderous to those they hate. Hating, like high explosives, can be very dangerous if not regulated and controlled.

“*If it’s all true, no morality or absolutes, then can I just kill all humans?*” First, there are two meanings to “can”. It may be physically possible for you to kill one or two people, but as there are about 6,500 million human beings on this planet, I don’t fancy your chances of working your way through all of them; and you are going to be rather lonely if you don’t kill yourself last of all.

The other meaning is *should* you just kill all humans? This, according to you, depends on “if” there is “no morality or absolutes”. I am not sure about absolutes, but moral codes are a feature of all human societies, and almost all of them frown on killing innocent human beings. There are a few people whose moral capacities are stunted, and they are termed psychopaths or sociopaths, and can be manipulative or downright dangerous. Even psychopaths tend to be wary and want to avoid being caught. I am not aware that there is any correlation between being a psychopath and either believing or disbelieving in God.

The notion that only those with a religion can be moral is, of course, arrant nonsense. Moral codes, and the capacity for making ethical judgements, are a consequence or attribute of our being social animals.

Moral codes may, of course, vary a bit from religion to

religion and from culture to culture: Quakers disapprove of violence and waging war; Hindus disapprove of killing cows; Jains disapprove of killing almost everything; Jews and Muslims have special dietary rules; Jews and Muslims permit divorce, Catholics don’t. Attitudes to alcohol and gambling are good examples here too.

I suggest you do not kill anyone for now, and raise this question again in twenty years’ time — *if* by then you really need to.

With good wishes,

Nigel
Public Relations Team
Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc

Hello

I read Richard Dawkins’ *The God Delusion* recently and found it refreshing and liberating, and he cited your organization as one of the better ones globally .

I also read your online essay on Hell and appreciated the information regarding the psychological damage organized religion does to children—not that we don’t have enough evidence already. My wife is a clinical psychologist and can attest to the harm it has caused people trying to free themselves from absolutist regions, especially Southern Baptism, which is pernicious and incredibly powerful politically.

A long-time secular humanist who has attended the liberal United Church of Christ for years, I find myself leaning toward atheism as a release from all the superstitious nonsense still governing America.

Thank you for your work.

Tom
Charlotte,
North Carolina

HOBART Meetup



Atheist Foundation member Daniel Hulme is organising an *Atheists Meetup* in Hobart. If you would like to meet fellow atheists for a casual get together, call or email Daniel. Details of the first meeting are as follows:

Where: Trade Hotel corner of Barrack & Collins Streets, Hobart

When: Monday, 29 September 2008

Time: 6 pm

Contact: Daniel Hulme **Email:** Daniel.hulme@bigpond.com **Phone:** 0408 492 440

HERETICAL HAPPENINGS

Keeping you in the know

Greetings,

Even though during the Pontiff's visit, Catholic World Youth Day events grabbed the attention of the media, it was a remarkably short-lived interest. Two weeks after the Pope ascended back into the Vatican, religious topics in the press diminished considerably. Many atheists found the lead up to the week of faith, the actual days of heightened pilgrim ecstasy and the short afterglow of winding down, to be unbearable. At the time, it seemed that the spectacle would last forever.

The placement in various papers by the AFA of 'The Pied Piper of Vatican' cartoon, added to public opposition to governments spending an enormous amount of taxpayer money on superstition and in doing so, disrupting Australia's largest city. The announcement of arbitrary laws giving police and authorised persons powers infringing on civil liberties prompted the AFA to join the NoToPope Coalition. The Coalition was comprised of disparate organisations, some, such as the Raelians holding views not consistent with reality. However, even those with 'weird' ideas have a right to express peaceably their point of view without undemocratic and unnecessary officially sanctioned harassment.

The media showed a greater interest than normal in the opinion of atheists although nothing compared to the voluminous airtime and tabloid pages spent on the main event. Even so, the AFA contributed to around a dozen or so Internet style magazine interviews, television spots and live radio. At the height of the holy visit, the AFA head office computers and phones went into near meltdown because of the sudden influx of inquires, suggestions and frustrations resulting from the religious fervour.

Thanks to NSW AFA members, Hannah Taylor and Alan Conradi, the workload was somewhat shared. You may read about Hannah's and Alan's experiences with the media on pages 9-11 and 12-14. Both performed professionally and intelligently, giving an endearing, uplifting, positive and human face to atheism. These bright young people holding firm and rational ideas about existence could only impress the discerning listener and viewer. My guess is that even some religious folk may have been surprised at their assertiveness in clarifying atheist ideas with such confidence. Well done, and thank you.

On a lighter note, the July AFA Committee of Management meeting had the pleasure of our own Pope Jac (Picture Page 16). Pope Jac entered the meeting room when all were seated and ready to get down to the business of the day. Mouths hung open, followed by raucous laughter bursting forth, enveloping the room after all present overcame the initial unplanned shock of seeing such a convincing performance by Pope Jac. Many blessing, incantations and the occasional infallible words made the gathering a very entertaining occasion. Passers by, unsure if the religious dignitary was the actual Pope or some other high ecclesiastical dignitary, looked upon the saintly scene in amazed disbelief. Good one, Pope Jac (aka AFA member Jac), you may have missed your real calling.

The AFA has received information that Scouts Australia is discriminating on religious grounds. Apparently, as they are a non-profit volunteer organisation, there are no laws or regulations in place for redress. The point of concern is the 'Scouts Promise' or 'Scouts Prayer', a short mandatory recited verse at Scout meetings. There are two versions.

On my honour
I promise that I will do my best
To do my duty to my God, and
To the Queen of Australia
To help other people, and
To live by the Scout Law

On my honour
I promise that I will do my best
To do my duty to my God, and
To Australia
To help other people, and
To live by the Scout Law

A complaint to the AFA by parents of a child who is a Cub Scout was that it is not only the 'Scouts Promise', which offends their atheistic stance, but in his chapter, their son has to say the Lord's Prayer. This would be an

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unacceptable point for parents of Jewish, Islamic and Buddhist religions as well as for parents with an atheist stance. The scouting movement is numerically on a downward slide in Australia. It would seem wise for it to be an inclusive organisation in a multi-faith and unchurched population.

On contacting Scouts Australia (NSW), the AFA received an official document from Dr Warwick Bateman OAM Assistant Chief Commissioner. An extract from the document states:

“Prayers should be a regular part of every meeting. The Scout Prayer is one that conforms to the inter-faith requirements **but can be just a rote saying without meaning or real understanding.**” (My emphasis)

The hypocrisy here should be obvious. It is akin to same-sex oriented people in the USA armed forces with the ‘Don’t tell and we won’t ask’ policy. I am reasonably sure that Australians in the main do not know the Scouts are a Christian faith-based club.

If AFA members have had experience with the religious content in this otherwise worthwhile and character forming association, we would like to hear about it as we intend to pursue the matter further. Maybe journalists, Catherine Deveny (The Age) and Phillip Adams (The Australian) might be interested. After all, it was they along with a very few others who were notable exceptions in exposing the darker underbelly of the RC Church, with damning articles, coinciding with the visit by the Pope.

On 11 August 08, members Australia-wide received an email message asking for expressions of interest in joining the AFA Cyber-Committee. There remain a few places still not filled. One needs only to be an ‘average atheist’ to apply. It involves one or so hours every two months, in the comfort of your own home with no further requirement to do anything else. If it eventuates that it is not your cup of tea, there is no obligation whatsoever to continue. Why not give it a go? You may be pleasantly surprised to find how enjoyable and informative the meetings are.

Until we meet again,

David



Becoming a young Atheist defender

By Hannah Taylor

I’m used to defending atheism privately, but after responding to a request from the *Atheist Foundation of Australia* (AFA) for young atheists prepared to be interviewed by a journalist from Triple J, I suddenly became a “public figure”. The interview would be for Triple J’s “Belief Week”; part of their current affairs show *Hack*. Before the program I was telephoned by the journalist and asked about my atheism and whether I belonged to a group of atheists that met socially. I don’t, but I am a member of the AFA, as well as several *Facebook* groups such as Australian Atheists. When I

told him I was going to Sydney that week to attend the Australian National Secular Association (ANSA) conference in Sydney. He said he would try to interview me there.

The night before my departure for Sydney, David (AFA president) rang to ask if I could speak on a SBS *Alchemy* radio show in Sydney the following evening. Not exactly fresh after a day-long train trip, I just made it on time to SBS in St Leonard’s for a forum about faith called “Faith to Face”. There were many people, microphones — and cameras! I’d had no idea what I was getting myself into: thanks David and Lee!!

Anyway, I thought that at least everyone could see that despite being an atheist and humanist I look normal, have human form (no horns) and am happy, smiling and reasonably bright. The “Faiths” at the forum were represented by a young Scientologist, a Catholic, a Baha’i, a non-practising Jew, a Kirat (from Nepal, an indigenous religion close to nature with Hindu and Buddhist influences), and a very spiritual non-practising Jewish woman accompanied by a Muslim man — both from an aid organisation in Jerusalem.

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Not being a live broadcast, the interview or forum went on for quite some time, but I didn't get to say much, probably because I was extremely nervous as it was my first such interview, and I was so inexperienced. In the edited program that went to air on *Alchemy* Radio and was made available via the SBS website, you don't see or hear much of me at all. The first question I get to answer is "What is wrong with religion?" Instead of getting straight to the point I stumbled; apologised to the others, and that was it! The whole point of my argument had been edited out! A great pity as I'd said that if anyone adhered strictly to the requirements of most religions, they'd be compelled to act immorally. Whilst many religious people are basically good (motivated by their fear of Hell?) the logical implications of unquestioning faith in the Jewish, Christian and Muslim God and obedience to religious scriptures are abhorrent and catastrophic – which history attests!

Belief in God's forgiveness is, in fact, a disincentive for individuals to act morally, because one simply has to believe or accept that Jesus is God and repent on one's deathbed to be "saved" and go to Heaven, not Hell. But it isn't only the certainty of forgiveness that can lead the faithful into evil acts; the Torah, Bible and Koran all depict a cruel and unjust God who commands and permits us to be cruel and unjust to others. When faced with this fact, religious people usually counter with arguments such as: "You're not supposed to interpret the text" literally"; or, "You should choose the good teachings and ignore the bad" (using our "God-given" reason to do so, presumably;) or they state categorically that there is no evil in the text (in which case they obviously haven't read it) or: "God works in mysterious ways and evil is necessary when dealing with humans if we want to create the kingdom of heaven on earth."

The spiritual non-practising Jewish woman took the first argument, insisting that these texts were not supposed to be taken literally. (An opinion that fundamentalists of all religions would violently dispute). Why they are there at all, I wonder, if they're not supposed to be taken literally? Doesn't the ambiguity cause far greater suffering than the good that is sometimes associated with religion? This is also a problem when secular laws are poorly drafted; people soon find ways around them, judges make different interpretations, and lawyers find loopholes so that society might be better off without these laws. The non-practising Jewish man explained that he does not practice his religion for these

very reasons: the Torah would require immoral action on the part of its adherents.

The young Catholic man then said, without admitting there was any evil or immorality in the Bible, that it was our God-given reason that allowed us to interpret the texts as commands to do good. At the same time he implied that it was also this ability to rationalise that led Christians to their faith. He also implied that the non-religious were moral relativists (a common misconception). Unfortunately, I didn't get a chance to respond. If I had I would have said something like the following:

The religious might find their own reasons (however unreasonable) for having faith in God, but an action is either rational or it is not, and a belief in a supernatural being is NOT rational. Science does not support religious belief. Scientific conclusions are based on evidence and

therefore it is rational to align one's world view with the findings of science, and irrational to align one's world view with a religion that contradicts it. That is why one must have faith to believe in God.

Most atheists find the idea of moral relativism abhorrent because it allows others to attempt to justify unjust practices and violations of human rights, (e.g. female genital mutilation), because it is part of their cultural heritage or religious morality. Moral relativism is not an attribute of atheism. Atheists believe that morality can be achieved through reason, and this reason would direct us towards a universal code of morality, something like that which is embodied in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It is ignorance, thoughtlessness and plain mischief to continue to perpetuate such misconceptions about atheists. Also on this topic, because atheists hold that morality is determinable without God, this means we are each individually responsible for our part in the good and bad in the world and therefore we each have to do something about it. This inherent "goodness" that atheists believe human beings have can be explained by science and evolution as well: for it's in our own best interests to treat each other fairly, demand justice, contribute to the community and help the needy. If we do something wrong, we don't have to fear God's wrath, but we would be

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*contributing to a world that we don't want
(perhaps even a moral relativist one).*

That was not the only time I wasn't given the opportunity to respond. But at least the host, Mariam, remembered to include me by adding "or the lack thereof" or words to that effect, whenever she mentioned our "faiths". However, I could have kicked myself when I heard myself answer the question about life after death – where I fail to point out to Mariam the fact that as an atheist, I don't believe we have a spirit that lives on after death (or at least not one that feels any pleasure or pain). Then I could have gone on to mention the whole ashes to ashes, dust to dust thing; why would I fear death if I'm only going back to where I came from – the state I was in for billions of years before I was born? This is to me, and to all the atheists I know, what gives life such deep intense beauty and meaning.

Anyway, I get barely another word in before the interview ends with the Scientologist implying that the non-religious are inherently selfish and materialistic because they do not have a faith in a God. Interview over; full stop. I was supposed to come on next and blow that horrendous (yet oh so common) assertion (based on a confusion between philosophical materialism and materialism in the sense of preoccupation with material possessions, comforts and perhaps wealth) out of the water. Damn it! I had to laugh though, because whilst there is no evidence to suggest that the non-religious are any more selfish or materialistic than anyone else (and there is in fact evidence to the contrary), there *is* evidence to suggest that many churches are greedy, selfish and materialistic (and the Church of Scientology was recently on the front cover of *Time* for being just that!).

It was a great experience nevertheless, and I learnt a lot. All the way back home on the train, I wrote notes to myself, mostly better or clearer and more concise answers to some of the questions I was asked at the SBS interview, such as: "Offer some words of inspiration to young people from an atheist/humanist world view".

Michael, the journalist from Triple J, couldn't make it to the ANSA, but was able to interview me over the phone on Tuesday 15 July. The interview went for over 20 minutes instead of the intended 10. It was also quite intense with Michael firing question after question at me, but I was able to answer with as much confidence as he asked them. I tuned into *Hack* that evening at 5:30 p.m. and, sure enough, on I came. I cringed when I realised that, of all the questions I'd answered, the only

one Michael had chosen to broadcast was when he'd asked for some examples of religion causing violent conflicts in the world today. This had taken me by surprise. (I guess I thought it was obvious.)

So away I went, mentioning Islamic Extremism and the American Administration's distinctly Christian "crusade": the War on Terror (after all, God speaks through Bush and gives him instructions about what to do). Well, I suppose it's a good thing I never wanted to travel to America! Other examples of religion causing conflict or violence in the world today would include Israel and Palestine and other Middle Eastern countries, Hindus versus Muslims in India, China's oppression and violence towards the Buddhists of Tibet, extremist Buddhist attacks in Sri Lanka, attacks by Christian fundamentalists against (or murdering of) doctors performing abortions in the US, child sexual abuse, child marriage, violence towards homosexuals and domestic violence, rape in marriage and rape as a weapon of war.

Michael had me acknowledge, of course, that there are other forces at work, but I should have added that religion does indeed supply the underlying incentive ("The New Wars of Religion", *The Economist*, 01 Nov 07). This underlying viciousness stems from the fundamental problem of religion: that it breeds intolerance because it creates the "saved" and the "unsaved", the "clean" and the "unclean", the infidels and the chosen ones – concepts which are taught relentlessly to children until they are brainwashed; really believing they are the clean and others the unclean. How is it that a child can be taught that he or she is superior to others simply because of that child's beliefs? How is it that children can be taught that their atheist friends will not be joining them in heaven (and consequently burning in Hell) simply because of their lack of belief? How is it that a grown person can believe that no matter how much good their atheist acquaintance does for the community or society, simply because that person does not believe in something that is hard to believe, or is homosexual, that this person is condemned to the depths of Hell? How is it that that same person can believe that all a paedophile (for example) has to do is ask for forgiveness and believe Jesus is the son of God to get a ticket to Heaven? Even if I discovered that sort of God did exist, I would still choose not to worship him. I didn't take it that far in the interview, at least on air, but my answer to Michael's final question when I suggest that what we all need to do is focus on what we have in common rather than our differences, atheists included, has been heard by everyone who tuned in. It's a positive message, but I'm beginning to wonder if even that simple action is not possible.

Representing the godless youth

By Alan Conradi



There's been a lot of attention given to the different religious groups, especially during the recent Catholic perversion of taxpayer's money dubbed "World Youth Day". We have seen all kinds of different religions represented in the media, but there hasn't been much time given to nonbelief. This is why, when I received an email from the AFA asking for a young person in Sydney to represent atheism on a religious panel, I thought it was an opportunity too good to pass up. The email explained that News.com were going to be holding a youth panel on religion and were hoping to get an atheist representative. I wrote back straight away.

David Nicholls called me soon after I replied to the email and we spoke for a while about my positions on the various topics likely to arise, the basis of my atheism, the kinds of books I read etc. In a day or two, I was called back and told that the AFA was happy to have me as the atheistic representative on the forum. I was excited, while at the same time being worried about the possibility of stuffing it up and making atheism look bad.

Preparation

I got in contact with News.com and was basically given the same information that was in the original email. What I did pick up from my initial conversations with the reporter was a seeming lack of bias. When discussing my view of religion, she seemed genuinely interested and I got the impression that they were going to represent my views fairly. I was still very aware of the possibility of being misrepresented, especially in view of the recent "Expelled" controversy where Richard Dawkins, PZ Myers, Eugenie Scott and other prominent advocates for secularism were the victims of biased editing from Ben Stein's intelligent design entourage.

So I began to prepare myself for the event. Some of the

books that I read during this time include *The Atheist Universe*, by David Mills; *God is not Great*, by Christopher Hitchens; David Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*; and Sam Harris's *Letter to a Christian Nation*. I found that "The Atheist Experience" podcast was great for learning how to discuss atheism and I learnt a lot about interview techniques from this and other podcasts. The internet was also a great source of information pertaining to the "big questions", like stem cell research, abortion, sex before marriage, Big Bang and evolution theories. I practiced defending my positions by engaging in discussions with family, friends and members of the various rational thinking groups that I belong to.

On 21 April, I received an email from the News.com reporter saying that the format was to be changed from a debate to individual interviews that would be spliced together. The reason for this change of format was because the videos for the news site were to be no longer than around three minutes each and a debate would not work in such a format. This was a shame, as I was looking forward to getting into a bit of a debate, but it was still a good chance to dispel a few myths about atheism and show that we aren't a rabble of baby-eating Satan worshippers.

We were lucky to get the questions ahead of time, which allowed me to draft out my answers and send them to the AFA to see if I was on the right track. Once I had my answers, had read up on a variety of different topics, and had a few practice discussions with people, I felt that I was ready to do the interview.

The interview

When I arrived at the News.com studio, I was quite nervous. I was taken to a meeting room and chatted with the reporter while she set up her equipment. She seemed genuinely interested in atheism, especially the social aspect and where atheists get their information from. As the interview progressed, we deviated from the set questions quite a bit. I was asked about why science is important to atheists, whether it is right to question people's beliefs and a great deal about (Catholic) World Youth Day. I also explained the differences between atheism and agnosticism, tried to dispel the myths about atheism being related to satanism, anarchism, narcissism, etc. I also spoke about how atheism addresses only a lack of belief in gods, meaning that there is no atheistic dogma and that each atheist subscribes to his or her own moral and ethical codes, usually based on a social exchange or humanistic model. I found that once the initial butterflies had been overcome, the 45 minutes flew by. By the end, it felt much more like a natural

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conversation than an interview.

I left the studio feeling excited, but all the way home, I was thinking about my answers to the questions and the things I could have said better or should have made clearer. I was consoled by the idea that it was great just to have a representative for atheism in the interviews and if some good points were made it would be a bonus.

The photo shoot

A few weeks after the interview, all of the participants attended a photo shoot for the online promotion of the clips. It was interesting meeting the other participants, as I wasn't sure who I'd been up against to this point. I had expected that the religious representatives would be hard-edged, well spoken, thoroughly indoctrinated, preacher types, trained in public speaking. Though when I did meet them I found that my fears were unwarranted. They were all fairly normal young people, with no particularly obvious religiousness about them. The Muslim, Hindu and Catholic were there when I arrived.

While we waited for the others, we chatted a bit, introducing ourselves and which religion we represented. I got talking to the Catholic about World Youth Day, which was a good discussion, but we had to agree to disagree. The most interesting of the participants was the Buddhist, who identified as an atheist and fully supported evolution. We spoke about our beliefs, I helped him understand what positive atheism is and the difference between atheism and agnosticism; he explained reincarnation and the core beliefs of Buddhism to me. What was most interesting was that he said that his spiritual belief is fully accepting of the scientific consensus on any issue, which I wasn't entirely convinced about.

During the photo shoot, the Muslim announced that he was not permitted by his beliefs to touch a woman. There were a couple of group photos where we all had to factor this in to our positioning and during a shot where we all had our hands on top of one another's the Jewish girl unknowingly put her hand in his, and he quickly withdrew his hand as if he'd been burned.

There was very little animosity between the participants and a general air of acceptance and tolerance between all of us. Once each person's faith was whittled down to its core beliefs it seemed that everyone there subscribed to a basically humanistic model, to which the believers applied a variety of unnecessary additions.

The online clips

The first video released for the "Faith off" was a teaser promo. It highlighted some of the more controversial positions, such as banning sex before marriage, God as a creator and reincarnation. My quote was "Heaven and hell are fictitious places", after which I was more comfortable that my words wouldn't be used out of context.

The full set of clips was released soon afterwards, covering evolution, homosexuality, life after death, World Youth Day and fitting in. Throughout the clips, the common religious positions are supported: sex before marriage is wrong, homosexuality is wrong, evolution is wrong, but their religion is right when it comes to theories of an afterlife, or promoting religion. The Buddhist had some interesting points to make about World Youth Day, evolution and sexual restriction, so I can't claim to be the only source of reason, but I was hoping that some of the religious representatives would have tried to be a bit more progressive. As it happened, the religious views tended to seem quite out of touch with a modern society that is generally permissive of the things that they were prohibiting.

I enjoyed a good response to the release of the videos, with many of my friends from online communities giving lots of positive feedback. All in all, I was happy with the way I was represented and was glad that my fears of being edited out of context were not supported. It was a great feeling to be given the chance to represent something that I feel strongly about.

The Kerri-Anne show

Not long after the "Faith Off" videos were released, the participants were all contacted by a popular breakfast TV show called *Mornings with Kerri-Anne*. They basically wanted us to speak about the same issues that we had for the Faith Off, but this time it would be a live group panel.

We all arrived and met in the green room, but there were only two of us from the original interviews, the Buddhist and myself. The Catholic was the twin brother of the one from the video, who couldn't make it because he was with the Pope on the day (I'm sure nobody noticed). The Jewish and Muslim participants didn't arrive until just before the show went on air. While we were waiting for the show to start, we were all chatting about our various different opinions and had the opportunity to each explain the grounds for our positions, which led to a big discussion about the

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origins of the universe, whether the taxpayers should pay for World Youth Day, and the difference between and non-exclusivity of atheism and agnosticism. I was surprised that the others were happy enough talking about such subjects and that there was not much conversation about their reasons for belief.

It wasn't too long before we were all called down to the studio, miked up and sent on set. Kerri-Anne introduced us before starting with the questions which included life after death, religion's responsibility for wars, suicide bombing, promoting tolerance, the roots of religion and "what if you're wrong".

Of the panellists, the Buddhist was the most eloquent, the Jew seemed to be reciting lines and the Muslim girl didn't seem very confident at all, which wasn't surprising, since she was asked to explain about suicide bombers and the virgins after death. It was a tactless question, even for morning TV. The rest of the questions were met by fairly predictable answers, with nothing too shocking. It was breakfast TV though, so I wasn't expecting Jerry Springer.

I was amazed at how many people saw it though. As we were leaving the studio, I got a rush of text messages and phone calls from people that had seen it. Old work

mates, friends, family, at least six people contacted me within the first hour saying they'd seen it and I hadn't told any of them about it beforehand. Even this week, months later, I was asked by someone at my work "Was that you on TV?" There's also been some pretty wide distribution of the video amongst the online atheist population since it has gone to YouTube; I was even congratulated by the guys from the Atheist Experience podcast, which I listened to in preparation for the first interview.

Overall, I'm so glad to have had the chance to do this. To stand up for something that you feel strongly about and get recognition for it is a great feeling. After doing this, I am now much more confident in discussing and debating various topics whenever the chance arises. I still have much to learn about the finer points, but through a thirst for knowledge and a deep interest in the subject matter, I continue to learn and build stronger arguments. I would encourage all atheists to do the same.

Editor's Note:

Alan's interviews can be viewed at the following links.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zCSYWWEQp-s>
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rWeWMKC7xgQ>
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rr6A3GN_6jg

Churches unite to fight abortion law

By David Rodda

The Age 4 September 2008

Controversial legislation before the Victorian Parliament is likely to increase the number of abortions, according to a coalition of church groups.

In an open letter to all Victorian parliamentarians, the group states its opposition to abortion "on moral grounds . . . as the taking of innocent and vulnerable human life".

The group includes Anglican Archbishop Philip Freier and Catholic Archbishop Denis Hart, as well as the Presbyterian, Anglican, Lutheran, Russian and Syrian Orthodox churches.

It said the legislation, to be debated next week, did not reflect community concern about the frequency of abortion and late-term abortions.

The proposed law would allow women to choose an abortion during the first 24 weeks of pregnancy. After that, two doctors would have to approve.

The letter acknowledges the "deeply conflicted and vulnerable" state of many women struggling with unexpected pregnancy, who feel they have no choice but to have an abortion.

But it criticises the bill for not providing for independent counselling or cooling-off periods, "which in other areas of the law, such as reproductive technology and even buying a house or car, is considered to be protective".

HUMOUR



ATHEISM

BECAUSE BABIES ARE TASTY

Q: Why did the Rationalist cross the road?
A: To be sure to see both sides.

Q: How many TV evangelists does it take to change a light bulb?
A: Just one, but please send in your donation today so that they can buy the bulb.

Q: How many Southern Baptists does it take to change a light bulb?
A: CHANGE?????

BITS 'N' PIECES

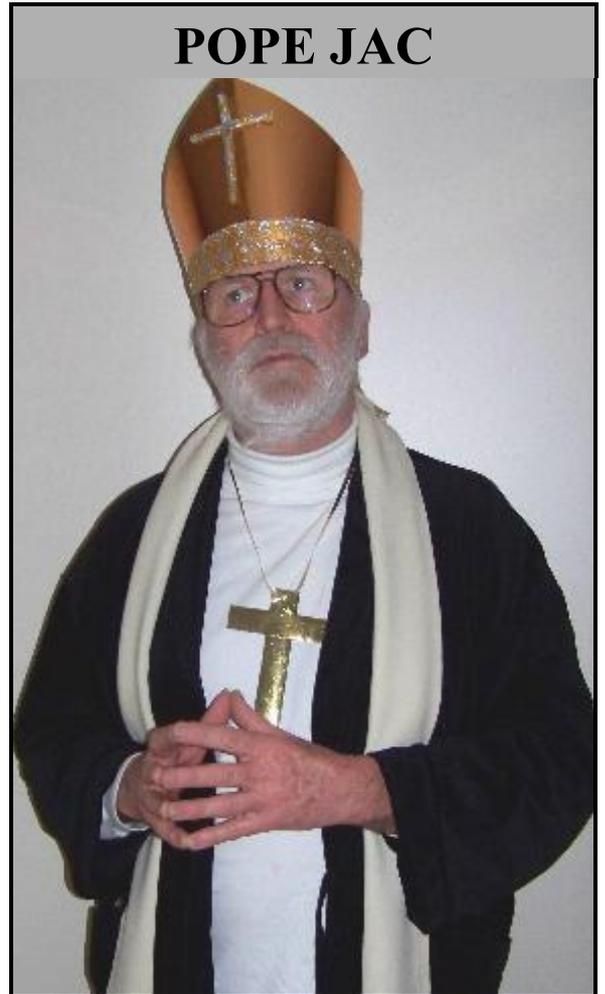


**Perth Atheists
with
Dr. Michael Shermer**

Michael Shermer delivered a lecture at the
University of WA

WHY DARWIN MATTERS

**Evolution, Intelligent Design, and the Battle for
Science and Religion**



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Tel: (03) 9467 2063

9 September 08 - Professor Graham Oppy (Philosophy & Bioethics, Monash University)
"The New Atheists and Christian Nationalism"

14 October 08 - Jacinta Cashen (Victorian Council of School Organisations)
"Challenges to Secular Education"

11 November 08 - Catherine Deveny ('The Age' columnist)
"My Conversion to Atheism"

9 December 08 - Wolfgang Eubel
"Was J.S.Bach an Atheist?"

LECTURE

“Random Design – Keeping God in the Equation of Life”

Richard Colling,

Institute for the Study of Creation in an Age of Science and Technology

Presented Friday, 18 July 2008 at the University of Tasmania

A critique by Daniel Hulme

Richard Colling until recently was the chair of Biological Sciences at the Olivet Nazarene University in Illinois. He was invited to the University Tasmania to present a guest lecture.

Unlike many creationists, Richard Colling accepts that there is a wealth of evidence in favour of evolution. He also believes that evolution is the means through which God created life. His hypothesis goes something like this.

Evolution relies on random processes. However, randomness by its very definition is purposeless, whereas God – by definition – has purpose. As Colling says, “a super intelligence would know no true randomness”.

Colling goes on to say that all randomness is apparent and that nothing is truly random. When computer specialists set up a “random number generator”, they actually set up a process that generates an apparently random series of numbers. The “randomness” is not in the patterns or processes behind the sequence being non-existent, but just not easy to identify.

To illustrate his point, Colling shows some examples of the occurrence of Fibonacci numbers in nature (such as the numbers of petals on various flowers).

Colling’s talk also focussed a lot on what he describes as the “barriers” to understanding life. They include:

- A lack of higher-order thinking, such as not understanding the connections between different concepts or disciplines eg. science and religion. (He refers to this as “connecting the dots”).
- Limiting the input of new “dots” or not accepting new information.

- Focussing on the wrong “dots”.
- Misunderstanding of the “dots”, which usually arises from imprecise definitions.
- Difficulty communicating an idea when one has the “dots” connected in ones own mind.

If life had to have a purpose and therefore a Creator, then who created the Creator?

This appeal for higher order thinking may be a device to open his audience’s minds to the possibility of God and evolution co-existing. However, Colling fails to mention another barrier to understanding life, and that is logic and reason.

One logical failure in Colling’s argument is the assumption that “if A means B, then not A means not B”. In Colling’s case “if randomness means purposeless, then not random means purposeful.”

Even if we accept that nothing is truly random (quantum mechanics would say otherwise) then why does that imply that the alternative to randomness is necessarily purpose? After all, Colling defines randomness as purposelessness, but he does not go on to say that purposelessness is always random. Nonetheless, Colling seems to assume that all patterns are necessarily a product of purpose.

The flaw becomes obvious when you consider the chicken-and-egg scenario this creates. After all, is a purpose not – in itself – a pattern of some sort?

This was raised in the discussion session when one questioner asked the obvious question that all creationists fail to answer. If life had to have a purpose and therefore a Creator, then who created the Creator? Colling said that if he attempted to answer that question

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he would be entering the realm of theology and philosophy and out of the realm of science.

It was a grossly inadequate response. I fail to see how the question of whether there is a Creator should be considered “in the realm of science” but the question of the Creator’s creator is not. Of course, this is an arbitrary demarcation between science and philosophy that creationists create to avoid answering this uncomfortable question.

To try and support his argument and rebut atheists, Colling often employs the device of the “straw man”. A “straw man” is the term used for an argument constructed and then effectively rebutted because it is a weak version of the actual argument created by your opponent. The analogy is that if you construct a man out of straw, then he is obviously weak and flimsy and therefore easy to knock over.

For example, he accuses Richard Dawkins of saying that if you believe in science and evolution you must necessarily not believe in God. In fact, Richard Dawkins sets out his arguments against the existence of God in *The God Delusion*, and does so independently of the arguments for evolution. Dawkins is quite explicit in saying that if you discount evolution or creation you cannot assume the other by default.

He also says that atheists and conservative Christians believe that randomness is mindless and therefore excludes God. Finally, he accuses atheists of being so arrogant as to think they know everything, simply because they discount randomness and evolution as

being part of a purposeful plan. Both these claims are arrogant in themselves – and somewhat insulting – because they oversimplify atheists’ arguments against the existence of a purposeful plan for the Universe.

For those who did not accept Colling’s logic, there was a call for compromise. He spoke passionately about how destructive the evolution-creation debate in the United States has been and called for a reconciliation between the two sides. He believes that his theory of random design provides this reconciliation.

Reconciling two opposing sides of an argument certainly promotes peace, but it is no way to assist the search for truth. Imagine if academics supported their conclusions by saying they were the ones that promoted the most harmony!

Perhaps a better antidote for the destructiveness of the current evolution-creation debate, is promoting open-mindedness and *constructive* debate. But is open, constructive debate part of Collings’ motive? Or is his motive to convince those agnostics who accept the evidence for evolution that their view can be compatible with a belief in God? I suspect the latter.

Editor’s Note:

The lecture attracted about 20 people. The mix was 50-50 of atheists and Christians. This is not a large crowd but at least atheists were not in the minority.

Aquinas’ Mistakes

By John Warren

Sydney has recently hosted World Youth Day. It was a some-400,000-strong gathering of young people organised by the Catholic Church and intended to be a demonstration and affirmation of faith in the existence of God. It came at an opportune time because in recent years there has been a renewed questioning of the existence of God and the role of his devotees in a modern society.

Many books, including one by Richard Dawkins, which labelled the belief a delusion, have gained a wide readership. And many have been produced in refutation with one, *The Dawkins Delusion*, being written by a fellow Oxonian, Alister McGrath.

Belief in the existence of a supernatural realm, peopled by various spirits, has been around for many thousands of years. That belief has given rise to many different sets of believers; one being those organised within the Catholic

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Church and including some who have devoted a large part of their thinking lives to justifying their belief. One of those, St Thomas Aquinas, was the leading Catholic philosopher and theologian of the 13th century. His writings gave rise to a particular school of thought called Thomism and, although seven centuries have passed, Thomism still has considerable relevance in present-day Catholicism and belief in the existence of God. Indeed, his thoughts are still held in such high regard that the members of the Catholic Church often see them as the theoretical foundation for belief in the existence of God.

The Australian Centre for Thomistic Studies has this to say about Aquinas on its website:

“What he did do was to provide the principles and methods for the true resolution of all the questions which perplex and puzzle the human mind.

The Church has recognised this and has adopted him as the surest guide for us in our search to understand not only the things of the natural world, but also the truths of our Faith, as far as human reason can take us. There have been numerous expressions of this confidence by all the popes of recent times, such as this recent statement of the present Holy Father to Catholic young people:

The philosophy of St. Thomas deserves to be attentively studied and accepted with conviction by the youth of our day by reason of its spirit and openness and universalism: characteristics which are hard to find in many trends of contemporary thought. . . As a Catholic, you are heir to mankind's supreme intellectual tradition.

Such praise of St Thomas' philosophy, however, is not confined to Catholic circles. Many recognise the greatness of his thought and work. He is by common consent acknowledged to be one of the greatest minds in the history of mankind.”

Unfortunately there are historical examples which teach us that a mind might be brilliant (whatever that might mean) in one direction but make mistakes in its understanding in another field because their understanding is superseded by further advances in knowledge. The undoubtedly outstanding physicist, Lord Kelvin, thought that the sun had less than 500 million years to live; only to be corrected later with the discovery of radioactivity as the true source of the heat of the sun. So, on the principle that a cat can look at a king, particularly after 600 years, it may be a good time to revisit Aquinas's theoretical achievements.

Thomas Aquinas lived hundreds of years before the great flowering of science, with its dependence on evidence gained from manipulating, i.e. experimenting on, the physical world. His investigatory tools were limited to brain, pen and paper.

The main mistake which Aquinas made was to start, as a functionary of the Catholic Church, with a firm belief in the existence of God. As a result, he spent his whole life juggling with words alone in an attempt to sustain that belief. However, it is a well-recognised fault in intellectual or experimental activity: to think you know the answer and devise the arguments or experiments to reach that predetermined answer. To be generous, the fault can arise unconsciously. In any case it destroys any value in the work; it is just a self-serving circular mental or physical operation. Aquinas could not contemplate a conclusion to his thoughts that would allow that God did not exist. No matter how cleverly tortuous his arguments were they could not prove that his God was anything more than an insubstantial image in his brain.

Of course, Aquinas is not alone in having confused an image with reality without being able to test it. Many an explorer has approached seeming water only to be disappointed when it proves to be no more than a mirage-generated image in the mind. Giving attributes to a mental image, such as omnipotent power or omniscient knowledge, might make it seem more real but it nevertheless remains an empty image until it appears in an examinable material form. Abductors from UFOs will be images in some people's brains until we have one on our own operating table.

If people respond to the Pope's admonition to study Aquinas's works attentively, they will get an insight into the mediaeval religious mind; but it does not have much relevance in the year 2008 when equally virtual-image games can be played at the touch of a few computer buttons.



Sometimes you just have to give organized religion credit; they sure know how to make a buck! This morning, when I glanced at the front page of our local newspaper, I saw a picture of a new cell phone tower going up on the main east-west road through our town. This wasn't just a "regular" tower, but rather one with a cross on top! Once again, a church not only gets to make money on tower leasing, but gets to advertise their product. In some areas, neighborhood groups will fight the construction of an "unsightly" tower, but stick a cross on top and — voilà! — you now have a sacred icon, calling out unto sinners to be saved.

But sometimes they can go too far. Earlier this year First Baptist Central Florida dedicated a sixty-meter high cross at their church. No, this one is not a cell tower, so it cost the church \$1 million dollars in construction costs. Of course, the county was all too willing to give them a zoning variance to allow it. This cross is so over-the-top that many local residents have complained about it ruining their view. It's fully illuminated at night so no one will miss it. You can always Google the church name if you want to see this monstrosity.

Our seemingly never-ending presidential campaign is really heating up now.

In August, both McCain and Obama appeared before a large audience at Rick Warren's 22,000-sheep Saddleback Church in California. The event was nationally televised and received a lot of publicity.

Pundits have claimed that Obama is more at home when courting Evangelicals, but from what I saw

McCain is the one who knows the right words and can press the right buttons. When asked when life begins, Obama finessed his answer, ultimately saying that answer "is above my pay grade". McCain, on the other hand, immediately blurted out "from the moment of conception." Bingo! Huge applause. Who cares about Iraq, fuel prices, foreclosures, eight years of Republican incompetence/criminality, etc? The minute a sperm and an egg meet up, you have a baby! The next week McCain started to pick up in the polls and is now about even.

Obama has made other attempts at getting the religious fundy vote, even going as far as promising to set up a White House office to coordinate with faith-based organizations *a-la* the Bush administration. He's actually just wasting his time courting these people. As long as he and the Democratic Party are pro-choice, it will make no difference how much he jumps up and down for Jesus. Recent polls confirm Obama has not made any inroads into the fundy religious vote.

The day after Obama accepted the presidential nomination before a crowd of 85,000 people in Denver, Colorado, McCain catered even more to the religious right with his selection of Sarah Palin as his Vice-Presidential choice. Who is Sarah Palin you ask? Well, most Americans are asking that question too! She's a 44-year-old first-term governor of Alaska who follows the religious right wing right to a tee. She's anti-abortion, anti gay marriage, and is a member of the National Rifle Association. She loves to hunt moose and bear! She is for teaching creationism alongside evolution in the public schools, and is against all forms of birth control except for abstinence.

As soon as her choice was announced, donations to the McCain campaign jumped \$10 million in three days! Most of that money has

been attributed to the religious right-wingers and gun lovers. On one of the financial blogs I follow, someone commented that his brother, a doctor who performs abortions, and a gun enthusiast, just sent in a donation to the McCain campaign because of her selection! The NRA and its members are always afraid that if elected, those "Marxist commie Democrats" will go door to door, taking away all guns. There is a strong correlation between owning multiple guns and religion in the USA. Maybe if I owned more than one, I could learn to love Jesus, too! Then again, since 92% of our population believes in God, there's a positive correlation between owning nearly *anything* and believing in God! But I digress....

In the last couple of days, it has been revealed that Sarah Palin's 17-year-old daughter is five months pregnant! But don't worry, her boyfriend is supposed to marry her. God will be pleased, but so much for teaching abstinence.

As reporters invade Alaska to find out more about her, who knows what else will turn up? It appears that McCain hastily picked Palin in an effort to appease the Party base and add some excitement to the Party's convention. This surprising Vice-Presidential choice appears to be a huge roll of the dice for McCain, shooting not only for the women who are unhappy that Hillary Clinton didn't win, but also the Evangelicals who put George Bush into office twice.

Never underestimate the lack of intelligence of the American voter! Electing Bush twice confirms that. I'm still betting that McCain will win it unless young people actually show up at the polls and offset the religious tide. If McCain wins, how long do you think it will be until the Hillary2012 web site becomes active?

Bill

Red hot enlightenment led me to believe in one fewer god.

By Catherine Deveny

The Age 23 July 2008

Believe what you will, but don't expect me to stop prodding you about why you're religious.

Wasn't it hilarious how World Youth Day was an attempt to make Catholicism appear all modern and trendy, but what it achieved was to highlight how deluded and anachronistic the religion is?

The cavernous gap between the fresh-faced young teenagers and the old blokes in frocks and party hats was never more apparent than when the words "pilgrim" and "texting" were used in the same sentence. Repeatedly.

I had to laugh when I heard that "Ratzinger Rules" had been spray-painted on the Hyde Park War Memorial. And when I saw pilgrims chanting, "Jesus! Jesus! Jesus! Oi! Oi! Oi!" I can't help wondering how the teenage pilgrims coped with their hormones and no condoms and what the consequences will be in a few weeks' time.

The fusion of wild youth and religious rapture is a complicated reality. A complicated reality I assume was responsible for the GOD ROCKS! graffiti I saw on an old stone church yesterday.

I don't give a stuff what people believe in, but it won't stop me poking at it or prodding it. Why should religion be any exemption? Telling me I'm going to hell won't bother me because I have the Flying Spaghetti Monster, the Invisible Pink Unicorn and Bertrand Russell's Teapot in my heart. Google them if you are in the market for some red hot enlightenment.

Over the past couple of weeks Catholic-bashing has been elevated to the level of an extreme sport. Put your hand down at the back there, I'm allowed to. I spent every Sunday for the first 18 years of my life sitting in a medieval torture chamber listening to a bloke bang on about his imaginary friend who did magic tricks. Then the next 20 years massaging, editing and pruning the brainwashing into something that fit until suddenly I woke up one day and realised I was an atheist.

I wasn't searching for anything. I wasn't dabbling or questioning. I wasn't having any kind of spiritual breakdown. I just opened my eyes one day, looked around and realised that I had once been standing in a house and one by one the walls had collapsed and there was no longer a house there. I was standing out in the open. It was very liberating.

Funny though. For a while I would go to pray and then remind myself that I didn't believe. These days I send out wishes. I know, just as crazy.

I question some of my progressive, believing mates about if they believe in Noah's ark, the Immaculate Conception, Adam and Eve, the Resurrection, even heaven, and they squirm a little and try to change the subject. They get vague, defensive and then start muttering something about faith and mystery and a power of love that unites us all.

Sure, it would be easy to torture them, but they're adults and it's their life. I just can't see why it's so difficult to have a rigorous discussion about it. I feel no need to convert them. I just want them to know that if you are brave enough to place your hand through the invisible electric fence there's a bigger world beyond.

It's been a revelation to me a year since my "epiphany". I feel as if I'm walking through life with the blinkers off. Suddenly all the religious mumbo-jumbo jumps out as so bonkers. Wearing certain things, eating certain things, mumbling certain things at certain times so some imaginary friend will let you into a club in the sky when you die. I want to do my living now, thanks. I'm not afraid of dying. I'm afraid of never having lived.

There is a school of thought that suggests atheists should not call themselves atheists but just say we apply rational thought to everything and religion is no exception.

(Continued on page 22)

(Continued from page 21)

As Sam Harris, author of *The End Of Faith*, puts it, “I think that ‘atheist’s a term that we do not need, in the same way that we don’t need a word for someone who rejects astrology.

“We simply do not call people ‘non-astrologers’. All we need are words like ‘reason’ and ‘evidence’ and ‘common sense’ and ‘bullshit’ to put astrologers in their place, and so it could be with religion.”

I don’t care what people believe in, but I do care that religion impacts on political discourse, public policy and that it stunts the ability of people to think for themselves and question. And that it kills people and causes suffering. But most of all I care that the invisible electric fences that are wired in the minds of children brainwashed by religion are difficult to remove. And impossible if you don’t even know they’re there.

A quote attributed to Stephen F. Robert sums it up for me: “We are both atheists, I just believe in one fewer god than you do. When you understand why you dismiss all the other possible gods, you will understand why I dismiss yours.”

Peace be with you.

I hope *The Age* is not paying Catherine Deveny (Comment & Debate, 23/7) to write the intellectually bankrupt and intolerant tripe she dishes out. How easy to build a straw-person concerning religion and set it on fire. Many of the world’s great thinkers, philosophers, artists and scientists have held deep personal convictions about God and faith. In her small world, however, such people are imprisoned, unliberated, and essentially morons.

She isn’t the first and God knows she won’t be the last to peddle her vindictive and unreasoned diatribe against God. People of faith don’t fear the atheistic diatribe, only the brutal and murderous regimes atheism has funded. But just like Voltaire, Nietzsche, and Russell before her, long after Catherine ceases to exist, faith in God will be alive and well in the hearts of billions.

Reverend Nicholas Tuohy
Heathmont Baptist Church

Catherine Deveny has really grown on me over time. She has faced up to modern stigmas and taboos and written of truths that many would rather not hear. I’m reminded of *The Emperor’s New Clothes*, and imagine Ms Deveny as the courageous soul who braves potential social backlash to point out the Emperor’s nakedness.

Jamil Khan
Vic

Catherine Deveny has reserved her most vitriolic and sarcastic prose to lampoon the Christian faith. Her ignorance of the faith is astounding. It would be better if she criticized quantum physics; she may be better informed on this subject. She should know it’s better to keep your mouth shut and be thought a fool, than open your mouth and remove all doubt.

However, she is safe. There will be no fatwabs, as we Christians are familiar with the concepts of love and forgiveness. Yes Catherine, we even defend your right to freedom of speech. But we are a soft target. So here is the challenge: write a similar piece criticising one of the other major religions. Go on, I dare you.

Lance and Claudia Sterling
Vic

As a religious Australian I found Catherine Deveny’s closed-minded views and dismissive tone deeply offensive. Her attempt to hijack the recent outpouring of faith in Sydney to push her fundamentalist atheist agenda was discriminatory and intolerant. If she does not wish to search for the real meaning that only faith can provide that is her choice. Faith, by definition, cannot be explained by science, reason or facts as those concepts have well-documented liberal biases. If I choose to worship the Flying Spaghetti Monster please allow me to practise my religion without fear of ridicule.

Michael Pallaras
Vic

COLLECTIONS FROM CATHOLIC WORLD YOUTH DAY

The Age (Melb.) 14 July 08

I hope (and, were I not an atheist, would also pray) that the WYD Portaloos and the confessionals had clear identifying signs. Or there could have been an unholy mess.

Barrie Smillie
ACT

I
WAS
TOUCHED
BY
THE
POPE
DOWN
UNDER



THE INQUISITION
21st CENTURY
N.S.W. - AUSTRALIA

Spiritual hero or sexist dictator?

The Centralian Advocate, 16 July 08

Paul Kokoski (*The Centralian Advocate*, 15/7/08) expounds the greatness of Pope Benedict, the man who has condemned 80 million Africans to death by his refusal to support the use of condoms to help stem the tide of AIDS.

The man who, while he openly apologises for the molestation of children by Catholic priests now, was responsible for threatening Catholic officials in 2001 with automatic excommunication for any who discussed abuse cases outside the church's legal system (*London's Observer* 24/4/05).

If Benedict had his way, we could kiss goodbye to women's rights, to reproductive technologies, to scientific advances in the treatment of some of our most debilitating diseases/afflictions, to compassionate and non-discriminatory treatment of those whose sexuality differs from the so-called "norm".

Indeed my disgust at the leader of the Catholic Church is equalled only by my disgust in his Australian representative Cardinal Pell, a man who has recently shown himself to be deceitful in his treatment of abuse claims and so out of touch with reality on the evidence for global warming that it beggars belief.

The only "faith" I have in the church is in its people, who offer compassion and work for the betterment of their fellow humans neither of which require the input of aged misogynists with an unusual interest in an activity in which they do not participate (sex and reproduction).

By all means ye Catholic pilgrims, enjoy our fine country, play nice and use protection, just don't expect all of us to swallow the same bland, unsubstantiated offerings that you do.

Sean
Alice Springs

The mighty pen of Pamela Bone has reincarnated itself into the hands of Catherine Deveny. How refreshing to read the article, - "Red hot enlightenment led me to believe in one fewer god." (*The Age* 23 August 08)

As stated, religions need rigorous examination, as is the case with other topics affecting so many. Those parts found wanting must be exposed publicly and often. For far too long, forever, in fact, religion has retained a sacrosanct status in society with justified criticism deemed heresy.

This unfounded protectionism has resulted in a very small section of the population having undue influence in social and political matters. Religious imposition negatively affecting real humans in favour of pleasing an imagined deity belong in a theocracy and not a democracy.

The secular portion of Australia is in rapid ascendancy. Catherine Deveny's 'awakening' from religion into atheism is now commonplace. Our leaders are obliged to reflect the new reality or place themselves at odds with a changing demographic.

David Nicholls
President
Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc

FRISKY BUSINESS

Daily Telegraph
Sex trade up

Pilgrims have increased business in an unlikely area, the city's brothels.

Adult Business Association spokesman Chris Seage said it had taken brothel owners by surprise.

"They are having to put on extra girls to meet the demand," he said. "Business is up by around 20 per cent in the city, Surry Hills, Bondi and the lower North Shore. They have not seen anything like it since the Olympics."

Visiting media and non-pilgrims were adding to the trade, he said. Most of the customers appeared to be Italians, Americans and Filipinos and one madam had told him they were bringing their own condoms.

One pilgrim has been arrested after clashing with anti-pope protesters on the route of the pilgrim walk in Sydney. The pilgrim, from Newcastle, allegedly jumped on a gay protester and punched him in the neck. He was not charged and was released shortly after the incident.



The Age (Melbourne) 19 July 08

Where on earth did Lance Sterling (Letters, 18/7) get the quarter-baked idea that Hitler, Pol Pot and Stalin were secular humanists? To take just the first example, Adolf Hitler remained at least a nominal Catholic throughout his life, wrote about "the will of the eternal Creator" and "natural laws framed by God", and claimed that "faith is absolutely the only basis of a moral outlook on life". He specifically denounced secular education and his campaign of persecution of the Jews drew upon the social legacy of centuries of Christian anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism.

Nigel Sinnott
Vic

THE ATHEIST SCROLL

AFA member, Ken Miles has compiled a history of the Universe from an atheist's perspective in the form of an attractive scroll.

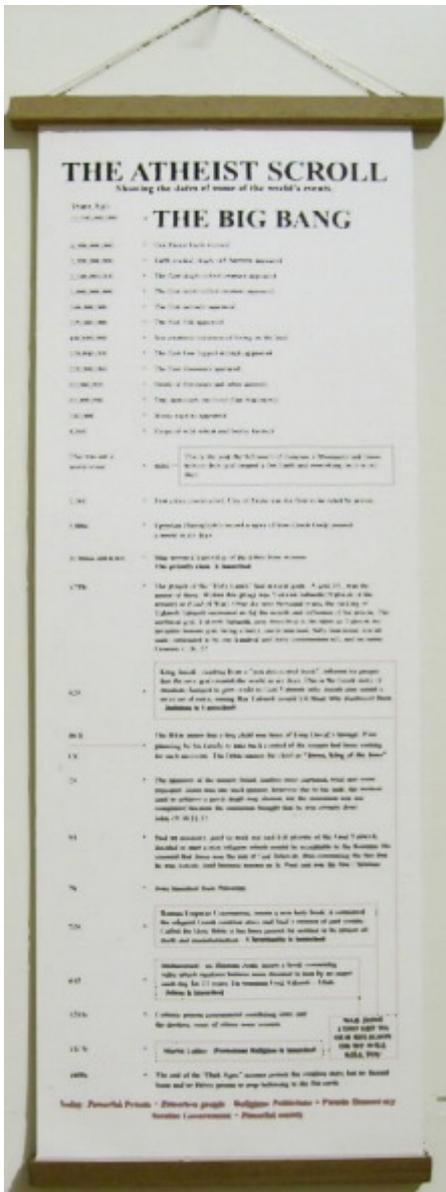
It is suitable for home, school or workplace.

The Atheist Scroll is made of tough and long lasting polypropylene.

Dimensions: 720 mm x 290 mm

\$20.00 (includes postage)

Contact Head Office for orders or more information.



This scroll has been compiled so that Non-religious people can learn when the cult of the single god commenced.

Religious people, who now control our parliament, say their Bible proves that the “Creation Story” is true and want it to be taught to children as a scientific fact. I have used the same Bible to show you what these believers ignore! I will describe the main points of this Creation Story:-

- The God is named YAHWEH by Jews, JEHOVAH by Christians and ALLAH by Muslims.
- The god having made a man in his image was therefore a small, fully-functional Jewish male.
- He resided on a large platform, called “Heaven”, set in the clouds.
- From this platform he dispensed feast or famine, death or favour.
- He created a flat earth and every thing on it, in the year 4004BCE.
- He made the Sun and the Moon and then caused them to circulate across the earth, go beneath and recirculate.
- After creating the ‘Devil’, he picked up a handful of dust and with this he made a man.
- He then took out one of the man’s ribs and made a woman, telling her that she was to obey the man and he was to rule over her.
- The human population of the God’s earth only comprised the God, the Devil (now a serpent) Adam, Eve and the children of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel.
- Cain killed Abel; then God instructed Cain to find a wife (*How? No other people existed*)
- Science has not only disproved the whole creation story, but has revealed that the true authorship of the creation story belongs to the Ancient Greeks.

Kenneth Miles

IN THE NEWS

Michael Guglielmucci, is a Pastor in The Edge Church in the southern suburbs of Adelaide. The church was set up by his father and mother. Two years ago he told his family, friends and congregation he had terminal cancer.

Michael wrote an emotive song, *Healer*, and he sang it to the congregation with an oxygen tube up his nose.

Unfortunately the terminal cancer story was false. He instead has a different illness...he claims he is “addicted” to pornography!

Michael is seeking counselling and so is his wife and probably some of his congregation.

Editor

Heavenly deception *The Advertiser* — 27 August 08

How significant really is the deception perpetrated by Michael Guglielmucci of the Assemblies of God church as against the deception perpetrated by the church itself?

After all, deception - and self-deception - is the core business of all religions, and in the grand scheme of things, Mr Guglielmucci’s peccadillo may seem a mere bagatelle.

But it is significant, in that it demonstrates once again that ethical and moral behaviour is not engendered by a perceived or proclaimed closeness to an imaginary being in the sky, but that it is innate and natural and can either be cultivated or transgressed.

Atheists, humanists and secularists have known for hundreds of years that the best way to maintain high standards of ethical and moral behaviour is to recognise at every turn that “one is one’s neighbour’s neighbour”. It’s a simple concept.

Even children have a grasp of it. And it doesn’t need buildings, rituals, pop music, idols, hysteria or money—particularly money.

Religious mountebanks are rife and their jiggery-pokery has made a good many of them very rich.

Jac Dittmar
Adelaide

Rebuilding lives *The Advertiser* — 28 August 08

In response to your writers critical of Michael Guglielmucci, please not that the Christian world is highly embarrassed by the deceptions perpetuated.

The Christian faith is about rebuilding broken people who lack meaning, hope and who have failed. It therefore speaks to us all, including Michael Guglielmucci.

It is not a “superstition” or an imaginative construction (Jac Dittmar) but is based upon a historical person, Jesus of Nazareth, whose existence is noted in secular as well as biblical sources.

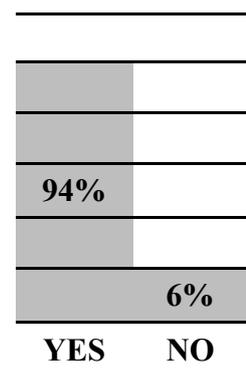
When Jac comments, as an alternative, the “ethical and moral” behaviour of atheists, does he have in mind Mao, Stalin, Hitler or more contemporary figures like abortionists. To dismiss all “religion” as bad, fails to distinguish between faiths which suppress human freedom and those that enhance it through grace.

Robert Iles
Adelaide

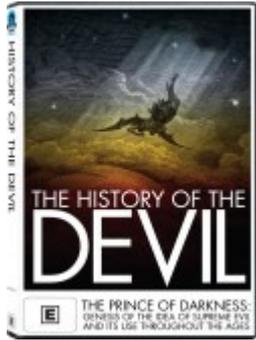
Vote line

The Advertiser
28 August 08

Should Michael Gulielmucci give back the donated monies or proceeds from his songs?
(90 callers)



D.V.D. Review



The History Of The Devil

Siren Visual www.sirenvisual.com.au

\$29.95

Reviewed by Lyn Longo

The History of the Devil is subtitled *The Prince Of Darkness: Genesis of the idea of supreme evil and its use throughout the ages.* The sleeve of the D.V.D. gives an excellent synopsis of the contents and I will summarise this to provide readers with an overview, and then comment on my personal reactions to it.

Prompted by the way in which the “Devil” has been the scapegoat for most disasters throughout history, this D.V.D. “charts the evolution of the idea of a supreme embodiment of evil from the time of the ancient gods to the present day. This critical analysis provides an insightful and structured examination of the origins of the Devil and the way in which it has been used over the centuries.”

In the sixth century, the Persian religious teacher Zoroaster is credited with beginning the notion of a Devil when he reduced the many gods into two: one good and one evil. Progressing through the centuries to modern times, the concept of the “Devil” has evolved, been added to, and modified to suit political and religious purposes. It is currently used as a marketing tool and as a controlling force within the Christian community.

In the final paragraph, the synopsis states: “This fascinating story is told through charting historical and archaeological facts and interviews with academics, historians and church members.”

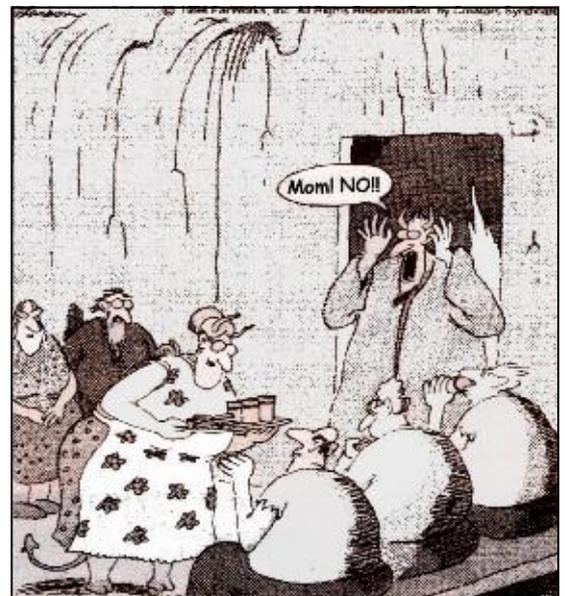
As for my reactions, I found it engrossing, interesting, visually powerful and comprehensive in scope. I felt angry on behalf of all the children who have been terrified into submission by horrendous descriptions of this supposedly real “bogey man.” Members of my own family who attended a Catholic Primary School filled our daughter’s head with nightmarish tales of hell and its evil master.

How I revile all the priests, ministers and purveyors of religious dogma who blithely consign loved ones to the “eternal flames of hell” for committing what they perceive is a “sin.”

I am horrified at the lies, self-delusion and ignorance displayed at all levels of Christian society.

One wonders why a “loving, caring God” would want to keep his worshippers under control with threats of such misery, suffering and eternal damnation. It surprises me that amongst the believers there are not a substantial number who rebel against such a character and reject him as a dominating tyrant who demands submission.

So in conclusion, if you are someone who might be seduced by the “just in case” argument as you contemplate your demise, you are safe. The Devil is fiction! An excellent, fascinating and informative study of this human-made myth.



Despite his repeated efforts to explain things to her, Satan could never dissuade his mother from offering cookies and milk to the accursed.

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