

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 the official view of the
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<http://www.atheistalliance.org>

The Catholic Church always gets itself in a mess when it clashes with science. It's easy to see why. Science is based on evidence, an open mind and a willingness to change when the evidence requires it. Religious belief is based on, well, belief.

OPINION

Church dogma once had it that the earth was the centre of the universe, then along came Galileo Galilei saying that his observations showed that the earth moved around the sun. Galileo recanted under threat of torture, but 359 years later the church officially admitted that he was right.

In the year 1600 it burned Giordano Bruno, in part for speculating about other worlds; and this brings us to the most recent example of the church trying to make its dogma fit reality. In May this year Fr José G. Funes, S.J., the Vatican's Chief Astronomer, surprised many when he said that a belief in aliens does not contradict the Catholic faith. (CBS News, 14 May 2008). Some years previously a high official of the Vatican, Monsignor Corrado Balducci, in discussions with the Hebrew scholar Zecharia Sitchin, reached the conclusion that 'Extraterrestrials *can and do exist* on other planets' (my emphasis). (<http://www.sitchin.com/vatican.htm>) Scientists have made estimates of the number of planets in our galaxy which may have intelligent life. Using something called the Drake equation, which is basically a product of a set of factors, such as the rate of star formation, the fraction of stars that have planetary systems, the number of planets in an average system that are ecologically suitable for the origin of life, and so on, the net result is that estimates can vary from something like one to a million, depending in particular on whether you take optimistic or pessimistic views of one of these factors (the lifetime of a technical civilisation). But why go to all that trouble when you can have all the answers by just sitting two theologians down for a 20 minute chat?

It is possible that the Catholic Church is making its case now for the existence of aliens to avoid another embarrassment in the future, should alien life be discovered, as suggested by Tom Flynn, writing in the August-September issue of the magazine *Free Inquiry*. But regardless of their reasons for buying into the debate, what are the implications for religion in general and for Christianity in particular should intelligent alien life be found (or should it find us)? It certainly raises some interesting questions, most already canvassed by Tom Flynn:

Would Christians expect extraterrestrials to have souls? Would they expect them to have suffered original sin and therefore need salvation? If not, why not? Do they think their God sends his only son to every race of sentient beings on every planet? And if so, is his appearance that of a human being every time or different for each race of extraterrestrials? Alternatively, since they believe that humans are made in God's image, then are all extraterrestrials also human in appearance? And what do they think about God's son being sent 'to travel from world to world on an endless succession of death' as Thomas Paine noted in ridiculing the idea.

These issues serve to highlight the difficulty of defending dogma in the face of science and reason. A sense of the confusion that results from trying to mesh religious ideology with the idea of intelligent aliens can be gleaned from a rather interesting paper by Douglas A. Vakoch of the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence (SETI) Institute, titled "Roman Catholic Views of Extraterrestrial Intelligence...". In this paper Vakoch explores the theological perspective on this issue, and exposes a conflicting and, in my opinion bizarre, range of opinions, such as: extraterrestrials (ETs) are likely to exist because that would add to the glory of God; the glory of God is a reason to consider that the existence of ET's is unlikely; it is inconceivable that God would populate the universe with images of God other than those descended from Adam; that ET's could be as different from us as an elephant is from a gnat; there is no room in the universe for nonhuman forms of intelligence; ETs could exist in a state of original grace or fallen into sin, only humans, descended from Adam, could share in redemption through Jesus Christ; God could have saved fallen ETs through Jesus Christ if God so wished; the idea of more than one Mother of God was inconceivable; the idea of more than one Mother of God was not inconceivable and so on.

Perhaps the biggest blow to religion from contact with intelligent aliens would be that stated by SETI pioneer Jill Tarter, who points out: "If we get a message" from a presumably superior alien civilization "and it's secular in nature, I think that says that they have no organized religion — that they've outgrown it." I have to wonder how many generations it will take for us to reach the same point.

Dennis

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Dear Editor,

As Tobias (From the Inbox) THE AUSTRALIAN ATHEIST, Number 11, and others who seem to think Atheists are promiscuous, degenerate and reprobates I offer him the following challenge.

For every Atheist paedophile you name I will name 25 paedophile Catholic priests.

You cannot stereotype anybody's morality or absolutes by their beliefs, colour or creed.

Ted Bellenger

Dear Editor,

As a former Boy Scout who spent many an enjoyable and instructive year in the movement, I was dismayed to read in THE AUSTRALIAN ATHEIST, Number 11, of the intent to "pursue the matter further". That is, the religious implications allegedly inherent in that association.

The concerns appear to be based on the inclusion of the word "God" in the Scouts prayer; that Scouts Australia is discriminating on religious grounds, and that compulsory recitation of the Lord's Prayer is offensive.

I submit that the mouthing of the word "God" in any context is as meaningless to a Boy Scout as it is to an atheist calling on divine intervention.

For Christ's sake! God Almighty! Jesus Christ! Mother of God! God help us!

In my many years in the movement I cannot recall ever saying the Lord's Prayer, discrimination on any pretext was unknown and Scout jamborees are renowned for bringing together the youth of the world regardless of race, colour or creed.

Unfortunately the worthwhile attributes of innovation, improvisation, initiative and self-reliance taught to scouts has been eroded in this electronic era much to the detriment of today's youth and society as a whole. Don't let's undermine the last vestige because of an insignificant anachronism.

The time spent on "pursuing the matter further" would be better spent on more important issues such as the frightening possibility of a gun-toting female fundamentalist who believes in witchcraft and spells being elected to the second most influential position in the western world.

Harry Edwards

I am the editor of Synergy Magazine. We are an Australian genre cinema and culture magazine. We also produce a regular monthly "Thinking Time" section which covers docos, magazines etc.

As the editor and atheist I work hard to include atheist material each month ranging from reviews of Penn and Teller to articles on Richard Dawkins.

We would like to run a piece on THE AUSTRALIAN ATHEIST magazine, can you send a couple of issues for review ?

Robert Black
Synergy Magazine

A review from Synergy Magazine can be viewed on page 11.



Hi,

My name is Marianna and I am a year 12 student at Macgregor State High School. As part of a legal studies assignment I am required to conduct an interview with an expert in my area of research. I am currently doing a report on the issues surrounding Euthanasia and whether it should or should not be legalised. I was hoping I could steal just a few moments of your attention and ask you to answer a few of my questions. These questions will be used in reference within my report and not as the sole research for my assignment (so you will not be doing my assignment for me, it is just required to get some expert opinion and it will also allow me to better understand the topic as well as the fact that I'm truly interested in knowing your opinion on the matter). I have been attempting to contact various places but have been constantly referred to the 'Q&A' section in their websites; which isn't much help seeing as the assignment criteria requires a real interview.

If you could please answer the following questions I would greatly appreciate it.

1. Do you believe that Euthanasia should be legalised? Why/why not?
2. What sort of issues do you believe impact whether or not euthanasia should be legalised?
3. If it were legalised, then (roughly) what sort of guidelines do you believe should be implemented in order to make sure it is not taken advantage of?
4. In 1995, under *The Rights of the Terminally Ill Act* the Northern Territory had legalised Euthanasia; however, this was overturned in 1997 through the *Euthanasia Law Act*. What is your opinion of this?
5. Do you believe it was in society's best interest to repeal the Rights of the terminally ill Act? Why/Why not?
6. Was the repeal a step forward or backwards for Australia?
7. *Euthanasia Law Act* worked through the amendment of the *Northern Territory (Self-Government) Act 1978*, what is your opinion of this? (Do you believe it was in the best interest of society or that it should not have intervened with the states self government

legislation?

8. What is your opinion of the *Terminally Ill (Euthanasia Laws Repeal) Bill 2008*? (Is it a positive step for Australia?)
9. What consequences could arise from legalising euthanasia?
10. What benefits could arise from legalising euthanasia?
11. Who would the legalisation of euthanasia help?
12. On a global scale, considering that euthanasia is legal in the Netherlands, US state of Oregon, Switzerland and Belgium do you believe Australian law has fallen short in protecting its citizen's best interests when it comes to Euthanasia?

Any extra information would be very helpful. I would like to thank you and would be really grateful if you could answer these questions (or at least some) as soon as possible.

Thanks again for your time and effort in answering these questions, it is appreciated.

Hello Marianna,

Thanks for your questions and yes, I would be pleased to answer them. Before I do, I must tell you I am uncomfortable with the word 'believe' and its derivatives when the case for any proposition is accurate on the available evidence. Those who dismiss the available evidence, distort it, or manufacture unrealistic claims about it, often use the word 'believe'. I tend to accept, reject or don't know about any given statement dependent on whether the highest probability demonstrates it to be correct, incorrect or indeterminate.

Take for example, the case for the introduction of a system of legal voluntary euthanasia (LVE). The argument by religious folk is really that humans allegedly have an extra supernatural component called a soul. They offer no proof of this spooky part of human nature. Their case is that a god gave us a soul and only a god can take it away. This is the only argument they possess. Knowing that will not wash with the population, religions have manufactured an element of doubt about the safety of introducing LVE.

The telling point is that even if a system of legal voluntary euthanasia were to be 100% bullet-proof-safe and effective, and nothing in life has that guarantee, religions would still be in opposition to its introduction.

The sad part concerning all of this is that the chicanery involved has also fooled some well-meaning members

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of the public, and many politicians into 'believing' indiscriminate killing of people is a distinct possibility if voluntary euthanasia is made legal.

Anyway, on to your well thought out questions.

(1) Do you believe that Euthanasia should be legalised? Why/why not?

I think we first need to define that which we are discussing. Let's assume your question is not just about Euthanasia, as that just means killing painlessly. Under discussion, is actually voluntary euthanasia where a person chooses of their own volition that they wish to die?

(2) What sort of issues do you believe impact whether or not euthanasia should be legalised?

If I rephrased the question to ask what sort of issues revolve around having a pet euthanased, then it is easy to see that the human animal should have no less benefit. Even though a pet cannot give consent, working for its best interest is always the priority of humane persons. When a pet or a person are in unremitting pain with a terminal illness, with the dignity which makes life important gone, it is not only an act of kindness to end the suffering but a duty. The request to doctors by patients to end their suffering has, so far been thwarted, in many countries, by the contemptible political machinations of religions.

(3) If it were legalised, then (roughly) what sort of guidelines do you believe should be implemented in order to make sure it is not taken advantage of?

This is a question best answered by the legal profession, doctors, psychologists etc. Basic requirements have to be:

- (a) Repeated request for voluntary euthanasia from a mentally competent patient diagnosed with a terminal illness who is in unremitting pain.
- (b) Such request be revised by at least one other independent doctor.
- (c) A psychologist, psychiatrist in liaison with the patient and doctors must determine if clinical depression is involved.
- (d) All persons involved must not be beneficiaries in the Will of the patient.

(4) In 1995, under The Rights of the Terminally Ill Act the Northern Territory had legalised Euthanasia; however, this was overturned in 1997 through the Euthanasia Law Act. What is your opinion of this?

This was a despicable denial of the rights of Territorians by Kevin Andrews at the behest of the conservatively Christian Liberal Party. Make no

mistake; the overturning of the act was because of religious bigotry with the narrow self-righteous views of religion used to override the lawfully elected parliament of the NT.

(5) Do you believe it was in society's best interest to repeal the Rights of the terminally ill Act? Why/Why not?

No! It was blatantly undemocratic, inhumane and a blight on our political system. The Howard government became cocky in disregarding those who elected them.

(6) Was the repeal a step forward or backwards for Australia?

It was a demonstration that we all need to be very aware that the interference of church in state matters has serious consequences. There is a need for a Bill of Rights in Australia to prevent such agenda driven meddling.

(7) Euthanasia Law Act worked through the amendment of the Northern Territory (Self-Government) Act 1978, what is your opinion of this? (Do you believe it was in the best interest of society or that it should not have intervened with the states self government legislation?)

All people in a secular democratic Australia should have equal representation in the governing of their lives. Just because an antiquated anomaly exists, making citizens in Territories have less privileges, does not make it right.

(8) What is your opinion of the Terminally Ill (Euthanasia Laws Repeal) Bill 2008? (Is it a positive step for Australia?)

Yes! Bob Brown is one politician who sees the anomaly as not being acceptable to the concept of equal rights for everyone. I agree with him and so do all fair-minded persons.

(9) What consequences could arise from legalising euthanasia?

If you mean, what negative consequences, then there is none beyond the normal risk factors with any laws. In fact, the controls on the legislation for voluntary euthanasia that I have viewed make risks of mistake far less than most other legislation.

(10) What benefits could arise from legalising euthanasia?

People will be able to make decisions about their lives, as they have always done and prepare themselves for death. Those contemplating self-deliverance before

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they become incapable to do so, will live longer as a result. Self-deliverance has a nasty habit of going wrong, leaving the patient still alive and worse off than before the attempt.

The big benefit is that with the introduction of a system of legal voluntary euthanasia we will demonstrate to the world that we have at last come of age in being a compassionate and caring society. We will no longer be leaving people to die horrible deaths because of the fantasy thinking of a few. Consistent surveys show that 70 to 80 percent are in favour of LVE.

(11) *Who would the legalisation of euthanasia help?*

It may help you or a loved one or me. None of us is immune from the terrible lottery of ending up in agony with a terminal illness with all dignity gone. Important to remember is that those in opposition to LVE do not have to choose it. However, they have no inherent right to disallow others the option.

(12) *On a global scale, considering that euthanasia is legal in the Netherlands, US state of Oregon, Switzerland and Belgium do you believe Australian law has fallen short in protecting its citizen's best interests when it comes to Euthanasia?*

As with all countries, even those mentioned, religion has interfered in politics slowing the process of the introduction of legal voluntary euthanasia. The four examples overcame this unnecessary obstacle and so will Australia, eventually. The sooner the better!

A wise person, knowing the real and desperate need for legal voluntary euthanasia would contact their local MP and ask their opinion on the matter. If their

response is that they are against the concept, then do not vote for them. Any politician, who cannot recognise the necessity and urgency on such a simple matter, is most likely inadequate in making decisions on a whole range of issues.

Marianna, I hope this helps in studies and in your own thoughts about LVE.

The warmest of regards,

David

David Nicholls
President
Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc

Hello Mr Nicholls,

I just wanted to thank you for answering my email with the questions on Voluntary Euthanasia. The answers were very helpful in getting a better understanding about the issue as well as it actually helped me meet the entire criteria (by conducting an interview).

Thanks again,

Marianna

Glad to be of assistance, Marianna.

All the best,
David

OBITUARY

William Darby

The ATHEIST FOUNDATION OF AUSTRALIA regrets to announce the death of Tasmanian member, William (Bill) Darby, on 2 June 2008. Bill became a member of the AFA in 1986 and has always been a generous supporter of and contributor to the Foundation.

The Foundation has sent a letter of condolence to Bill's wife, Kathleen, on behalf of past and present Committee Members.

HERETICAL HAPPENINGS

Keeping you in the know

Mike Paget, the resident chaplain at the University of Technology, Sydney, invited the *Atheist Foundation of Australia* to a debate. The original person on the religious side dropped out and Mike replaced him. AFA member Alan Conradi, who reported his recent media deeds in the September issue of THE AUSTRALIAN ATHEIST, represented us. Alan has eloquently written about his latest experience on page 15 of this issue.

In the weeks leading up to the debate, I corresponded at length with Mike Paget. It was obvious from the outset of our discussion that an important misunderstanding about Atheism exists in the minds of religious folk. It revolves around the word *belief*. The adherents of all faiths use this word extensively. They hold a ‘belief’ a god exists, a ‘belief’ that souls, cherubim’s, heaven and hell, all are real entities and places.

The faithful therefore assume that Atheists must have a ‘belief’ that none of these ‘beliefs’ are true. The religious are saying that we do not ‘believe’ in their ‘beliefs’ and that amounts to a ‘belief’ in itself. Stating that a religious ‘belief’ system is comparable to Atheists accepting such a ‘belief’ system has no supporting evidence is patently false. Now a small child may ‘believe’ that there are fairies at the bottom of the garden, but it is irrational for well-adjusted adults to say that they ‘disbelieve’ this. As with religion, mature people know there is no evidence for fairies and furthermore the psychological reasons for holding such a ‘belief’ are well understood. We simply do not accept fairies exist, with ‘belief’ having naught to do with it.

Even science is problematical here with the theory of ‘justifiable beliefs’ if a fact is shown to be correct. However, mixing science and metaphysics only leads to confusion. The reason I write on this topic is that many Atheists often state they do not believe in a god. Why shouldn’t they state this? Dictionaries lavishly use the disbelief word in their descriptions of the word *atheist* and its derivatives. The very important point here is that religious cultures pervaded the early development of dictionaries and dictionary entries therefore represent the predominant views when written.

An atheist culture definition of religion would be along the following lines:

Religion: The belief in the existence of supernatural entities and realms, without any credible supporting evidence.

Or
Religion: A psychological device used to waylay the fears surrounding the knowledge of our eventual demise.

Or
Religion: The credulity of humanity in accepting supernatural myth as fact.

When I put this point to the eminent theologian, Mike Paget, there was no comment. I did not expect one as it is self-explanatory.

It is time that atheists organisations, secular groups and, indeed, all individual atheists and those with no religion in their lives dropped the ‘belief’ word from their writings and language. They made not need to get rid of it completely, but they should ensure they use such an ambiguously loaded word with care. The atheist stance and religious ‘belief’ have nothing in common and those who fail to grasp the importance of the difference are supplying unnecessary ammunition to those who flout language to gain unwarranted advantage.

Until we meet again,



Insanity Streak



The drunk in the cathedral

A drunk staggered down the main street of the town. Somehow he managed to make it up the stairs to a cathedral and into the entrance, where he crashed from pew to pew, finally making his way to a side aisle and into a confessional.

A priest had observed all this, and figured the fellow needed some help, so he entered his side of the confessional.

After the priest sat there in deathly silence, he finally asked, "May I help you, my son?"

"I dunno," came the drunk's voice from behind the partition.

"You got any paper on your side?"

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ARE YOU
UNSURE
WHO / WHAT
TO WORSHIP?

—
SIMPLY CLOSE
YOUR EYES
AND STICK
A PIN INTO
THIS CHART.



NATURE	TOM CRUISE	SPAGHETTI MONSTER	SATAN	BLACK OBELISK
SAURON	NOTHING	ZARQUON	RICHARD DAWKINS	GIANT LIZARDS
ANUBIS	SCIENCE	PRINCE PHILIP	GOD ALMIGHTY	CTHULHU

MEDIA RELEASES

VICTORIAN ABORTION LAW REFORM

30 September, 08

Abortion is a private matter, not a criminal one. A justified majority consensus of society has at last recognised this reality.

The vociferous far-right anti-abortion brigade not only considers they possess absolute truth, they wish to have it imposed politically on the rest of the population. These fanatics do not want to know about the reasons for decriminalisation of abortion as rationality is not their strong point.

They promote that women are inferior and exist only as perpetual incubators without the same rights afforded to males. From where does the knowledge they alone possess originate? It certainly does not come from a compassionate and understanding humanity. No, the innate 'truth' fervently expounded is a direct result of the interference to malleable minds by a religious upbringing.

Religious fear has so traumatised their thinking that reasoning ability has conceded to dogmatic simplicity.

It matters not to them the consequential negative cost to women.

Politicians taking heed of fraudulent religious and cultural indoctrination do a disservice to democracy in general and to all fecund women in particular.

COMING TO A BUS NEAR YOU! Atheist Foundation launches bus advert fund

2 November 2008

Due to the incredible response by the community and the media to the London bus slogans, the *Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc* has initiated a similar program in Australia. It is envisaged that all state capitals will be involved in carrying the signs on their buses.

The message: "**Atheism – because there is no credible evidence**" clearly and concisely explains the Atheist stance.

President of the *Atheist Foundation* of Australia, David Nicholls said: "The positive reaction to the London experience demonstrates there is an opening for Atheists to visibly express their thoughts. At this time in history, religion is attempting to wrench away the benefits of the enlightenment of only a few hundred years ago. It is threatening human survivability.

Atheists have been looking for a constructive way to counteract the growing power and irrationality of religion and this looks like it might fit the bill."

The AFA is calling for donations to fund the endeavour. The more money raised, the greater the exposure into the public consciousness. For details, contact head office.

VOLUNTARY EUTHANASIA RALLY IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA OCTOBER 2008

The following speech was to be delivered by David Nicholls on the steps of Parliament House in South Australia. As David was unable to attend on the day, Mary Gallnor read the speech on his behalf.

Hi, I'm David Nicholls; president of the Atheist Foundation of Australia.

Well folks; here we are once again, on the steps of parliament house protesting in memory of Shirley Nolan whose death was so unnecessarily tragic, as are many others. We must now look to the future, waving our new popular banner; Rally to Legalise Voluntary Euthanasia.

This building, is supposed to be the source of good laws that reflect our informed hopes and aspirations. We grant our elected representatives high status, pay them handsomely and give them many perks in the expectation that they will govern our secular democracy with wisdom, justice and compassion. We certainly do not expect them to pass laws, which are against our interests, or fail to enact laws that will improve our lives or our deaths. Surely it is reasonable to expect that any incidental harm resulting from decisions taken on our behalf, is minor and far outweighed by the good such laws bring.

For example; if we wished for zero road deaths, the open-road speed limit would be around 5 kilometres per hour. (Imagine!) We accept the risks of 110 kilometres per hour, knowing some of us will die or suffer injury as a result. This demonstrably unsafe law is never contested, even though in application it does kill innocent people. Unsurprisingly, countries with inadequate regulations, concerning driving, or end-of-life decisions, record more involuntary deaths than those with proper guidelines.

Therefore, when politicians argue that Voluntary Euthanasia must be 100% safe, they are changing the rules to suit their personal fears, rather than considering the wishes of the majority. If it's good enough to accept the risk of dying in a road accident, its reasonable to accept that voluntary euthanasia legislation can never be 100%, foolproof. But even if it were, religious opposition would not change because belief, not reason, is their guiding light.

Their only argument against introducing a system of Legal Voluntary Euthanasia is they believe their god gives life, and only their god can take it away. Fine! Let them believe this, but it is not *fine* to impose that belief, on the whole population by law.

We have not hired politicians to forgo rationality in favour of their personal religious beliefs. We have not hired them to make laws that assume everyone shares their fears of an afterlife in torment. As informed citizens with a rational, logical, humanitarian case, we have hired them to do our bidding. Instead of which, when Voluntary Euthanasia is debated, logic and commonsense are forgotten. They go weak at the knees, buckling like programmed robots to religious and peer pressure, from within the house and from without.

The deluge of misleading propaganda against Voluntary Euthanasia so frightens our gutless political representatives — be they religious or not — that they kowtow to the demands of a fanatical, noisy minority.

It is unprincipled; indeed immoral for an elected representative of the people to impose his or her personal beliefs onto the nation. Politicians elected in a secular democracy, finding themselves in this position, have only one ethical choice — and that is — to abstain from voting.



SYNERGY MAGAZINE

EXPLORING THE BOUNDARIES OF CINEMA & LITERATURE

Attached is our review, if you like it, feel free to use it in full or excerpts in your own PR !
We like what you are doing !

Robert Black

Australian Atheist

Atheist Foundation of Australia

Web: <http://www.atheistfoundation.org.au/>

The *Atheist Foundation of Australia* is an organization promoting the worldview that “there is no credible scientific or factually reliable evidence for the existence of a god, gods or the supernatural”. While personally I have never had a problem with such a definition of Atheism I have always worried about putting things in the negative – perhaps it could be said that Atheism works from the premise that “nothing should be accepted without being proved by the scientific method”.

Atheism is becoming a major issue today as we see the inroads that religion and superstition is once again making into our lives. While the Sixties and to a lesser extent Seventies was a period when many of us hoped the shackles of superstition would fall away, alas, we hoped too soon and it seemed that as the years went on our culture has become more and more irrational. Not only was there a resurgence in Christian belief (especially in emotionally fringe sects as the Pentecostals), but a cultural acceptance of all manner of “weirdness” from alternative medicine to the new age.

Of course with the advent of violent fundamentalism the far right and religious conservatives had the ultimate weapon and using the fear of terrorism the conservative revolution of John Howard and George Bush took control and put religion back on the map.

Too often we see the media talking about the danger of “fundamentalists” and “terrorists” without realizing that any superstitious or irrational belief is only a breath away from violence. As soon as we jettison reason, anything is possible. Have a nice quiet talk to any supposedly non violent conservative about abortion or gay marriage and you will quickly find out what I mean ! All the talk about protecting babies and stopping the decay of marriage seems to simply underlie a violence personal demand the world accept

their values – or else.

It is too easy to be tolerant, for example, of alternative medicine—what can

seemingly be wrong with an alternative cancer cure ? That is until we realize the terrible cost in human suffering as the weak and the infirm are exploited by either the money hungry or the self deceived, depending on how charitable you wish to be about their motives.

As someone with a health background, I am shocked by the horror stories I hear about supposed treatments sold an exorbitant prices to those in the most vulnerable of situations.

For me Atheism is not a choice but an ethical imperative.

At last with the work of Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris and others the debate is squarely back on the map and the *Atheist Foundation of Australia* is working to both promote Atheism and to fight against infringements of our freedom by those of religious (and spiritual) persuasions of all sorts. We need to move base to an rational and evidence based approach to government policy and to promote a truly scientific worldview in schools and I am pleased to see the *Atheist Foundation of Australia* standing up and saying what needs to be said.

The Australian Atheist is published bi-monthly and includes excellent articles, news, columns such as Heretical Happenings and reviews; it is not all heavily going and has a good sense of humour with some fun articles and cartoons as well.

Their website offers a free associate membership with a pdf of an issue of The Australian Atheist; it is well worth a look as it also includes lots of articles, links, background information and other pertinent material.

I am very pleased to have found the *Atheist Foundation of Australia* and commend it to you as an organisation that deserves our support.

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DEBATE: CHRISTIANITY versus ATHEISM

Held at the University of Technology, Sydney, on Thursday 16 October 2008.

Principal speakers: Michael Paget (Anglican Minister); Alan Conradi (AFA member)

Which makes more sense; Atheism or Christianity?

By Alan Conradi

First of all, I'd like to thank the AFA for giving me the opportunity to represent them once again.

In preparation, I had read some books by Michael Shermer, Christopher Hitchens etc., and was sent a link to a great archive of MP3s of debates, including William Lane Craig versus Robert Price, Vic Stenger, Paul Kurtz. Lennox versus Dawkins, Michael Licona against Dan Barker, and heaps more.

As for the debate itself, I think it was a good night and everyone that came would have been a little challenged. I was very nervous beforehand, especially when the seats had all been filled and there were just as many people standing as there were sitting. I could not estimate how many there were, but the theatre was packed, with people sitting in the aisles and on the floor at the front, standing at the back and in the corridor. It was terrific to see so many people interested in thinking about these issues.

I was much more nervous about the questions from the floor, and I don't think I answered them as well as I could have, had I been given some preparation time. I prefer to think things out and prepare my arguments, rather than to think on my feet, but having had the experience I will be working on building up my answers to the types of questions people are likely to ask.

Afterwards, there were heaps of people who came up and congratulated me, and a lot less who wanted to argue with me.

It was a terrific experience to be involved in this debate. Each time I get to do one of these things I feel terribly under-prepared, especially so as this was my first time speaking in front of a crowd, but pushing myself has the benefit of improving my knowledge on the subjects. I look forward to my next opportunity to do something.



Alan Conradi [speaking] and Mike Paget [right]

Alan describes himself as a skeptic, an atheist, a critical thinker and a vegetarian who is interested in science, psychology, philosophy and all areas of critical thought and rationality.

A video of the debate can be viewed online at

<http://video.google.com.au/videoplay?docid=-3955939770430269270&hl=en>



The Hall begins to fill.

Wording on the flyer made by the Christian students at UTS.

Atheism and **Christianity** are both very prominent beliefs in our society today and their fundamental differences have been the fuel for much recent debate. Atheism, which denies the existence of a God, gods or the supernatural, has been growing in prominence over the past century while the Christian Bible and its belief in one God has remained unchanged for 2000 years.

The question for you is: **which belief is correct?** logically, historically, scientifically, factually and emotionally, which makes more sense?

STRIKE WHILE THE IRON IS HOT!



Many may be aware of the campaign run by British Humanists and Atheists to place advertisements on the sides of London buses. The signs simply state:

**THERE'S PROBABLY NO GOD.
NOW STOP WORRYING AND ENJOY YOUR LIFE.**

The *Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc* considers this a marvellous way to promote Atheism and the organisation. We would like to try a similar scheme in our capital cities.

Carrying a large sign on three buses in each city other than Darwin (the company doing the work has no reach there) would cost about \$20,000 for 12 weeks. The more money we acquire, the longer the time of display.

The wording will be:-

ATHEISM - BECAUSE THERE IS NO CREDIBLE EVIDENCE

**ATHEIST FOUNDATION OF AUSTRALIA INC
<http://www.atheistfoundation.org.au>**

**In SA, Vic, ACT, Perth and Sydney
the signs will be placed either
side of a middle door.**



**The image above is NOT a true representation of the intended signs.
Art work will be carried out by professional sign writers.**

STOP PRESS

The Australian Bus Slogan Saga

With the help of Richard Dawkins, who offered a substantial donation, the London bus slogan has emerged from obscurity and become an item of newsworthy interest.

The ATHEIST FOUNDATION OF AUSTRALIA has decided to run with its own version of that advertisement. Communication with the British Humanists has established that other counties are intending to do likewise. From small beginnings messages on buses have become a world-wide affair and are sure to attract press attention at the intended simultaneous launch on or about 20 January 09.

Unlike Australia, England has a Human Rights Act, which prohibits discrimination in all areas of society. This includes advertising. In at least South Australia, the Minister of Transport can remove or not allow the display of signs, and a local advertising company has stated in a recent e-mail.

“...most Bus operators are governed by State Government regulations and as such there is restriction to advertising content on transit advertising that extends beyond those requirements of the Advertising Standards Bureau.

In this case the Clauses to be tested would pertain to any breaches to any religious guidelines. In SA the following clauses apply:

14.1 The Licensee must not display on a Vehicle an Advertisement that :-

(a) discriminates against or vilifies a person or section of the community on account of . . . religion. . .

(h) depicts . . . religious or other subject matter which is contentious. . .”

As we go to press we do not know if our wording for the slogan has been approved for the mainland capital cities. The Metro bus company in Tasmania has knocked us back on our advert and any other we may think of. We are investigating other venues for that state.

The London slogan reads: “**THERE IS PROBABLY NO GOD, SO STOP WORRYING AND ENJOY LIFE.**” This is not an accurate description of Atheism and the ‘GOD’ word would most likely be disallowed anyway.

This is the AFA ditty under consideration:

— **ATHEISM** — **BECAUSE THERE IS NO CREDIBLE EVIDENCE.**

The AFA organisation name and URL is also included. There is a distinct possibility that the authorities may view this as inadmissible. If that is the case, we have another amongst the hundreds suggested by nearly as many people inside the AFA and from the public:

— **ATHEISM** — **CELEBRATE REASON!**

I think most members would be happy with such a positive message.

In less than a week we have about \$15,000 in pledges, enough to run a very good campaign. The English have amassed £117,000 over a six- month period.

The success of the pledge program so far has been beyond expectation. We at head office are all very moved by the positive response. I sincerely thank those of you who have donated and those intending to do so if able.



The *Atheist Foundation of Australia* has sent a submission to HREOC regarding

Freedom of Religion and Belief in the 21st Century in Australia.

Public Relations Team member, Peter Taylor compiled the 13-page document. The introduction below gives an overview of the AFA concerns. We urge members to send their own submissions. Closing date is 31 January 09.

<http://www.hreoc.gov.au/frb/index.html>

Freedom of Religion and Belief in the 21st Century Submission

Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission

GPO Box 5218

Sydney NSW 2001 or by email to frb@humanrights.gov.au

Introduction

Implicit in every aspect of the Discussion Paper is the assumption that Organised Religion is an inevitable, natural and desirable part of a modern secular democratic society. However, there is nowhere any justification for this assumption. It is a great pity that Australia has not had a public debate about Organised Religion, to answer questions such as: Why is it deemed unfair to expect religions to justify their existence? Why is there no audit of their claims to moral superiority and spiritual enrichment? Why are religions not accountable for the public money they absorb?

This Discussion Paper makes no distinction between individual faith/belief, and Organised Religion – but there is a world of difference. The *Atheist Foundation of Australia* supports every adult's right to choose what to believe and have faith in, as long as they don't impose their beliefs and faiths on others; but it has serious qualms about political and media deference given to Organised Religion.

Organised Religion codifies and controls the set of beliefs and ceremonies its adherents use to worship their god or gods. This removes individual responsibility and transfers power to non democratically appointed 'representatives' of that god. Over the last two thousand years the big three monotheistic religious sects; Judaism, Christianity and Islam have been organising themselves, recruiting followers, quelling dissent, building vast structures in which to worship their gods, refining rituals, and aligning themselves with temporal power so that today they are powerful multinational businesses that use their enormous wealth to influence governments.

As the primary purpose of Organised Religion is power and influence, it is no accident that the citizens of every society ruled by religion now and in the past have lived in fear and misery, burdened by inequality, corruption, and the cruel persecution of minorities. Despite claims that modern Organised Religions have changed, there is little evidence to support this. Most still ignore scientific advance when it suits them, and persecute minorities if it gains them supporters. All

religions are constantly hounding governments to pass laws that support their dogma and beliefs, which suggests they have little respect for individuality or democracy.

Humanity had to wait until the twentieth century for individual human rights and freedoms, but these only arrived in lands ruled by democratically elected, secular governments! And always these liberating laws received strong opposition from Organised Religions.

No one disputes that there are many thousands of generous, caring, good people attached to religions, but it is the natural generosity of these people that is the motivation, not religion. Research by Marc Hauser¹, published as, '*Moral Minds*' indicates that morality is 'hardwired' into our brains and separate from religion. Jesse Bering² [Institute of Cognition and Culture, Queens College, Belfast UK.] suggests that the fear of a god looking over one's shoulder can also motivate some people to behave according to their innate moral hardwiring. Greg Paul's³ study in the *Journal of Religion and Society* discovered that the more a society embraces religiosity, the lower the morals. Commonsense tells us that if being religious made people good, there would be no evil believers.

Australasia, North America and Western Europe remain the only places where human rights are respected and enforced by law. Unfortunately, recent legislation intended to secure our safety from religious terrorism, shows how easily these rights can be eroded. It is reasonable to conclude that unless Organised Religions are rendered politically powerless, human society will return to the dark ages as religion and tyrants support each other in their quest for earthly power.

It is time for governments to realise the potential social dangers posed by resurgent religiosity, and to legislate that religious organisations are considered to be clubs, like needlework and karate clubs. People join religious clubs for many reasons; social activities, companionship,

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a need to believe in a supernatural godfather, fear of life...but this is no reason for religions to receive more favourable treatment than any other club, and no reason for the business enterprises of religion to receive more favourable treatment than the commercial enterprises of other organizations.

Researchers: We suggest that because the researchers: Desmond Cahill, Gary Bouma, and Dr Hass Dellal, appear to be religious men, they are not disinterested participants in this discussion. The absence of a secular researcher undermines the credibility of this exercise.

¹*New Scientist*, 1st September 2007 p 34. Marc Hauser, Harvard University Cognitive Scientist in his book *Moral Minds*.

²*New Scientist*, 1st September 2007 p 36. Jesse Bering heads the *Institute of Cognition and Culture at Queens University in Belfast* below is his explanation of why people believe in life after death.

He is Reader in the School of History and Anthropology and Director of the Institute of Cognition and Culture. His work has focused on the psychological foundations of supernatural belief.

Bering's experimental research program provides some of the first evidence for the 'naturalness' of belief in the afterlife. His simulation constraint hypothesis holds that a delimiting phenomenological boundary prevents people from experiencing the absence of certain categories of mental states, such as emotions, desires, and various episteme (the most "ethereal" qualia). Because we can never know what it feels like to be without such states, these natural representational borders encourage afterlife beliefs; when we attempt to reason about what it will be "like" after death—and what it is "like" for those who have already died—we inevitably get ensnared by simulation constraints and reason in terms of a continued consciousness.

His other research interests include people's attributions of symbolic meaning to the occurrence of natural events (e.g., signs or omens), the psychological mechanisms by which strategic social information is adaptively managed within human groups (e.g., confession and gossip), and the extent to which human social evolution was influenced by adaptive problems that were fundamentally unique to our species (e.g., natural language and theory of mind).

³Gregory Paul an independent researcher from Baltimore Maryland published a study that attempted to quantify the negative effects of religion (*Journal of Gary Jensen* in a more detailed study *Religion and Society vol 8, p 1*. found that homicide rates were indeed linked to passionate beliefs.

IN THE NEWS - Rape Victim, 13, stoned to death

A 13-year-old girl who said she had been raped was stoned to death in Somalia after being accused of adultery by Islamic militants, a human rights group said.

Dozens of men stoned Aisha Ibrahim Duhulow to death Oct. 27 in a stadium packed with 1,000 spectators in the southern port city of Kismayo, Amnesty International and Somali media reported, citing witnesses. The Islamic militia in charge of Kismayo had accused her of adultery after she reported that three men had raped her, the rights group said.

Initial local media reports said Duhulow was 23, but her father told Amnesty International she was 13. Some of the Somali journalists who first reported the killing later told Amnesty International that they had reported she was 23 based upon her physical appearance.

"This child suffered a horrendous death at the behest of the armed opposition groups who currently control Kismayo," David Copeman, Amnesty International's Somalia campaigner, said in a statement Friday.

Somalia is among the world's most violent and impoverished countries. The nation of some 8 million people has not had a functioning government since warlords overthrew a dictator in 1991 then turned on each other.

A quarter of Somali children die before age 5; nearly every public institution has collapsed. Fighting is a daily occurrence, with violent deaths reported nearly every day.

Islamic militants with ties to al-Qaida have been battling the government and its Ethiopian allies since their combined forces pushed the Islamists from the capital in December 2006. Within weeks of being driven out, the Islamists launched an insurgency that has killed thousands of civilians.

In recent months, the militants appear to be gaining strength. The group has taken over the port of Kismayo, Somalia's third-largest city, and dismantled pro-government roadblocks. They also effectively closed the Mogadishu airport by threatening to attack any plane using it.

GOD AND SUFFERING, AGAIN

by Peter Singer



The conservative commentator Dinesh D'Souza is on a mission to debate atheists on the topic of the existence of God. Challenging all the prominent ones he can find, he has debated Daniel Dennett, Christopher Hitchens, and Michael Shermer. I accepted his invitation, and the debate took place at Biola University. The name "Biola" comes from "Bible Institute of Los Angeles," which tells you what the predominant religious orientation of the audience was. (Biola now occupies a suburban campus south of Los Angeles.)

I was debating an experienced and evidently intelligent opponent, so I wanted to stake my position on firm ground. I argued that while I cannot disprove the existence of every possible kind of deity, we can be sure that we do not live in a world that was created by a god who is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good. Christians, of course, think that we do live in such a world. Yet a powerful reason for doubting this confronts us every day: the world contains a vast amount of pain and suffering. If God is all-knowing, he knows how much suffering there is. If he is all-powerful, he could have created a world without so much suffering. If he is all-good, he surely would have created a world without so much suffering.

Christians usually respond that God bestowed on us the gift of free will and is therefore not responsible for the evil we do. This response fails to deal with the suffering of those who drown in floods, are burned alive in forest fires caused by lightning, or die of hunger or thirst during a drought.

Sometimes, Christians attempt to explain this suffering by saying that all humans are sinners and so deserve their fate, even if it is a horrible one. But infants and small children are just as likely to suffer and die in natural disasters as adults, and it seems impossible that they could deserve to suffer and die. Yet, according to traditional Christian doctrine, because they have descended from Eve, they inherit from her the original sin of their mother, who defied God's decree against eating from the tree of knowledge. This is a triply repellent idea, for it implies first that knowledge is a

bad thing, second that disobeying God's will is the greatest sin of all, and third that children inherit the sins of their ancestors and may justly be punished for them.

Even if one were to accept all this, however, the problem remains unresolved. Humans are not the only victims of floods, fires and droughts. Animals, too, suffer from these events, and since they are not descended from Adam and Eve, they cannot have inherited original sin.

In earlier times, when original sin was taken more seriously than it generally is today, the suffering of animals posed a particularly difficult problem for thoughtful Christians. The seventeenth-century French philosopher Rene Descartes solved it by the drastic expedient of denying that animals can suffer. They are, he maintained, merely very ingenious mechanisms, and we should not take their cries and struggles as a sign of pain any more than we take the noise of an alarm

clock as a sign that it has consciousness. That claim is unlikely to convince anyone who lives with a dog or a cat.

Surprisingly, given his experience in debating atheists, D'Souza struggled to find a convincing answer to the problem. He first said that, given that humans can live forever in heaven, the suffering of this world is less important than it would be if

our life in this world were the only life we have. That still fails to explain why an all-powerful and all-good god would permit it. Relatively insignificant as it may be from the perspective of all eternity, it is still a vast amount of suffering, and the world would be better without it or at least without most of it. (Some say that we need to have some suffering to appreciate what it is like to be happy. Maybe— but we surely don't need as much as we have.)

Next, D'Souza argued that since God gave us life, we are not in a position to complain if our life is not perfect. He used the example of being born with one limb missing. If life itself is a gift, he said, we are not wronged by being given less than we might want. In response, I pointed out that we condemn mothers who cause harm to their babies by taking alcohol or cocaine when pregnant. Yet since they have given life to their children, it seems that, on D'Souza's view, there is nothing wrong with what they have done.

Finally, D'Souza fell back, as many Christians do when pressed, on the claim that we should not expect to

"Some say that we need to have some suffering to appreciate what it is like to be happy. Maybe— but we surely don't need as much as we have."

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understand God's reasons for creating the world as it is. It is as if an ant should try to understand our decisions, so puny is our intelligence in comparison to the infinite wisdom of God. (This is the answer given, in more poetic form, in the Book of Job.) But it is an abdication

of our own powers of reason, and, once we do that, we may as well believe anything at all.

Moreover, the assertion that our intelligence is puny in comparison with God's presupposes just the point that is under debate—that there is a god who is infinitely wise as well as all-powerful and all-good. The evidence of our own eyes makes it more plausible to believe that the world is not created by a god at all. If, however, we insist on divine creation, the god who made the world cannot be all-powerful and all-good. He must either be evil or a bungler.



*Peter Singer is professor of bioethics at Princeton University. His books include *Animal Liberation* (Random House, 1975), *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge University Press, 1979), and, most recently, *The Ethics of What We Eat* (with Jim Mason, Rodale, 2006).*

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“QUOTES”

PETER SINGER

The notion that human life is sacred just because it is human life is medieval.

My work is based on the assumption that clarity and consistency in our moral thinking is likely, in the long run, to lead us to hold better views on ethical issues.

All the arguments to prove man's superiority cannot shatter this hard fact: in suffering the animals are our equals.

It is easy for us to criticize the prejudices of our grandfathers, from which our fathers freed themselves. It is more difficult to distance ourselves from our own views, so that we can dispassionately search for prejudices among the beliefs and values we hold.

Hallelujah and praise the American voters; the eight-year reign of George Bush and his Republican right-wing administration is almost over!



OK, I was wrong when I predicted four months ago that McCain would win the US Presidential election thanks to a flood of anti-abortion, anti-gay, pro-creationist soldiers of God turned loose on our country on 4 November. What I didn't see coming at the time was the near meltdown of the world's entire financial system, which caused many of the more docile, "moderate" voters to totally rebel against the Republican Party, which presided over the roots of this disaster. You know the moderates: those people who dare not criticize the insanity of the fundamentalists, preferring to say, "Oh, they mean well. They just get a little excited now and then."

Republican John McCain's choice for Vice President, Sarah Palin the Creationist, was apparently another cause for his defeat. He gambled on appeasing the aforementioned "fundies", but wound up alienating the moderates from both sides: voters he desperately needed to win. As more was revealed about Palin, it became obvious that she had no clue as to how the federal government operates, and couldn't even answer a simple question about what the duties of the vice-presidential office were. The final pre-election polls indicated that about 60 per cent of the electorate felt she was unqualified to be president. More on Palin later.

So, who do we have for the next four or eight years in the person of Barack Obama? To hear Republican religious nuts talk, it sounds like most foetuses will be shredded in the womb, Islam could become the new state religion, the US will become a socialist, or perhaps communist country, and the white flag of surrender will go up in Iraq. Hmm, what did I forget? Oh yes, all guns will be confiscated, and Obama's "terrorist friends" will help him run the government! The Republican campaign against Obama was a festival of lies and name calling for the most part.

In actuality, the US will probably have *much* better relations with other countries, especially Europe, where the Bush gang created a lot of ill will. As far as state-church relations go, the crazies will not have anywhere near the influence that they did with Bush. Obama, while claiming to be religious, seems to be a more typical 21st century Democrat. That is to say religion of the moderate variety will be present as perhaps an undercurrent; it just won't achieve the tidal

wave proportion that it has enjoyed for the last eight years. There will probably be some "faith-based initiatives", but no anti-abortionists and pro-creationists running things.

Elsewhere in the elections, atheism reared its "ugly" head in the North Carolina Senatorial race where incumbent Elizabeth Dole, behind in the polls, aired a desperation ad accusing her opponent, Kay Hagan, of taking contributions from the Godless Americans political action group. The TV ad featured a home video allegedly showing Hagan trying to stay hidden at a fund raiser where she supposedly received thousands of dollars from members of this group. At the end, a picture of Hagan was shown with the audio "There is no god"; yet not with her voice but someone else's. Hagan responded in her own TV commercial proclaiming her Christianity and church attendance. Pro-choice Hagan won, and should be a welcome addition to the US Senate since she is more moderate than the far right-wing, Bush rubber stamp Elizabeth Dole.

More on Sarah Palin: Would you believe that the presidential campaign for 2012 has already begun? Actually it began *before* this election was over. A week ago, here in central Florida, a McCain-Palin rally featured the usual McCain "Country First" banners, but instead of signs proclaiming "McCain-Palin", the other signs read, "Florida is Palin Country". Also, as I write this, there are 62 auctions on eBay for Palin in 2012 T-shirts, buttons, bumper stickers and banners, etc.

My guess, based on the many polls taken over the last two months, is that she has a solid 40 per cent support from American voters. This, of course, is the group where abortion, creationism, and gay marriage trump everything else. Remember, McCain-Palin got over 56 million votes; 46 per cent of the total. Unfortunately, she will be back!

Briefly, in other contests, same-sex marriage was banned in California, Arizona, and here in Florida. Religionists spent many millions to promote the constitutional amendments. Fortunately, abortion bans were voted down in Colorado and South Dakota. With religion, the assault on personal freedom never ends.

Bless you!

Bill

HARMONIOUS MIXTURE

Replacing Christian prayers before parliamentary sessions with quiet reflection or universally accepted ideas would demonstrate to Australians and the world that we are an inclusive society. Australia is comprised of many faiths and those with none. We are socially richer and more tolerant than most nations despite this mix and it is time to afford due recognition to the secular status of governance. It has delivered to us a harmonious culture.

Traditions remain in place until there is a necessity to modify or rid them as circumstance dictates. Our laws are not dependant on spiritual ideas but on the notions held in common of compassion, fairness and equality. The enacting of these laws does not need the added impost of particular beliefs held by some politicians, which may be against the common good.

Symbolically highlighting one religion is unhelpful to parliamentary process, makes a large proportion of the population feel excluded, satisfying only 9% of people who bother regularly to attend a church. The citizens of Australia have outgrown the assumption of promoting one religion. It is now time for politicians to follow suit.

David Nicholls
President
Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc

**‘ARCHAIC’
PARLIAMENT**

by Hendrik Gout

State Parliamentary committees dealing with the rules of Parliament itself will not comply with a request from House of Representatives Speaker Harry Jenkins.

Mr Jenkins this week called for public debate on rules which order Parliament to begin each day with a specially worded prayer to ‘Almighty God’. His call made headlines in the Washington Post and other international newspapers.

He questioned whether Parliament’s 1901 standing orders were relevant to the 21st century.

SA’s standing orders command the Speaker to begin each daily session by saying Parliament will advance God’s glory. Members must stand in their places while the ritual is performed. The rule has been in SA since colonial times.

Unless State Speaker Jack Snelling reads the prayer, Parliament could be construed as not having sat properly and this could influence debates and the legality of legislation.

Mr Snelling is a member of Don Farrell’s religious

Right faction. Mr Snelling told the Independent Weekly he has ‘no problem’ with the Order.

The Standing Orders committee members say they have no plans to discuss changing Standing Orders 39 and 51, which govern the prayers.

Many MPs on both sides of Parliament believe the ancient rule is inappropriate. The prayer uses archaic language outdated by the more modern version of the Lord’s Prayer in many Church services.

“We are a multicultural society,” said Unley Liberal David Pisoni.

“We have as many agnostics and atheists as people who have a religion. Government and Parliament should be separate from religion because Parliament should reflect society.

“I don’t think I would do my job any better if, or if not, Parliament opened with the prayer.”

The prayer says all MPs “forgive them that trespass against us”. Immediately afterwards MPs usually attack each other with insults and smears.

Upper House MP Ian Hunter makes a point of reading a magazine or book during prayers. “I prefer to improve my mind by reading,” he said. “As an atheist I don’t say prayers. I see them as just one more example of archaic parliamentary practice which wastes MPs’ time.”

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Some MPs including Tom Koutsantonis, Bernard Finnigan, Michael Pengilly, Paul Holloway, Carmel Zollo and Attorney-General Michael Atkinson like the ritual.

“I support the current version of the Lord’s Prayer and the prayer for the High Court of Parliament from the Book of Common Prayer 1662. Prayers in poetry, not in prose,” Mr Atkinson believes.

“I strongly support prayers in Parliament. They are part of our tradition,” Mr Rann told The Independent.

“Prayers is an established procedure and it would offend some people to remove it.

I have no intention of interfering with peoples’ spiritual beliefs,” Infrastructure Minister Patrick Conlon said.

MPs who disagree are more circumspect.

“It’s lose-lose,” explained the Labor Member for Giles, Lyn Breuer. “Whatever you say will offend 50 per cent of the people.”

Democrat MLC Sandra Kanck does not enter the Chamber until after the prayers are read, but says changing standing orders to get rid of prayer was “not high on my agenda”.

The ALP’s Anne Levy refused to read the prayer while president of the Legislative Council in the 1980s, so standing orders had to be amended to enable the “President’s Delegate” to perform the ceremony.

Ms Levy was patron of the Humanist Society and 1986 Australian Humanist of the Year. She campaigned for abortion law reform, family planning, and equality.

Ms Levy’s stance would be at odds with the religious Right controlling the ALP today. Mr Hunter and Mr Pisoni both told the Independent Weekly that there was “no chance” of Parliament ridding itself of Christian prayer.

Atheist Foundation national president David Nicholls, who lives at Maitland on the Yorke Peninsula, said Australians had outgrown the assumption of promoting one religion and it was time for politicians to follow suit.

“Symbolically highlighting one religion is unhelpful to parliamentary process,” Mr Nicholls said. “It makes a large proportion of the population feel excluded, satisfying only nine per cent who regularly attend a church.”

Meanwhile, Parliament this week debated a Bill which would allow some stem-cell research in SA.

Such research is allowed under Commonwealth legislation but is banned in SA, creating a constitutional anomaly. “SA researchers regulated under the Commonwealth Act can get Commonwealth permission for research that would not be permitted under SA laws,” said State Health Minister John Hill.

“This amendment to our legislation will ensure we fit into the national regulatory system.”

ALP Senator Linda Kirk was dumped at the last federal election by her Right faction after she voted in favour of stem-cell research.

Voting intentions suggested to the Independent Weekly indicate the legislation will pass both Houses, despite passionate opposition from Family First and religious MPs in the major parties.

IN THE NEWS - Nuns ‘in Italy restaurant brawl’

A priest and two nuns have allegedly beaten up a restaurant boss in the village of Rutino near Salerno in southern Italy. Antonio Esposito, 49, was taken to hospital with neck and stomach injuries allegedly after a dispute concerning the restaurant lease. Italian police said the restaurant was left looking like a scene from a “wild west saloon”. The priest and nuns deny the allegations, their lawyer says. “Let’s be realistic here, all three have a combined age of 160 so it’s not very likely they are going to attack a 49-year-old man,” said the lawyer, Gaetano Di Vietri.

The restaurant is owned by the local religious order who want the property back and claim it is being occupied illegally. Mr Esposito told police that the priest hit him over the head with a chair and the nuns followed by kicking him. Police say witnesses saw three attackers throwing tables and chairs then turning on the owner. No formal charges have been made but local police are continuing to investigate.



Book Review



by John Perkins

The Purple Economy: Supernatural Charities, Tax and the State, by Max Wallace.

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PO Box 700,
Elsternwick, Victoria, 3185**

This book fills a much-needed gap. It is a gap in our ability to think more rationally about the appropriate role of religion in society, and a gap in our perception as to whether the privileges, status and financial advantages that we confer on religion are actually justified. At least, many people think that such a gap is “much needed”. But others, like those of us who think that we decidedly do not need such a gap, will welcome Max Wallace’s contribution.

Why is there a gap? Despite the popularity of books such as *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins, there is a kind of political correctness that surrounds religion, where religions cannot be criticised for fear of offending cultural sensitivities. Instead we pretend, as a society, that there are multiple religious realities that are all equally valid and true.

If all this is a mystery too hard to comprehend, then perhaps applying some economic rationalism to religion may succeed where rationalism has failed. The problem is that religious enterprises are accorded tax exemptions, whether their activities are charitable or not. These amount to at least \$500 million annually (but possibly billions), that other taxpayers must make up out of their own pockets. All taxpayers are affected. *The Purple Economy* exposes the inequity of this anomaly in detail. No one is suggesting, of course, that religions do not perform charitable works. It is just that they are accorded financial privileges that other charities are not. In Australia, they are accorded more privileges and concessions than in almost any other comparable country, and are the least accountable.

How we arrived at this situation, and what it means, is the subject of Wallace’s book.

In order to gain tax-free status, a religion, sect or cult need not demonstrate its ability or even inclination to perform charitable works. It just has to demonstrate a capacity for supernatural belief. It is then just assumed that the charitable works will justify the concessions. Legally, religions are charities with a supernatural belief. Hence Wallace refers to religions throughout the book, and in the subtitle, as “supernatural charities”. It may not be a terminology that will catch on, but it certainly serves to highlight the necessary criterion for achieving privileged tax status.

The book is divided into two parts, and the first part into three sections. The relationship between the section titles and the content of the chapters therein is not always clear, as the book is a compendium of information, thoughts and observations collected over a period of time.

The central theme of the book is that religions have accumulated billions of dollars in wealth over decades, if not centuries, due to their tax-free status, and that they are not accountable for the management of this wealth or the income derived from it. Just as the income and wealth derived from criminal activities is described as the Black Economy, the financial dealings of the religions similarly provide no tax revenue and are unaccounted for; hence the title, *The Purple Economy*.

The first section of the book, “Church and State”, goes into the historical developments that have led to the current situation. How is it that even the commercial activities of religious enterprises are considered to be worthy of tax free status? All religious works were deemed to be charitable according to the 1601 *Statute of Charitable Uses*. After over 400 years this still remains in effect in Australia.

The last time there was a major debate about these matters in the Federal Parliament was in 1936, when dealing with to the *Tax Assessment Act*. Parliament again upheld that all that the works of religious organisations were basically charitable and that therefore they were entitled to blanket tax concessions. “Charitable activity” is not defined in legislation but is left to case law.

Today federal exemptions apply to income tax, fringe benefits tax and the GST. State government exemptions cover land tax, payroll tax, stamp duties and car registration fees. Local government bodies give exemptions from municipal rates. The Melbourne City Council estimates that these concessions are ten per

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cent of revenue.

Over time, these concessions have enabled the churches to accumulate great wealth. Wallace cites an estimate of “supernatural charity” annual income exceeding \$20 billion. The Catholic Church is the largest property owner in Australia. All charities have tax-free status, and deservedly so, but it is only for supernatural charities that this extends to their commercial operations. The obvious equity question is why should the average taxpayer have to support the activities of cults, sects and religions that they do not believe in or agree with?

It is commonly thought that Australia is a secular country but this is true only in a limited sense. There may be no established state religion but there is also no “separation of church and state”. Section 116 of the Australian Constitution was intended to provide such separation, but this interpretation was rejected in the High Court’s rejection of the Defence of Government Schools’ challenge to the provision of state aid to religious schools in 1982.

Catholic witnesses to the High Court argued that religious instruction in their schools was “about” rather than “for” religion, and that therefore Catholic schools did not in any way promote Catholicism. This is a rather ludicrous argument that has hardly been heard before or since, yet the majority of High Court judges found it convincing.

The book relates some interesting arguments as to what the proper role of the state should be regarding religion. The state should be impartial between religions. This is arguably the only element of secularism that exists in Australia. The state should not “advance religion”, but it undoubtedly does, both in the form of preferential tax concessions, and in the form of subsidies to religious schools, which have increased enormously since 1982.

We have freedom of religion in Australia but not freedom from religion, it is argued. The state should be neutral, that is, it should be non-religious: neither pro-religion nor anti-religion. The state does not provide funds for atheists to promote atheism so why should it fund religionists to promote religion? It is this type of question that the book is very valuable in raising.

The rest of the book provides further anecdotes, case studies and evidence as to the inequities and anomalies that currently exist due to the inability or unwillingness to treat religion on a rational basis. Religious oaths and

prayers in parliament provide state endorsement of a monotheistic religion.

In the section on “Government and the Supernatural”, Wallace recounts numerous instances of the questionable behaviour of religious institutions and personnel. The Vatican, which with its subsidiary the Vatican Bank acts like a multinational corporation, runs over 49 casinos in Europe. In NSW there are many Catholic Clubs which generate large poker machine revenues.

In the section entitled “Interactions”, Wallace investigates the political machinations that give rise to the acceptance of the status quo. A political stalemate exists where major parties are intimidated into maintaining tax concessions and funding to religions. They may be mostly low key on the issue but if the supernatural charities feel that their interests are threatened, their influence can become toxic, Wallace says.

This is despite the fact that most people favour the separation of church and state. Wallace cites a 2006 survey carried out for the Secular Party of Australia and the Humanist Society of NSW, in which the majority favoured a new law to separate religion and government in Australia. In response to an earlier prior question, most also thought — correctly — that such a law did not already exist.

People are generally concerned about discrimination, but not when it comes to discrimination against the non-religious. If a couple is married in a church, GST is not payable; but for a secular marriage ceremony, it is. Discrimination on grounds of religion is generally unlawful. Wallace describes his own attempts to raise this instance as a case of discrimination against the non-religious with the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. Basically they refused to even consider the case.

Tax-exempt charitable trusts must file audit accounts, and apply at least 85 percent of their income to charitable purposes, but religious institutions need not. Any HREOC finding on discrimination would therefore have large implications, which they would rather avoid.

Another anomaly occurs with Christian job agencies. They are allowed to discriminate on grounds of religion in recruiting staff for their own agency, but they cannot recruit clients to their own faith. Further, Wallace cites various Census results on religious adherence, which show a large increase in those stating “No religion” in 2006. This was about 30 per cent, including “Religion not stated”.

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Wallace cites the ability of the religious to deliberately confuse and obfuscate. He refers to physicist Paul Davies claiming the US\$ 1 million Templeton Prize for “interdisciplinary Christian research”. “If Paul Davies could explain how matter transmogrifies into supernatural phenomena, that *would* be worth a million dollars”, Wallace says.

In the section on “Where is the Money?” Wallace provides more anecdotes and case studies and an annotated list of published financial transactions of the supernatural charities. A priest is an employee under tax law but not an employee under industrial law, which can give rise to quite unfair employment terminations. However all sorts of rorts are available to supernatural employees in terms of tax free fringe benefits that enable the avoidance of income tax.

Wallace also gives details of the sorry story of paedophile priests and recounts some of the scandalous abuses of the human rights of children that have been perpetrated by the presumed guardians of morality in the Catholic Church. He cites a 1988 paper titled “Moral Reference Points for Tax Reform” in which the church pontificates on the inequities in the distribution of wealth, but is entirely unreflective about the inequities inherent in the wealth of the church itself.

In conclusion Wallace argues that there is an inequitable and discriminatory anomaly in our treatment of religions and that this should be fixed. At the time of the 1936 Tax Act, religions did not run multi-billion-dollar businesses. Volunteer work is commendable, but we cannot just assume that all church run activities are charitable. In response, churches claim that their income is equal to their charitable expenses. If so, let them prove it.

It is claimed by some that the problem is too intractable to fix. But church-run enterprises are taxed in most other jurisdictions, including the USA. Australia is a supernatural tax haven. The time has come to adopt a more rational approach. At the very minimum we need a Charities Commission, as in other comparable countries, to supervise the administration of the accounts of all charities, including supernatural ones.

A flaw in the book is that if it could have done with another round of editing before publication. The more pedantic will feel compelled to make margin notes where typographic errors and oversights appear. For most readers, the content will speak for itself and the superficial flaws will probably not be distracting.

As already mentioned, this book fills a gap. But why will there be many who feel that this is a gap that does not need to be filled? In all matters to do with religion, psychological factors are at play. Resistance to rational persuasion arises because challenges to religion give rise to an uncomfortable cognitive dissonance: a fear that one’s cherished beliefs may be false. The common response is denial, aversion or more strenuous efforts to believe, rather than rational thought and reflection.

However “evidence-based policies” is the now new mantra, so why not evidence-based beliefs? After all, there is no objective evidence that sustains the supernatural truth claims of any religion. This may be an inconvenient fact but the voice of reason needs to be heard.

Generally, if alternative medicines worked, they would not be alternative. If supernatural beings existed, they would be natural. If religions were true, they would not be religions. As ever, morality is best derived from the universal principles of compassion, honesty, freedom and justice.

A WORRIED FATHER

A Jewish father was troubled by the way his son turned out, and went to see his Rabbi about it.

“I brought him up in the faith, gave him a very expensive barmitzvah, cost me a fortune to educate him. Then he tells me last week he has decided to be a Christian! Rabbi, where did I go wrong?”

“Funny you should come to me,” said the Rabbi. “Like you I, too, brought my boy up in the faith, put him through University, cost me a fortune, then one day he, too, tells me he has decided to become a Christian.”

“What did you do?” asked the father. “I turned to God for the answer” replied the Rabbi.

“And what did he say?” pressed the father.

“God said, ‘Funny you should come to me...’ ”





Heard this One?

From myths and lies and legends we receive
It's hard to fathom which ones to believe.
Suppose, (a mad idea, I must admit),
You're told this story and you swallow it:

"The world was made by someone unseen, who
Watches every act of me and you,
Knows all our thoughts and guards us all the time,
Beneficent, omnipotent, sublime.

Then, on a whim, divides himself in two
To make one half a human being, who
Gets himself condemned to death for treason,
But rises from the grave for some strange reason
And vanishes, it seems to god - knows where
Yet leaving doubtful promise in the air.
Will he reverse the trick and come again?
There's never been a witness to explain
Why we should keep up hope or start to pray
By chatting to just one of them each day.
For those who learn to kneel and grovel well
Will never feel the burning flames of hell."

If you believe this stuff you're not alone!
As reason dwindles in the twilight zone
Authorities connive to numb our minds
With childish fantasies of many kinds.

Some like to prove they're right by waging war
Others threaten tower collapse and more.
Till dire events destroy the human race.
A dismal prospect that we all must face.

The Book

We're often told, when young, that we should look
Into that jigsaw puzzle of a book.
We see that it's divided into two
Called Testaments – the Old one and the New

The old one's full of hatred, cruelty, rage
Where tales of vengeance dominate the page
Plus simple stories makeup to explain
A world they found both fearful and arcane.

The content and the lay-out were by men
Written at a time in history when
They thought the earth was flat with Hell beneath
And wanted eyes for eyes and teeth for teeth.

The New's about a Jewish man who trod
The earth they say: believed the Son of God.
How he became a self appointed priest
And sermoned in the ancient Middle East.

Accounts of him grew stranger each time told
(But that's the sort that gain a stranglehold.)
He seemed obsessed with human sin,
Made many folk feel guilty with his spin.

It's all there in the odd anthology
Of mythological theology
Actually, it's limited and tribal
But this is what is called The Holy Bible.

Joan Vaughan - Taylor

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