

The Australian Atheist

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ATHEISM:

is the acceptance that there is no credible scientific or factually reliable evidence for the existence of god, gods or the supernatural.

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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.

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The subject matter herein need not be taken as the official view of the
ATHEIST FOUNDATION
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ATHEIST FOUNDATION OF AUSTRALIA INC

EST. 1970

PHILOSOPHY

The Atheist Foundation of Australia recognises scientific method as the only rational means toward understanding reality. To question and critically examine all ideas, testing them in the light of experiment, leads to the discovery of facts.

As there is no scientific evidence for supernatural phenomena, atheists reject belief in 'God', gods and other supernatural beings. The universe, the world in which we live, and the evolution of life, are entirely natural occurrences.

No personality or mind can exist without the process of living matter to sustain it. We have only one life - here and now. All that remains after a person dies is the memory of their life and deeds in the minds of those who live.

Atheists reject superstition and prejudice along with the irrational fears they cause. We recognise the complexity and interdependence of life on this planet. As rational and ethical beings we accept the challenge of making a creative and responsible contribution to life.

AIMS

To encourage and to provide a means of expression for informed free-thought on philosophical and social issues.

To safeguard the rights of all non-religious people.

To serve as a focal point for the fellowship of non-religious people.

To offer reliable information in place of superstition and to offer the methodology of reason in place of faith so as to enable people to take responsibility for the fullest development of their potential as human beings.

To promote atheism.

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OPINION

Dear Atheists,

I am writing to you from a rather unusual location. You will probably not believe it (not without some evidence, anyway). It seems that the Christians were right after all. God really exists, and Heaven and Hell. Luckily I saw the light and repented just in time. Actually the 'light' was the head lights of a bus. I saw that bus coming out of the corner of my eye, and whipped off a quick repentance (just in case) in the nick of time. Then Wham! Too bad about the Muslims, and the Jews and Hindus and so on, and of course all you atheists. Everyone is consigned to an eternity of pain. Oh well, never mind, I am OK.

So here I am in Paradise. I have just woken up to the dawn of another perfect day. Outside my window a beautiful bird sings a perfect song. He's there every morning. I will shortly have breakfast and the food will be perfect. I'll probably have bacon, eggs, sausages, tomato and toast, all perfectly cooked, and the great thing is that you can have as much as you want and you don't put on weight. Yesterday I had three serves. Of course I will go and 'work out' a bit later, but you know all that business about 'no pain – no gain', well here that doesn't apply. There's no pain and all gain. I'm starting to look like Arnold Schwarzenegger in his prime already, and I have only had one 'work-out'. Once I have the perfect physique there won't be much point in working out any more, but never mind.

After breakfast I will probably walk down to the beach, on the perfect white sand, and go for a swim. The water temperature is perfect. If you want to surf you can catch a perfect wave every time. After that I may go ten pin bowling with some friends. Of course everyone will score a perfect 300 every game. I have a lot of friends. You can have as many as you want. They are all so nice. Always friendly and smiling all the time and they never have a bad word. Sometimes it's a bit difficult to tell them apart, what with their perfect appearance. The only couple that can be readily recognised is Adam and Eve of course (no belly button – I bet you didn't see that coming!). Later in the day we will all go to see God. We have to go every day and praise Him. I still haven't quite figured out why He needs all that praise, but never mind.

I'm not sure yet what I will do tomorrow. Oh, that's right, it's my birthday (which is counted from when you arrive in this place). Of course nobody celebrates the 'ordinary' birthdays, only the 'big ones' as they say up here, when you turn 100,000, then 200,000 and so on. I guess I'll have a nice breakfast (bacon, eggs, sausages, tomato and toast sounds nice, maybe with extra bacon) then after breakfast I may go for a walk on that perfect sand on the beach, and maybe take a swim in that perfect temperature water and... God I'm bored. Bored, bored, bored. Bored rigid, bored stiff, bored to tears, bored, bored, bored. Bored shitless, bored out of my brain, bored to death. I wish I was dead. Wait a minute, I am dead. No, hang on, I was dead but now I'm not, so I was right the first time - I WISH I WAS DEAD. I wish I had never become a Christian. I have to get out of this place. Maybe I could get permission to go down to that 'other place' for a while. Just for a thousand years or so. Just for a bit of a change. Surely a bit of pain can't be that bad. There goes that bloody bird again.

I... AM... SO... BLOODY... BORED!

Yours from Paradise (?)

Dennis

I don't like to commit myself about heaven and hell — you see, I have friends in both places.

Mark Twain

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Hello,

Please find enclosed my membership for the Atheist Foundation of Australia. While I have been an atheist, or perhaps more correctly a non-believer, I have decided to join the Atheist Foundation, in part as a mark of solidarity against ignorance, prejudice and intolerance.

The final straw of the process has been the comments made by so-called Pastor Danny Nalliah in relation to the recent (current) fires in Victoria. His comments about the fires being God's punishment for Victoria's recent changes to abortion legislation are a classic example of why people like me have to stand up against this insulting, intolerant and sickening world view.

As a non-religious family we were married by a celebrant and our children were welcomed into our family and community with naming ceremonies performed by a fantastic celebrant. Yet I have been told by another person that my wife and I are not really married – no religious ceremony – and I suppose the same sort of judgements apply to our children.

I look forward to being a part of the Atheist Foundation and helping to play a role in exposing the ignorance of many religions and the often insulting utterances of many of their adherents.

Your sincerely
Russell H.

Dear Lee,

If I may I would like to recommend a publication to AUSTRALIAN ATHEIST readers, namely *God And The Astronomers* (ISBN 0393-85005-6), by Robert Jastrow who manages the Mount Wilson Observatory in the USA. Jastrow comes straight to the point by admitting “. . . it should be understood from the start that I am an agnostic in religious matters”.

It's an interesting read, dealing with God and His (Her?) possible association with the universe. After the initial chapters dealing with astronomers such as Hubble and his contributions to early twentieth century understanding of the cosmos, and moving on to “Architects of the Universe”, featuring Albert Einstein.

Jastrow thoughtfully includes an Afterword which includes discussions by Professor Steven T. Katz, Department of Religion, Cornell University on “*Judaism, God and the Astronomers*”, and Dr. John A. O'Keefe of NASA on “*The Theological Impact of the New Cosmology*”.

O'Keefe opens his discussion with “I should like to comment as a practising Catholic and astronomer on the issues raised by the new cosmological discoveries.” His contribution dealing with astronomy initially read as I would have expected, until I came across the following: “If it should turn out that other planets bear intelligent life, then certain theological questions would be raised: e.g., did God also send his Son to them, or is it our job to evangelize them?”. What? Our job to evangelize them!? Isn't this being a tad superior?

O'Keefe also mentions the eighth-century Irish missionary Vergilius who deduced that the earth was spherical and that there must be a race of men who lived on the other side – the Antipodes. “These it was clear, had not heard of Christ; what should we think of their salvation?” This “problem” was apparently “solved” by missionaries when America and Australia were discovered! O'Keefe also mentions: “A greater challenge would be presented by the discovery of a nonhuman race of intelligent beings, because of the notion of original sin which we inherited from

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our ancestors. Would they have original sin at all? Christ came to us as, the Redeemer for our sins, what about theirs?" What, I ask, are we to make of that?

With regard to missionaries, I'm reminded of an SBS television program some time ago dealing with various island communities and the after-effects caused by the missionaries. It wasn't an inspiring program; just the opposite.

I've often wondered what the ramifications for religion might be if intelligent life were discovered elsewhere in the universe by SETI etc. (Incidentally, a good example of what might — or probably will — transpire is illustrated in the film *Contact*, dedicated to Carl Sagan who penned the book). I humbly recommend the film to atheists.

Having just read *Why Aren't They Here?* by Surendra Verma (ISBN-10: 1-84046-806-8), dealing with possible life on other worlds, I was intrigued to read that during preparations to send the Voyager spacecraft on its way quite a few years ago, replete with a message from Homo Sapiens, it was decided not to include religious material (and this is from America no less!).

However, I also find that Douglas Vakoch, a resident psychologist at the SETI Institute responsible for designing messages that are intelligible to extraterrestrials, wants to make sure that our next message tells the aliens how and what humans worship. Given the diversity of religions that abound I guess it's going to be quite a lengthy message!

And I wonder if it might include aspects of suicide bombing, the likes of which appears to be carried out in the name of a god.

Cheers for now.
Terry F.

FROM THE INBOX

Dear AFA,

I have really only just begun my journey to become an atheist after 37 years of being a Christian. As you can well imagine, it takes a lot of hard work to undo all the brainwashing and indoctrination that has occurred.

I have read books including: *God Delusion*, *God is not great*, *Adams Vs God*, and *Atheist Universe*. I have enjoyed these very much and many Christian thoughts and ideas have been discredited, but I'm still left wondering where an atheist believes the actual origin of life itself occurred. Has life 'always been', in some cellular form in one way or another?

Also, could you recommend other readings I may be interested in? I enjoy reading about origins and spread of religion, the Bible origins and its discrepancies, and

basically evidence disproving Christian views and teachings.

Your assistance would be much appreciated,

Kind regards,
Warren

Hi Warren,

Thanks for your email. It is a great pleasure to hear from someone who has managed to escape the clutches of religious indoctrination. I have never been along that journey myself, having not been subject to too much brainwashing in the days when my brain was still open

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to such things, but I have learned from others in the AFA that it is one of the most difficult things to accomplish in life.

Now to your question about the origin of life. First I think it is useful to explain that Atheists generally do not 'believe' things, at least not in the religious sense, as this implies accepting something without any evidence. In terms of the origin of life Atheists will look at the scientific evidence and base their understanding on that.

The scientific evidence is that the first simple life forms appeared on the earth about 4 billion years ago. Immediately following the formation of our solar system, about 5 billion years ago, the earth was a fireball, and life had to wait for it to cool sufficiently for the conditions to be suitable. Many organic molecules, some quite complex, have been identified amongst the interstellar dust clouds which are the birth-place of stars such as our sun, and it is known that water, carbon dioxide, methane and ammonia, for example, are present on other planets in our solar system, and therefore quite likely to have been on the early earth as well. These simple building blocks can be shown to readily react to form a large range of complex chemicals, including amino acids, with the simple application of an energy source such as ultraviolet light or electric sparks. Amino acids are the building blocks of proteins, which are necessary for life (as we know it on earth at least).

'Life' implies the ability to reproduce, so for life to get started what was needed initially was some type of self replicating molecule, that is a molecule with the ability to make copies of itself, and the mechanisms by which this may occur are understood. The actual mechanism is not known at this time, and given that these events were taking place 4 billion years ago that is not surprising, but through science we have gained an understanding of how the first self-replicating molecules could get started. There are competing theories as to whether this was based on organic or inorganic chemistry, but plausible mechanisms can be constructed for both. Certainly there was no shortage of organic chemicals to provide the primeval 'soup'. Once self-replication is underway, the process of natural selection can then increase the complexity of the collection of atoms thus formed, first to simple cells and then in conjunction with the enormity of geological time to the complexity of life as we see it today.

My explanation is a bit brief, but for an in depth discussion of this subject I would suggest some books by Richard Dawkins such as *The Selfish Gene*, *River Out of Eden* or *The Blind Watchmaker*. Organic

self-replicators are discussed in *The Selfish Gene* and the possibility of inorganic self replicators is pursued in *The Blind Watchmaker*.

It is possible that your question of where the origin of life occurred was meant to imply that it may have been extra-terrestrial, i.e., existed elsewhere in the universe then found its way here. There is a case to be made for this, as we know that there is an 'exchange' of material between planets in our solar system and between other celestial bodies, as a result of comets and meteorites etc, but in that event the life forms would still have needed to originate somewhere else, in which case a mechanism such as that proposed for the origin of life on earth would still be needed.

For recommended reading on the subjects you have listed can I suggest *The Bible - Humbug and Horror* by Michael Glass, which is on the AFA web site <http://www.atheistfoundation.org.au/humbug.htm> and *On the Historicity of Jesus Christ* by Prof. Ioannis Roussos, also on our site.

<http://www.atheistfoundation.org.au/jchistory.htm>

To help with your escape from the clutches of Christianity I can recommend the article by our President, David Nicholls - *Overcoming Religious Indoctrination*.

<http://www.atheistfoundation.org.au/indoctrination.htm>

I hope that this is helpful and wish you all the best.

Regards

Dennis
Public Relations Team
Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc

Is it not a matter of faith? God put us here to test us and to strengthen us so that we might overcome the obstacles that face us each and every day. To not believe in Him, is foolishness and ignorance. History makes it obvious that God's wrath comes when men turn their back on Him.

How can you not believe that there is a God? Who created this world? Who created you? Where does your intelligence come from? Or your stupidity? How has mankind learned how to create machines, medicines, weaponry? If you do not believe in God, do you believe in good and evil? For everything there is an opposite in life. God exists and so does the devil. Read the Bible.

We are here, simply as a test of our faith and everyone

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of us has faith instilled in them. Whether or not you choose to believe is up to you, but for those of us that do believe, we will be praying for those of you who are lost.

Jana

Dear Jana,

My name is Nigel and I will reply to your comments and questions about faith, God, the Devil and related matters.

To answer every single remark in precise detail would take a very long time, but I will try to cover at least the main points. For this reason I may not reply to your remarks and questions in the order you made them.

How can you not believe that there is a God?

Because I can see no convincing reason for doing so.

Who created this world? Who created you?

Nobody has satisfied me that this world was “created”. I do not think anyone “created” me: I was conceived and grew. In a rather loose sense of the word, my parents “created” me, but not in the sense of assembling me in detail.

Where does your intelligence come from? Or your stupidity?

From the same sources as yours do: from my genes, upbringing, education and life experiences.

History makes it obvious that God’s wrath comes when men turn their back on Him.

No, history does not make it obvious to me. If “God” is omniscient and omnipotent then, by definition, God is complete and self-sufficient and does not need to be angry (a sign of inadequacy) or to care if human beings admire him (or her) or turn their backs on him. Why on earth would a good and all-powerful God want to “test” people? The idea is absurd.

Do you believe in good and evil?

Well, there are good and evil actions, but I very much doubt that “Good” and “Evil” exist as idealised abstractions prancing around like pantomime fairies and villains. And plenty of evil actions have been

carried out by bullies who claimed they were God’s agents and carrying out “God’s will”.

God exists and so does the devil.

Really? How do you know? Did each tell you personally? And if God is so good and powerful, why has he not vanquished the Devil. And who created God and the Devil, and which was created first?

How has mankind learned how to create machines, medicines, weaponry?

It would take a book to answer this in detail, but the short answer is that machines, medicines and weapons are tools, and tool using is what has enabled generations of human beings to cope, survive and even prosper.

Read the Bible.

Oh, but I do. Some of it is fuzzy history, some of it is enjoyable poetry or colourful prose, and some of it is downright nasty and immoral. The Bible provides justification (if read selectively) for killing “witches”, mass-murder of prisoners of war, rape and other abominations. Thomas Paine (a deist, not an atheist) called the Bible “a history of wickedness that has served to corrupt and brutalise mankind”. The trouble with your God is that he sounds only too human, rather like a Bronze Age Middle Eastern warlord or absolute monarch, demanding grovelling obedience in return for “protection”. Thanks, but no thanks: I do not like Great Dictators, either visible or (allegedly) invisible.

With respect, there are more useful ways of spending your time than “praying” for those you consider “lost”. The trouble with organised religions like Christianity and Islam is that, over the centuries, their leaders have started off praying for the “heathen” and have progressed to “preying” on them. Indeed, one of the “obstacles that face us each and every day” is the socially harmful effects of several large-scale religions. Human society needs knowledge, freedom, tolerance and reasonable levels of safety and security; not “faith”, dogma and “obey or be damned” emotional thuggery.

With good wishes,

Nigel
Public Relations Team
Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc

There is only one good, knowledge, and one evil, ignorance.
Socrates

PRESIDENT'S REPORT TO THE AGM

18 MARCH 2009

Since the AFA Annual General Meeting last year, the world has changed dramatically. Civilisation has now recognised that the problems associated with global warming are real and are without precedent in human history. Responses by governments have fallen far short of requirements to halt environmental collapse, let alone reverse the trend brought about by too many, consuming too much. The best kept secret — that the depletion of oil is not a case of if, but when — has finally hit conscious thinking.

Unfortunately, old habits of excessive use are dying hard. Mouthing a need for alternatives seems to be the adopted strategy. The world financial system, with its reliance on infinite expansion by ever increasing personal debt, is faltering dangerously. Again, there is an unwillingness to admit we are living beyond our means.

Brought to a resounding end has been the disastrous George W Bush era with a new hope Barack Obama will bring sanity into decision making affecting the whole planet concerning the previously mentioned problems and more. The relevance to Atheism of this incredible turn of events cannot be understated. In his inaugural speech, Obama made a reference to American society being made up of multiple religions and of people without any religion. This could only be a clear declaration that religion is in the process of losing its privileged position. In the first days of office, Barack has overturned the Bush and Co faith based initiative of aid to developing nations being conditional on no money for abortion or family planning. He has more recently, reversed the faith-driven ban on stem-cell research.

An Atheist father with Muslim roots and an Atheist mother, raised Barack and he is intelligent. This lucky combination gives the greatest chance likely of nurturing Atheism in an offspring. It is highly likely that Obama may be a 'cultural' Christian, and feels he has to comply with the Christian religious traditions of most Americans. Even if he is not an Atheist, he has the good sense to see Atheism as no threat, something the old administration failed to grasp.

Who then can we thank or partly thank for this monumental change of attitude allowing for a heretic, or at the least, a heretic supporter into the White House?

The Resolution unanimously adopted by the 7th World Atheist Conference in India this year, and wholeheartedly endorsed by the AFA, supplies more than a clue. Allow me to read it to you.

"We, the participants at the 7th World Atheist Conference meeting in Vijayawada, India from 5 to 7 January 2009, hereby record our appreciation to Professor Richard Dawkins for his steadfast and exemplary advocacy of science and reason and for the depth and clarity of his writing.

"Through his work, Professor Dawkins has clearly demonstrated the centrality of evolution through natural selection to the development of life on Earth. He has made an outstanding contribution to the public understanding of science, has championed the supremacy of reason, and has defended science and the scientific world-view from their detractors.

"We stand in awe at the revolution he has inspired in the public view of religion, making it possible for the first time in the modern era to openly discuss and promote Atheism as a rational and ethical philosophy in almost every part of the world."

The resulting interest in Atheism is on a steep rise and Australia reflects this fervour in equal proportion to other developed nations. We may all feel at times, often justifiably, that religion is still pulling the strings and hampering social progression beyond its representative numbers. But the winds of change have unleashed a new wave of enthusiasm for humanity to reach its unhindered potential and to exist on planet Earth cooperatively

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without interference by numerous dogmatic interpretations of ancient writings. They are no longer relevant in the modern era. Not only are they irrelevant, they carry with them the promise of continuing divisiveness and even the risk of total destruction of the biosphere.

The troubles enunciated by Barack Obama will not diminish easily and, in the long term, they may even be impossible to overcome. However, there is one certain thought; we will not triumph over any of the adversities we face if a reliance on supernatural concepts blurs our thinking, thus taking it away from reasoned evaluation and the necessary actions we must initiate for life to go on.

It is a commitment to the idea of an expanding secular influence in governments throughout the world, which has the only chance of bringing peace, environmental stability and equality to all peoples. Atheist pressure on our leaders is increasing and must continue to do so until we are a powerful voice not drowned out by the many faiths pushing conflict-ridden and dangerous agendas. All the signs are that, eventually, we shall prevail.

Thank you

MEDIA RELEASE

Finally, Atheists' slogans are on the buses!

4 March 09

The **Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc** is very happy to announce there will be a public viewing of its slogan in the **Gay & Lesbian Mardi Gras** parade on Saturday 7 March.

One of the entrants, the **Sydney Queer Atheists** have agreed to run the AFA slogan on their "buses" proudly sponsored by the **Atheist Foundation**.

President of the AFA, David Nicholls said. "We are delighted to support the Mardi Gras. The parade is equally pleased in promoting freedom of expression, which we have been denied by overly staid bus advertising companies. Planet-wide attention will focus on the bus slogans in a fun-filled atmosphere.

"Bus advertising companies might reconsider their hardline stance on seeing that the world didn't stop because of a few innocent but important words placed in the public arena. Australia stands almost alone in rejection of these messages."

Happy Mardi Gras!



The only position that leaves me with no cognitive dissonance is atheism. ... Life on this earth, with all its mystery and beauty and pain, is then to be lived far more intensely: we stumble and get up, we are sad, confident, insecure, feel loneliness and joy and love. There is nothing more; but I want nothing more.

Ayaan Hirsi Ali

Coming Out Stories

Hi Guys,

Reading other people's stories about how they have come to "see the light" is most useful. We can relate to some or even all of their experiences and feelings in some way.

I, too, was brought up in a religious family and I seem to be the only one of a few that has taken an independent road. Considering the size of my extended family, that is quite sad. Some have even gone over to the Hillsong church, but I don't like to talk about this, it is too scary to contemplate!

My experience in becoming an atheist was a slow realisation and, as such, hardly the stuff of melodrama. I have also seen both sides, where there was a time I would want to go to Sunday school as a kid and be part of the Christian world. Then I grew up and saw other points of view. Never underestimate the power of logic and education, for they are powerful weapons when countering any type of belief system. For some, they are not enough by themselves. I was lucky, they were enough for me. At age 20, I finally gave myself the label of atheist and never looked back. I now view religious belief with a mixture of sadness and annoyance rather than with hostility. However, there was a time when I did, as I will relate to you now.

One aspect of religious behaviour I found to be particularly disturbing after I turned atheist was the way in which so many religious people responded to the AIDS crisis, when it first appeared in Australia. I was 28 at that time, with two young children and so many bills to pay. That same year, my younger brother collapsed and almost died from pneumonia in a very sudden and unexpected way. The doctors managed to save him, but only just, so weak was his immune system. A blood test told us that he had full blown AIDS. It was then the nightmare began. For my family and I saw society at its very worst, driven by fear and hatred. The label they gave AIDS was "God's revenge", such a cruel term to refer to people who had committed no crime. The disturbing part was that the same people, who believed that this was so, were often the same ones who prayed in their churches preaching

peace and goodwill for all of mankind. It was small comfort that this approach was softened and reversed in the years that followed. Ean was not alive to see this, for he died a year after diagnosis.

These were and still remain very powerful memories and they left a mark on how I see the world. It is so easy to go down the cynical path and spit venom at the righteous, for they more than deserved our scorn. And there were other notable incidents in our family history where religion had alienated and caused considerable trouble amongst family members. But one has to move on and get on with life, for it is the only one we have.

It truly did help me to see things as they really are and to accept the facts, rather than pray for a miracle cure. I seemed to be better prepared for what was happening and what would be the ultimate outcome. Religion has its own support structures, but if it is based upon its own flawed view of the world, then it cannot be a viable alternative. I think, in so many and subtle ways, religion makes a person blind at a time when they need to think and react in a rational manner. This was certainly my experience. Whether it is true for others in similar situations, I cannot say.

Ean's death was only one experience that showed up the many flaws in religion and how it affects people in an often adverse way. And to be fair, in amongst the darkness, there was enough light to allow me to see the good side of people; sadly, not as much as I thought I might find.

Twenty years on, there is still no miracle cure, even though there have been useful improvements in treatment and care. Sometimes, I really hate being right. It was a difficult decision to relate this experience here, for some might see it as not being relevant to the discussion about atheism. I think it is, because it is only when a person is challenged that their true colours come out. And death is a subject that is more than challenging on its own, let alone mixed with the question of morality and breaking of God's rules. The major religions were inadequate in dealing with this crisis and failed miserably. I think that is a powerful enough statement, on its own.

Ironically, I have two other brothers that are gay, with one only coming out of the closet two years ago after a 23-year marriage. Is this a record? Three gay siblings! I

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accept them for what they are, as distinct from tolerate. For we should never confuse the two words. As an atheist, I am free to make up my own mind about any subject and I see no fault in the lifestyles or preferences that they have. It is not something I always understand or even like, but this is also true for many other aspects of human behaviour. I know it means a lot to them that I do not judge and treat them as equals. My sister recently told one of my brothers that they would burn in hell. I rest my case, your Honour.

I apologise for the length of this article and I hope it has been a benefit to some of you who might read it. I have learnt never to be scared about telling it like it is, even if some find it awkward. You will often be surprised at how positively so many people do respond. That is what I think, anyway.

With regards,
Colin L.

Looking back, it feels as if I've lived two different lives.

All but four (including me) of the 39 members of my immediate and extended family are Jehovah's Witnesses. So, naturally, I spent my first 18 years as a witness.

From my earliest memories we attended three meetings a week and had a family study night once a week. On top of this, daily Bible reading and personal study were strongly recommended. Then there was the annual four-day convention, bi-annual assemblies, and of course the weekly door knocking.

All of this study was centred around the publications of the Watchtower Society (they've got a lot more up their sleeve than just the *Watchtower* magazine). Association with non-witnesses, or "worldly people" as they were called, was strongly discouraged.

So in other words I lived and breathed the religion from birth, in fact I don't think I really thought of it as a religion — it was my reality. It became the framework from which I built my understanding of the world.

But luckily, I managed to free my mind from the nonsense. I'm not sure how though: it definitely wasn't deliberate. I think my interest in science and my general curiosity saved me. The more I studied, the more questions I found myself asking, and as I confronted more and more questions my faith slowly dissolved. This took a few years actually.

However I do remember the exact moment when the last traces of my faith were shattered — when I really understood the concept of evolution.

One day I realized that evolution — a subject I had always automatically disregarded — was something I knew nothing about. So I set out to find out exactly what I had been ignoring all these years. I started reading *The Selfish Gene* by Richard Dawkins, and by the time I finished my faith was no more.

Unfortunately, by this stage I was baptised. Now to a witness baptism means you have dedicated your life to God, and the breaking of this oath is not taken lightly. The policy concerning those who have been baptised and then leave the religion is to avoid contact. So I was faced with a decision: either leave or fake it so as not to lose friends and family. I know a few people who have faked it so as not to be shunned by loved ones but that path was not for me.

Telling my father was probably the hardest as I knew how upsetting it would be for him. He is a good man and really believes the teachings of the church, one of which is that God's Day of Judgment will come within his lifetime. So for him my decision would soon cost me my life, and I hated to put him through that. But he continues to be a part of my life in spite of what some members think, for which I am grateful.

I have no contact with the rest of my family and friends but, to be honest, it doesn't bother me at all. In fact, I don't regret any of it.

To be able to see the world first hand through the eyes of the faithful and the faithless was for me rare and precious experience.

The most valuable lesson I've learned from the whole thing is not to underestimate the power of religious dogma. It's not just a trap for the foolish and gullible: given the right circumstances, I think anyone can be infected by it.

Cody

Intellectual growth should commence at birth and cease only at death.

Albert Einstein

BOOK PROPOSAL

Call for Atheist stories by atheist writers.

“Coming out of the atheist closet stories” will open the book I would like to edit and produce and sell on Lulu.com.

I hope too for short stories, sci-fi, fantasy, literary, or whatever you can write that tells an atheist tale. Poems, opinion pieces, articles, humour — all written by the members of the AFA to sell not just between ourselves, but to a worldwide audience.

Lulu.com caters to worldwide buyers and readers. (So do your best work!)

The book will be available as a hard copy or an e-book.

No deadline; send stories or articles to:

info@atheistfoundation.org.au

or

Private Mail Bag 6
Maitland SA 5573

For more information please send an email to the above address.

Start writing, AFA!

Yours sincerely,
Linda—known as “Kid” on the AFA forum.

(PS. I am a writer myself and write under my pen name of L.A. Wilson).

Thank you!

AFA FORUM AND FACEBOOK

www.atheistfoundation.org.au/forums/index.php

<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Maitland-Australia/Atheist-Foundation-of-Australia-inc/38706925484>

Don't forget to pop into the AFA Forum and to our Facebook page to say hello.

We would love to meet you.

It is a great way to keep up with what is happening each day.

If you would like to advertise an upcoming event or meeting you can do so on the Forum calendar.

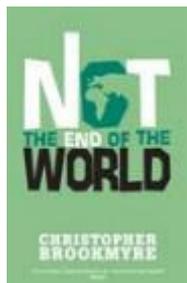
See you soon.

BOOK REVIEW

Two books by Christopher Brookmyre

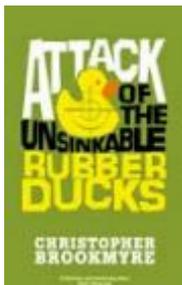
Reviewed by Peter Taylor

Not the End of the World



ISBN: 9780802139153
Format: Paperback
Publisher: Abacus
Published: July 2002

Attack of the Unsinkable Rubber Ducks



ISBN: 9780349118819
Format: Paperback
Publisher: Abacus
Published: August 2008

Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, Phillip Adams *et al* provide a reservoir of well-reasoned arguments in support of Atheism, proving non fiction is important for presenting facts, ideas and arguments. However, the impact of their revelations is sometimes limited because seldom, if ever, does any one person or situation embody all the elements necessary to make the perfect illustration of a point. This is where fiction comes in; novelists can extrapolate from reality and create ideal scenarios in which characters and situations perfectly demonstrate philosophical ideas and situations.

Writers like Ben Elton and Christopher Brookmyre cleverly stimulate our imaginations enabling us to clearly envisage the consequences of irrational policies, philosophies and social behaviour. In *Blind Faith*, [reviewed in *Australian Atheist* No.9] Elton takes a satirical look at post diluvian life in a theocracy.

In *Not the End of the World*, Christopher Brookmyre slams present day fundamentalism and, in a sharp and sarcastic no-punches-pulled, stylish thriller, takes us on a wild ride through the bizarre reasoning of the god-obsessed crazies who, tired of waiting for their god to punish sinners, decide they've been selected by the bloke in the sky to carry out his will. It's well researched and so full of philosophical asides and factual information that by the end of this rattling good yarn you'll have all the arguments you need to counter the insane notion that we should love the sinner but hate the sin, and an appreciation of the mindset and mental gymnastics required to convince oneself that the commandment; 'Thou shalt not kill' doesn't always mean that. Warning: If the probable consequences of religious fundamentalism send shivers down your spine, this novel will only increase your disquiet.

In *Attack of the Unsinkable Rubber Ducks* Brookmyre takes us to Glasgow where the 'hero' of several previous Brookmyre titles, Jack Parlabane, grapples with the apparently impossible achievements of psychic spiritualists. If you've ever wondered how mind readers, clairvoyants and spiritualist mediums work their tricks, this book will inform as well as entertain, while Jack, and the others caught in the plausible, otherworldly net, struggle to stay ahead of fraud and foul scheming that's underwritten by the world-wide retreat into medieval belief systems and the proposal that Intelligent Design be accepted as a genuine field of rational, scientific study. Another unputdownable book by one of the funniest and smartest English 'crime' writers.

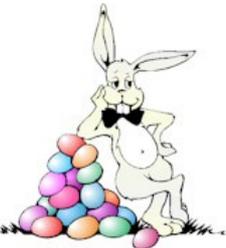
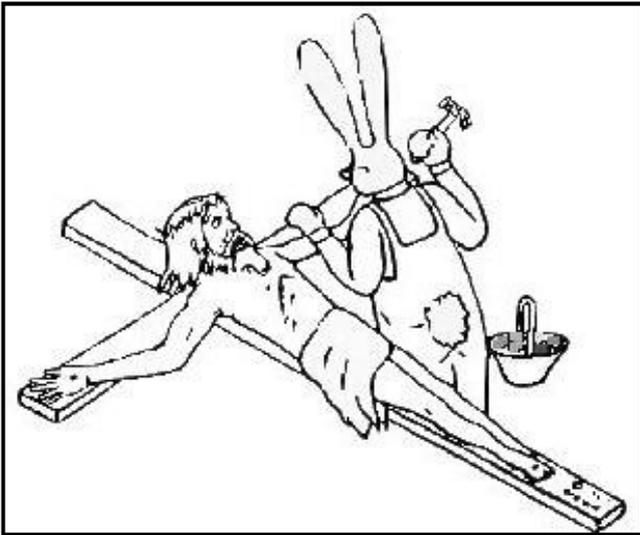
Clairvoyant, n.: A person, commonly a woman, who has the power of seeing that which is invisible to her patron - namely, that he is a blockhead.

Ambrose Bierce

MARDI GRAS 2009



HUMOUR



Q: A candy is on a table in the center of a room.
In the four corners of the room are God, an atheist,
the Easter Bunny, and Santa Claus.
Suddenly the lights go out.
When the lights come back on, the candy is gone.
Who ate it?

A



A: The atheist.
There's no such thing as Santa Claus,
there's no such thing as the Easter Bunny,
and there's no such thing as God.

Easter has been cancelled folks.
They found the body.

Jesus Christ scurried into the
carpenters shop and asked,
"Father, did you call me?"
Joseph replied,
"No. I just hit my
thumb with
a hammer."



CoolClips.com

ROAD KILLS IN HEAVEN



"It was exactly the same with me!
The last thing I saw was this really bright light..."

IN THE PAPERS



Fear of God, or fear of a difference of opinion?

By Catherine Deveny

The Age, Melbourne 18 February 09

“What do you say?”, the mother said as the toasted sandwiches were put down in front of her twin boys. The boys placed their hands together in a prayer position and said, “Thank-you, Lord.” I laughed. We were in a cafe. I laughed because they thanked God but they didn’t thank the woman who made the sandwiches and brought them to the table. They didn’t tip either.

My second-best laugh recently was at the news that Australia’s largest outdoor advertising agency, APN Outdoor, rejected an attempt by the Atheist Foundation of Australia to put slogans on buses.

British atheists have 800 buses around Ol’ Blighty emblazoned with: “There’s probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life.” So the Little Aussie Atheists decided to do their bit for the cause. The cause being freedom of speech, rational thought, intelligent discussion and consciousness-raising. In the same way religious groups try to spread the good news to help ease people’s existential pain, so too are the atheists. One man’s good news is another man’s harmful propaganda defacing public spaces.

As a rule, we atheists don’t tend to try to convert. Enlighten, suggest and argue? Sure. We’re a bit, “Well if you’re intelligent enough you’ll work it out eventually.” Blame the existence of child abuse, torture, war, hunger, poverty, pain, the inequitable distribution of wealth and the fact that God doesn’t have a *Facebook* page. This Epicurean riddle comes in handy: “If God is willing to prevent evil but not able to, he’s not omnipotent. If he’s able but not willing, then he’s malevolent. If he is both able and willing, whence cometh evil? If he is neither able nor willing, then why call him God?”

The Atheist Foundation of Australia approached APN with a slogan and a fistful of cash. APN, a company that has run religious and political slogans in the past, initially said: “Sounds good, no problems.” So APN and AFA spent three weeks tweaking, diluting and compromising until APN abruptly pulled the plug. End of discussion.

How offensive was the message? Was it, “Sucked in, there’s no God. Ha, ha, ha”? Was it, “Those hours in church bored out of your brain, those years of guilt and all those prayers? Wasted. God’s not real”? Was it, “The look on their faces when they find out God doesn’t exist? Priceless.”

No. It was, “Atheism — Celebrate Reason”. How scary is that? That was after “Atheism — Sleep in on Sundays” and “Atheism — Because there is no credible evidence” were knocked back. How flimsy does APN think people’s faith is if they’d be rocked by a gentle comment like that? How fragile would someone’s faith be if they were rocked by a gentle comment like that? If I were a believer, I’d be offended that someone would think my convictions were that shaky. How dare someone assume I was living in some state of suspended intellectual adolescence?

Aren’t we a multicultural, multifaith country that prides itself on diversity and tolerance? So APN, what gives?

APN has cracked open a can of “No Comment” on this one. As you would, considering Spain and Canada are all running the British slogan, America’s going with “Why believe in a God? Just be good for goodness’ sake” and Italy, home of The Grand Poobah of The Roman Catholics, is going with, “The bad news is God doesn’t exist. The good news is we don’t need him.” Ireland will run something similar.

The number of churchgoers in Australia is about 9% and dwindling, the diversity of spiritual belief is flourishing and atheism is going off like a frog in a sock. In his inauguration speech, President Barack Obama, a man raised by atheists, mentioned non-believers. We exist. Like it or not.

Why does the media appear to have a vested interest in portraying atheists as a bunch of radicals rather than dealing with it as the mainstream issue it is? What’s the fear?

Fancy advertising taking the moral high ground. Since

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when has the advertising industry worried about offending women by sexually objectifying them, Muslims by advertising alcohol, vegetarians by plugging meat and anyone even remotely interested in the environment by promoting petrol-guzzling four-wheel-drives as a fashion statement. This rejection of

what is free speech and falls clearly inside the guidelines of taste seems odd. Perhaps, dare I say it, discriminatory?

David Nicholls, head of the Atheist Foundation of Australia, told me that he and his crazy rationalist mates are not taking this lying down. He's made an official complaint to the Victorian Equal Opportunity And Human Rights Commission. Watch this space.

Atheists cry foul on ads

By Barney Zwartz

The Age, Melbourne 29 January 09

The Atheist Foundation of Australia has lodged complaints of religious discrimination in Melbourne and Hobart after being refused permission to put atheist advertising on buses.

The AFA raised \$16,000 from donations to put signs on buses around the country saying "Atheism — celebrate reason". This followed a London campaign, backed by anti-religion campaigner Richard Dawkins, with signs on buses reading, "There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life".

But APN Outdoor, which handles bus advertising in all metropolitan cities except Hobart and Darwin, declined

the advertising and refused to give any reason, AFA president David Nicholls said yesterday. Nor would Metro Tasmania in Hobart accept the ads, he said.

A complaint was lodged with the Anti-Discrimination Commission of Tasmania late last year. In Melbourne, AFA member John Perkins emailed a complaint to the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission on Tuesday.

"Legally atheism counts as a religion, though we say we're not one," Dr Perkins said.

Mr Nicholls said it was an issue of freedom of expression.

APN's general manager of marketing, Paul McBeth, said public buses were owned by state governments, who stipulated in agreements with APN that any advertisement that might offend the community was not permitted on public buses.

Greens MP Colleen Hartland made a statement in Victorian Parliament in support of the Atheist Foundation's plan for adverts on public transport.

Atheist advertisements on buses

4 February 09

Atheists in Britain recently raised money from public donations to put advertisements on 800 buses, saying, 'There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life'.

Thunderbolts from heaven did not strike the London bus system. All that happened was a rash of good jokes such as, 'You wait your whole life for an atheist bus, then 800 come along at once'. In the USA atheists raised money through public donations to put ads on transport telling people to 'Be good for goodness sake'.

But in Australia the proposed Atheist Foundation ads were refused by advertising company APN Outdoors, which manages advertisements on our public transport system. The Atheist Foundation proposed an advert saying, 'Atheism: sleep in on Sundays'. This is a nice bit of larrikin humour, and to my mind it is harmless.

If the Foundation had wanted to challenge people's faith, it could have pointed out the horror of religious wars or the sexist treatment of women by many religions.

As a Christian whose beliefs are based on humanitarianism and compassion, I am more offended by ads that sell commercialism than those that sell atheism.

If atheism ads took the place of the billboards telling us to buy, buy, buy, then our streets would be a better place, and I would not care if the train I was on had these ads and was pulled by the four horsemen of the apocalypse, as long as the trains were running on time in hot weather.

Some consequences of expressing an ardent Atheist message in the media

By David Nicholls

22 February 09

<http://www.atheistfoundation.org.au/forums/showthread.php?t=344>

Catherine Deveny writes an Opinion piece for *The Age* newspaper in Melbourne. On Monday 26 January Catherine contacted the AFA to do an interview regarding the long drawn out bus advertising saga. I supplied all the information necessary and an article was to appear in the Wednesday 28 January edition. It was not published.

Shortly after speaking to Catherine, Barney Zwartz (Religion Editor of *The Age*) phoned for an interview on the same subject. His article was published on Thursday 29 January. It was an interesting piece but nowhere near as condemning of APN Outdoor (the advertiser who rejected our signs in the mainland states) and the protectionism afforded religion, as the one by Catherine.

Whether Barney was supplied the same lead to the story is unknown. It is not beyond the realms of possibility that Barney's piece was used as a tone-down effort in replacing CD's rather good rant. I say rant with affection.

I heard later from a very reliable source that Catherine

Deveny resubmitted the article four times over as many weeks, but each time it was spiked (newspaper term for binned). This led to CD not being published at all in that period at a cost to her of \$2,000.

But wait, there is more!

Eventually CD wrote another article, deemed unsuitable by an editor or someone at *The Age*, and a tizzied-up and "better" version of the original article appeared therein. There is a suggestion that CD wrote an inferior article on purpose. However, the Atheist bus article was not in the Opinion section but relegated to the back page (a sign of disapproval by management).

Apparently *The Age* does not mind CD's huge following (whether of love or hate), which is larger than that of most of its other writers; but it seems the management cannot abide such anti-establishment views as CD's having equal opportunity with those of others.

The AFA is indebted to Catherine Deveny for her article, which was a hoot, by the way, and for her openly expressed Atheism.

Australia needs more writers such as CD, not less. It does not need punitive measures applied when anyone sticks their head out of the trenches of ultra-conservatism.

A very big thanks from the AFA, Catherine.

No problems with atheists after all

Letters to the Editor,

The Age, 3 March 09

Catherine Deveny (Metropolis, 23/2) seems to have formed a view of APN Outdoor based on incorrect information. APN Outdoor has run ads for a diverse range of religious organisations. We always have and will continue to work with religious and non-religious groups.

When the Atheist Foundation came to us in November, we welcomed its business. APN Outdoor recommended a range of roadside advertising sites. However, the AFA specifically wanted bus panels.

Bus, or "transit", advertising sites are public property, owned by state bus authorities. These are regulated differently from private property. One regulation is that any advertisement, religious or otherwise, that may offend the community or represent an individual point of view is not permitted.

Deveny was right on the toing and froing. We went backwards and forwards trying to help the AFA find a creative line that would meet its needs and still fall within the regulations. We also presented the

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foundation with equally impactful outdoor advertising options on which it could advertise without changing its ads at all. For starters, there are 2200 premium roadside billboards in Australia that can be used for

maximum impact. We were happy to work with the foundation then and we're still happy to work with it now.

Paul McBeth, general manager — marketing, APN Outdoor

Little faith in this corporate stance

Letters to the Editor,

The Age, 4 March 09

How wonderful to hear from APN Outdoor at last (Letters, 3/3). This belated mixture of imaginative reasoning was one of the finest pieces of creative writing I have come across. The Atheist Foundation made it clear from the outset that advertising on public buses was in line with an international campaign. There was no discussion of other types of signs.

APN Outdoor has never supplied a reason for rejecting AFA slogans, nor did it “help the AFA meet its needs and still fall within the regulations”.

There were no suggestions from APN Outdoor at all.

It is a spurious claim that regulations against offending the community, alone, determine what advertisements go on buses. Past religious and sexist advertisements say otherwise.

What words of the AFA ditty, “Atheism — celebrate reason”, are offensive? Are they a call to violence, vilification or incitement to hatred of any person or group?

No, they are none of those.

The rejection of Atheist Foundation advertising on buses is for no other reason than that we are atheists. It is therefore discriminatory and the Government should step in and support our freedom of expression.

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

HUMAN RIGHTS

Freedom of Speech, Round 5,425

By Katha Pollitt

18 February 2009

This article appeared in the March 9, 2009 edition of *The Nation*

<http://www.thenation.com/doc/20090309/pollitt>

Happy Twentieth Anniversary, Salman Rushdie fatwa! Can it be two whole decades since February 14, 1989, the day the Ayatollah Khomeini called upon Muslims to murder the world-renowned novelist and anyone associated with the publication of his

supposedly blasphemous novel, *The Satanic Verses*? Many book burnings, riots, firebombings and deaths later—his Japanese translator was murdered, his Italian translator was seriously wounded, thirty-seven Turkish intellectuals perished when their hotel was set on fire in an unsuccessful attempt to kill his Turkish translator—it would be nice to say that the world has learned what happens when freedom of speech and thought is subordinated to religious authority.

In fact, the lesson seems to be the opposite: careful, you might hurt the feelings of the faithful. Oh, and they might kill you. Rushdie's been out of hiding since 1998

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without incident, but he is far from alone. Taslima Nasreen, Theo van Gogh and Ayaan Hirsi Ali are only the most famous targets of Islamist rage. We've had the Danish cartoon riots (more than 100 dead); the Berlin Opera Muhammad-head prop flap; Random House's dropping of Sherry Jones's *The Jewel of Medina*, a steamy potboiler about Aisha, Muhammad's child bride (and the burning of the offices of the British publishers who brought it out). Most recently, Dutch MP Geert Wilders was refused entry to Britain, where he had been invited to show his admittedly extremist anti-Islam film *Fitna* to Parliament. Say what you like about Wilders, it's pretty unusual to ban an elected politician from another country.

Here on the American left we tend to see these incidents as gratuitous provocations by insensitive Westerners, and there's something to that. The Danish paper that published cartoons mocking Muhammad had previously rejected ones satirizing Jesus. The problem with that argument is that the same spirit of religious dogmatism backed by violence that shaped the protests against perceived Western insults operates, far more powerfully, in Islamic states—against their own citizens. In Iran and Pakistan, women have been imprisoned for protesting Sharia law. In 2008 Sayed Pervez Kambaksh, a student in Afghanistan, our client state, was sentenced to death for the crime of downloading a report about women's rights. Even in relatively secular Egypt, blogger Reda Abdel-Rahman was jailed and tortured for calling for an Islam that does not include Sharia.

I was reminded of these last two examples by left-wing British journalist Johann Hari, who provoked the wrath of the believers when a column he wrote for the *Independent*, "Why should I respect these oppressive religions?" was reprinted in the Indian newspaper the *Statesman* on February 5. Hari chronicled the decade-long campaign of Islamist theocrats (with the support of the Vatican and Christian fundamentalists) to insulate religion from criticism at the United Nations. This campaign has borne fruit: the UN Council on Human Rights has directed its rapporteur to busy himself not with attacks on freedom of speech but with "abuses of free expression," including "defamation of religions and prophets." Hari pulled no punches: "All people deserve respect, but not all ideas do. I don't respect the idea that a man was born of a virgin, walked on water and rose from the dead. I don't respect the idea that we should follow a 'Prophet' who at the age of 53 had sex with a nine-year-old girl, and ordered the murder of whole villages of Jews because they wouldn't follow him." Hari's column caused—surprise!—violent riots; what is more shocking, and more unusual, is that Indian authorities arrested the editor and the publisher of the

paper for "hurting the religious feelings" of Muslims. When I write about religious extremism I try to spread the blame around. So, let's not forget that just before Valentine's Day male sectarian Hindus assaulted young women in Mangalore for drinking in a pub; the pope welcomed an ultraconservative Holocaust-denying schismatic bishop back into the church and tried to elevate an Austrian priest who held that Hurricane Katrina was God's wrath against gays and abortion in New Orleans; in Israel, some ultra-Orthodox women are now wearing veils; and, of course, here at home we have our creationists and clinic bombers and gun nuts for Christ. It's true that Islamic fundamentalists are the most active and violent attackers of free speech and the most tyrannical enforcers of religious conformity through the organs of the state. But that's because other major religions have lost their control of the state (or never had it) and have had to adapt. In the seventeenth century, when Protestant and Catholic states were laying Europe waste while burning witches, heretics, Jews and the occasional sodomite, no one would have said Christianity was particularly broad-minded.

Appeals to the hurt feelings of religious people are just a dodge to protect the antidemocratic and retrograde policies of religious states and organizations. We're all adults; we have to live with unwelcome expression every day. What's so special about religion that it should be uniquely cocooned? After all, nobody at the UN is suggesting that atheists should be protected from offense—let alone women, gays, leftists or other targets popular with the faithful. What about *our* feelings? How can it be logical to say that women can't point out sexism in the Bible or the Koran but clerics can use those texts to declare women inferior, unclean and in need of male control? And what about all the abuses religions heap on one another as an integral part of their "faith"?

The clerics fight so hard to control speech because they know they are losing minds and hearts. Twenty years after the *Satanic Verses* fatwa, it's more than ever Rushdie's world—globalized, fluid, culturally impure. The fanatics just live there.

Reprinted with permission from the author.

Katha Pollitt's writing has appeared in many publications, including *The New Yorker*, *The London Review of Books*, the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*.

Her most recent books are *Learning to Drive: and Other Life Stories* (Random House), a collection of personal essays, and *Virginity or Death!* (Random House), a collection of her *Nation* columns. *The Mind-Body Problem*, a collection of poems, will be published by Random House in June.

Visit her website at www.kathapollitt.com.

Why Women Are Bound to Religion: An Evolutionary Perspective

By R. Elisabeth Cornwell, PhD

16 February 2009

<http://suicidegirls.com/news/culture/23567/>



Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression.

1 Tim. 2:11-14

Religion has both revered and reviled women, exalting their fertility and fearing their sexuality. While religions throughout history have mutated, gone extinct, and propagated—the position of women within their ever expanding reach has usually fared poorly. Yet, women are far more likely to be religious, attend religious services, and inculcate their children with their beliefs¹. Why are women so willing to give in to religious dogma and subject themselves to the degradations often inflicted upon them? This is a fascinating question, and is especially perplexing when

you consider the great strides toward equality women have gained in the West. Yet, without women passing on faith, belief, and dogma, religion could not survive through the generations.

The answers we seek shall neither come easily nor be all-encompassing. As with all things psychological, we must account for individual differences, culture, family, friends, media and politics. However, we can begin to unravel the mystery of why women willingly submit to male domination through religious hierarchies by examining our most evolved psychological adaptations. While it is not possible to cover all the details necessary to treat such a vast and complicated subject, I hope to tease you into considering ideas that challenge long-held assumptions.

Sexual Selection: Why Men and Women Differ

In case it has escaped your notice (or fallen foul of your political sensibilities), men and women differ. In terms of our physical differences, women on average are smaller, weaker, more gracile, and distribute fat differently. There are a number of physical secondary sexual characteristics, that is, characteristics that are not necessary for reproduction but differ between the sexes, some of which are obvious such as more muscular development in men and exaggerated breast development in women². Other characteristics are more subtle; For example, women have fuller lips, larger eyes, and smaller chins on average than men. These characteristics are mediated by hormones, largely testosterone, estrogen, and progesterone.

But the physical characteristics we can see are not the only differences that come about because of hormones. Our brains are awash in hormones throughout our fetal development, during our childhood, and then the familiar (some might say ominous) surge during adolescence. As adults, our hormones still continue to affect us and as we age, the waning of hormones affects us as well.

It is because of hormones that male and female brains differ. While there is no evidence for differences in intelligence (as was believed in the nineteenth century and on into the twentieth—women were not even allowed to vote until 1920!), to deny that differences exist is simply wishful thinking. Evolution cares nothing for either misogyny or feminism; it cares not

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for what is moral or immoral, just or unjust: without caring at all, it builds survival machines to carry genes into the next generation.

But what has this to do with religious beliefs among women? Quite a bit actually. When we look at some of the behavioral and psychological differences between women and men, we can glimpse some of the adaptations necessary for our ancestors' survival. What makes humans human is our large brains, and in order for our brains to develop, evolution had to 'intervene';

Ancestral women had to develop a wider pelvis to allow the large head of a newborn through the birth canal. Another way to facilitate and accommodate big brains was to give birth to premature infants. This is why human neonates are so helpless compared to all other primates.

As hominid brains grew in size and complexity, so too did the need for extended childhood, late-onset reproduction, and extended life-span. The vulnerability of infants and children would have led our ancestral females to select mates who were more likely to stay around, as well as to rely heavily on support from the group. Women would have relied on close female relatives to provide both emotional and practical support. Males within the group would have provided protein and defense against invading males. It was not only a woman's individual survival that was dependent on the group, but more importantly it was essential to the survival of her offspring. In other words, the future of her genes.

With this in mind, we can begin to understand why it is so essential for women to fit into their social group. Exclusion would have meant extinction since those women who could not live in accord with the other members of their group would have had fewer or no descendants. Thus, the evolutionary pressures that shaped the need to live in harmony with the group pressed more strongly on women than on men. This is not to suggest that there were not strong evolutionary pressure for males, too, to conform, indeed there were. However, males who risked upsetting the status quo and did so successfully would have gained an advantage in their own reproductive success. Females who tried the same would not.

Before going on, I need to go touch on a rather obvious but extremely important element of male/female differences: unequal reproductive success. This simply means that men are capable of producing a far greater range of offspring than women. Reproductive success of the average male equals that of the average female. But the most successful male is far more successful

than the least successful male, and than any female. Males can hold harems (which means that some males never reproduce at all). Females cannot hold harems—or at least there would be no point in their doing so. Sperm is cheap, wombs are costly and gestation time consuming. Women are limited in the number of offspring they can produce, while men, feasibly, could sire thousands of infants if only they could find willing partners. Thus, where women tend to range between 0 and 5 offspring, men can range from 0 to double digits (and beyond!). This very simple fact makes it far more advantageous for men to risk everything, including social exclusion and death, if there is a chance they can gain sexual access to a substantial number of women. However, women gain very little by risking it all, since they cannot increase their ability to have more offspring by increasing their number of sexual partners. Women therefore would have been under much stronger evolutionary pressures to 'play it safe' and remain with the status quo. Let the man take the risks, and if he succeeds choose him as a sexual partner.

Religion and Cultural Norms

It is not my purpose here to discuss the relationship between religion and culture, but I will suggest that, for as long as written history has existed, cities, states, and empires have enlisted the help of religious leaders, and religious leaders have relied on the protection of the state. This is true of all the major religions of today, with no exception.

Religion is a human invention, the gods and goddesses that have come and gone during our short history have all displayed the best and (more often) worst human traits. They fell in love, jealousy was common, revenge, anger and trickery prevailed, the struggle for power was universal, and all could be brought to folly and woe due to excessive hubris, greed, and lust. Soap operas pale in comparison! What concerns me, though, is that religion reflected the culture of the times—and, for better or worse, the religions most prominent today are all rather ancient beasts that grew out of a time when women were subservient to men, and often considered as property to be bartered, battered, and controlled.

So we are back to our original question: Why do women today continue to fall victim to an archaic system of beliefs that foster misogynistic behavior? Why are women even more likely to be religious than men? The simple answer is that it is safe. Please don't take this as a slight against women—it isn't. Male/female differences exist, but I'm certainly not suggesting that risk taking is a better option than playing it safe. After all, women are less likely than

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men to die doing incredibly stupid things (check out the Darwin Awards it is nearly exclusively male 'winners'). But the fact that women are less likely to push the status quo for fear of social exclusion and even retribution makes a lot of evolutionary sense.

I acknowledge that some women have in fact taken extraordinary risks and have paid the ultimate price. And I am not saying that the majority of men will risk everything in order to achieve a particular goal. But we are looking at general trends, and men overall take more risks.

Religion and Kinship

Religion creates the illusion of kinship, and kinship is crucial to a woman's reproductive success. Even today, single mothers (and fathers) who receive support from family often avoid many of the pitfalls that single parents without support endure. Family support reduces stress through emotional support as well as practical support, and throughout the last 100,000 years would have been a critical factor in raising an infant to reach reproductive age.

The instant support group that religious institutions offer remains today. Churches, synagogues, temples, mosques offer immediate female fictive kin (assumed family). Raising a child, with or without a partner, is a difficult and daunting task. Women, especially new mothers, seek out other women for advice, encouragement, and support. Certainly, women who were raised with a religious upbringing would be more likely to become dependent on these intimate social relationships with other women. This inter-dependency taps into deep psychological needs, and being excluded from it would trigger a very primal fear response.

In order for women to abandon religion and its securities, there needs to be something tangible to replace the support that it offers. This is especially true in small and/or insular communities where one could face being shunned by family and friends. And in some parts of the world, abandonment of belief would bring a death sentence to be carried out by family members.

Women traditionally have had the strongest ties to family compared to men: thus breaking those ties will be more difficult and more psychologically

painful. While nobody has done a specific study of atheism and women, it is easy to guess that those women who have been raised in more traditional religious homes, with family and religion closely tied together, are most likely to fear of rejection and isolation if they announce their lack of faith. Some manage to break through, but not without significant loss. Ayaan Hirsi Ali's book, *Infidel*, shows the strength and courage it takes to leave one's faith and family. The psychologist Jill Myton also reveals not only her own struggles against religious indoctrination, but also documents the struggles of others who left one of the most secretive and exclusive religious cults in the West.

Humans have the capacity to show great strength, courage and integrity. Sometimes we need just a little push, to encourage us to question those ideas and long-held beliefs we hold most dearly. It is threatening to question not only our own beliefs, but those of our family and friends. We feel safe, even in falsehoods, as long as others believe the same. In order for women to move on from the archaic falsehoods of religion, dialogs need to be opened and our most intimate fears revealed. Women can abandon the tyranny of religion, but it will take courage—the same sort of courage that won women the right to vote, the right to work, and the right to steer their own destiny.

Sources:

¹ The Harris Poll: The Religious and Other Beliefs of Americans 2003. Argyle & Beit-Hallahmi (1975). The social psychology of religion. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Francis & Wilcox (1996) Religion and Gender Orientation. Personality and Individual Differences, 20, 119-121.

² Other mammals do not display exaggerated breast development, and it is not necessary for lactation.

Special thanks to Andy Thomson for sharing ideas about this topic.

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Her most recent paper can be found in *Animal Behavior*, regarding evidence in support of various theories of mate selection in humans. Most recently her work has involved differences between theists and atheists on a variety of psychological profiles.

Religion is against women's rights and women's freedom. In all societies women are oppressed by all religions.

Taslima Nasrin

World Youth Day wash up

By Max Wallace

5 February 2009

<http://www.onlineopinion.com.au/view.asp?article=8475>

In December 2003 *The Catholic Weekly* reported Australia's Catholic bishops had agreed to make a bid for Sydney to host World Youth Day for 2008. Cardinal George Pell would oversee "the preparation of a bid to the Pontifical Council for the Laity in Rome". It was estimated that as many as 150,000 young people from around the world would attend. *The Weekly* reported that in Toronto in 2002 about 500,000, many from overseas, but mostly Canadians, attended. In 2005 WYD had been held in Cologne, Germany, where about 400,000 attended.

While it is titled World Youth Day (WYD) it is directed overwhelmingly to Catholic youth and the "Day" is in fact a week. It ran from July 15 to 20, 2008. The likely motivation for WYD to be in Sydney was to arrest the significant decline of young Australians identifying with Catholicism.

On April 9, 2006 Catholic member of federal parliament, Malcolm Turnbull, who had converted to the Catholic faith not long before taking up a seat in parliament, reported on his website that he was asked by the Prime Minister, John Howard, "to travel to the Holy See ... to represent the Australian Government and mark the start of events leading up to World Youth Day in 2008 in Sydney, with his Eminence Cardinal Pell and New South Wales [state] Premier Morris Iemma ..."

On the website there was a photo of Malcolm Turnbull, now Leader of the Opposition, who was later to reveal his support for a woman's right to choose, sitting alongside Cardinal Pell. So the supporter of a woman's right to choose, and a leading opponent of abortion in Australia, sat side by side, to announce federal government funding of \$20 million for World Youth Day, a major event for the promotion of Catholic values.

On November 15, 2006, the NSW Parliament debated the World Youth Day Bill allowing state resources for the occasion.

The Catholic Liberal MLC, David Clarke, said "It is expected to pump over \$100 million into the NSW economy". He said, "And what a great event it will be, with 500,000 expected to attend, including 125,000 from overseas".

It was mooted that NSW would match the Federal government's \$20 million.

So, with the benefit of hindsight, what were the profits, what were the costs, how many attended, both from within Australia, and from overseas?

According to the official WYD website, the total number of registered pilgrims was 223,000, including 110,000 from overseas.

So it seems the total number of 500,000 of attendees suggested by both the Catholic Weekly in 2003 and David Clarke in 2006, was a significant overestimation. So how much did the event cost Australian taxpayers and how much income was generated?

By June 2008, a month before WYD, it was estimated the total cost to taxpayers had blown out to \$150 million. The *Sun-Herald*, on June 22, 2008, reported "NSW taxpayers could be hit for a bill four times that footed by Canadians and Germans when they hosted World Youth Day". It was estimated the state government's contribution was then \$108.5 million including \$22.5 million for "funding related to Randwick racecourse". This latter expense was to compensate the Australian Jockey Club and horse trainers for the weeks that Randwick would be required in preparation for the Pope's final Mass.

The *Sun-Herald* reported that a spokesman for WYD said it was "misleading" to compare costs of events. He reportedly said: "Host cities start from different levels of readiness and offer different levels of service."

But Sydney 2008 had the same amount of time to prepare as other cities as the event was held 2002 in Toronto and 2005 in Cologne. In terms of the services the city was to provide, what apart from the use of Randwick racecourse was so different? And how could Toronto host some 500,000 people at a cost of A\$89.7 million, as reported by the *Sun-Herald*, while the estimated Australian cost was \$150 million for what turned out to be no more than a total number of 223,000 attendees, less than half than attended Toronto?

So if the numbers were down, how did the expenditure and income stack up?

On September 20-21, 2008, some two months after

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World Youth Day, the *Sydney Morning Herald's* Freedom of Information (FOI) reporter, Matthew Moore, wrote "Before the event the Catholic Church and the State Government financial backer were remarkably reluctant to reveal details of who was paying for what. Now that it is over, not much has changed."

He recounted a letter to the Herald the day before, written by a general counsel of the Premier's Department, which stated that the Catholic WYD 2008 organisation had requested that details of funding and liabilities be subject to a number of exemptions under FOI. One of them was "not in the public interest".

Matthew Moore noted that "What a contrast Toronto was. It hosted World Youth Day in 2002 and published audited figures, detailing where every dollar went." He concluded "It is hard to make the State [NSW] Government appear open and accountable but the Catholic Church is doing a pretty good job."

In other words, even the normally reticent state government which habitually refuses FOI requests was outshone by the Catholic Church on this occasion in its search for secrecy.

The whole sorry affair was summarised well enough by a report and an editorial in the *Sydney Morning Herald* of November 27, 2008. The two analyses spoke to the NSW Auditor-General's report on WYD. The Auditor-General had found WYD had exceeded its original state budget of \$20 million by six times for a total cost to NSW of \$120 million. This does not include the Federal Government's contribution of \$20 million. The Church itself, depending on differing reports, provided only \$10 million or \$15 million. Compensation for the use of Randwick Racecourse finally amounted to \$41 million. So the total cost was in excess of \$150 million.

The Auditor-General called for a more thorough analysis but in the Parliament the Minister for State Development refused to commit the government to a full assessment of WYD. The Herald editorial concluded it was unlikely the economic benefits of WYD were achieved as the numbers were so down, the event discouraged other tourists from Sydney and "only 21 per cent of the pilgrims used paid accommodation".

But we don't know for sure because neither the government nor the church is willing to be totally frank about the whole affair. It is arguable that if WYD had generated a profit there would be no such reluctance.

WYD cost taxpayers considerably more than it did in

Toronto and Cologne and the final balance remains opaque. Meanwhile, public hospitals in NSW are told to cut back seriously strained resources and public schools have to fight for funding from the government table. But the church was given what was in effect a blank cheque.

Cardinal Pell was cited in *The Australian* on May 27, 2001 saying "the separation of church and state in Australia is a blessing and we should preserve it".

In the United States the outright gift of vast sums of taxpayers' money to a church is held to be a breach of separation of church and state and therefore unconstitutional.

So how can Australian federal and state governments give tens of millions of dollars to a church when there is a separation of church and state? The answer is there is no constitutional separation of church and state in Australia. In 1981 the High Court interpreted s.116 of the Federal Constitution to mean there is no separation. A High Court challenge to WYD funding came to nothing. There is no section in the NSW Constitution separating church and state. Cardinal Pell was wrong.

Accordingly, there is no problem for a government to give any amount of taxpayers' money to a church in the future. Strictly speaking, the constitutional monarchy that is Australia, unlike the republic of the United States, is not a fully realised democracy. It is a soft theocracy where church and government purposes coincide to garnish taxpayers' money and resources where governments perceive it will afford an electoral advantage, both structurally through tax exemptions, and functionally through grants, given there is no constitutional bar. WYD 2008 was just one more, expensive example.

But there was another cost of WYD which went unnoticed. By staging the event in Sydney, the church added significantly to greenhouse gases generated by the majority of the 110,000 visitors who flew vast distances to participate. Had WYD been held in North America or Europe the greenhouse gas footprint would not have been so large.

In April 2008, three months before WYD, the Pope announced seven new sins. Number four was "polluting the environment".

Max Wallace is the Director of the Australia New Zealand National Secular Association. His book, *The Purple Economy: supernatural charities, tax and the state*, was published December 2007.

NEWS ITEMS

Compiled and edited by Lee Holmes

Rape victim sentenced to 100 lashes

A Saudi judge has jailed a woman for a year and sentenced her to 100 lashes after she was gang raped.

The woman, 23 who is pregnant after her ordeal, was ruled to have committed adultery.

She was reportedly raped after accepting a lift from a man who took her to a house east of the city of Jeddah, where he and four friends attacked her throughout the night.

She later discovered she was pregnant and made a desperate attempt to get an abortion at the King Fahd Hospital for Armed Forces.

According to the *Saudi Gazette*, she “confessed” to having “forced intercourse” with her attackers and was brought before a judge.

She is still pregnant and will be flogged once the child is born.

Abortion for 9-year-old rape victim in Brazil

“Life must always be protected”, said Cardinal Giovanni Batista Re in an attempt to defend the Catholic Church’s excommunication of the mother and doctors of a nine-year-old rape victim, who underwent an abortion.

Although the girl fell pregnant after apparently being abused by her stepfather, her twins had, “the right to live, and could not be eliminated” he said.

The Cardinal went on to say, “It is a sad case but the real problem is that the twins conceived were two innocent persons. Life must always be protected.”

The girl’s mother and doctors were excommunicated for agreeing to an emergency abortion. The Church has not taken formal steps against the stepfather, who is in custody. Jose Cardoso Sobrinho, archbishop for Pernambuco where the girl was rushed to hospital, has said that the man would not be thrown out of the Church, because although he had allegedly committed “a heinous crime”, the Church took the view that “the abortion, the elimination of an innocent life, was more serious.” “The law of God is above any human laws. If a human law created by legislators works against God’s law then it has zero value.”

Luiz Ignacio Lula da Silva, President of Brazil said, “As a Christian and a Catholic, I deeply regret that a bishop of the Catholic Church has such a conservative attitude.” “The doctors did what had to be done: save the life of a girl of nine years old. In this case, the medical profession was more right than the Church.”

The young girl at the centre of the case escaped excommunication only because she is still a child in the eyes of Church authorities.

Abortion is illegal in Brazil. It is permitted only in cases of rape or a medical emergency, where the pregnant mother’s health is at risk if the birth goes ahead.

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