

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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1970

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



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

In listening to debates by people such as Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens and others with religious folk, the argument from design is a favourite of the religious, and not just those of the creationist or “intelligent design” school. The argument goes something like this: Just look at the universe and how marvellous it is. Even scientists say that the basic physical constants, such as the gravitational constant, are so finely tuned that if only one of them were different by a tiny amount the universe would not exist. And just look at the earth with its finely tuned environment and ecosystem, all so perfectly arranged to suit human existence. And look at the complexity of life, and in particular the perfection of the human body, and how can you not believe that there is a divine creator behind all this?

So let’s have a look at the universe, the earth and the human body, and see how well the designer has done.

First the universe. It has now been established that the expansion of the universe is accelerating. That means that ultimately all stellar objects will be so far apart that no light, and therefore no signal of any kind, will be able to pass between them. The universe is condemned to a cold, black, death. Of course for humans there are other fates awaiting. Our nearest galaxy, Andromeda, is headed straight for the Milky Way, and will collide with it in about 5 billion years. And if that’s not enough, our sun is heating up, on its way to becoming a red giant, and in about a billion years the surface of the Earth will become too hot for liquid water to exist. On a shorter timescale, there are asteroids, like the one that was possibly the reason for the annihilation of the dinosaurs. There could be one out there with our name on it.

Now what about the earth. It is just the right distance from the sun to be not too hot and not too cold for life to exist on it. It has just the right amount of oxygen, has liquid water and so on. But the earth’s climate is finely balanced, and an extended period of global warming or a new ice age could signal the end, at least for us mammals. And just look at how precarious our situation is. If the earliest known vertebrate, called *Pikaia gracilens*, found in the Burgess shale, had not survived, then we would not exist. And at one stage in our evolution the human race was within a few thousand people of going extinct, just as 98 per cent of all life forms that have ever existed on earth have gone extinct.

And what of the human body? Consider these things. Nerves that are inherited from fish and travel from the brain to the diaphragm can become irritated and trigger hiccups, a closing of the entrance to the windpipe, an action that is a hand-me-down from amphibians that breathe with both lungs and gills. In human males, the urethra passes right through the prostate gland, a gland very prone to infection and subsequent enlargement. This blocks the urethra and is a very common medical problem in males. The gut is supported by being enclosed in a big membrane called the peritoneum. The peritoneum is attached to the backbone. This is fine for a four-footed animal. However, given an animal with an upright posture (e.g., us) the gut falls to the bottom of the abdominal cavity, and the common outcome may be various types of hernia. The big maxillary sinuses or cavities are behind the cheeks on either side of the face. They have the drainage hole in their top, whereas a drainage hole in the bottom would enable gravity to assist in drainage of fluid. We breathe through the same hole that we use for eating (many people choke to death each year as a result). And a key component of our eyes (the photosensitive cells) are built backwards — light has to pass through the nerve cells to reach the photosensitive cells (rods and cones), resulting in reduced vision and a blind spot. Interestingly the designer took a bit more care with the eyes of squids and octopuses, which are the “right” way round, with light falling on a lining of photosensitive cells inside the eye, with the nerve cells behind them, on the outer side.

As Christopher Hitchens often says during his debates “Some design!”

Dennis

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

To the Editor

For those rationalists who despair that we are a minority, there is some joy to be had. Get hold of Ricky Gervais "Animals". Watch it again and again. And cheer yourself with the thought that, not only is there plenty of great new (rationalist) comedy material around, but this guy is also the producer of the most popular podcasts in the world.

Religion is, of course, an easy mine for comedy extraction, but Gervais' particular double-irony style hits the motherlode. His reading from the Old Testament had me, a lifelong atheist, reaching for a hitherto unopened Bible on my bookshelf. Wow!... Who'd a thought? It's terrific stuff! The Bible!? Well, it's surreal and absurd. It's fantastic and epic. It's Lord of the Rings and Harry Potter and Alice in Wonderland and 300 and Mad Max and Gladiator all rolled into one. Brilliant! Who wrote this thing? Why haven't we heard more about the author? And as Gervais implies, if you don't accept every single story in the Book then... You're just not suspending enough disbelief. Shame.

Trevor

Dear AFA,

I am a new member and I write by way of thanks for my first edition of your magazine. From everything I have read, both on the home website and the magazine, I have found myself really quite inspired. It is such a wonderful revelation to have opened up this universe of resources and contacts to such an organization full of like-minded people.

I was born and raised a Catholic and I grew up in the sixties where everyone had a Holden in the driveway, you went to the football on Saturday and everyone went to church on Sunday morning. I could not wait to get home from church so that I could watch *Nature Walkabout* with Vincent and Carol Serventy. Have I invoked a few memories for some of you?

The Catholic education system was a cold and cruel place in the sixties. Teaching children was a matter of beating knowledge into them and the pretty ones could find the close attentive eye of the parish priest a frightening prospect. I am sad to say that I found the government secondary school system of the early seventies to be an equal den of sadism and paedophilia. But the nuns, they were something special: cold, cruel, sadistic failed human beings who could not have survived in the real world; and their revenge would be wrought upon the terrified children in their care. I clearly remember the maths tests where every wrong question would mean one beating. I got 14 questions wrong once and was sent home black and blue with strict instructions to conceal my pain as a sacrifice for God and I would get worse again if I said anything to my parents.

As a young primary student I had an unusual way of holding a pen and when I was deep in concentration writing something for my school work, the three-foot blackboard ruler would suddenly come crashing down on my hand, followed by an outstretched accusing finger and a declaration that my penmanship was "The Devil's work!" Pity the poor kid next to me who was left handed: he was beaten for writing with his natural hand and then when they forced him to write with the other he was beaten for poor penmanship.

The seeds of my atheism were sown at a young age; I just didn't realise it. As I grew into adolescence, I began to question the belief system that had been forced down my throat. To reflect upon the cruelty of a flawed educational system is but the least of motivations for questioning a faith. True maturity is the ability to question that which you have been expected to believe and not to be content with an unjust means of conditioning because society thinks it is "for the best."

After a lifetime of reflection, I have concluded that religion truly is an ingenious form of crowd control with three simple rules:

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- (1) Keep the people poor.
- (2) Keep the people stupid.
- (3) Keep the people scared.

Result: you will keep the people in line. This applies to every religion on the face of this planet. The concept of a (or any) god is that of an irrational, cruel, cold-hearted beast which preys upon the weak, irrational mind of the gullible and the frightened.

Now that I have discovered this platform for the advancement of a movement which subscribes to logic, reason and the truly solid foundation of science and knowledge, I am heartened and humbled for reasons other than pathetic superstition.

Michael A. Hinch

PS. Remember to break a mirror on Friday the 13th. They say it is good luck.

Credit where Credit's Due

By Fernando Gomez

I am an atheist, but a fair minded one. I like to give credit to those who have earned it — even if it happens to be God.

For many years I have been increasingly disturbed by the common practice of only thanking God for half his work. For example, if I trip over the carpet, twist my ankle but miss the coffee table by millimetres then I might be heard to say “Thank God I didn’t crack my head on the coffee table and bleed to death!” When I read about a car accident, I will often read “Thank God no one was seriously hurt”. Just the other day I read about a couple who were attacked by two savage dogs, whilst walking along the beach and — you guessed it — their comment was “Thank God our disabled son was safe!”

So you see my point? God only gets the credit for things that didn’t happen: I didn’t smash my head on the coffee table; but not for the things that actually took place: I tripped on the carpet and twisted my ankle. Fair? Methinks not.

So I have decided to remedy this situation and I invite you to join me. From now on if I trip over the carpet and badly twist my ankle then I will say “Thank God I tripped over the carpet and twisted my ankle”. Or “Thank God I spilled coffee over my pristine white shirt on my way to a job interview”.

Now before you decide whether to join me or not, I feel it fair to warn you of some of the consequences of this approach. I have noticed that people become quite annoyed at me especially if, when reading about a plane crash, I mutter “Thank God the plane crashed and all those people were killed”. You see I think my comments are interpreted as a sense of gladness that these things occurred. This of course is not correct; I am very distressed at these events and feel very sad about the human suffering involved — my ankle included. My attempt is simply to make the point that, if God exists, then He should be thanked for all events, not just some.

So there you go. If you choose to join me and end up berated by others, divorced, disowned or excommunicated, or you even get your head punched in, then at least you know who to thank.

In the beginning the Universe was created. This has made a lot of people very angry and been widely regarded as a bad move.

Douglas Adams

HERETICAL HAPPENINGS

KEEPING YOU IN THE KNOW

Greetings,

Nicolas Patrick, a lawyer working for DLA Phillips Fox contacted the AFA on the 25 March this year. According to its web site, <http://www.dlaphillipsfox.com>, DLA Phillips Fox is one of the largest law firms in Australasia, and has an exclusive alliance with DLA Piper, one of the largest legal services organisations in the world, with lawyers in 28 countries.

Nicolas is the director of the Pro Bono division of DLA Phillips Fox. After hearing an interview with me on the ABC *Religion Report* he became aware of the problems the AFA was having with our advertising campaign proposed for buses. As a result, the AFA will be making an official complaint to a number of anti-discrimination bodies in various states, and this may involve the Supreme Court. It is also a distinct possibility that we will legally challenge states with inadequate legislation in the United Nations.

Working for Nicolas is Alison Ewart, solicitor. Alison has extensively interviewed Lee and me about the sequence of events. Both Alison and Nicolas have a dedicated commitment to human rights. The AFA is extremely grateful to them and the companies supporting them in the pro bono work performed in many countries. So, folks, hang onto your seats, the AFA is about to make an international splash!

Speaking of international events, the undeniably futile “War on Drugs” is coming under increasing fire from a growing number of commentators, politicians, journalist and knowledgeable persons. The prohibition of certain drugs has proved to be a gigantic and ineffective worldwide policy. In Australia the drugs task force was first headed by a former Salvation Army officer, Brain Watters. Religious wowsers, racism and the protection of commercial interests initiated the whole shameful affair.

Some commentary is available here:

Terry Nelson, a member of Law Enforcement Against Prohibition and former federal agent with the US Border Patrol, the US Customs Service and the Department of Homeland Security.

<http://www.smh.com.au/opinion/drug-laws-allow-gangs-to-flourish-20090403-9rej.html?page=-1>

And here: Michael Duffy, “Drug laws allow gangs to flourish” (SMH)

<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/latenightlive/stories/2009/2531099.htm>

On the AFA web site is an article on drugs written by Dean Dowling, AFA Committee Member.

<http://www.atheistfoundation.org.au/drugs.htm> It has been there since May 2005 and, unlike many other articles on our site, there has never been an attempt at refuting its contents. The AFA considers there needs to be a total rethink of the so-called War on Drugs, taking it away from punitive measures to some kind of decriminalising, accurate education and harm minimisation. Page 8 of this issue has an edited version of Dean Dowling’s Paper.

Richard Dawkins Down Under!

Wonderful news everyone! A very exciting occasion is heading our way next year. Atheist Alliance International, of which the AFA is a member, is proposing we combine with them in having a convention in Melbourne in March 2010. With guest speakers the calibre of Richard Dawkins, Phillip Adams, Catherine Deveny, and yet to be finalised notable international and national presenters, it will be a once-in-a-lifetime event not to be missed. The convention will run from Friday night 12 March until Sunday midday with the cost of registration and meals about \$250 per person and less for concessions. The theme is “The Rise of Atheism.”

We are still in the early planning stages but it would be of great assistance if those who have an interest in attending the convention contact head office by phone, letter or email and let us know. An estimate of numbers is critical to the success of this venture. Just write the word “Convention” in the subject line when replying by email.

Until we meet again,



Drugs and the Law.

Extracts taken from Dean Dowling's article on the AFA web site.

Current laws regarding illegal drugs are irrational and the punishments cruel and unjust. Instead of questioning the validity of these laws, Judges accept them unquestioningly, and subsequent convictions make criminals out of otherwise law abiding citizens.

Australians labour under the misconception that all drugs except alcohol should be prohibited and automatically defined as “dangerous drugs of addiction”, regardless of whether there is proof of pharmacological harm.

There is, in fact, no reputable evidence that all drugs currently labelled ‘illegal’ are in fact “dangerous drugs of addiction”! Drug laws have been established by decree, and are based on belief, not scientific facts. This means that imprisonment and confiscation of property for possession and/or use, are frequently cruel and unjust punishments.

98% of drug deaths in Australia are due to alcohol/tobacco.

In 1980 (the year of the Justice E.S. Williams Royal Commission on Drugs) the Federal Department of Health figures on death due to drugs were:

Narcotics 90,
barbiturates 280,
alcohol 3600,
alcohol-related 1829,
road alcohol 3478, (total alcohol 8907),
tobacco 16,200.

Similar figures have occurred every year since.

Even in drug ravaged U.S.A. in 1985 the deaths due to alcohol/tobacco were 400,000 compared to only 3562 due to *all* the illegal drugs combined!

Ethically and logically, if drug penalties were proportional to their pharmacological harm, producers and users of the drug Alcohol should get the longest prison sentences.

The Christian Temperance movements from the 1850's onwards campaigned for alcohol and other drug prohibition. Religious authorities desire power and control over how people obtain spiritual pleasure and happiness, so they demand proscription of drugs over which they have no control.

In Hindu India, however, hashish is used in their ritual worship of Shiva, one of their trinity of gods. A bag of hashish can be bought in government shops for \$5.00 but if brought into Australia you may get 20 years, or in Bali, execution or life imprisonment.

Drug prohibition causes the growth of criminal gangs, house breaking, violence, fraud and police corruption. The *real* crime, though, is “Criminogenesis”... Laws that make criminals out of otherwise decent, law-abiding citizens!

If Australian courts fail to redress the injustices of present laws, there is a danger we may regress further and become like the U.S.A. where there are appalling injustices including disproportionate confiscation of property, even before the trial (if found not guilty one can attempt to claim it back), coupled with mandatory prison sentences of 5 years without parole for “manufacturing” 100 or more marijuana plants. Already in Australia, when people speak about drugs it's as if we are still in the Middle Ages. Driven by fear and ignorance, our courts, law makers and police conduct ‘witch’ and ‘heresy’ hunts; humiliating, imprisoning, and confiscating property on hearsay and anonymous dobbing-in! Is this the society we want?

The full version can be viewed at: <http://www.atheistfoundation.org.au/drugs.htm>

FROM THE INBOX

Hello

My name is Ronni and I am a Year 12 student. I am currently studying Studies of Societies and we are required to research a social ethics issue and I have chosen to do voluntary euthanasia. I was just wondering if I would be able to have some help from someone from this organisation to answer some questions on euthanasia that I can use in this assignment.

Any help would be greatly appreciated.

Yours truly,
Ronni

Hello, Ronni, here are my personal* views on the questions you asked.

1. What is your view on voluntary euthanasia?

It should be legal, voluntary, and accessible to everyone who desires it. These things should be considered:

- It must be voluntary. No one should ever be coerced into suicide.
- Euthanasia simply means a peaceful death.
- We are all going to die; the lucky ones more or less peacefully in their beds. There is nothing unusual about dying.

Related opinions garnered from a few years experience of a Nursing home:

Unfortunately, the advantages of modern medicine have a flip side. Instead of simply dying quickly of a heart attack, pneumonia, or some virulent disease as elderly people have done for the last two hundred thousand years, they are rushed to hospital, pumped full of antibiotics, put on respirators, given heart bypasses, have gangrenous limbs amputated, spinal canals honed out, broken hips and knees replaced or stapled together... and then sent home to live in pain and fear of the next catastrophe.

When their waterworks give out they'll get a catheter stuck through the abdomen into the bladder and a bag hanging down their trouser leg. Weak knees and shaking muscles will eventually prevent them from living alone so, at great expense to the state, knee joints are replaced, and they're pumped full of pills that will: raise heart beat; lower blood pressure; lower cholesterol; thin the blood; keep stools soft and bowels

moving along nicely; stop the shakes; put them to sleep; wake them up and a host of other things. Then they're deposited in a nursing home where they're bullied by some impatient nurses, treated like pets by others, spoken to as if they're not all there by everyone, fed, watered, turned, have the dribble wiped off their chins, visited less and less frequently by relatives, and long for release as they slowly deteriorate.

Then another bout of pneumonia that would normally kill them peacefully, instead is the trigger for another trip to hospital where a stroke renders the right side of the body useless so the hand and foot curl up and cramp and physiotherapy is prescribed but the pain is alarming. Overworked nursing assistants spoon feed and hold cups to quivering lips — but even so dehydration is common. They can't turn on or off the TV or radio, and can't hold a book to read. The other occupant of the room has dementia and screams most of the night calling out for his long dead wife. Strong male nurses lift them into their wheelchair, tip them back at an alarming angle and wheel them at speed through green painted corridors to the 'lounge' where they are strapped into a chair to prevent them falling out. The person next to them is asleep and has wet himself. The place smells of disinfectant and urine. But at least they are alive! They should be grateful. Disconsolately they wonder if god would really have been angry if they'd been allowed to die naturally at the first heart attack. But it is too late now. On entering a nursing home they gave up all rights to their body. They can beg till they're hoarse — they will not be allowed to die until the last medical procedure has been exhausted.

2. What are the concerns around legalising voluntary euthanasia?

Ensuring there are proper legal safeguards so elderly invalids aren't bumped off by those who stand to inherit.

3. Should we allow it in Australia? Why/why not?

Yes, of course we must. We shoot horses that have no quality of life. We'd consider it inhumane to allow a pet dog to lie in agony for years if it had been hit by a car, had lost the use of its legs, was incontinent and needed feeding, which is why veterinarians have a supply of Nembutal. There are a great many people who do not want to end their days like that and/or in pain. We are told that palliative care will control the pain, but that is not always the case because laws

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prevent the use of enough morphine in some cases. And it is hardly the point! To be considered a 'life', the way we live has to have a certain quality. Lying in a hospital ward or at home for years helpless and in pain is not living, it is merely existing.

The unspoken and deliberately ignored terrible consequence of refusing euthanasia to those who desire it, is that, according to anecdotal evidence, healthy elderly people who do not want to become nursing-home invalids whose brains are still functioning perfectly but their bodies aren't [as described above] are suiciding long before they arrive in that situation! They do this in case they are suddenly unable to do it themselves.

These tragic, early, unnecessary suicides are committed because the government has made Nembutal an illegal substance. When it was possible to simply drink a glass of Nembutal to ensure a quick, painless and dignified death, it didn't matter if you became physically frail. But now the only means of suiciding are difficult, painful, messy, slow and not foolproof. What chance has an elderly frail person of shooting or hanging themselves, jumping off a tall building, tying a plastic bag over their head and tight around their neck till they suffocate, gassing themselves in the car, slitting their veins, jumping in front of trains or semi-trailers...?

Note well that there's no law against doing any of those things, but they require the ability to move easily, and/or a private space that no one will enter for several hours, and, in the case of jumping from a building or in front of a truck, can cause severe emotional or physical trauma to others. An American was killed a few years ago when a woman jumped onto him from the tower of Notre dame in Paris. The potential suicide survived and lived long and painfully in hospital — charged with involuntary manslaughter.

There is no reason in logic, humanity or anything else for banning a chemical that will grant people who desire it a gentle death... it is cruelty pure and simple, and the result of a foolish belief that we belong to a god — not to ourselves. If politicians listened to the majority of Australians instead of the rich and powerful religious leaders, Australia would have humane laws like Holland, Belgium and the other civilized countries.

4. Why do you believe that euthanasia is such an emotional issue?

People fear death because religions have convinced them they will go to hell and be tormented for eternity if they haven't exhibited enough faith in the correct god. This makes them want to live as long as possible

to put off the 'day of judgement'. Religions have also convinced people that everyone is unique and specifically made by god, who takes a detailed interest in whether or not that person is worth 'saving'. They reckon we do not own our bodies or lives; we are 'owned' by the god who 'made' us, and it is only up to him to take our life. If we do it too soon he will be angry and send us to hell for eternity. [This doesn't stop Christian ministers and priests from blessing battle ships; chaplains from going to war to assist soldiers to fight; and religious funerals praising dead soldiers for killing their 'enemies'.]

There is also the fear that when they get old their children will 'help them along' before they are ready, and this leads to the spurious argument called the 'slippery slope' that goes like this: — If we allow doctors to assist ill people who want to die, then before long they'll be assisting people who don't want to die to make more space in hospitals, for example. This is fallacious propaganda from religionists that takes no account of the facts. Countries that permit strictly controlled euthanasia have discovered there is no abuse.

5. Do you agree that there should be strict criteria met with before a terminally ill patient could go through with euthanasia if it were to be legalised? What, in your opinion, should the criteria be?

Of course there must be safeguards such as:

- The person desiring assisted suicide must have stated his or her desires while in a legally sound state of mind, before unbiased legal witnesses such as lawyers or justices of the peace, who record this in writing and sign.
- He/she must be of sound mind at the moment of death, or, if they are unable to communicate due to trauma, or being in a coma... their appointed agent who has Enduring Power of Attorney, must agree that euthanasia is to take place.
- Two qualified medical practitioners must agree that the patient's condition is terminal.

Peter
Public Relations Team
Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc

* These opinions are endorsed by the AFA.
David Nicholls
President

Hi, I am researching a story on Atheism and Religion for my University Assignment, with a view to publish. I would like to interview someone from the

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Atheist Foundation who will answer my questions.

Regards,
Jason

Hi Jason,

I am Tanya, one of the PR Team members and I will respond to your questions.

Can you explain to me why you are an Atheist, and how you became one?

I am an atheist because it never made sense to me to just believe in something — I always wanted to know the “why” and “how” of everything. There is a fundamental disconnect between those who have the capacity for faith — belief without proof — and those such as myself who don’t really “believe” in anything, but require credible evidence and a rational explanation before forming opinions.

I have been an atheist since I was old enough to understand the concept of religion and its flaws, probably around the middle of primary school. I was raised in a “no worldview” household where my parents neither promoted nor particularly argued against any religion. I didn’t make a conscious decision to be an atheist, it was a natural derivation from my rational approach to life and the more I see of religion and its impact on society, the more I am convinced that atheism is the right approach.

Do you think Atheism is becoming more popular in Australia, and globally? Will Atheism ever become a political force, such as religion.

Yes, I think that as more people are made aware of the atheist approach — including through media coverage and the bus campaign if it proceeds — it will gain greater popular acceptance. Atheism promotes social tolerance and cohesion whereas religion (particularly the various versions of Christianity in Australia) is often used as an excuse for discrimination and restrictions on individual freedoms. Over time Australia has evolved into a progressive and generally tolerant society, which should be conducive to the atheist approach. Also, as a broad generalisation, in Australia older people are more religious than younger people so generational change will support the greater popularity of atheism. Australia is already a well-educated society and there is evidence that atheism is correlated with education so globally I think that as living standards rise over time and education is more prevalent it is likely that atheism will also become

more prevalent on a global basis.

I think it is more difficult for atheism to be a political force than religion because it is based on a proposition about reaching conclusions based on evidence rather than religious dogma. Rational people may disagree about conclusions, place different weightings on various facts or may interpret the same evidence in different ways, so there isn’t necessarily a cohesive atheist view on any particular political issue. Also, atheists don’t have anointed “leaders” in the same way Catholicism has priests or Islam has mullahs, so there isn’t necessarily someone who has authority to speak for atheists collectively. Rather than try to be a political force, I think atheists achieve their aims if they neutralise any influence of religion in the political process, allowing government decisions to be made on rational grounds, based on evidence.

In your opinion, do you think religion adversely affects the political agenda in Australia, i.e. Euthanasia, Censorship.

Definitely. Religion (in Australia, often Catholicism or other versions of Christianity) is a well-organised, well-funded (thanks partly to tax-payer subsidies) voice that makes direct submissions to governments in an attempt to influence policy — as does any other lobby group. The difference with any other lobby group is that our society is overly-deferential to religion and it is considered rude to criticise someone’s views if they are religious-based; somehow this insulates religion from the self-interest criticism and scepticism that other lobby groups are subject to. (This in itself is not logical because it’s more defensible to have a view if you’ve at least thought about the issue and the evidence rather than simply taking a view you’ve been told by someone else (e.g. priest at church) or taking guidance from a book written a long time ago with many possible interpretations and questionable provenance.) Lobbying is a direct influence of religion but it may also have an indirect influence — as many government members are religious they may be susceptible to religious views on political issues. Government members represent the people of Australia and decisions should be based on what they conclude is in the people’s best interests, based on rational thought and evidence, not any other basis.

Euthanasia and censorship are two good examples, the issues noted below (gay rights, abortion etc) are others.

Do you think religion affects society adversely, on what level can we see these effects occurring, i.e. Gay Rights, Abortion, Sexism, protection of paedophiles.

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Again, definitely. There are numerous examples — homosexuality, abortion, the role of women, as the use of condoms in HIV/AIDS-riddled countries, the use of contraception more generally, the suppression of natural sexual desire (etc, etc) where promotion of or adherence to an illogical and outdated set of principles has caused people misery, illness and death — that's definitely an adverse effect on society. I'd distinguish between those mentioned so far — where there are publicly stated religious views that cause people misery, illness and death — and the protection of paedophiles as I don't think the mainstream religions advocate that, although some Catholics (in particular) have certainly protected paedophiles in practice, which is clearly an adverse affect on society also.

More generally, religions teach people to accept an unprovable answer as fact and not to question that which doesn't make sense. That isn't healthy, it doesn't promote the progress of humankind or tolerance of people's natural diversity — also adverse for society.

Do you think religion is ever a necessary part of Society?

No. We've had thousands of religions for thousands of years and they've generally resulted in wars, discrimination and restriction of personal freedoms.

I understand why people find comfort in religion — to believe there are reasons why bad things happen, that there is some kind of grand plan for humanity, that there are rules that tell you how to behave so you don't

have to work it out for yourself, that there is a clear answer to the question “why are we here?”, that there is an afterlife where people can meet their loved relatives again. It can be much harder to face the idea that there is no real reason for things happening and that when you're dead you're just dead. But finding comfort in something doesn't mean it's true.

I also understand why people believe what they are told when they are young, before they can think rationally for themselves — it makes a lot of sense from an evolutionary perspective for people to trust their elders (explained well in Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*). This is why there are “Christian countries”, “Buddhist countries” and “Muslim countries” — most people retain the unprovable beliefs and attitudes that they are taught when young — then go on to teach the next generation. But being told something from when you're young doesn't make it true either. If people were not indoctrinated from a young age and simply left to figure it all out for themselves some may choose religion as an adult but I expect many would not.

I don't believe in any religion and I have plenty of enthusiasm for life and motivation to be a good person. I make constructive contributions to society through my career and charity work and, most importantly I have valuable relationships with other humans.

Without religion I think we'd have a much more peaceful and tolerant world.

Tanya
Public Relations Team
Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc

OBITUARY

Josiah John Rawson

By Lee Holmes

John Rawson was a life-long atheist.

He joined the AFA in 2001, and wrote many articles, some of which are included on our Website. John was an avid letter writer to *The Age*, in Melbourne, often being the lone atheist voice amongst the religious barrage.

John and I had a special bond...being our love of Bertrand Russell and Richard Dawkins. We exchanged and purchased for each other hard to find Russell books.

We were fortunate to have the chance of meeting in the flesh when John and his wife Liz came to an AFA Committee Meeting in Adelaide.

His son, John Jr. wrote to tell me of his death saying, *He died knowing that through the most recent, laughable comments from the Pope and Pell, in particular, that he can rest easy as they are doing their best to self destruct.*

John died at home following a long illness two days after his 87th birthday.

An atheist life well lived.

Who'd be female under Islamic law?

By Yasmin Alibhai-Brown

In Muslim states, violence against women is validated. A dark age is upon us.

I am a Muslim woman and, like my late mother, free, independent, sensuous, educated, liberal, contrary and confrontational when provoked, both feminine and feminist. I style and colour my hair, wear lovely things and perfumes, appear on public platforms with men who are not related to me, shake their hands, embrace some I know well, take care of my family.

I defend Muslims persecuted by their enemies and their own kith and kin. I pray, fast, give to charity and try to be a decent human being. I also drink wine and do not lie about that, unlike so many other "good" Muslims. I am the kind of Muslim woman who maddens reactionary Muslim men and their asinine female followers. What a badge of honour.

Female oppression in Islamic countries is manifestly getting worse. Islam, as practiced by millions today, has lost its compassion and integrity and is entering one of the darkest of dark ages. Here is this month's short list of unbearable stories (imagine how many more there are which will never be known):

Iranian painter Delara Darabi, only 22 and in prison since she was 17, accused of murdering an elderly relative, was hanged last week even though she had been given a temporary stay of execution by the chief justice of the country. She phoned her mother on the day of her hanging to beg for help and the phone was snatched by a prison official who told them: "We will easily execute your daughter and there's nothing you can do about it." Her paintings reveal the cruelty to which she was subjected.

Meanwhile Roxana Saberi, a 32-year-old broadcast journalist whose father is Iranian, is incarcerated in Tehran's Evin prison, accused of spying for the US. She denies this and says she has been framed because she was seen buying a bottle of wine. This intelligent, beautiful and defiant woman is on hunger strike. Over in Saudi Arabia, an eight-year-old child has just divorced a 50-year-old man. Her father, no doubt a very devout man, sold his daughter for about £9,000.

I have been reading *Disfigured*, the story of Rania Al-Baz, a Saudi TV anchor, the first woman to have such a job, who was so badly beaten up by her abusive husband that she had to have 13 operations to re-make her once gorgeous face. Domestic violence destroys females in all countries, but in Muslim states, it is validated by laws and values. As Al-Baz writes, "It is appalling to realise that a woman cannot walk down the street without men staring at her openly. For them she is nothing but a body without a mind, something that moves and does not think. Women are banned from studying law, from civil engineering and from the sacrosanct area of oil."

Small optimistic signs do periodically appear in this harsh desert, says Quanta A Ahmed, a doctor who worked in Saudi Arabia and then wrote her account, *In the Land of Invisible Women*. She describes the love she finds between some husbands and wives, idealists who think better rights will come one day.

That faith in the future is echoed by Norah al-Faiz, the Deputy Minister for Women's Education, chosen in this week's *Time* magazine list of the world's most influential people. They hope because they must, I guess, even though they can see the brute forces lining up on the horizon ready to crush them by any means necessary. This country has spread its anti-female Wahabi Islam across the globe, its second most important export after oil.

In Afghanistan Ayman Udas was a singer and songwriter who wore lipstick and appeared on TV, defying her family. She was a divorced mother of two who had remarried. Ten days after this she was shot dead, allegedly by her brothers, who must think they are upright moral upholders with places reserved in paradise. In March President Karzai gave monstrous tribal leaders what they demanded, absolute control over wives by husbands and the right to rape them on the marital bed. Protests by brave women in that country and international outrage has forced him to step back from this commitment but there is concern that he is too weak to hold out, and once again women will become the personal and political playthings of men.

Let's to Pakistan then shall we, the country that once elected a woman head of state. The divinely beautiful Swat Valley has, for reasons of political expediency, been handed over to the Taliban, and there they have blown up over a hundred schools for girls and regularly flog young females on the streets. The girls are shrouded and forbidden to scream because the female voice has the potential to arouse desire. Or pity perhaps.

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I am aware that my words will help confirm the pernicious prejudices that fester in the minds of those who despise Islam. Yet to conceal or excuse the violations would be to condone and encourage them. There have been enlightened times when some Muslim civilisations honoured and cherished females. This is not one of them. Across the West — for a host of reasons — millions of Muslims are embracing backward practices. In the UK young girls — some so young that they are still in push chairs — are covered up in hijabs. Disgracefully, there are always vocal Muslim women who seek to justify honour killings, forced marriages, inequality, polygamy and childhood betrothals. Why are large numbers of Muslim men so terrorised by the female body and spirit? Why do Muslim women encourage this savage paranoia?

I look out of my study at the common and see a wife fully burkaed on a sunny day. She sits still. Her children and husband run around, laughing, playing cricket. She sits still, dead, buried, a ghost. She is complicit in her own degradation, as are countless others. Their acquiescence in a free democracy is a

crime against their sisters who have no such choices in Saudi Arabia, Iran, Afghanistan and elsewhere.

Al-Baz says: “I am a disruptive presence because I give women ideas.” Me too. To transgress against diehard obscurantists and their unholy rules is an inescapable sacred duty. Yet how pathetic that sounds. Progressive believers tilt at windmills driven by ferocious winds of self-righteousness. Our arms and legs weaken and we are brought to our knees. I fear there is only worse to come.

MEDIA RELEASE

Ridding the national deficit

In 1991, the USA population was 253 million. The National Council of Churches that year reported \$450 billion dollars of untaxed income. The number of people in Australia in 2009 is in the vicinity of 20 million.

Using these amounts and an educated guess, religions in Australia did not pay tax on *\$35.5 billion dollars or some figure short of that although still appreciable. As this money is not accounted for, even generously allowing for 10 billion dollars spent on charity, it leaves 25 billion untaxed dollars made up by *all* Australians, not only those who follow a faith.

The Churches are rolling in it. Is it any wonder that they are extraordinary quiet about the actual total that hardworking Australians are subsidising?

David Nicholls, president of the AFA said, “One has only to state a belief in an invisible superman in the sky to flout the taxation laws and make them a nice little earner. Our ‘moral guardians’ are living off the fat of the land while the rest of the country struggles with debt.”

*The Australian Humanist No. 93 Autumn 2009 - Perkins & Gomez estimate \$31B annually. (Not including unknown GST or FBT)

Faith No More

By Andrew Fenton

The Advertiser, SA Weekend Magazine

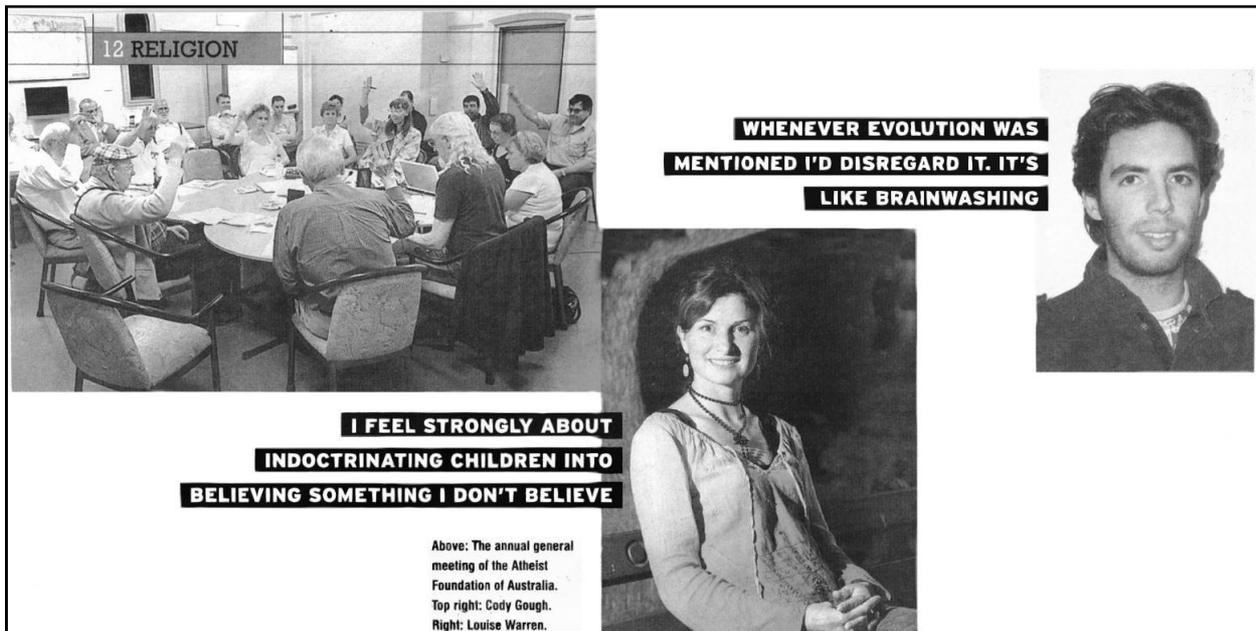
April 11, 2009

The City of Churches is a hotbed of atheists — and they're keen to start spreading the word. So what has got the non-believers all fired up?

your family?" he said. "Your friends?" Gough said: "That's up to them. I can't fake it anymore."

Now 23, Gough says his move towards atheism was a gradual one. "As soon as you're confronted with anything that goes against (the religion) your mind shuts off," he says. "Whenever evolution was mentioned I'd disregard it. It's like brainwashing."

Gough says reading evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins' atheist manifesto *The God Delusion* sealed his doubts. Apart from detailing contradictions in the Bible and outlining various philosophical arguments, the book focuses on the process of evolution and the concept of "the selfish gene" — the idea genes are



Cody Gough's break with his faith came when he lit a cigarette in front of his father.

The Jehovah's Witness had spent two decades in the church, with nightly Bible study and three meetings a week. "I lived and breathed the religion from birth," he says. "It was my reality, the framework from which I built my understanding of the world." But doubts began to grow until he didn't believe any longer. Even then the young man spent a year pretending, because to give up his faith meant giving up his family and friends. Associating with anyone outside the church is strongly discouraged. His aunt had already disowned her son for that reason.

Even after Gough stopped attending meetings, he still couldn't bring himself to say the words to his dad. In desperation and wracked with nerves he lit up a cigarette — strictly forbidden by the church — and his father instantly understood." What about the rest of

entirely focused on self preservation. "At any other time if I'd read it I wouldn't have been ready, but I read about the selfish gene and it was so simple," Gough says. "I was surprised I'd been against it so long as it was so logical."

Gough is one of an increasing number of Australians declaring themselves atheists. While the Christian churches will see some of the year's best attendance figures this Easter weekend, there are more than twice as many non-believers as church goers. Australian Bureau of Statistics figures show the number of people identifying themselves as atheists or stating "no religion" on the census grew by more than a third to 18.8 per cent between 2001 and 2006.

A further 11.2 per cent declined to answer the question, meaning as many as a third of Australians don't believe in God. Among young people the proportion is even higher. A 2006 study by Monash University, the

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Australian Catholic University and the Christian Research Association found that just 48 per cent of people born between 1976 and 1990 believe in God. And when it comes to the godless, Adelaide is atheism central. The City of the Churches is home to the Atheist Foundation of Australia, an organisation that campaigns on behalf of a secular society. It was the AFA website, which recently clicked up its one millionth unique visitor, that Gough turned to for information as he weighed up his beliefs.

It's a Wednesday evening in Eastwood and the unfaithful have gathered for the AFA's annual general meeting held, somewhat ironically, in an old church hall. I'm keen to see exactly what this bunch of heretics and blasphemers get up to as they plan their godless activities. David Nicholls, who looks like a former hippie with his white mullet, goatee and glasses, opens proceedings with a bit of humour. After all, if there's no afterlife, you'd better get your laughs in this one. "Did you hear they've set up a dial-a-prayer service for atheists?" Nicholls tells the assembly. "You ring it - and it just rings and rings and rings . . ." Boom, boom.

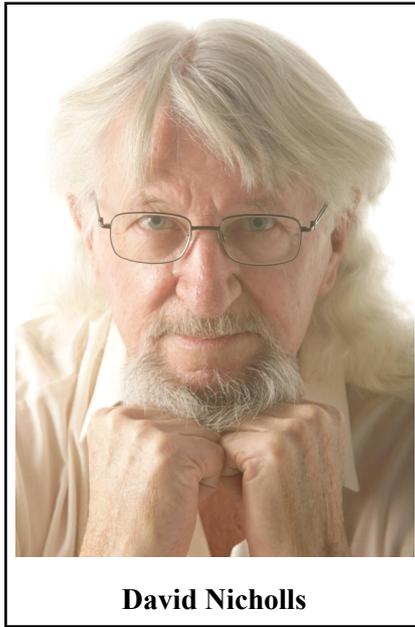
And then it's down to business. About 30 well-dressed, mostly silver-haired people sit around politely discussing the meaning of life — or lack of it. And Nicholls' president's address isn't that far removed from a sermon. He preaches that the only truth can be found in atheism, details the ever increasing numbers of converts to the cause, and praises the prophet Richard Dawkins for spreading the good word.

"The winds of change have unleashed a new wave of enthusiasm for humanity . . . to exist on planet Earth without interference from numerous dogmatic interpretations of ancient writings," he solemnly tells the congregation. "They are no longer relevant in the modern era and . . . promise continued divisiveness and even the risk of total destruction of the biosphere."

As tempting as it is to continue this "atheism as religion" metaphor, it doesn't really stand up to close examination. Because among atheists nothing is sacred, everything is up for debate, and there appears to be only one commandment: Thou shalt always produce the evidence or be accused of talking poppycock. For

example, Nicholls' swerve towards apocalyptic global-warming doom-mongering is immediately challenged by one of the members who is as sceptical of climate change as he is of God. As Nicholls explains later: "The only thing atheists have in common is that they don't accept there is a God. Everything else is up for grabs."

The foundation is enjoying its best publicity in years thanks to the refusal by the advertising company APN Outdoor to run a \$16,000 campaign on buses promoting atheism, modelled on the successful British campaign that has since spread throughout the world. While APN has happily run Christian advertisements before, late last year it balked at the slogan: "Atheism - because there is no credible evidence", and rejected two compromise versions that merely suggested the public "Celebrate reason" or "Sleep in on Sunday mornings".



David Nicholls

Nicholls is both outraged on principle and delighted in practice about a ban that's resulted in him being interviewed more than 50 times by every major media outlet in the country. The AFA has launched anti-discrimination proceedings in Tasmania and Victoria and a prominent Sydney law firm has offered to take the case, pro bono, to the Supreme Court. "Our cause has had much more public interest than had the ad companies simply taken our money and done the ads," Nicholls says.

The atheist bus campaign is part of a new willingness among some atheists to spread their godless humanism.

Stephen Downs, the head of the School of Theology at Flinders University, says the emergence of vocal atheists demonstrates that religion remains strong. "One reason why there's this phenomenon of a small group of militant atheists writing publications — like Richard Dawkins — is there was an assumption religion would die out," he says. "But it hasn't. Pentecostal and evangelical protestant churches have grown enormously and religion has become involved in politics. That freaks out secularists."

Like many, Downs is uneasy with the developments in atheism. "In the past atheists didn't actively promote it, or ridicule and denigrate people practising religion," he says.

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There certainly seems a new acceptance among the public for doing just that. Musical comedian Tim Minchin has been playing to crowds who applaud wildly as he mocks believers and sends up creationists. Like Downs, Minchin cites the rise of the Pentecostal churches and the emergence of Family First as reasons atheists are taking a more aggressive stance.

“Suddenly people are getting the feeling that the nice movement towards secularism is being arrested and is actually being challenged, and people like us need to go, ‘hang on!’” he says.

“Now they . . . are getting into politics like Family First. Stem cells and abortion debates that require intelligent, sensible debate, are being ruined by people saying: ‘Yeah, but I know what God thinks.’”

The reason for this new acceptance of atheism probably lies in the fact that organised religion’s influence on society is dwindling. These days, 91.6 per cent of the population does sleep in on Sunday mornings (or at least, doesn’t go to church). And while many have focused on the growth of Hillsong and other Pentecostal Christian churches, they have only added a net 13,800 converts over the past decade, according to the multi-denominational Christian Research Association. Over the same period, the ranks of atheists have grown by hundreds of thousands.

However, the numbers are murky. Neither religious nor atheist groups have much faith in the census data. This is because they were designed to measure identification with religious belief — not belief itself or its absence. Demographer Bernard Salt says the data underestimates the number of atheists because some people who don’t believe in God tick “Christian” purely because they were brought up in Christian households or went to Christian schools. “Twenty per cent of the population are declared atheists and I would say another 20 per cent are ‘practising’ atheists,” he says. “And, of course, parents tick a box for their children saying: my child is Catholic or Protestant. By the time you work it out probably 40 per cent of the population are atheist.”

Phillip Hughes, from the Christian Research Association, also says the data is flawed. “Some people who write ‘no religion’ are spiritual and religious; they just don’t wish to identify with religious groups.” Hughes says the rate of atheism hasn’t changed much since the 1970s: what has occurred has been a “drift to

secularisation”. “People are adopting a non-religious approach to life, but that’s different to atheism because they don’t think there is no God, they just choose to live without regard to the question,” he says.

Hughes says a large group of people don’t know what to think and just try and muddle through without dwelling on the subject too much. “Secular by default, not atheist by commitment,” is how he puts it. “Militant atheism is a product of the 1970s,” he says. “(The AFA) are a group who formed in the 1970s and it was part of the rejection of religious traditions that happened then with a fair degree of passion and anger, and the feeling the church and faith had let people down and was misguiding people.” He says younger atheists — most of whom have never believed — don’t have the same anger.

The term “militant atheist” riles Nicholls. “What is a militant atheist?” he asks. “If you say gays should be allowed to be married is that militant? We don’t have people bare-breasted running through the streets waving their swords about saying, ‘Darwin rules!’ Atheists aren’t like that.”

And according to 39 studies carried out in the past 80 years, the more intelligent a person is, the more likely they are to be an atheist.

So what are atheists like? It’s hard to generalise but they’re more likely to be young, well-educated and professional. And according to 39 studies carried out in the past 80 years, the more intelligent a person is, the more likely they are to be an atheist.

Nicholls says people join or contact the AFA for a variety of reasons. “I think people would be surprised by how many people are angered by religious intrusions in schools,” he says. But these sorts of inquires don’t translate into big numbers. “Atheists aren’t big joiners. We’ll never have numbers like at a church.”

I speak with a number of atheists at the AGM. Mary Gallnor, 73, says she became an atheist at six after being told the central tenets of Catholicism. “I thought what they were telling me was just shocking,” she says. She joined AFA 15 years ago as part of her campaign to help change the law to allow the terminally ill to die with dignity. “The only people who don’t support voluntary euthanasia really are religious,” she says. (Interestingly, surveys show that even among the religious there’s overwhelming public support).

Fifty-something Michael Cunnington is at his first meeting. Originally from Leeds, England, he experienced what he calls “Irish Catholic indoctrination” as a child. “It took a while for me to

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realise what they were teaching me to do was to believe, rather than to think, and I resent that,” he says. Even though he didn’t believe in God, Cunnington says he called himself an agnostic for years. “I didn’t want to cause any offence to anybody,” he says. Two recent developments convinced him to change his mind — the banning of the atheist bus ads and when Catch the Fire Ministries leader Danny Nalliah called the Victorian bushfires God’s punishment for the state’s abortion laws. “Religion is quite bloody militant and it’s quite prepared to enforce its views on society,” Cunnington says.

“They need to know we’re not all in the closet and there are a lot of people out here prepared to stand up and say, ‘I’m an atheist,’ and let them know we exist.”

New member Louise Warren says she had a “very fundamentalist Baptist” upbringing and went through a very gradual conversion to non-belief. “People think you’re going to hell because you lost the faith,” she says. “But once I realised there wasn’t such a place, it wasn’t hard.”

Her feelings about religious instruction are part of what prompted her to come along tonight, although she’s not sure if she agrees with Dawkins and Nicholls, both of whom call it “child abuse”. “Those are pretty strong words but still, that’s what I went through and it does affect children,” she says. “I feel strongly about indoctrinating children into believing something that

I don’t believe is true.”

A member for two decades, Ronald Evans, 63, joined the Australian Skeptics in the mid — 1980s. He put up \$10,000 of his own money as a challenge to anyone who could demonstrate anything paranormal or supernatural. “That was 25 years ago and my money is still safe,” he says with a grin. Debunking mystics led him to re-evaluate his agnosticism. “If you’re a rational person you think about everything, about how science and reality works. And when you do, you really have to become an atheist. It’s just inevitable.”

But lots of intelligent people think about religion and do believe in God, I point out.

“The first thing you should do is read the Bible — it’s dreadful,” he argues. “It’s amazing the number of Christians who’ve never read the Bible. It’s full of murder and rape and ethnic cleansing. Religion in general is the cause of all — well, most of the world’s problems,” he says.

This is a familiar refrain of atheists, and the equally familiar retort from the other side has been played out countless times in tit-for-tat letters to the editor in newspapers and websites.

“People involved in religions have been involved in bad behaviour but it’s certainly not exclusive to people of faith,” Downs says. “How do you explain ideological atheists like Pol Pot, Mao Zedong or Stalin?”

AFA FORUM AND FACEBOOK

Have you popped in to say hello yet?
Don’t be shy.
We would love to meet you.

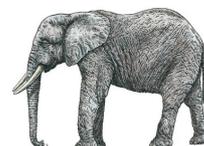
www.atheistfoundation.org.au/forums/index.php

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



BYO food and beverages of your choice.

Pets welcome.



The perfect riposte to Childhood indoctrination



By Catherine Deveny

The Age April 15, 2009

Good Friday was spent sitting round with lapsed Catholics drinking wine, eating meat and using the Lord's name in vain, punctuated by the odd person saying, "Don't tell my parents." What a thrill to stare eternal damnation in the face with a chop in one hand, a glass of cask wine in the other and a mouth full of blasphemy while still being scared of your mum and dad. All the while not believing in God. We don't believe in heaven any more, but as sure as hell something's making this snag taste so good. It's probably the confidence of our contradictions.

A dozen wide-eyed children were rigid with fascination as we recounted Good Fridays of our childhood, on which being happy and watching television were classified sins.

"What's a sin?" asked the 11-year-old atheist. I could have sung with joy knowing a child knew right from wrong and good from bad but knew not what the word "sin" meant.

Sin. The conflict of desire verses programming may explain the common myth (or as we micks like to think, well-known fact) that Catholics go off like a frog in a sock in the sack. All that programming of wrongness makes some things feel so right. We all have guilty blocks of chocolate hidden in our glove boxes. The thrill of the illicit. But it's not all good.

Last week a lapsed Catholic atheist mate of mine told me she was gay. I'm shattered. She doesn't fancy me. Don't touch me, I'm fine. Truth is I bullied her into telling me because of my interest in the physical manifestation of the emotional. She'd suffered debilitating migraines for years. She vomited blood and needed injections and hospitalisation. I kept prodding until I found out what it was that was making her head explode. This is how it went: "Are you gay?" "Yes." "Have you told your parents?" "No." "Tell your parents and the migraines will go away. They're proud of you and they love you. There is no perfect time. You'll wonder what took you so long, but you'll be thrilled you didn't wait a moment longer. Nothing is

ever as bad as you think it will be. The body never lies and the truth will set you free." Hell is truth seen too late.

The next day my beautiful friend, the embodiment of integrity, truth, honesty, love and acceptance woke with a shocking migraine and unexpectedly made the brave jump over her invisible electric fence of rejection and told her parents. The conversation went like this: "Hello, it's your mum. How's your migraine?"

"Mum, I'm gay." Her family has embraced her in a way she'd never have dreamed of. Yes, they had suspected, and sure, the emotional digestion will take some time.

My mate and I debriefed about the deep-rooted brainwashing of children by religion. No child is born religious, homophobic, racist or sexist. They are programmed. Children's brains are malleable to promote the survival of the species. Here's how it goes: "Hey, little cave kiddy, don't eat those poison berries or you'll die." Imprint equals better chance of survival. The more malleable the substance the better chance of imprint. Religion has successfully exploited this evolutionary leg-up to its advantage.

Scientists from the US National Institute of Neurological Disorders searching for the neural "God spot" found not one but several spots, "supporting the idea that the brain has evolved to be sensitive to any form of belief that improves the chances of survival." According to Professor Jordan Grafman, "some evolutionary theorists have suggested Darwinian natural selection may have put a premium on individuals who were able to use religious belief to survive hardships that may have overwhelmed those with no religious convictions ... Religion and the belief in God, they argue, are just a manifestation of this intrinsic, biological phenomenon that makes the human brain so intelligent and adaptable." And consequently so vulnerable to corruption and with such potential to engineer.

I'm with Richard Dawkins. Indoctrination of children into religion is child abuse. Children should have the right to be raised free from their parents' superstitions, prejudice and mumbo jumbo. Let them make up their own mind when they're adults. Instead, let us use our powers for good and brainwash our children with

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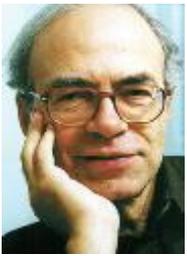
tolerance, acceptance, rational thought and unconditional love.

Children are indoctrinated into religious belief by emotional manipulation and mining the God spot in their reptilian brains. They are programmed to play by the rules or God won't love them and will send them to hell, and this means children are being hard wired with religion-approved racism, sexism, bigotry and intolerance.

Despite dismantling much of our hardwiring, even we who have seen the light of truth find gnarly little knots deeply imbedded long ago by a society with a vested interest in controlling us through guilt and fear, and a brain responding to an unsophisticated biological predisposition.

It's Not My Fault They Print Them (2007) and *Say When (2008)* are both collections of Catherine Deveny's columns and published by *Black Inc*

To defame religion is a human right



By Peter Singer

We must defend the right to cause offence to believers, when this is not meant to stir up hatred.

Last month, the UN human rights council adopted a resolution condemning “defamation of religion” as a human rights violation. According to the text of the resolution, “Defamation of religion is a serious affront to human dignity” that leads to “a restriction on the freedom of [religions’] adherents.”

The resolution was originally proposed by the 56-nation Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), and was put to the human rights council by Pakistan. It supports that it was aimed at such things as the derogatory cartoons of the prophet Muhammad published in a Danish newspaper three years ago.

Germany opposed the resolution. Speaking on behalf of the European Union, a German spokesperson rejected the concept of “defamation of religion” as not valid in a human rights context, because human rights belonged to individuals, not to institutions or religions.

Many non-government organisations, both secular and religious, also opposed the resolution. Ronald Lauder, president of the World Jewish Congress, said that that body saw the resolution as weakening “the rights of individuals to express their views”.

This seems like a sound argument. While attempts to stir up hatred against adherents of a religion, or to incite violence against them, may legitimately be suppressed, criticism of religion as such should not be.

The resolution is non-binding, but if nations were to enact laws putting it into effect, there can be no doubt that it would interfere with freedom of expression. For a start, what counts as “defamation of religion” is contested.

For example, the OIC said in its statement that “Islam is frequently and wrongly associated with human rights violations and terrorism.” Are those associations wrong? If the OIC wishes to change many people’s perception that Islam violates human rights, suppressing freedom of speech is hardly the best way to go about it. The way to change such a perception would be to marshal evidence against it, and to make the case that human rights — including the rights of women — are as well protected in Islamic countries as they are in non-Islamic countries.

To demonstrate that it is wrong to associate Islam with terrorism, the OIC might begin to compile statistics on the religious affiliations of those who engage in terrorism. By contrast, suppressing the freedom of speech of Islam’s critics merely gives rise to the suspicion that evidence and sound argument cannot show their arguments to be mistaken.

Coincidentally, in the same week that Germany and the World Jewish Congress rejected the idea that defamation of religion is an affront to human dignity, and upheld the right to freedom of expression, Germany’s highest court issued its ruling on a case brought by a Jewish organization, and two Jewish individuals. The court ruled against the right of the United States-based animal rights group People for the

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Ethical Treatment of Animals to exhibit posters that juxtapose photographs of victims of the Holocaust with photographs of animals in factory farms and at slaughterhouses.

The posters bear the heading: “To Animals, All People are Nazis” — a line from the Polish-born Jewish writer Isaac Bashevis Singer. According to the court, Germany’s laws on freedom of speech did not protect PETA’s campaign, because to make “the fate of the victims of the Holocaust appear banal and trivial” was an offense against human dignity.

PETA was, of course, not arguing that Holocaust victims’ fate was banal or trivial. On the contrary, it was using the Holocaust — which we would all agree was utterly horrific — to suggest, as Isaac Bashevis Singer did, that there are parallels between the way the Nazis treated Jews and the way we treat animals. The conclusion PETA wants us to reach is that both the Holocaust and the mass confinement and slaughter of animals are horrific. A free society should be open to discussing such a claim.

Irrespective of the merits of PETA’s campaign, however, those who stood up for free speech at the UN human rights council should be able to see that the fact that some forms of speech cause offense is not sufficient reason to censor them. If PETA is not

allowed to state its case against our abuse of animals in the way that they judge best, because doing so might offend some people, then criticism of religion could also be prohibited on the same grounds.

If, on the other hand, a religion’s adherents have no right to protection against criticism of their religion, then, even in Germany, Holocaust victims and their descendants (I am one) should not be protected against advertising campaigns that, though not intended to incite hatred or violence, may cause them offence.

Peter Singer is the Ira W. DeCamp Professor of Bioethics at Princeton University.

His books include:

- ◆ *Rethinking Life and Death: The Collapse of Our Traditional Ethics*
- ◆ *Writings on an Ethical Life*
- ◆ *The President of Good and Evil: The Ethics of George W. Bush*
- ◆ *In Defense of Animals.*
- ◆ *A Darwinian Left: Politics, Evolution and Cooperation*

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Can you help?

I am writing to ask, nay beg, that you help the South Australian Voluntary Euthanasia Society (SAVES) at the next state election. The election is due on the 20th of March 2010 and we are planning to conduct a major campaign to inform voters about which candidates support voluntary euthanasia.

We will be placing advertisements in the newspapers and leafleting as much of the state as we are able. If you support voluntary euthanasia for humanitarian reasons or because you think that this is a matter of democratic rights or if you just want to strike a blow against religion (which is the main reason why we do not have voluntary euthanasia already) then please give what help you can.

Donations can be sent to
SAVES
c/o PO Box 3034
Norwood SA 5067.

South Australian members can also help by leafleting. It is a boring task but it is in a worthy cause and there is nothing wrong with extending your life by a little gentle exercise. If you could spare a couple of hours walking around your neighbourhood next March please contact me and I will take it from there.

Ronald Evans (SAVES)
Phone: 08 8363 2507 or
Mobile: 0414 414 610 or
Email evans@timex.to

Why Atheists Make the Best Type of Citizen

By Marie Alena Castle

In our religious culture, Atheists are not so much on the outside looking in as caught in the crossfire. We'd just as soon be left alone, but the demand from all sides is that we have a god belief. Because we don't, the Bible calls us "fools," it is assumed we have no moral compass, and we cannot get elected to public office.

As for patriotism, "An Atheistic American is a contradiction in terms," according to Congressman Louis Rabaut, who introduced the bill putting "under God" in the pledge in 1954.

The elder George Bush reiterated this on August 27, 1987, at a Chicago press conference: "...I don't know that Atheists should be considered as citizens," he said, "nor should they be considered patriots. This is one nation under God." All this simply because we accept that the natural world is all there is, having no reason to think otherwise.

These accusations have been piled on us for so long that Atheists rank at the bottom in social acceptability. But, as the girl said as she picked up the shovel, "With such a big pile of crap, there has to be a pony in here somewhere." There is.

The truth is that Atheists actually make the best type of citizen and cause the least trouble of any demographic group.

We go only by what makes sense and improves life in the here and now. Our commitment to secular government has made us strong supporters of freedom of conscience and of every movement to repeal oppressive laws. This includes abolition, women's suffrage, workers' rights, civil rights, reproductive rights, gay rights, children's rights, medical research, and physician aid in dying. We appreciate liberal religionists who also support these issues. We oppose religious authoritarians as politically and socially harmful. In the workplace, we are there to get the job done. We need no accommodations for prayers, holy days, religious attire or services we refuse to provide because of religious beliefs.

In politics, we have no contentious religious beliefs to impose and we don't do religious wars. In public education, our interest is in educating students about the arts and sciences, and teaching them to think critically, behave responsibly, and make the most of their abilities.

Like all humans, Atheists create myths to express ideas.

While religious myths offer inspiration from the past with stories of miraculous and heroic events, Atheist myths look to the future, often expressed through science fiction.

Perhaps the most powerful is the world of "Star Trek," created by Atheist Gene Roddenberry, where humans have given up wars, social prejudices and divisive beliefs, and used science to end hunger and poverty. That is a myth to inspire us that has some faint hope of realization.

This is the reality humans face and must deal with: We are a vulnerable species in a universe that is basically a huge debris field 15 billion light years across, full of violence and destruction. We are hunkered down on a small, unstable rock wobbling through that debris field. The life forms that evolved in the thin biosphere surrounding this rock survive by eating each other. The evolutionary process that brought us to consciousness works off of high birth and death rates with many defective products. There is no greater prescription for misery.

But here we are, with one life to live and no one to turn to for help but each other. We humans have worked mightily to overcome nature's short-comings, with the only "god" in sight being us, warts and all. Despite the difficulties, life remains an exciting challenge, and we accept it.

Marie Alena Castle is communications director for Atheists For Human Rights (www.Atheistsforhumanrights.org), based in Minneapolis, Minnesota. For most of her life she has been involved in one cause or another, including labor unions, women's rights, abortion rights, civil rights, gay rights, etc. She discovered that all the causes could be addressed by Atheism, since the source of all their troubles was religion.

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VIEW FROM AMERICA



Life has been very interesting, to say the least, here in the US so far this year. Of course, the economy has been the main topic of discussion and concern not only here but worldwide. Throw in the swine flu, and the news cycle is pretty well filled up. So, what has become of the wild, wacky world of religion in the US after Barack Obama took office?

I wonder how many of you saw, or read the text of Obama's Inaugural Address on 20 January? For atheists, this was most likely the most important line: "For we know that our patchwork heritage is a strength, not a weakness. We are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus — and non-believers." Wow! Did he just say *non-believers*! At that moment, those of us who suffered over the last eight years of the Bush cabal, where religious fanatics did so much damage to our country, realized that things were going to be different. Sure, we understand that religion is not just going to go away, but it's no longer driving the bus.

Obama has also reversed the Bush ban on stem cell research, and is allowing the funding of overseas birth control and AIDS prevention that actually allow the use of condoms. Under Bush, it was basically abstain from sex or die. Even on the domestic front more federally funded contraception programs will be offered including the dreaded "morning after" pill. On numerous occasions, Obama has pushed for more science education. Things are indeed getting better!

The next few years may reveal a lot more of the excesses of the Bush regime, not only regarding possible war crimes, but perhaps a lot more about how they attempted to fill the Justice Department with staffers and supervisors who graduated from religious-based laws schools. Instead of hiring highly qualified people from such prestigious institutions as Harvard, Yale, and Columbia, the Bush "Justice" Department, hired grads from schools such as the late Jerry Falwell's Liberty University, Pat Robertson's Regent University of Law, and Bob Jones University. The four main goals of students from these religious-based schools are to end abortion, stop gay marriage, promote the teaching of creationism, and get

prayer back into the public schools.

Once again, another poll has been released regarding religion in American life. This time the results are more encouraging. According to the American

Religious Identification Survey, while only 1.6 per cent of American identify themselves as atheist, the total number that say there's no god or are unsure (agnostics) is 12 per cent, and 12 per cent more are deists who believe in a higher power, but not a personal god. The number of self-described atheists has nearly double since 2001. Which group in the survey has increased the most since 2001? Non-believers, by far!

One more good thing happened a couple weeks ago. The North Dakota Senate defeated an abortion bill that had been passed in February by the State House of Representatives. The bill was designed to give human rights to a fertilized egg. Yes, it was the tired old "life begins at conception" nonsense about to be codified into law. Any abortion would be considered murder. It seems that every year or so North Dakota tries to push through some sort of anti-abortion legislation. At least the Senate had the sense to vote it down by 29 votes to 16 this time.

Lastly, I thought it was an April Fool's joke when I first read it in this morning's paper, but quickly realized that April is almost over. The state of Florida is actually contemplating issuing special license plates for motor vehicles, one depicting a figure of Jesus complete with a crown of thorns, and another one of a stained glass window, a cross, and the slogan "I believe". Your choice! Very shortly I will be contacting my local representative and tell him what I think of this promotion of JC & Company. Religion may be on the decline, but the Republican Party is still strong here in the South, and they continue to spew forth the product they know so well.

Maybe by the next issue of THE AUSTRALIAN ATHEIST we'll know the ending to this fiasco.

Bill

When someone tells me that 'the Almighty told me to do this', I want to see the transcript.

Fred Reed

BOOK REVIEW

A Defence of Atheism

by Ernestine L. Rose.

London: Freethought History Research Group*, 2009.
(A5) 23 pp. Price in U.K., £3 (about \$A6.25).
* BCM Box 5276, London WC1N 3AX, England

Reviewed by Nigel Sinnott

The Freethought History Research Group has published a facsimile reprint of *A Defence of Atheism*, followed by a two-page outline of the life of the author, Ernestine Rose, by R.W.M. (Robert Morrell). The facsimile part is a bit spotty and blotchy in places but, as the original type was quite large, it is perfectly readable and, I found, very well worth reading.

R.W.M.'s biographical account at the end gives us some very interesting details about the character of Ernestine Rose, but no mention is made of when *A Defence of Atheism* was first published. According to Victor Neuburg (*Encyclopedia of Unbelief*, 1985) this was in Boston (Massachusetts) in 1851.

Ernestine Potowsky was born in Poland in 1810, the daughter of an Orthodox rabbi. She became a rebel "at the age of five", and as a teenager resorted to legal proceedings (which she won) to avoid an arranged marriage. In 1827 she moved to Berlin, where she successfully petitioned the King of Prussia about restrictions on the city's Jews. In the 1830s, in London, she came under the influence of Robert Owen and married one of his followers, William Rose, a jeweller, silversmith and liberal Christian. In 1836 the couple migrated to the United States and settled in New York, where Ernestine became very active in the women's rights movement and in campaigning against slavery. The couple returned to live in England in 1869. William died in 1882 and Ernestine in 1892. They were buried in Highgate Cemetery, London.

In *A Defence of Atheism* Ernestine Rose shows not only an excellent command of clear English — and English was not her cradle language — but she also comes over as a very mature and pleasant personality who had a gift for combining thorough, no-nonsense argument with courage, clarity and an absence of rancour or overblown hyperbole. No wonder she became well known as a lecturer and debater!

An occasional point in the pamphlet looks dated, such as a reference to phrenology, but very much more has stood the test of time, such as "It was a great mistake to say that God made man in his image. Man, in all ages, made his God in his own image; and we find that just in accordance with his civilization, his taste, his refinement, his sense of right, of justice, of freedom, and humanity, so has he made his God."

A little later she remarks, "The savage, ignorant of the mechanism of a watch, attributes the ticking to a spirit. The so-called civilized man, equally ignorant of the mechanism of the Universe, and the laws which govern it, ascribes it to the same erroneous source."

After this, I was not surprised to find a splendidly nifty demolition of Paley's watch argument for divine design of the universe: "Yes; the watch shows design, and the watchmaker did not leave us in the dark on the subject, but clearly and distinctly stamped his design on the face of the watch. Is it as clearly stamped on the Universe? Where is the design, in the oak to grow to its majestic height? or in the thunderbolt that rent it asunder?"

After giving more examples, Ernestine Rose introduces a novel twist with: "The watchmaker not only stamped his design on the face of the watch, but he teaches how to wind it up when run down; how to repair the machinery when out of order; and how to put a new spring in when the old one is broken, and leave the watch as good as ever. Does the great Watchmaker, as he is called, show the same intelligence and power in keeping, or teaching others to keep, this contemplated mechanism — Man — always in good order?" And there is more in this vein.

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The booklet also deals with religion and morality, giving the author an opportunity to beat the anti-slavery drum: “Look at the present crisis — at the South with 4,000,000 of human beings in slavery, bought and sold like brute chattels under the sanction of religion and of God, . . . and the South complains that the reforms in the North are owing to Infidelity.”

I think I have written enough to show why I reckon this brave and articulate argument for atheism is not only a remarkable historical document, but is well worth reading today.

Religious Shrines

By Harry Edwards

Having dealt with miracles and religious relics in previous articles, it seems appropriate to mention the shrines that have sprung up to house them and serve as places of worship.

In pre-Christian times Pagans were normally devoted to local shrines of particular gods. The church tried to meet this psychological need by establishing shrines of martyrs.

By 400, particular saints were being invoked for particular needs — for health, travel, fertility and even the detection of lies!

When in 410 the Goths sacked Rome, citizens asked why Peter and Paul had failed to protect their city. Pagan critics said that the old gods were offended by neglect and that they were the true givers of success and miracles. (Ours is the only true god!) To meet such criticisms the churches found it necessary to provide similar assurances of success and miraculous cures. By the sixth century, wonder-working shrines and a multitude of holy relics became the means of winning over the barbarian tribesmen.

There are tens of thousands of shrines throughout the world; no culture is without them.

Essential precursors in deciding what becomes a religious shrine and where it is to be established include conformity and self-induced visual experiences. Nowhere is this more apparent than in those countries where the religion is predominantly Roman Catholicism. To understand why, we must look at Catholic liturgy.

Traditionally referred to as the mother of Jesus in the Christian Gospels is Mary, otherwise known as the “Blessed Virgin”, “Our Lady”, or simply the “BVM”. Destined to become the mother of Christ, God

allegedly infused her soul with grace at the moment of conception in the womb of her mother, St Anne. This we are told freed her from the consequences of Original Sin — hence “Immaculate Conception”. Believing that God could not be born of woman, Church patriarchs discouraged worship of the mother figure.

Constantine I forbade the worship of Mary and ordered all goddess temples destroyed.

By the eleventh century, however, she had become more popular than Jesus and was hailed as the saviour of mankind. The great Gothic edifices built over the centuries to honour her still stand today.

The “undefiled virgin” was raised from the dead by Jesus and ascended into heaven as a live woman. The Assumption became an article of faith in 1950.

Devotion to Mary is part of Catholic liturgical life, and the studies, doctrines and devotion associated with her are known collectively as Mariology.

Marian apparitions — the alleged appearances of the BVM over the centuries, have been reported many times and in just as many different countries.

Percipients identify the manifestation, usually in the form of a luminous woman, as Mary. When she speaks, she usually foretells of apocalyptic disasters; claims that the reign of the Anti-Christ is imminent and that we should all repent, pray and do penance.

Although Catholic dogma states that apparitions are not ghosts it accepts that God permits the phenomena. In many cases the sites of these appearances have become shrines to which millions flock often in search of miraculous cures.

Space precludes listing them all so I will restrict my comments to the four most famous.

Lourdes would probably be the first name to spring to mind if asked to name a famous shrine. Situated

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southwest of Toulouse, in southern France, it attracts some three million pilgrims each year, fifty thousand of them sick and disabled in search of a cure for their afflictions.

It came into prominence in 1858 when Bernadette Soubirous was out gathering firewood with her sisters on a cold winter's day. A deeply pious, poorly educated and asthmatic girl of 14, she heard a noise like a gust of wind, looked up, and saw a soft glow in a grotto at the Massabielle cliff. A figure with a soft white veil materialised. Years later Bernadette wrote:

"I put my hand in my pocket and found my rosary there, I wanted to make the sign of the cross... I couldn't raise my hand to my forehead. The vision made the sign of the cross. Then I tried a second time and I could. As soon as I made the sign of the cross the fearful shock I felt disappeared. I knelt down and said my rosary in the presence of the beautiful lady. The vision fingered the beads of her own rosary but she did not move her lips. When I finished my rosary, she signed for me to approach but I did not dare. Then she disappeared."

At a later sighting the apparition is alleged to have said, "I am the Immaculate Conception."

My own doubts about the genuineness of the vision revolve around the alleged actions of the apparition. She is reported to have 'fingered the beads of her own rosary.' This prayer talisman was non-existent 2000 years ago and Eastern Christian monks did not adopt the practice until the 3rd century. It was not until 1520 that Pope Leo X gave the rosary official approbation.

To claim to be the "Immaculate Conception" when the title was conferred posthumously and not defined as Catholic dogma until 1854 by Pope Pius IX, creates further doubts as to the accuracy of Bernadette's story.

Although thousands saw Bernadette experience her visions on eighteen different occasions, none shared them. Oddly, nobody seemed at all surprised that Mary was fluent in French — only one of her remarkable linguistic attainments as will be become apparent as we proceed.

While the sick and the crippled flock to Lourdes every year in search of miraculous cures, Bernadette suffered from asthma all her life, was a victim of cholera and died at the age of 35 of a tubercular knee. God certainly bestows his blessings in mysterious ways!

Guadalupe, or more precisely, the Basilica of our Lady of Guadalupe is situated in Villa de Guadalupe Hidalgo just north of Mexico City. Hundreds of thousands flock there each year to worship and pray for miracles. The principal objects of veneration being a "miraculous cloth" and a portrait "not made with human hands."

According to legend, a recent convert to Christianity, a young Aztec peasant by the name of Juan Diego, heard a voice calling "Juanito". An apparition in the form of a young girl in a radiant mist appeared and identified herself as the "ever-virgin Holy Mary, Mother of the True God". She instructed the peasant to hasten to the palace of the Bishop of Mexico and express her desire to have a temple built on this plain. Bishop Juan Zumarraga was unconvinced and asked for a sign. Reporting back to the Virgin (!), Juan was told to gather some flowers, wrap them in his mantle, and take them to the doubting priest. When the flowers were scattered on the floor they formed a drawing of the ever Virgin Holy Mary (simulacrum?)

When the flowers were scattered on the floor they formed a drawing of the ever Virgin Holy Mary.

Casting doubt on the legend, Historian Jacques Lafaye (1976) suggests it was borrowed from an earlier Spanish legend in which the Virgin appeared to a shepherd and led him to discover a statue of her. Many of the events can be correlated with biblical stories — a luminescent personage (Matt. 17:2); the sending of a messenger to persuade a doubter (Exod.3:18-19) and the invoking of tangible "signs" to convince a disbeliever (John 20:25-30).

A second apparition resulted in a supposedly miraculous painted image that became known as the Virgin of Guadalupe. It's now housed in the New Basilica, the second finished in 1709 and build on the site of the original.

Once again doubt is cast on its authenticity. The portrait discloses a remarkable similarity to a Spanish painting by Bonanat Zaoritzza housed in the Museo do Arte de Cataluña in Barcelona right down to the broach at the throat. That painting precedes the Guadalupe Virgin by nearly a century!

One of the main purposes of Spanish Imperialism was the propagation of Christianity — an estimated 8,000,000 Indian converts from 1532 to 1538. Miracles undoubtedly helped to convince, and given that Bishop Zumarraga was the chief organiser of the Church in Mexico one could be forgiven for believing that the whole thing was a pious fraud.

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Fatima, situated in central Portugal, has since 1917 been one of the world's great Marian shrines.

Three young peasant children, Lucia dos Santos and her cousins Francisco and Jacinta Marto aged nine, six and eight respectively, were tending their sheep when there was a flash of lightning. They reportedly saw a beautiful young girl who said that she had come from heaven and identified herself as "The Lady of the Rosary". News of the vision spread, and crowds of the faithful and curious accompanied the children whenever the vision visited them.

On 13 October 1917 an estimated crowd of seventy thousand people gathered at Fatima and allegedly witnessed a "miraculous solar phenomenon" in which the sun seemed to "dance". The vision is supposed to have entrusted the children, in particular Lucia, with secrets that were passed on to the Vatican. Believed to be of apocalyptic disasters, the Pope is alleged to have collapsed in horror! Pilgrimages to Fatima commenced in 1927. A basilica was begun in 1928 and consecrated in 1953.

Fatima International puts out a monthly newsletter full of warnings about the approaching apocalypse and the coming of the Antichrist. It would appear, however, that the Antichrist must have lost his GPS — St Louis de Montfort, promoter of devotion to the BVM, stated unequivocally that the world was moving remorselessly into that terrifying period of human history known as the Reign of the Antichrist. That was back in 1711!

Philosopher and atheist Professor A. J. Ayer was asked whether it would satisfy his criterion of evidence of truth for the statement that more than 100,000 people reported seeing the Sun spinning at Fatima. Ayer replied, "No, it would not, for the simple reason that the phenomenon was reported nowhere else in the world, so we must conclude that the Sun stayed in its proper place and that the people were subject to some sort of mass hallucination."

Medjugorje. Closer to the end of the millennium we have Medjugorje, a small mountain parish in the former Yugoslavia where, in 1981, the Blessed Virgin Mary is alleged to have appeared to six young people — Ivanka, Mirjana, Vicka, Ivan, Marija and Jakov. She gave them "secrets" and countless messages. Among them (straight from the pulpit!) commitment to God; turn away from sin; repent; regular mass; monthly confession; daily rosary and

dedication to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. All the usual exhortations and a repetition of traditional Catholic dogma.

Although the communiqués of three Investigative Commissions into the events at Medjugorje exhibit a cautionary quality, they have not deterred the hundreds of thousands who have now made it a place of pilgrimage. Stories of miracles abound, none of which stand up to scrutiny.

Once again Mary demonstrated her proclivity for linguistics. Apart from her fluency in French, Spanish and Portuguese she has somewhere along the line picked up Croatian! Oh for the day when she appears in PNG and speaks Pidgin English with an Aramaic accent. That'll be hilarious!

What are we to conclude?

First, let's look at the BVM's appearance as described by the visionaries. She is always young, beautiful, radiant, dressed in fine raiments and bathed in light. Her accomplishments and accoutrements include fluency in the language of the country in which she appears, and a knowledge of the Scriptures; she is conversant with the traditional teachings and rituals of the Catholic Church and possesses a rosary. Her utterances follow the conventional teachings of the Catholic Church and profundity is conspicuously absent. Her revelations are simply restatements — her warnings, promises of salvation, threats of perdition, and the need for unquestioning devotion are all reiterations of those written in the Scriptures. These are exactly what the pious would expect to hear from a divine messenger.

The visionaries are usually young, uneducated and thoroughly indoctrinated by the Catholic Church.

As no one has ever seen the original Mary or any evidence of what she may have looked like; all recorded descriptions of the apparition conform to the percipients' familiarity with contemporary religious representations. The visionaries are usually young, uneducated and thoroughly indoctrinated by the Catholic Church. They come from poor or deprived families and believe in miracles and the supernatural. Perhaps the conjuring up of a divine figure may comfort them and give them status in the eyes of others. Young children have vivid imaginations and love to fantasise. Given the right environment, a religious background and a suitable motive they are well on the way to hallucinating.

The supernatural is contradicted by everything we learn from our five senses and natural laws. To "see" and "hear" beyond those senses and laws is the result of a subjective state based on commonplace concepts.

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