

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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of Australia Inc** Established
1970

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ATHEIST FOUNDATION OF AUSTRALIA INC

EST. 1970

PHILOSOPHY

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

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

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

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

AIMS

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

To safeguard the rights of all non-religious people.

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

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

To promote atheism.

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Editorial

Out with he old...

Hello readers,

I would like you all to welcome with open arms the new Editor of THE AUSTRALIAN ATHEIST Sean Broughton-Wright. (I hope that is clapping I hear!)

Sean has been a member of the Atheist Foundation for a number of years. He set up our first Forum (at his own cost) so members and other atheists could gather together online. It was a huge success and has gone from strength to strength.

But Sean has moved onward and downward since the heady days of the Forum. He and his wife (and Gaby the cat) moved from Alice Springs to South Australia this year. Hence the downward! The onward was due to me realising I didn't have time to continue with the magazine. Let me explain.

As you are aware, we are organising the Global Atheist Convention in March next year. It is hugely complex and time consuming.

It became obvious that I wasn't a goddess (doing all, being everywhere, etc) and therefore had to relinquish one of my duties. The magazine was it.

I have thoroughly enjoyed (mostly) editing and compiling the magazine. I hope you have all enjoyed it too. Being an editor is not easy and I realise you can't please everyone.

Thank you to members and friends who have sent in bits and pieces, articles, poems, newspaper clippings, comments, suggestions, cartoons, jokes and other stuff I can't think of. Your enthusiasm has been inspiring.

So it's over to Sean now.

Lee

... and in with the new.

Thank you Lee for that wonderful introduction.

Having just completed this issue I comprehend just what a difficult job you have been tasked with.

Each editor brings their own style, flavour and preferences to the position and while there are some small changes in this issue I have tried not to stray too far from what members have come to expect from the magazine.

I have tried to showcase some of the atheist and freethinking talent that is becoming increasingly obvious as the Global Atheist Convention nears.

We have five articles from speakers who will be appearing at the Convention, including two that were written exclusively for us. Check out: Kylie Sturgess' "*No Apologies*" - *no evidence*, on page 13 and Russell Blackford's, *The emperors have no clothes*, on page 19.

We also have a call to arms for members living in NSW to support the provision of Secular Ethics classes as an alternative to religious instruction - see page 11.

On page 23 Bruce Everett takes a look at the misnomer "New Atheists" in his criticism of Guy Rundle — a handy reference article the next time someone tries to mischaracterise Dawkins, Dennett, Harris or Hitchens.

Personally I find this an exciting time to be involved with Atheism in Australia I hope you enjoy reading the magazine as much as I did collating it.

Got something to say about atheism in Australia, get writing.

Articles, letters and queries can be sent to the editor at :

sean.broughton-wright@atheistfoundation.org.au

or

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OPINION

Why are we here? It's an interesting question, often asked by religious apologists who already 'know' the answer. My attitude to this question is best summed up by the words of two philosophers whom I heard quoted recently. (These are best read in the accent of the archetypal absent-minded German professor). *"I'm not sure why we are here, but I'm pretty sure it's not to enjoy ourselves"* and *"We are here to help others. What the others are here for, I have no idea"*. In other words the "why are we here?" question is not a valid one. A bit like the question "what is the square root of a pork chop?" It has no answer.

A better question is this: "How did we get here?" This is actually two questions. The first is "how did the universe get here" and the second is "how did humans get here". Of course the religious apologists have their answer ready: "God did it". The more intelligent and sophisticated religious apologists no longer push the creation argument in relation to the second of these questions, and accept evolution as a fact (although they may claim that God kick-started the whole thing), but on the question of how the universe got here there is now an increasing trend to try to use scientific arguments to support the "God did it" response.

This is somewhat ironic, since all progress in science has always been made in the teeth of ferocious resistance from religion. I am not referring here to the so called "intelligent design" arguments, which are couched in scientific terminology but which are nothing but pseudo-science and bad science. This current assault on reason uses cosmological facts to try to support an argument for the existence of God. This takes some hide, since our cosmological knowledge is solely derived from science, and at the time when all religious dogma was set in concrete nothing of course was known about the big bang, star formation and all the rest. (Although there have been attempts to re-interpret the Genesis story in the Bible to show that it predicts these cosmological events). The main arguments are these: The question "how can something come from nothing", and the fact that the physical constants are so finely tuned.

If you asked the religious apologist 'from what did God make the universe', the answer would presumably have to be 'nothing'. So there would seem to be no disagreement about the fact that something can come from nothing. The real issue is how it came about that something came from nothing. The difference between the scientific and religious approaches to this issue could not be more different. Scientists will admit that they don't know, speculate about possibilities and look forward to a day when we may have an answer. The religious will claim that they do know, on the basis of no evidence whatsoever, except for the fact that they cannot imagine how the universe could come into being unless there was a supernatural creator. This of course is just a failure of the imagination, and it carries the danger of putting a stop to scientific enquiry since there is no need to put all that effort into finding answers if you think you have them already. When I say that scientists will admit that they don't know, I need to add that there are some physicists who will not quite agree. Theoretical physicist Stephen Hawking, for example, is comfortable with the idea of the universe spontaneously creating itself from nothing. And particle physicist Victor Stenger speculates: *"There is no reason why the physical universe cannot be its own first cause. As we know from both everyday experience and sophisticated scientific observations, complex systems develop from simpler systems all the time in nature—with not even low intelligence required. A mist of water vapour can freeze into a snowflake. Winds can carve out great cathedrals in rock. Brontosaurus can evolve from bacteria. And our relatively complex universe could have arisen out of the entity that is the simplest and most mindless of all—the void"*. (From Free Inquiry Magazine, Vol 25, No 2).

What about the fine tuning of the physical constants? The point here is that even a minute change in any of the fundamental physical constants, such as the gravitational constant, would mean that our universe could not exist in its present form and support human life. The implication is that only an 'intelligent designer' could be responsible for such fine tuning. Once again this is a failure of the imagination. And once again I quote Victor Stenger: *"While slight changes in the constants of physics could make life as we know it impossible, what about life as we do not know it? We have no reason to believe that our kind of carbon-based life is the only form that is possible under every possible variation in constants and the laws of physics. I have shown that long-lived stars, which are regarded as necessary for the building of the chemical elements that constitute living structures, can be*

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expected for a huge range of physical constants. Similarly, Anthony Aguire examined the universes that result when six cosmological parameters are varied by orders of magnitude and found that they do not preclude the existence of intelligent life. Furthermore, modern cosmology indicates that multiple universes may exist with different constants and laws of physics. In that case, it is no more surprising that we live in a universe suited for us than it is that we live on the planet suited for us—Earth rather than Mars or Venus. The universe is not fine-tuned to life; life is fine-tuned to the universe.”

How can something come from nothing? How can an electron be in two places at the same time? It's the same issue. Just because our poorly evolved brains are not able to fully grasp a concept is no excuse to jump to the lazy option – ‘God did it.’

For the last word on the matter I have to turn to the late, great Douglas Adams, of ‘The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy’ fame: “*There is a theory which states that if ever anybody discovers exactly what the Universe is for and why it is here, it will instantly disappear and be replaced by something even more bizarre and inexplicable. There is another theory which states that this has already happened.*”

Dennis

Letters to the Editor

Dear fellow atheists,

I would like to share with you a publication which gels with Charles Cornwall's article in the latest edition (Issue No 17) of THE AUSTRALIAN ATHEIST.

Some years ago an acquaintance of mine said that he would like to lend me a book, but first needed to know if I was a Christian. I assured him that I was, in fact, an atheist, at which point he produced the book he thought I would enjoy.

When I ask this acquaintance why he need to know if I was a Christian before lending me the book, he replied that if I was, he did not want to be responsible for destroying my faith/beliefs, and would, in that case, not lend me the book!

The book was entitled “Jesus the Man” by Barbara Thiering. I found the book absolutely fascinating, especially as I was brought up by devout Baptist parents and was an enthusiastic believer until the age of about 14 – 15 years of age when my intellect kicked in, and, as an adult atheist wondered where all the “miracle stories” had come from.

Barbara Thiering was, apparently, a nun (of which

order I cannot remember) who spent 20 years studying the Dead Sea Scrolls. Her study of the socio-political environment, (including various Jewish rituals and customs) in the time of Jesus sheds a whole new light on the so-called miracles. Two, I remember particularly were the explanations of why Mary was called a “virgin” and how it would appear that Jesus “walked on water”.

The validating aspect of this book is that approximately one third is her own writing, the other two thirds are her detailed references.

The BBC (United Kingdom) did make a series of the book apparently, but only one episode was shown, after which the series was cancelled – I cannot imagine why!

I would challenge anyone who holds traditional Christian beliefs to read this book in a non-judgmental frame of mind.

I'm afraid I no longer have that copy of the book as I lent it to a religious friend of mine who did not return it and who now does not return my phone calls either.

Keep up the good work.

Jennifer C

From the Inbox

Hi, my name is Mira, I believe in God. (Why Mira?) Because. (you are crazy, superstitious, insecure, soft, unrealistic, romantic, you can not stand on your own two feet, you need a crutch.) Wow guys, am I all that?

Woe betide the one who needs everything in writing, with a seal of approval from his/her peers. Now who is insecure? Modern man, that is the way to go, degrees and all that. The loony bin, that's the place for any kind of faith. Faith in oneself, in mankind, God forbid in God.

Where will you go when you DIE boys and girls? I have tried to be a good girl to the best of my ability and I will go to heaven. I will wave as I go past. If you are there or anywhere for that matter. All the best for the future (after life that is).



Hi, Mira,

Thanks for telling us you believe in the Christian god and that you're not crazy, superstitious, insecure, soft, unrealistic, or romantic, and you don't need a crutch to stand on your own two feet. It must also be a relief to you not to have to worry about the opinions of your fellow humans because you and your god are so close.

You're right that many people feel insecure, but I'm sure that's perfectly normal for all animals... it can't be relaxing to be a bird always on the lookout for predators, or to be a human living in ancient forests worrying about wolves, or fearful of the inquisition in

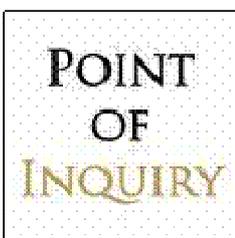
the middle ages, or at any time in human history during wars and famines and floods and plagues that humans have endured.

There's nothing wrong with faith, Mira, as long as you have faith in something worthwhile like the values that have sustained humanity during our 300,000 years of existence. Such things as: kindness, generosity, consideration, affection, honesty, hospitality, compassion, charity, humour, gentleness, equality, listening, egalitarianism, respect for the elderly, love of children, diligent respect for the land, plants and all other animals.

But blind faith is another story. When humans cease questioning and checking up on what they're told, then they're no better than prisoners. As for where I'll go when I die; up in smoke is my choice. Cremation so my ashes can rain down and fertilize the earth assisting the growth and continuation of life on earth. In that way the atoms that make up my body will have eternal life.

It does you credit to have always been a good girl, ten ticks for that. I hope you were good because you wanted to be, not because you were frightened of boiling in hell forever. But as for waving to us on your way to heaven after you die; according to all religions that believe in an afterlife, the 'thing' that goes to heaven is the soul – an invisible entity that has no substance, no form, no observable features... what bit of invisible substance-less stuff will you wave, and how will you see us?

Best wishes,
Peter
Public Relations Team



Point Of Inquiry:

Hosted by DJ Grothe, is a podcast and radio show produced by the American humanist organisation Centre for Inquiry (CFI). They usually host a weekly interview with prominent thinkers.

Episodes focus on CFI's issues: religion, human values and the borderlands of science. Point of Inquiry explores three research areas: Pseudoscience and the paranormal, Alternative medicine and Religion and secularism.

The latest episode features Australian philosopher and author Russell Blackford. Past guests include Peter Singer, Francis Collins and Ayaan Hirsi Ali.

Check out their archive of past shows here: <http://www.pointofinquiry.org/archive>

If you have any recommendations for podcasts, particularly those relevant to Australia or want to write reviews, please contact the editor (details page 3).

HERETICAL HAPPENINGS

KEEPING YOU IN THE KNOW

Greetings,

Many will be aware that Gold Passes for the Global Atheist Convention in March 2010 sold out very quickly. There has been an amazing response for various types of tickets and for the dinner on the Saturday evening. We have invited all speakers and entertainers to attend this function followed by a night of entertainment. Just because we are Atheists doesn't mean we have to be serious all the time, and a bit of comedy and an illusionist will round off the day nicely.

The Global Atheist Convention is running on a tight budget and the AFA has applied for sponsorship support from the Victorian Government. The conditions for funding boil down to having 1,000 people attend who are a mixture of overseas, interstate and locals. Attendee numbers have surpassed this already. Many will take advantage of tourism highlights, spend a few nights in hotels, eat the wonderful variety of food on offer, and use taxis, buses, trams and hire cars thus enriching Victoria's economy.

The Government encourages large Conventions by financially supporting them. The AFA will know the outcome of the request for assistance in a couple of weeks. Considering the Parliament of World's Religions (December 2009) is heavily subsidised by Victoria, we see no reason why we won't be, although we have asked for a lot less. The Global Atheist Convention fits the necessary criteria.

The Convention is more than a talk-fest: it is a demonstration of our strength as a voice for reason in Australia. Do not miss being a part of what is going to be a history changing event. This is a unique occasion, a moment of significance where all Atheists have the opportunity — dare I say, the responsibility — to make a stand for reason and have an enjoyable time in the process. The use of the sentiment "win-win" could hardly be more appropriate.

There is good news about the Atheist slogan, "Atheism – Celebrate Reason!" Signs will be appearing on Tasmanian buses for two months from January next year. We have high hopes for the other states of Australia. The intention, if we are successful, is to have signs on buses only in Victoria to highlight the Global Atheist Convention. The logic is that to cover many states would dilute the number of buses and the amount of time we can display our slogan.

The lengthy bus sign saga has concluded in our favour. The AFA is still pursuing two states that have poor anti-discrimination legislation, New South Wales and South Australia through the United Nations. This will take a number of years to accomplish.

Victory does come at a price. The AFA will be asking for donations to support the bus sign campaign sometime in the future. I thank all the good people that have pledged and all those who will donate. Atheism is on a roll with the bus signs and the Global Atheist Convention, with or without government financial support.

The face of Atheism in Australia is changing markedly and rapidly. With these changes will come a greater say in the political process with decisions being made for the benefit of all citizens and not just those who are religious folk. Things are looking good.

Until we meet again,

David



In the News

Focus on the Family has been banned from ACT schools pending an investigation into their provision of Sexual Education Seminars.

A far right religious import from the United States, Focus on the Family Australia has been accused of vilifying homosexuality, and preaching religion to students without parental consent.

A spokesman for ACT Education Minister Andrew Barr says the government launched the investigation after a complaint made by a parent at a Canberra high school.

The group has operated in five other ACT schools without complaint. A cursory review of their website reveals a sexual education program based on abstinence and delay of sexual activity until marriage. Seminar attendees are offered pledge cards on which to note their promises to stay celibate.

According to the *Canberra Times*, attendees reported being told that if a couple had sex it was the boy's fault and that young women should not provoke boys by putting their hair up and wearing make up.

[Ed—*In the old days, of course, it was fast, provocative or immoral for a "nice" woman to let her hair down! And if only F.o.t.F. supporters would abstain from sexual goings on and marriage altogether, they would please me immensely.*]

Focus on the Family has the support of the Australian Christian Lobby, who describe the seminars as a values-based program.

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Mercy Ministries Australia, responsible for the alleged abuse of mentally ill women through the use of Deliverance Ministry, has closed its doors, citing financial hardship resulting from loss of sponsorship and negative press.

This news followed the revelation by Gloria Jeans that the company had officially ceased sponsorship of Mercy Ministries. The evangelical mega-church Hillsong, who have long sought to disassociate themselves with the group, despite strong business and

social ties, released a rather panicked media statement leaving the public unsure as to whether or not there might have been more to the closure than financial hardship.

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October and November have seen two vitriolic attacks against Atheists in the mainstream media. The first by Dr Dvir Abramovich in Melbourne's *The Age* was a convoluted and ill-considered rant against the "New Atheists" which left a number of readers wondering if he had actually read any books by Dawkins or Hitchens.

The second by Australian Catholic University Vice-chancellor, Greg Craven, in the *Sydney Morning Herald* likened atheists to a plague of unwanted and unlovely creatures before launching into a hateful and hypocritical tirade.

These rantings were countered by two articulate replies from Michael Brull and James Richmond, showing the theists to be severely outclassed. With the Atheist convention round the corner the religious are ramping up their polemic and so far it has been found wanting.

±

Following on from his move to round up disaffected Anglicans, Pope Benedict is planning to meet with several prominent Catholic politicians past and present. These include Tony Blair, Joe Biden, Angela Merkel, and Silvio Berlusconi. It seems the pontiff is concerned about the erosion of Christian values and laws being passed that contradict the teachings of the church. He apparently fears that not enough prominence is being given to basic Christian and family values by governments. The recent ruling by the European Court of Human rights to remove crucifixes from Italian classrooms no doubt has him very concerned.

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In a stunning act of humanity and sanity Christian groups have joined with human rights and civil liberties groups in opposing the reintroduction of a

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motion at the United Nations Human Rights Council that would outlaw “defamation of religions”.

The Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC), a bloc of 56 Islamic states, has been proposing the non-binding motion every year since 1999, attempting to make it illegal to “defame religion” anywhere in the world, although the only religion named in the motion is Islam.

Now Christian groups are coming to realise that the purpose of the motion is not only to silence the critics of Islam generally, but to provide an internationally recognised legal right to punish Christians in Islamic countries.

The Obama administration has come out strongly against the proposition, a move expected considering the value Americans apply to the individual and the right to free speech. Hilary Clinton was quoted as saying, “The protection of speech about religion is particularly important since persons of different faith will inevitably hold divergent views on religious questions,” Clinton said. “These differences should be met with tolerance, not with the suppression of discourse.”

±

Less than a year has passed since World Youth Day and the Catholic Church is launching yet another assault on the youth of Australia.. The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference is inviting youth leaders from across the country to attend a Youth Ministry Convention in 2010, to draw them together for dialogue, network and exchange of ideas.

The event will be held at the Australian Catholic University’s St Patrick’s Campus in Melbourne from 1 - 3 October 2010.

±

God apparently needs defending by Federal MP Joe Hockey. Big Joe claims that the loss of faith and the perceived irrelevance of the modern church to the Australian people is the result of too literal an interpretation of the Bible.

±

In France, Scientology was found guilty of defrauding followers after a judge effectively debunked the ideas behind the church’s trusty E-meter, a crude polygraph used to encourage Scientologists to purchase everything from books to extreme sauna courses.

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Historically speaking France is both a Catholic stronghold and an exemplar of a secular state, having written the separation of church and state into its constitution. Unfortunately, however, it appears that US-style evangelicalism has taken root. This lamentable fact was demonstrated when thousands of evangelicals descended on Strasbourg to turn the 500th anniversary of Calvin’s birth into a huge media covered event. The number of French evangelicals has risen from 50,000 in post war France to roughly half a million today.

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The United Kingdom is bracing itself for the largest compensation payout provided by the Catholic Church in that country. The Middlesbrough Diocese of the Catholic Church was informed by the High Court that it was responsible for a children’s home that was the centre of a large-scale abuse scandal. The compensation could amount to £8 million [\$14.5 million]. The case alleges that the home was involved in systemic abuse of emotionally and behaviourally disturbed boys from 1960 until 1992.

The case is the culmination of 6 years work, which the church has tried every legal avenue to avoid.

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Animal Welfare groups have protested against exemptions given to some Victorian abattoirs to continue to allow them to prepare Halal and Kosher meat products involving the ritual slaughter of animals. The religious ritual involves slitting the animal’s throat while it is conscious. The RSPCA has called the practice cruel and inhumane.

Even calls by Princess Alia bint al-Hussein of Jordan to Prime Minister Kevin Rudd to stop the ritual slaughter has fallen on deaf ears.

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Education

Antique religious education policy needs reform

By Teresa Russell

(this article was first published in Eureka Street 29 Sept. 09)

Unless you have sent a child to a public school in New South Wales, you won't have come face-to-face with the madness that is known as 'non-scripture'.

For one hour each week, usually first thing in the morning during prime learning time, every public primary school in the state must divide its students into different faiths to receive 'special religious education' (SRE) from a wide assortment of adults, known collectively as 'scripture teachers'.

If a parent wants their child to opt out of SRE, that child is not entitled, under existing education policy, to any instruction during this period. The policy specifically states that learning in the areas of 'ethics, values, civics or general religious education' must not occur.

These non-scripture children are supervised in classrooms, school halls, and corridors. In many schools, even access to the library is prevented in order to ensure these children don't learn anything that their SRE counterparts might miss out on.

The policy relating to scripture classes dates back to a century-old agreement between the churches and the state of NSW. When the state made a bid to assume the primary responsibility for education, the churches agreed, on the condition that one hour each week be reserved exclusively for scripture education.

While there is little doubt that this agreement would have reflected community sentiment at the time, it is not relevant today in NSW where an estimated 25 per cent of students sit idle each week. In some schools, the opt out rate is as high as 80 per cent and teachers must stop their classes while just a few students leave to attend scripture.

In Australia's 2001 Census of Population and Housing,

20.7 per cent of people described their religious affiliation as Anglican, 26.6 per cent as Catholic, 20.7 per cent as other Christian, 4.9 per cent as other religions, 15.5 per cent as having no religion and 11.7 per cent as not stated or inadequately described.

Schools that have very high opt out rates usually have a parent body that is unhappy with the quality of religious instruction in their affiliated faiths or else there is no access to education from their own faiths.

In 2003, St James Ethics Centre¹ in Sydney was approached by individual parents and the Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations² in NSW to create a secular, ethics-based course to serve as an alternative to scripture. Andrew Refshauge, the then Minister for Education, rejected its introduction on the grounds that there was 'neither scope for implementation, nor was there a community-wide call'.

In 2004, a resubmission, which included evidence of strong community support, was again rejected, this time by Carmel Tebbet.

Today's NSW Minister for Education, Verity Firth, has just received a joint submission from St James Ethics Centre and the Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations in NSW. It asks the minister to amend the policy that requires non-scripture students to remain idle, and proposes a pilot of an ethics-based option to scripture in interested public schools.

On what grounds could a rational person oppose the teaching of ethics to a group of idle primary school children? Surely religious education of children aged 5–11 is faith-based ethics education, lots of great stories and a bit of selective history teaching.

Denying these children access to ethics education is a social injustice. Every child is entitled to ethical instruction, regardless of religious affiliation. Indeed, there is anecdotal evidence that many children who opt out already feel excluded during this hour, thanks to treatment by their peers and more surprisingly, by the interpretation of the policy by individual principals.

In one Sydney primary school last year, access to chess, knitting and other craft was removed from non-scripture class. It was replaced by sitting still and having to read quietly for the hour, after religious

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parents complained to the principal that non-scripture was more fun and their children were pushing to go to that class instead.

Recently, parents at Bungendore Public School created and taught a curriculum of comparative religions and societal beliefs to the non-scripture attendees, which was half the school. The NSW Department of Education closed down the course after several years — once it found out about it.

At the very least, ethics education will do no harm, and recent research shows it is likely to do a lot of good. A research review undertaken by St James Ethics Centre indicates a link between a child's sense of purpose or meaning, benevolent behaviour and vital mental health.

'By denying children the right to explore fundamental themes and virtues, we are essentially denying them the right to contribute to their own wellbeing and, by extension, to that of the community,' states the centre's

'Rationale for an Ethics-based Complement to Scripture'.

The people of NSW anxiously await Minister Firth's decision about finally removing this redundant and discriminatory policy from her department's books. How could she possibly refuse?

References:

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Teresa Russell is a freelance business writer whose two children attend non-scripture every Wednesday morning in a Sydney public school. She is an early signatory to a petition to the minister in support of an ethics-based complement to scripture.

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Petition

NSW Department of Education policy prohibits children, who are not attending scripture, from receiving any formal instruction during this period, and specifically not in the area of 'ethics, values, civics and general religious education'.

In the past the NSW Department of Education has held the view that offering such formal instruction, would pose a possible conflict of interest for students attending SRE, and their parents.

St James Ethics Centre (the Centre), and those for whom it is advocating, view NSW Department of Education policy as socially unjust - all children ought to be entitled to ethical exploration and its associated benefits, regardless of their parent's religious persuasion.

Contemporary research has empirically linked the opportunity to explore purpose, meaning and virtues with vital youth mental health. By denying any children this opportunity, we are essentially denying them an opportunity to contribute to their own well-being and, by extension, that of the community.

Further, the Rawlinson Committee, set up to review Special Religious Education in schools, specifically recommended in 1980 that pupils withdrawn from SRE should be provided with purposeful secular learning (Rec 62). Those with whom the Centre has consulted see no conflict of choice between a secular,

ethics-based course and the study of a specific religious tradition.

It is difficult to see how such a conflict could arise given that all religions share a number of completely distinct and compelling attributes including – claims to universal truth, claims to a particular understanding about the relationship between humanity and God, access to revelation, and so on. One might question how an introduction to ethics, shorn of all theological authority, could ever be said to compete with faiths that have persisted over centuries.

The St James Ethics Centre (the Centre), the NSW Federation of P and C Associations (P and C) and a cross-section of community leaders have requested ministerial approval to pilot a course in ethics to serve as a complement to scripture in NSW primary schools. The pilot was proposed at the July 2009 P and C AGM where a motion to provide such a course was tabled and unanimously passed.

More recently, a consultation of community leaders indicated broad support for such a course on the basis that all children have the right to ethical exploration, regardless of whether it's tied to a particular religious tradition. Outcomes of the pilot would permit Minister Firth to assess the need for and impact of an ethics-based course. But we need your help to convince the Minister to proceed.

Visit the petition site here:

<http://www.ipetitions.com/petition/SpecialEthicsEducation/>



“No Apologies” - No Evidence

By *Kylie Sturgess*

religion to students without parental consent.”

The *Canberra Times*⁴ depicted even more lurid tales from the students’ perspectives of the content, with Education Minister Andrew Barr saying that :

“...preliminary advice from his department indicated the “extreme views of a fringe organisation”, Focus on the Family, had been presented in six ACT schools in the past two years.”

I’m certain that many of us have a few no-longer-working pens left over from a former place of employment; a notepad with the company logo from years back, maybe an old polo shirt that celebrates an event from 2002. You might even still use their sticky-notes and put your receipts in the emptied training manual file.

I should point out that Focus on the Family is the same group that had a massive fallout in the media, after they tried to introduce creationism via nationally-available educational materials (with Brendan Nelson realising what an incredibly bad move it was to support it⁵) back in 2005:

I found recently that I had a scribbled-in, second-hand book left over from one of my former places of employment, given to me by a former student, years ago. It’s called *No Apologies*.¹

“At a time when we need to develop a more critical attitude to the power of science over our everyday lives, the pseudoscience of intelligent design takes us backwards. Faced with a real challenge to clear thinking, educational standards, and the pursuit of knowledge, the minister has turned and run.”

It was from a student from my form class, a group of Year 11 girls. They thought it was quite a joke, particularly the illustration on page 37, a ‘Progression of Sexual Intimacy Chart’. It claims that engaging in sexual activity will result in an ‘end of relationship in present form’, implying throughout its pages that engaging in sex as a young person is somewhat akin to the plot of *When Harry Met Sally* or a hysterical out-take from *Bridget Jones’ Diary*. They thought it was amusing, when they casually discussed the contents, as something not to be taken seriously. It didn’t take long before it was challenged by parents, community members and the health education teachers on campus as something quite serious indeed.

Abstinence-only education is potentially dangerous and is a backwards step for educators who should be promoting health and well-being:

Not that it seems to have deterred them much⁶, admittedly, as you can see. But why should people question *No Apologies* seminars and texts in schools? Even though the website says that the *No Apologies* seminar is

Why does this interest me now? Even though it has been quite some time since I’ve looked at this book, it has hit the news again. Whilst the promotional material for the text² and the program says that it was “created to help young people safely navigate the most critical decade of their lives” and “young people need information and skills to guide them in their decision-making to avoid the consequences of high-risk behaviour”, it’s really about promoting a key concept that is supported by its creators.

‘an authorised program by Performances for Schools managed by the Department of Education and Training NSW’, why am I gravely concerned? As much as I was concerned about the ‘funny’ book given to me by my students? The strongest point I usually make is because of the research: it’s been repeatedly shown⁷ in the USA, for example, that it just doesn’t work. Abstinence-only education is potentially dangerous and is a backwards step for educators who should be promoting health and well-being:

Focus on the Family is promoting abstinence-only education through *No Apologies*.

Based on an experimental design, the impact analysis uses survey data collected in 2005 and early 2006 from more than 2,000 teens who had been randomly assigned to either a program group that was eligible to participate in one of the four programs or a control group that was not. The findings show no significant impact on

ABC Online³ reports on how they have been accused of

(Continued on page 14)

“...vilifying homosexuality, and preaching

(Continued from page 13)

teen sexual activity, no differences in rates of unprotected sex, and some impacts on knowledge of STDs and perceived effectiveness of condoms and birth control pills (Trenholm, Devaney, Fortson, Clark, Quay & Wheeler, 2008)⁸.

Over the past decade, abstinence education has emerged as the primary U.S. government strategy for dealing with adolescent sexuality. Abstinence-only programs have been found not to help youth delay initiation of sexual intercourse; long-term demographic trends such as later ages at first marriage suggest that policies and programs promoting abstinence until marriage are unlikely to work. Emphasis on abstinence-only programs has coincided with restrictions on what teachers can cover in health education classes and with fewer students reporting that they received information about such topics as contraception and sexually transmitted disease prevention... Furthermore, offering information only on abstinence and withholding potentially lifesaving knowledge on risk reduction raise ethical and human rights concerns (Kantor, Santelli, Teitler & Balmer, 2008)⁹.

A few of the documentaries that I recommend to people include *The Education of Shelby Knox*¹⁰. It tells the story of how, in 2001, a 15-year-old high school student (and politically conservative Southern Baptist) chose to keep her own vow regarding abstaining from sex, but defended the right for her fellow students to be educated in all forms of contraceptive means, with factual and comprehensive schooling. Last year ABC TV (with a rather misleading title, if you think about it) aired *Texas Teenage Virgins*¹¹, a British documentary with mostly vox pop interviews and discussions with frustrated and concerned young people in an abstinence-only community. Both of these would be suitable for a classroom teaching opportunity.

After reading the following summary from Advocates for Youth¹², I wonder if the notion of 'it is best never to teach teenagers to drive as it'll prevent teen road deaths' would ever catch on and get similar funding and textbooks made up for them?

Evaluation of these eleven [abstinence-only] programs showed few short-term benefits and no

Evaluation of these eleven [abstinence-only] programs showed few short-term benefits and no lasting, positive impact.

lasting, positive impact. A few programs showed mild success at improving attitudes and intentions to abstain. No program was able to demonstrate a positive impact on sexual behavior over time... Abstinence-only programs provide these youth with no information, other than abstinence, regarding how to protect themselves from pregnancy, HIV, and other STIs. A third, related concern of evaluators was abstinence-only programs' failure to provide positive information about contraception and condoms. Evaluators noted more than once that programs' emphasis on the failure rates of contraception, including condoms, left youth ambivalent, at best, about using them.

I'd strongly suggest that people who are concerned about issues like abstinence-only education being promoted as the only sex education

that young people receive, become involved as stakeholders with their school communities and programs — as parents, future employers, future co-workers of young people and fellow community members.

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Kylie Sturgess is an educator, blogger, independent podcast host, writer and new media activist. When she's not working on a million projects at once she can be found distilling quality writing at Podblack.com

Kylie will also be speaking at the Global Atheist Convention next March.

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The Deep Rifts simply call us unto the breach once more

By **PZ Myers** (Published originally at Pharyngula Blog, 9 November, 2009)

I hereby declare this the official theme of the whimpering, pathetic, anti-atheist backlash of 2009: there are Deep Rifts in atheism.¹ It's all over the place, and it's a little weird.

YOU would think, wouldn't you, that one of the principal attractions of atheism would be the complete absence of schisms. Where the devout always seem to be working themselves up into a frenzy over some obscure theological point, non-believers can glide through life, absolved, as they are, of the need to negotiate the terms of their disbelief. If there's no God, there is no message. And if there's no message, then there's nothing much to argue about. (Dani Garavelli : Believe it or not, 08 November 2009)

Well, we do have a complete absence of schisms, *because we don't have any central dogma or doctrine*. I wish this weren't so difficult for the believers to understand. Each of us has our own, individual goals and follows their unique paths to understanding. Nobody is looking at Paul Kurtz and Christopher Hitchens and saying that they're so different that they can't both be atheists. There is no atheist pope, no atheist catechism, no atheist holy book.

And nothing to argue about? Oh, we have and always will have a million things to argue over — it's just that they tend not to be whether Jesus was of the similar or same substance as God, but instead about real world politics and about ideas that matter. As anybody who has attended a meeting of atheists knows, we love to argue. We're ordinary human beings in that regard, despite repeated claims by apologists for religion that godless and faithful are different species. Really, when I'm on my deathbed, if my wife wants to keep me going for a little longer, all she has to do is bring in editorials like that by Dani Garavelli, and I'll cling to life as long as my middle finger and my snarling muscles are still functional.

This Garavelli person is so oblivious to reality, though, it's the kind of thing to keep me jazzed up for whole minutes.

Despite this, atheism was last week rent by disagreement, proving that the need for petty,

internecine squabbling runs deeper in the psyche than the need to find meaning in existence. The question that is dividing its leading proponents is how much they should be evangelising about their lack of faith. Should they adopt a live-and-let-live approach to the religious? Or should they be shouting their atheism from the rooftops in an attempt to get all the blinkered throwbacks to see the light? (Dani Garavelli: Believe it or not, 08 November 2009)

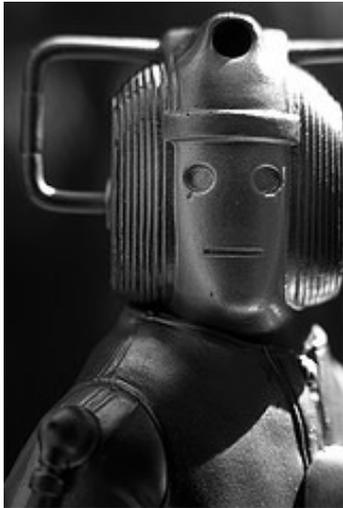
Oh, just last week. We've been unified, until just then, huh? So Madalyn Murray O'Hair, to name one example, united all atheists under one banner, and no one ever criticized her approach? We've been bickering over strategy as long as atheists have been a visible part of the culture; Garavelli is remarkably uninformed if he thinks dissent just popped up *last week*. One of the things that has provided fuel for discussion on this blog has been constant disagreement with other godless partisans who want the mob to go one way (usually to a more complacent silence) than I want them to go — so we engage in healthy, sometimes ferocious, open argument. So what? This is our strength. We offer competing solutions, and we'll see in the end which one is most successful.

Go read Ophelia Benson's discussion² of this issue. It ain't a schism. It's not something that should provide apologists any solace at all; they should regard us atheists as diverse barbarians who gird themselves for war at birth, and train themselves with a lifetime of fierce strife among themselves and against our weak, whiny foes. It's our nature to wield a wicked pen and rouse ourselves to rhetorical battle at the flimsiest slight; it should be no comfort to the frightened faithists and followers of cultie fallacies. They should fear us, instead.

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PZ Myers is a biologist and associate professor at the University of Minnesota, Morris. He writes about science, atheism and unbelief at the Pharyngula blog—<http://scienceblogs.com/pharyngula/>



Atheists under cyber attack

*By Sean Broughton-Wright
with technical assistance from
Grant Ettrick and David Fregon*

In the wee hours of 19 October hordes of Cybermen converged on Atheist headquarters in a bid to stop the strategically significant Global Atheist Convention.

Well not really...

The reality was that both the AFA and Convention websites were targeted by a major and sustained Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attack.

Some news sites and radio programs reported that the websites had been hacked, which was incorrect. A DDoS attack does not compromise your information but rather prevents you and others from getting to it. A network of criminally controlled computer networks (botnets) send false queries to your website jamming it and preventing people from accessing it. Think of a million robotic monkeys all typing in the AFA web address and hitting enter at the same time, over and over again.

The attack was large enough not only to “blockade” the AFA and Convention sites, but also to affect other sites hosted on at the same data-centre. Generally these kind of attacks are the forte of the Russian Mafia or other criminal syndicates who use them to extort money from online businesses, in other words pay up or we’ll stop you getting any customers. Sadly as the number of botnets increases, the price of procuring such services drops, making a DDoS attack a viable option for the unscrupulous, back yard zealot. The costs of acquiring a botnet attack are lower than you would think — depending on quality they can be purchased for as low as \$US100 a day.

So who carried out the attack? The answer is that we will probably never know. It may have been some misguided religious zealot, or some bored teenager or it could have been someone demonstrating the capabilities of their botnet to a potential buyer.

But what I can assure you is that it was not, as some commentators in *The Age* online comments section suggested, an inside job designed to generate publicity. The human and financial costs were significant:

- The AFA’s volunteer tech support spent three days out of their working week and additional time at night, finding and carrying out the solution.
- The Atheist Foundation phones almost melted with the number of additional inquiries from members and worried ticket buyers.
- The attack used up a significant amount of bandwidth for which the AFA is charged for.

Essentially there are easier and more cost efficient ways of getting the message about the convention out to the public.

The attack has been a publicity boon though, with AFA president David Nicholls being interviewed on BBC radio and the incident gaining major coverage in the Australian print media. There has also been a marked increase in the discussion of Atheism following the attacks with outbursts from the Australian Catholic University’s Greg Craven and Dr Dvir Abramovich whose ranting cries resemble those of another Dr Who staple — the Daleks.

Sean Broughton-Wright is a blogger, freelance writer and was subjected to ABC only telecasts for most of his formative years

Photo by Freddie Cooney Ahlstrom

Humour

Divine Denial of Service Attack

Contrary to Greg Craven's assertion that Atheists can't be witty or funny when attacking Christianity we have a superb piece of satirical activism launched by Dan Kerr. Dan along with the Young Australian Skeptic's Jason Ball decided a Divine Denial of Service Attack against god, was an appropriate response to earlier attacks on the Atheist Foundation and convention websites.

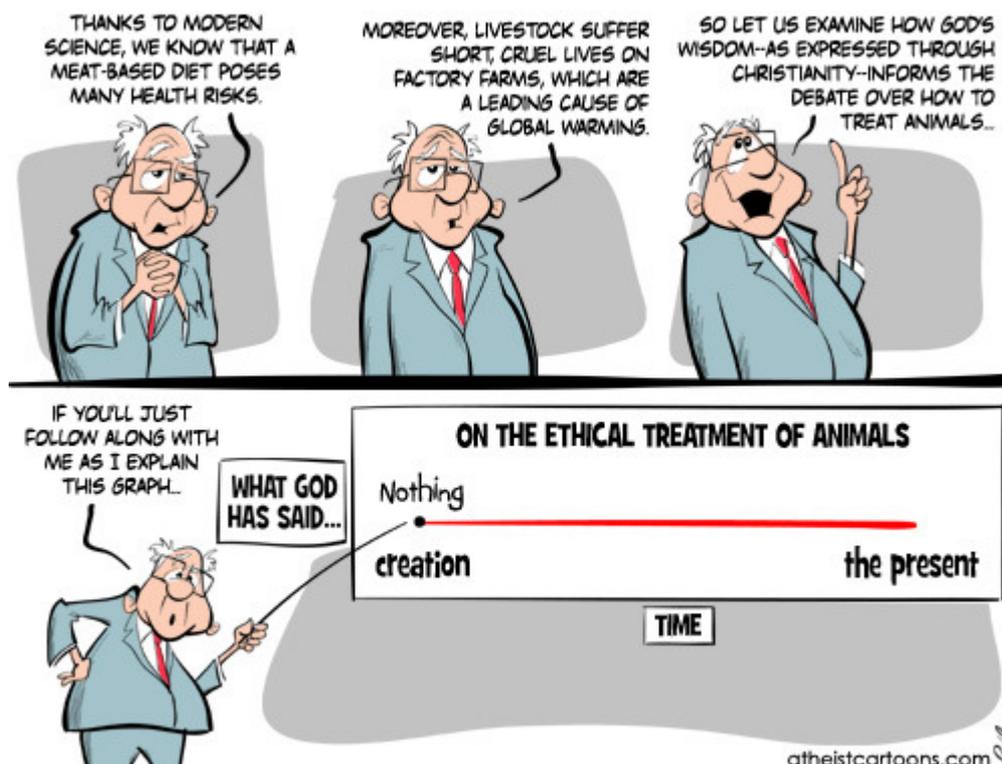
From their Facebook page:

"As you may already be aware, recently the Atheist Foundation of Australia and the Global Atheist Convention websites were the target of a significant DDoS (Distributed Denial of Service) attack, which began on Monday 19 October.

This is a call to all non-believers and advocates for freedom of speech to join us in a global co-ordinated minute of prayer with the aim of inundating God (in this context, the Christian god, God, as distinct from the Greek god, Zeus, the Egyptian god, Ra etc etc) with so many useless prayers that it causes his divineness to go offline as a result of our own DDOS ('Divine' Denial of Service).

The prayer minute will be at exactly 8pm (Eastern Standard Time) & 9am (Greenwich Mean Time) on Sunday 8 November 2009.

Please join us in this important task, with any luck it will take God a while to get back online, ensuring us at least a few days of godless peace. It will also give the Westboro Baptist Church some much needed time to catch up on paperwork."



The emperors have no clothes: Why I speak out against churches and sects



By *Russell Blackford*

Contrary to many expectations in the 1970s, or even the 1990s, religion has not faded away, even in the

Western democracies, and we still see intense activism from religious lobbies. Even now, one religion or another opposes abortion rights, therapeutic cloning research, and most contraceptive technologies. Indeed, rational AIDS-prevention strategies are undermined by the superstitious view that safe sex violates a God-ordained natural order. Various churches and sects condemn essentially harmless activities such as homosexual conduct between consenting adults. Most religious organisations are especially bitter in their opposition to all forms of euthanasia, thus condemning patients with terminal illnesses to lingering deaths, accompanied by humiliation and pain. So much for Christian love.

Even in relatively secular countries, such as Australia, governments pander blatantly to the moral concerns of churches and sects, but the situation is far worse in the USA. American religious conservatives reorganised with dramatic success during the 1970s and 1980s, establishing well-financed networks, think tanks, and even their own universities. Look at the situation now. Slick attempts are made to undermine public trust in science where it contradicts the literal Genesis narrative; a rampant dominionist movement wants to establish a Christian theocracy; the recent Bush administration took the country some considerable way down that path; and the election of a relatively liberal president has produced hysteria on the Religious Right. American religiosity is real, and there is nothing subtle or liberal-minded about its most popular forms.

Even in a very different world, the merits, or otherwise, of religious teachings would be worth exploring. We would still ask whether any structure of doctrines can deliver what it promises: moral guidance, insight into the workings of the universe, spiritual salvation, and the rest of it. But the issues might be discussed more dispassionately. In that world, some of us who criticise religion itself might be content to argue that the church (and the mosque, and all the other religious

architecture) should be kept separate from the state. Unfortunately, however, we don't live in that world.

In the real world, churches and sects often have good reasons — at least by their own lights — to oppose strict secularism. Some of them do not distinguish sharply between guidance on individual salvation and the exercise of political power. They may be sceptical about the independence of secular goals from religious ones, or about the distinction between personal goals and those of the state. Some clearly do not accept the reality of continuing social pluralism. Instead, they look to a time when their views will actually prevail, perhaps with divine assistance.

When religion claims authority in the political sphere, it is unsurprising — and totally justifiable — that atheists question the source of this authority. If religious organisations or their leaders claim to speak on behalf of a god, it is fair to ask whether the god concerned really makes the claims that are communicated on its behalf. Does this god even exist? Where is the evidence? And even if this being does

exist, why, exactly, should its wishes be translated into law? Conversely, if religious leaders do not claim to speak on behalf of any divine being, why do they have more authority than anyone else? Why kow-tow to them?

... satire and mockery have traditionally had a legitimate place whenever absurd ideas are joined to power and privilege.

In many situations, it is better to be civil, but satire and mockery have traditionally had a legitimate place whenever absurd ideas are joined to power and privilege. In any event, there is an important difference between some appropriate level of civility and outright self-censorship. In the US, unfortunately, some atheists appear to have concluded that even civil and thoughtful criticism of supposedly “moderate” religion (i.e., almost anything that does not dispute evolutionary theory) should be discouraged. On this approach, atheist arguments are especially unwelcome if they draw upon scientific findings about ourselves and the universe in which live.

These “accommodationist” atheists tend to be focused on science advocacy, particularly the teaching of evolution in public schools. In seeking public support for their positions, they think it prudent to take the various American demographics as they are. Since they want to sell evolutionary science to very large numbers of pious Americans, the last thing they want is to see it linked with atheism.

Once you think like that, however, sincerity goes out

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(Continued from page 19)

the window; your whole approach will be driven by what might please an audience, rather than by what actually seems to be true. For example, you won't want to point out the difficulty in reconciling the existence of a loving and providential creator with the millions of years of suffering in the animal world, before human beings finally evolved and had an opportunity to sin. You won't want to question what evolutionary theory does to religious notions of human exceptionalism, or to mention the apparent wastefulness of the process and the inefficient "designs" that often result. And you won't want others to say such dangerous things.

But this is a flawed strategy. Thoughtful and moderate Christians who accept the scientifically-measured age of the earth (about 4.6 billion years) can see for themselves that evolutionary theory raises deep questions for their faith. It's futile, and rather insulting, to try to hide this from them. In most cases it is just as futile trying to coax hard-line fundamentalists, who believe that our planet is less than 10,000 years old, to convert to some more moderate, science-friendly kind of religion. For such people, the age of the earth and the special creation of each life form are doctrines that sit near the core of an integrated theological system; they are not optional extras.

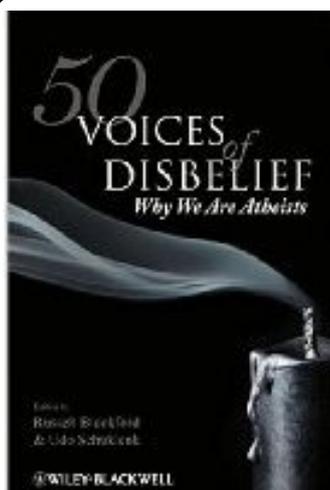
In the upshot, I favour a diversity of views from atheists with widely varied backgrounds, as displayed in *50 Voices of Disbelief: Why We Are Atheists*, the

book I co-edited with Udo Schüklenk. However, silence is not an option. I cannot accept that atheists should keep a low profile, or abandon certain powerful lines of argument, merely because this might offer a marginal (and highly doubtful) propaganda advantage to some science advocates in one country.

This is a good time to speak up and explain our disbelief in gods and the whole panoply of the supernatural. Religion cannot be eradicated — that is not a realistic goal — but the many problems with religious dogma can and should be highlighted. As atheists, we should state clearly that no religion has any rational warrant, and that many churches and sects promote cruelty, misery, ignorance, and human rights abuses. Religious leaders are not our moral leaders, much as they might affect to be, so we should contest the moral authority that is accorded, all too often, to pontiffs and presbyters, to imams, monks, and god-men.

The spiritual emperors have no clothes, and we shouldn't flinch from saying so.

Russell Blackford is an Australian writer, philosopher, and literary critic. He will be one of the speakers attending the Global Atheist Convention in March next year. Russell has recently co-edited with Udo Schüklenk - *50 Voices of Disbelief: Why We Are Atheists*, published by Wiley-Blackwell.



50 Voices of Disbelief:

Why we are Atheists

Russell Blackford (Editor), Udo Schuklenk (Editor)

ISBN-10; 1405190469

50 Voices of Disbelief: Why We Are Atheists presents a collection of original essays drawn from an international group of prominent voices in the fields of academia, science, literature, media and politics who offer carefully considered statements of why they are atheists.

It features a truly international cast of contributors, ranging from public intellectuals such as Peter Singer, Susan Blackmore, and A.C. Grayling, novelists, such as Joe Haldeman, and heavyweight philosophers of religion, including Graham Oppy and Michael Tooley

Contributions range from rigorous philosophical arguments to highly personal, even whimsical, accounts of how each of these notable thinkers have come to reject religion in their lives.

Likely to have broad appeal given the current public fascination with religious issues and the reception of such books as *The God Delusion* and *The End of Faith*.

Interview

David Nicholls was interviewed by FHM, for their Movember 2009 issue.
Please note the title was printed as it appears below.

Quote Unquote

The Athiest

David Nicholls, president of the Atheist Foundation Of Australia, on beliefs
WORDS: BEN SMITHURST

Do you think Jesus was probably a good bloke?

I personally have doubts there was a person called Jesus, as depicted in the New Testament.

Okay, what about Buddha then? Nice guy, by all accounts.

Yes, he was a real person. But who knows what he was like? When you talk about Buddha or even the imaginary Jesus you're going so far back into history that it depends upon what interpretation you want to put on those people. Buddha did seem to have some good points — that people should think for themselves for example — which is something Jesus didn't promote very heavily.

Why does Australia need an atheist foundation?

We're only one of many secular organisations in the world, even though we've been going a lot longer than most of them. There is a need in the political sphere, both in democratic countries and in the rest of the world, for a stronger voice for rationalism and reason to try to combat the voices based on faith.

Has anyone ever almost convinced you there is a God?

I was absolutely convinced when I was a child, going to a Catholic school with Catholic parents and peers and relatives and Christian brothers and nuns — I was completely convinced. But then I developed the power of reason somewhere around puberty, and I realised that some of the questions that had bothered me, even as a young child, couldn't be answered. And that's when I became an atheist.

And those questions were?

The main question was, which faith seems to discount without any good reason, that each religious culture inculcates children into that culture when they're young, and then as adults they end up believing their religion to be the absolute truth — and all other cultures are wrong. There have been 34,000 religions that have existed over the past 6000 years.

Hang on, but If you teach your child about your atheist beliefs, isn't that just as bad?

No, I haven't got a belief. The only thing atheists have

is the acceptance that there's no credible evidence for anything that is supernatural. If an atheist brings up a child, they should give that child a broad world view about, well, not all the 34,000 religions but the main religions — Judaism, Christianity, Islam Hinduism, etc — and explain that people who believe these religions and believe them to be absolutely correct do so because they've been bought up in a certain, culture.

And if they still punt for God?

Then that child should be free to do that. As long as the child understands that practicing a religion should be done in private among consenting adults. And that the religious basis for political decisions has to match empirical evidence before they can be put in the political sphere.

Which religion is silliest?

To me they're all equal. It's not a matter of "silliest"; I don't class religions as silly or religious people as silly. This is part of human nature: for a matter of survival, children retain messages so they will survive when they are older. But one of the flaws in evolution is that those messages don't have to be correct.

If you die and you find yourself lining up at the Pearly Gates, or whatever religious equivalent, you'd feel quite the fool.

Haha! If I died and I was confronted by some supernatural force that is just beyond belief, the first thing I would say would be the same thing Bertrand Russell, the 19th century philosopher, would say: "Not enough evidence, God."

Er, but once you're dead, and Saint Pete's standing there burning you, the evidence would surely seem quite strong.

If I was dead then this supernatural force could convince me it is a god or it is a very powerful being that created the universe, I would accept it.

But you'd be dead. It's too late to change your mind. You've read the answer!

Any god that doesn't want you to use the reasoning powers that you possess when you are a mortal being is

(Continued on page 22)

(Continued from page 21)

a god not worth adoring.

What do you shout when you stub your toe?

Generally it's an expletive about intercourse.

Well, sure. But even when you were transferring your phone earlier you said, "Oh, God, there's wires everywhere..."

I mean, sure, if I stub my toe I'm like anybody else; I'll state whatever is culturally implanted into me. But I can bet you one thing: if a Hindu man stubs his toe he doesn't say, "Jesus Christ!" does he? And that's because of the inculcation. Underplaying this indoctrination process is what keeps religions going.

Have you ever corrected a woman for shouting about God at the point of orgasm?

Haha! No.

What would you do if you found Allah on a tortilla?

I'd probably spread on my favourite jam. I might even try Vegemite – it would depend what I felt like eating.

What happens when you die?

You return to the elements from which you were made. Do you remember being born?

Ugh! I should hope not.

Do you remember anything before you were born? No. So you won't remember after you're dead.

If Megan Fox asked you to convert to religion, would you.

No.

Come on...

Somebody would have to come forward with evidence of something supernatural about life that until now is not known. If somebody was showing me that, whether it was Megan Fox or Bugs Bunny I don't really care — I'll accept the evidence.

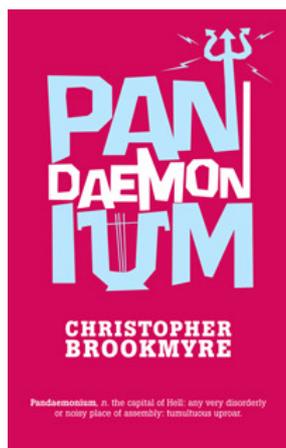
Why does nature work to constant mathematical laws if there's no God?

Because it does.

Finally, will the Spanish Inquisition ever return?

Many civilizations live with the Spanish Inquisition right now. In many Muslim countries they're still killing people for not recognising the faith. But if the western hemisphere part of the planet keeps increasing its education levels and keeps being in a position of political security, then no, the Spanish Inquisition won't return. But religion is trying to push us back into the days of the Inquisition all the time. It is like rust, it never sleeps.

BOOK REVIEW



Pandaemonium

By Christopher Brookmyre

ISBN; 9781408700617

Reviewed by Peter Taylor

In some ways the best of all Christopher Brookmyre's works. He is a master of character development and understanding of young people and their developing sexuality, and one of the few people who acknowledge that females initiate and permit sexual experience, not males.

The tale is based on the scientific possibility that there are a multitude of universes, parallel to but separated from ours. Parallel evolution too, and he asks what would happen if creatures from one of our parallel universes strayed into ours? How would we treat them? He suggests such strays could be the source of many myths, including, and especially, those of the Roman Catholic Church.

It is a chilling, quasi Sci-Fi tale that should make readers reflect on the power of religions, blind faith in anything, and how we treat those who are different.

Guy Rundle's God awful own goal against Greg Craven

By Bruce Everett

In taking Greg Craven to task¹ over a rather paranoid, bare assertion and straw man laden snit against those terrible new atheists, which given the material,² is fair enough, thanks to his own rhetoric, winds up scoring an own goal as well.

The neo-atheists – Dawkins, Hitchens and others – are an annoying bunch, taking the most literal version of monotheism, and then guffawingly mocking it ('oh a whale, really') in a tone not unlike the baby in the Family Guy. (Guy Rundle, 2009)

Firstly, the use of the whole “neo-atheist” tag, with the recent (and perhaps unfortunate) exception of Victor Stenger, isn't readily used by the “neo-atheists” themselves. The phrase is pretty much the province of people who whine that there is an atheist conspiracy to rob people of their religious rights, which is baloney. It's lingo right up there with the terminology of birther, Obama is a secret Muslim-Socialist and FEMA death camp conspiracy theories. A label to facilitate outgroup hostilities.

Rundle's take on things is also pretty inaccurate. At least for even remotely for anything outside Hitchens' *God is Not Great*, and even then it's a pretty poor approximation.

I'll summarise the “neo-atheist” books so that you can see why I don't think Rundle's approximation stacks up.

***The End of Faith (and Letter To a Christian Nation)*, by Sam Harris** – First of all, Harris makes a clear and explicit distinction between fundamentalist literal monotheism, and more moderate religion, then proceeds to tackle the fundamentalist variety. Making such a clean distinction, there is no room for reasonable confusion between the two and thus one can't possibly make the serious suggestion that he's pretending to represent all there is to religion. He does however, in my view, while excluding the possibility

of accidental equivocation and straw man arguments, ride rough-shod over the self-identification of religious people and flirts with the problems of essentialism with his talk of “true Christians” and so on. As for guffaw, there isn't much – the tone is very serious and attempts to engage fundamentalist Christians with the utmost sincerity.

***The God Delusion*, by Richard Dawkins** – This book sets out with a very specific purpose – it's essentially a public polemic reaching out to what one pastor referred to a “low hanging fruit” – the doubters. The point is to give affirmation to atheists, closet atheists and would-be-atheists, that being an atheist is a “splendid” thing. It deliberately and explicitly doesn't deal with moderate religion because frankly, it doesn't have to. It doesn't pretend to represent or critique moderate religion. Guffawing? Sure. Although I'm not sure Stewie is the best approximation for the tone of humour, and there's a lot more to the book than the laughs.

***Breaking The Spell*, by Daniel Dennett** – Again, another book that while singling out less moderate religion, does so for a reason – Dennett arguing that his immediate concern entails the breaking of the taboo of analysis of more fundamentalist religious belief, and that if he had the time, he'd liked to have addressed the taboo of the analysis of moderate religion as well (which wasn't as pressing). Guffaw is

pretty much the opposite of what you will get in this book. In fact the book is about how religion came about, not a condemnation.

***God: The Failed Hypothesis*, by Victor Stenger** – This book focuses on those more literalist Gods – specifically the ones that Stenger argues make testable predictions (which is pretty much the thrust of the book, so you can't expect the unfalsifiable gods of moderate religion to make a show). Again, like with Dennett, it's pretty much a guffaw free zone.

***God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, by Christopher Hitchens** — If there is any one of the “new atheist” books that deserves Rundle's approximation, this is it. But to argue that guffaw is the point of the book, or even the mode of the book, is an exaggeration. The Guffaw is garnish, and there are plenty of factual religious dogmas (from East and West) worthy of said guffaw. But let's be charitable to Rundle and assume that Hitchens stays with the more familiar monotheisms, and simply

...Harris makes a clear and explicit distinction between fundamentalist literal monotheism...there is no room for reasonable confusion between the two.

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restricts himself to put-downs, rather than worthy critique with a bit of acerbic flair.

The Portable Atheist, edited by Christopher Hitchens – Most of the content is philosophical essay, of which most contributors aren't on the "neo-atheist" black list. *Gerin Oil* by Dawkins has guffaw, which really takes the edge off of a rather chilling analogy. *Atheists for Jesus* by Dawkins is almost the exact opposite of what Rundle pretends the "neo-atheists" to be about – it's rather flattering of moderate Christians. Bertrand Russell's *An Outline of Intellectual Rubbish* is scathing and Mencken's *Memorial Service* makes light of dead gods in typical Mencken fashion – so much so that the guffaw in *God is Not Great* seems all the milder. If the "new atheists" have some kind of monopoly on laughing at religion, shouldn't the old atheists and agnostics have been abstinent?

Quantum Gods, by Victor Stenger –

This book is dedicated to those gods of moderate religion that take refuge in obfuscations of quantum theory and cosmology, to which Stenger (a physicist) takes the proverbial blow torch. Quantum theory of mind (all that Penrose rubbish) also gets a look-in, making it a nice complimentary text to Dennett's *Freedom Evolves* and *Consciousness Explained*. As fundies tend not to hide their god in quantum theory, the focus is in exactly the opposite direction from what Rundle suggests. *Like God: The Failed Hypothesis*, the book is to the point and very serious. It's not the stuff of guffaw. Further to this, the book questions whether moderate Christianity has slipped into deism, quietly abandoning theism while keeping some of the bells and whistles – something to consider if you wonder why the "neo-atheists" aren't paying attention to your god.

The New Atheism, by Victor Stenger – This is the "new atheist" book of 2009, and perhaps an unfortunately titled one. If there is irony, it doesn't appear to be intentional and there isn't any hint of deliberate appropriation of the "new atheist" term, making it look like Stenger isn't aware of the term's history as a pejorative. Either that or he's holding his cards to his chest with regard to subversion, or his sense of humour is even drier than mine. *The New Atheism* is a review of the discussion surrounding most of the above books, and an analysis of the largely rubbish critique they have received.

These are the major "neo-atheist" publications by the major "neo-atheist" authors. Yet to me, they don't

show Rundle's assertion (partly in jest I'm sure), holding true. Even by standards permitting oversimplification. Let's just go with the obvious truth and state that Rundle's perception is that of those who are annoyed by "new-atheists" (atheist and theist alike); *they feel* like all the "new atheists" do is guffaw at fundamentalists. It's a load of rubbish of course. They're just being overly precious.

Rundle entreats Craven that...

If you're going to oppose atheists, you better give a more sophisticated account of what belief is... (Guy Rundle, 2009)

...they feel like all the "new atheists" do is guffaw at fundamentalists. It's a load of rubbish of course. They're just being overly precious.

I'd argue that if Rundle was going to oppose "new-atheists", he'd better give a more sophisticated account of his objections. Perhaps for the sake of Rundle, and the theists and atheists that share his irritation, the "new-atheists" could amp-up their guffaw to something approximating that of which they are accused, just to resolve the confusion? "This is what

derision looks like!"

At the very least, it'd help delineate them from the Russells, Ingersolls and Menckens of old so that the level of mockery was actually something new. Indeed, then they would be speaking about religion in unflattering tones that are allowed when discussing most anything else – such as politics (I'm looking at you, Crikey!)

References:

1. <http://blogs.crikey.com.au/thestump/2009/11/04/greg-cravens-god-awful-own-goal-against-the-atheists/>
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Bruce Everett has just completed a Bachelor of Science with a major in Environmental systems. He runs the Thinkers Podium at <http://thinkerspodium.wordpress.com> where readers are treated to his wit and erudition on the subjects of Philosophy Science, Religion and Politics.

Contrary to the tone of this article he is quite fond of Guy Rundle, he just thinks that on this occasion he's been misled.



Women are being failed by our hospitals

*By Leslie Cannold,
The Age, 2 November 2009*

There is no room at the Women's. Once the hospital saw its mission as looking after all Victorian women. Now, those inquiring about having their baby there will be asked their postcode. Should they fall outside the hospital's new geographical catchment area and be at small risk of complication, they'll be referred to a hospital closer to home.

Poor government policy and planning, an upward blip in the fertility rate and Victoria's burgeoning population has seen the number of births jump 12 per cent in the state over a three-year period - but the number of maternity beds fail to keep pace.

As a consequence, the Victorian Government now "encourages" women to give birth at their local, suburban hospital.

For most women, the major anxiety generated by the squeeze is finding somewhere, anywhere, to have their baby. But behind the scenes, some perinatal specialists and GPs who share the care of pregnant women with hospitals are fretting about women being referred away from secular public hospitals and towards institutions that are Catholic-run. The reason is simple. There are a number of services that Catholic-run hospitals, even those dedicated to women's health, will not provide.

As the church's episcopal vicar for life and health, Anthony Fisher, explained earlier this year: "Catholic health-care institutions, whatever legal, financial or other pressure they are under, may not co-operate with abortion, sterilisation or euthanasia."

Nor do Catholic-run health care institutions offer a full range of contraceptive services.

Some women discover, as they approach a planned caesarean section, that they won't be able to have their tubes tied at the time of delivery, requiring them to undertake the cost, inconvenience and risk of the procedure at a later date.

Others, reeling from the blow of abnormal results from prenatal tests or screens the hospital will provide, find they must transfer to another hospital if they make the difficult decision to terminate.

Women whose membranes rupture too early may be denied surgery to remove the doomed foetus, or intervention to speed the delivery of their dead baby unless sepsis is diagnosed and the woman's womb or life is at risk.

Rape victims brought into casualty will not be offered emergency contraception. If staff suspect pregnancy, the woman will not be referred to a rape crisis centre that does offer the pills.

Do Victorian women know the limits placed on their care when they enter a Catholic-run hospital? For many, it seems not. There seem to be no attempts by referring hospitals to inform women about these matters.

Nor do Catholic-run hospitals make specific disclosures when women arrive for care. For instance, neither the patient information guide nor the guidelines for those sharing the care of pregnant patients with the Mercy make any reference to the limits the hospital puts on services because of its religious views.

Both hospitals and the governments that fund them to provide essential health-care services to Victorian taxpayers have an obligation to ensure that women, and the external health-care providers sharing care of such patients, are fully informed about what a hospital's religious philosophy might mean for a patient's care.

Simply identifying a hospital as Catholic and assuming everyone - including very young women, new migrants to Australia and those from non-English-speaking backgrounds - knows what this means, fails the most basic disclosure requirements necessary for informed consent.

But the real problem is policy that allows publicly funded institutions to become central to health-care arrangements designed to serve all citizens, despite the known limits such institutions place on the care they provide to women.

Catholics, and other faith-based groups in Australia, are entitled to their moral beliefs and to the expression of these through the institutions they run.

But women have a right to health-care provision that does not put them at the mercy of those views, and the

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health-care information and options that flow from them.

There is no problem with Catholic hospitals providing boutique care to women and men able to make informed decisions about an institution's suitability to their needs.

But when women have no choice but to become patients in this system for emergency and essential health care, something is terribly wrong.

The Catholic Church sees the provision of health care as part of its mission, believing that a Catholic-run hospital "serves the whole community, especially the vulnerable".

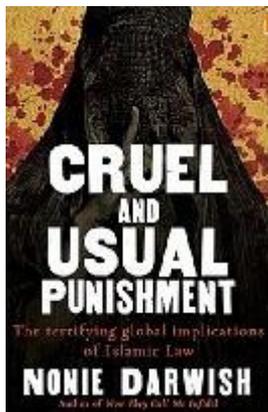
Pregnant women are vulnerable. Rape victims are vulnerable. Patients without information and real options about their health care are vulnerable.

Victorian women pay taxes and are citizens with a right to informed decision-making about, and with access to, the full range of sexual and reproductive health services, not just those the Catholic-run hospital nearest them is willing to provide.

Leslie Cannold is a medical ethicist and adjunct senior lecturer at Monash University's School of Public Health and Preventive Medicine.

She is scheduled to speak at the Global Atheist Convention in March 2010.

BOOK REVIEW



Cruel and Unusual Punishment:

The terrifying global implications of Islamic Law.
by Nonie Darwish,

ISBN; 978-1-59555-161-0.

Reviewed by Terry Fowler

A somewhat depressing read that highlights the terrible discrimination against women living under Sharia law, and how that law dictates the way Muslim society perceives the West and its "Infidels".

For those of us with a smattering of knowledge regarding the terms "Fatwa", "Jihad" etc., this book clearly explains what they represent and the implications for western democracies/societies (including Australia) in general.

However, given that Darwish grew up under Islam and immigrated to the USA, perhaps it is understandable that she, now having heard the Christian pastors often say, "...we are all sinners" and "only through the grace of god can we be forgiven" found such utterings profound.

Darwish then adds "we are all sinners" was "one of the most comforting, liberating, uniting and humbling expressions I have heard by a preacher", which surely gives some indication as to the influence Sharia Law has on Muslim society.

I highly recommend this book, and not only for Atheists.

Well known poet, social commentator and science friendly blogger **Digital Cuttlefish** can be found at <http://digitalcuttlefish.blogspot.com/> where readers will find more poetry and astute observations from the Order of the Molly winner. For the moment, however, enjoy...

A Critical Examination of Belief

I've examined evolution, and I think I understand
Though the evidence is shaky, still I think the theory's grand
But it's only just a theory, so it's only just a start
And an open-minded person should try picking it apart.
No belief without a reason! Give me proof of what you claim!
And the more I look, the more I see the evidence is lame!
When considering a tangled bank, I choose to see God's Laws
And the reason I believe it? Just because.

Charles Darwin drew a picture of an ever-branching tree
From the earliest of creatures all the way to you and me
Other limbs produced the fishes, beetles, lizards, monkeys, ants,
Paramecia, bacteria, creationists and plants;
He supported it with evidence of every kind he could
Which I've critically examined, as a thinking person should;
Now I know that he's mistaken in the picture that he draws
And the reason I believe it? Just because.

If you analyze it critically, as science says we must
You'll find laws of physics broken, so the theory is a bust:
The second thermo-something law is busted into pieces
By the fact that evolution means that entropy decreases!
And random changes couldn't make the creatures that we find,
So the evidence is clear, that we cannot be un-designed!
With castles out of playing-cards and armies made of straws
There's the reason I believe it: Just because.

Now, with Darwin and his evolution clearly in the tank
There is only one alternative, if I am to be frank;
That's the theory found in Genesis, the Holy Word of God,
And with natural selection out, creation gets the nod.
But we can't be disrespectful to our deeply held belief,
So our critical examination, this time, must be brief
There's no clothing on this emperor, not even filmy gauze—
But the reason I believe it? Just because.

Sure, the logic may be iffy, and the evidence is slim—
Who created the creator? And then, who created *him*?
Why the Genesis creation? Why not something else instead?
Can we guarantee the story is exactly what God said?
Is it literal or metaphor, or maybe outright fiction?
What's the proper course of action when we find a contradiction?
I'm ignoring any nagging doubt within me where it gnaws
And the reason I believe it? Just because.

If I'm right, I go to heaven, which I'd really like to do
But I'll go to hell for sure if I suspect that it's untrue
It's a simple little wager, there's no reason to think twice:
You get punished if you're naughty, you get presents if you're nice
From the guy who watches all of us, from there behind his beard
(And who cares if it's millennia since last time he appeared?)
And so, even if it's really just a grown-up's Santa Claus
Well, the reason I believe it? Just because.

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