

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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ATHEIST FOUNDATION OF AUSTRALIA INC

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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

Well readers, the Global Atheist Convention is nearly upon us. I for one would like to raise a glass (and probably will at the convention) in praise of those hardworking members of the committee and volunteers for making the event a reality.

I hope to meet many members of the AFA at the convention and for those who could not make it for a multitude of reasons, I hope that the interest generated might inspire letters or articles commenting on the wonderful speakers in attendance.

To tide you over until the convention we have: an interview with Tanya Levin one of the female speakers at the convention. A plethora of letters from the membership including some corrections, constructive

criticism and praise. Leo Igwe African atheist and humanist fill us in on the situation in Africa. Plus all the standard fare you've come to enjoy

So get reading and if you feel inspired to write, have an alternative view send in your mail or articles to

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INTERVIEW

Interview with Tanya Levin

By Sean Broughton Wright

You first hit the headlines with your book *People in Glass Houses*, part expose part personal memoir. Breaking free from the grip of Hillsong was an experience in itself; can you give us a summary?

When I was about 20, I stopped attending Hillsong regularly. I wasn't completely free of its grip for many years to come, but I knew that it wasn't the place for me. Having been brought up in the church from the age of 14, I knew that even the doubts I had had for some years were sinful, and that disagreeing with Hillsong philosophy while still showing up every weekend made me a hypocrite. So I chose the path of least hypocrisy. I knew that I was going to hell, but I figured at least I was being honest about it.

Throughout my twenties I was even more sure that I couldn't be a Hillsong Christian. Our values grew further apart than ever, but I didn't know what other kind to be. As well as that, we had been taught when I was young, that all other mainstream versions of Christianity were inferior and Catholics were Satanic. That's the shtick they use to sell Pentecostalism. If you

haven't been baptised in the Holy Spirit, and you can't speak in tongues, it's like only seeing the movie in 2D. Hillsong markets their 3D larger-than-life Christianity.

But in 2002 I attended Hillsong to listen to the speech the Senior Pastor of my youth, Brian Houston, was to give regarding his father's alleged sex crimes against young people and children. Houston acknowledged his father's confession to sins that were a 'serious moral failure', without naming the crimes. He then requested prayer for his family as he said it had been a difficult time for all of them. As pastor to an estimated 12 000 congregants at the time, Houston offered no apology, nor a clear stance on Hillsong's position on child abuse or child protection within their walls. Like the Christmas cards Hillsong sends out every year, it's all about the Houstons.

As the packed auditorium rose to give Houston a standing ovation and prayer, that's pretty much when the grip of Hillsong lost any real hold on me.

When did you consider yourself an atheist?

Once I had dispensed with any concerns that Hillsong

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was a Christian organisation, I was still left with the nagging questions about Christianity itself. And there had always been many. A large number of people leave Hillsong and practise a different form of the religion. To me Christianity, similarly to Hillsong, marketed itself as a generous and benevolent machine, when its policies and practices were arrogant, illogical and dangerous just beneath the surface.

I was fortunate enough to have dinner with an atheist while researching for the book. Instead of directing me to Bible College or rolling his eyes like the teachers of my youth, he spent hours answering my questions about the Bible's contradictions and flaws. The consistent logic being applied scientifically was irresistible. Instead of restraining my powers of critical thinking and censoring my curiosity, they were allowed to roam free. I was an overnight atheist. I went around asking my neighbours and friends if they were atheists and found out that many of them were. It was like finding intellectual relatives. Absolutely liberating and sure beats church family any day, plus you don't have to spend all weekend with them. That was about 5 or 6 years ago.

There was never any question of pursuing spirituality. In my youth, I had been a devout, sincere, committed Christian. I had spent hours praying, reading the Bible, and following its instructions. In early adulthood, I had been tormented about God's existence. I noticed that I'd managed reasonably well without Jesus, despite what they'd said, but that I still didn't want to go to hell, which according to the rules, I most certainly was. My question was always "Is God real?" not "Which God is real?" Once I was content that Christianity made no sense at all and that there were a world of other people who agreed for many of the same reasons, I was an atheist. Trying another religion would be like putting on a different costume — just another form of make-believe that gets harder and harder to pull off. That's what I like about atheism - you don't have to try and remember the excuses for all the inexplicably stupid things you have to believe in.

You are booked as a speaker in the Rise of Atheism convention; do you see this as a pivotal point for Australian Atheists?

The convention is such an exciting time for Australia and for atheists around the world. After the long years of fundamentalist Christians making decisions for the West, we are all still recovering free speech and human rights. We are still considered Christian nations and we are still under governments and leaders that consider themselves Christian. There's still a way to go. Australia needs this convention to highlight how

ridiculous this perception is, and how little this image represents the needs of almost all Australians.

Given the convention's publicity, this could be an opportunity for the average non-practising Australian to examine atheism on a broader level. Atheism offers so much to the average Australian even though it is perceived as counter-Christian, something Australians shy away from, traditionally. Given that only 9% of Australians are in church on Sundays, there must be a whole lot of questions out there people are too afraid to ask. Now may well be their time.

The size of the convention and the speakers that are confirmed will put Australia on the map as a nation with a serious and determined atheist contingent. I see this convention as the beginning of something very powerful and influential for Australian atheists. I think we're making history in March.

There are a number of female speakers listed for the convention, how important do you think it is for women to have a prominent place in an Atheist movement?

It is as vital that women contribute to the work of atheism as it is for women to contribute to medicine, science, literature, or the arts. Any body of knowledge is incomplete without female influence and input.

Institutionalised religion has been responsible for authorising the patriarchy to stay powerful for hundreds of years. An existence without religion would do more for women's equality than any other change I can imagine. Critical thinking has been denied to women culturally for so long, as we are viewed as overwhelmed by emotion, and incapable of true (male) rational thought.

This stereotype needs to be broken down, and it will be best done by women in the movement making atheism accessible to women. There are so many liberating opportunities for women who dare to consider the atheist view.

What do you see as important issues that Australian Atheists should be focusing on?

The most recent reminder that this is still a country held to ransom by religion is the issue of gay marriage. This is one of the gayest countries in the world. Even the defence forces recognise same-sex relationships yet the relationship between a male and female is legally privileged and protected where a same sex relationship can't be. There seems to be no other reason apart from religious influence. Marriage is theirs and they're not giving it away for anyone.

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Tourism Australia could have retired if it offered combined Mardi Gras/wedding packages for tourists and locals. Billions of pink dollars would have been pumped into the economy. Australia has once again traded opportunities for a Christian appearance. Religious recruiting remains a threat to indigenous Australians who continued to be viewed by white Australia as they were in the early days of missions. The disregard for indigenous Australians culture, language, land and spirituality by those who held The Truth over 200 years ago had disastrous results. Social justice cannot be achieved for indigenous Australians, or any disadvantaged vulnerable Australians until the concepts of deserving and undeserving poor are eliminated.

An atheist perspective is so important in fighting the imaginary War against Drugs. It is ironic that inciting people to believe in mythical heroes, give up otherwise useful money and dance around to bad music is legal if it's done in the name of God. If drug dealers do it, they risk jail. Imagine the resources that could be freed up if we actually believed that people could make decisions and take risks for themselves. You can bow down to a statue of a fat man, speak in tongues, or make your wife wear a face mask. Just don't take ecstasy. God doesn't like that.

What are your hopes for the convention, what do you see as important outcomes?

The convention will be a great opportunity for so many different applications of atheism to be shared. It will be my first time at a meeting place of like thinkers so I'm thrilled. It's going to be interesting to see how Australian atheists use this chance to have attention on our rather conservative doorstep. Awareness is what I am hoping for most: that people will be able to get a better understanding of what atheism and skepticism is about, rather than presume it is too far removed from their own values to investigate.

To me atheism is very much about human progress be it in medicine or social justice. It's about viewing the world without the kaleidoscope of confusion that religion presents. I hope more people feel they have permission to explore ideas that are not restrained by the demands of an invisible god. Humans can only improve if this happens.

You work as a social worker, how do you find the religious presence in this industry?

A lawyer at University told me once that there was no difference between do gooders like social workers and fundamentalist Christians. Both spent their lives telling

other people how to live their lives. He had some good points.

There is a strong religious presence in the field of social work and other so called 'helping' professions, and that's for a number of reasons. Some religious devotees view social work as an opportunity to further their own faith by working alongside the needy. Some see it as an avenue to right the wrongs of the heathen, and that's where frightening things can happen for the client, who is often unprepared for moralising or evangelism of any belief.

In any case, Howard followed Bush's Faith First Initiatives model by outsourcing as many social issues as he could to the private Christian charity sector. These charities are given preference and funding because of the benign wholesome Christianity that they reflect. Many mainstream services such as drug and alcohol rehabs, homeless shelters, and Centrelink programs are delivered by these charities which prefer staff who will uphold Christian values. As key employers in the field, being Christian can often be an advantage.

Social work is a job where religion is often discussed with one's clients. When people are in crisis, or in trouble, they often turn to their faith even if it had lapsed. When it comes to making difficult life choices, some people prefer a familiar cultural background to ease the burden. Many people aren't aware that decisions can be made ethically without having to defer to any religion at all.

You have your first book out, can we expect anything else in the near future?

Yes, I'm writing or that's what I tell my editor. My next book is on a completely unrelated subject, although the atheist convention is making me think about returning to the religious debate again.

Will you be available for book signings at the convention?

Of course I will be available for signings of the book, but I am most looking forward to meeting so many incarnations of the atheist, skeptic, and agnostic. There have been some wonderfully supportive people online whom I've never met in person, but are all going to be at the convention. It's actually quite emotional for me.

Tanya Levin is a social worker, atheist and the author of People in Glass Houses: An Insider's Story Of A Life In and Out Of Hillsong(2007). She will be appear as part of a panel of female Atheists at the Global Atheist Convention

OPINION

All religions are ridiculous; some are just more ridiculous than others. You can find an example almost every day. Islam comes up with some good ones. For example, Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei last year declared that the results of the elections in that country were divinely inspired, and then proceeded to agree to a 10% recount! Presumably he believes that there is a 90% chance that Allah really exists! Or how about the protestor (following the release of the Danish cartoons lampooning Islam) holding up a sign saying "Behead those who say Islam is violent". And a Saudi man was arrested for boasting about his sex life on television. But in my opinion the Catholics take first prize. In March last year it was reported that "Thousands of people have flocked to a Roman Catholic church on the French Indian Ocean island of Reunion after believers said they saw the "face of Christ" in the pleats of a church cushion... Believers and curious onlookers pulled out cameras to take pictures of the cushion attached to the priest's chair." Now we have had the face of Christ appearing on cheese bread, and other miscellaneous food items (a recent one was on a banana skin), but this one is better by far. Why? Because God used a priest's backside to make this one! What amazes me more about these appearances is not how good the quality of the image may be, but how on earth anyone knows what the guy looked like! You have to wonder about the mentality of people who believe that the Supreme Being would temporarily suspend the laws of nature to create a relatively poor image in a strange medium (pizza, cheese bread etc) of a person that no one alive has ever seen and for whom there is no pictorial record.

There was an issue recently in Malaysia when some Muslims stomped on a severed cow's head in protest at a proposal to build a Hindu temple in their area. A recent news report concerned a group of about 50 rabbis and Jewish mystics flying over Israel chanting prayers and blowing ceremonial trumpets in the belief that it may stop the spread of swine flu. In Iran even the store mannequins have to meet the strict Islamic dress code. Apparently even the sight of a plastic ankle is enough for most men to lose control in that country. What they might then do to a mannequin that flaunts itself in such a way doesn't bear thinking about! And in Mexico last year a Bolivian preacher hijacked an airplane because he had "gotten the word from God that he had to warn Mexicans of an impending disaster..." on the 9th September, because that date 9-9-09 is the devil's number turned upside down.

Since religions are so ridiculous, we are obligated to ridicule them at every opportunity. This is one way in which we can raise consciousness about the fact that belief in the supernatural will lead to absurdities. Because more often than not, when religion is at its most ridiculous it is also at its most deadly.

In Iran it is against the law for a woman who is a virgin to be executed if she is convicted of a crime with that penalty. But in accordance with Sharia law, a sham marriage to one of Ayatollah Khamenei's revolutionary guards can be arranged, and the 'wife' raped by her new 'husband', then executed the next day.

In Brazil the Catholic Church has "raged against an abortion carried out on a nine-year-old girl who had been pregnant with twins after allegedly being raped by her stepfather", as we reported in a previous issue of THE AUSTRALIAN ATHEIST. And during a recent visit to the African continent the Pope has again confirmed the Church's ban on the use of condoms, thus condemning thousands more to preventable suffering and death.

Religion is ridiculous, but usually when it is being ridiculous it is also being cruel, uncaring, inhuman and deadly. For this, we need to ridicule it even more.

Dennis

Ridicule is the only weapon which can be used against unintelligible propositions.
Ideas must be distinct before reason can act upon them.

Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Whose Values ?

Dear Sean and Fellow Atheists,

As a member of the Atheist Foundation of Australia, I would like to address misinformation, published in the November/December issue of THE AUSTRALIAN ATHEIST, in respect of an 'education' article by Teresa Russell.

I am a recently retired teacher, having taught for the NSW Department of Education for 30 years, in high schools and infants/primary schools, in inner Sydney and outer Western Sydney and in rural communities. My last position, prior to retirement, was at Bungendore, a school Teresa Russell specifically refers to. I would like to clarify the situation concerning religious instruction in government schools.

Weekly scripture sessions are of half an hour's duration; NOT an hour. They never have been any longer than half an hour — certainly not over the last 30 years, since I commenced employment.

Bungendore was the only school I taught in that had the weekly scripture session in prime learning time (between 9.00 a.m. and 11.00 am.) Other schools conducted scripture classes between recess and lunch. At Bungendore, a very vocal and influential group of parents, whose children attended non-scripture, decided that their children should not be granted half an hour's respite each week, to read, draw horses or play chess.

Oh dear, no!

They MUST spend this half hour a week pursuing 'meaningful' intellectual activity!

One foolish parent, whose non-scripture attending daughter was in my class, objected so strongly to her daughter being idle for 30 minutes, that she kept her daughter at home on the morning of scripture/non scripture. I pointed out to the parent that officially, her daughter was truanting!

Without bothering to check with the NSW Department of Education, the then principal granted his permission to this bunch of bossy whingers, to set up a 'curriculum of Comparative religions and societal beliefs'.

Luckily, one of the parents boasted about this

programme in a letter to 'Good Weekend' magazine, in the Sydney Morning Herald. An officer from the Department saw the letter and took immediate, appropriate steps to ban the programme.

All atheist and any non-atheist parents reading this magazine who have children in government schools, should be very thankful to the department of education, for being so vigilant - and strict - about who exactly can enter their schools and influence society's most vulnerable members; their children.

Readers may recall the Victorian Education Department tightened its guidelines for principals recently, concerning outsiders with (possibly) personal agendas entering its schools, after it was revealed the photographer Bill Henson entered a primary school, with the principal's permission, to 'select' students to photograph.

No matter how innocent Henson's intentions may have been, the fact is, the students of that school were scrutinised by him — aid accepted or rejected — without their permission.

If you (rightly) hate or fear religious cults such as scientologists, coming anywhere near your children - then thank the relevant departments of education.

From the NSW Department's perspective, they had no idea who these parents of Bungendore were - and why they wanted to enter the school. Reason enough to say "no", I should think.

As atheists, we should be lobbying departments of education to ban all religious instruction in their schools. Why should 'comparative religions' be okay— but not separate religious instruction? Why should 'ethics' be taught in schools? Whose ethics? When John Howard was prime minister, he coerced government schools to teach "values based education".

Whose 'values'? Howard's? Good grief!!

As atheists, we should swiftly reject any attempt, by any education department, to replace one set of 'beliefs' with another!

How about this for a suggestion: leave our children

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alone — to learn, among other things, nouns and numeracy — and being NICE to each other!

Thank you.
Bronwyn Gahan

Bronwyn,

Thank you for the clarification. It appears that there is provision in the act for 1 hours instruction, though as you have stated, this does not appear to be the case in practice.

On the subject of any group being allowed in to teach the children, you also have a point, it appears that the Principle has been remiss in his duty.

On the subject of what Atheists should do? My opinion differs. I think we should campaign for the removal of religious instruction from schools and I see a successful ethics based course as a wedge — it undermines the religious cry for the teaching of “traditional” values. Now as to whose ethics, whose values - an examination of the scheme being implemented by the St James Ethics centre shows that it is to be an inquiry-based program focusing on ‘ethical exploration’. Covering such topics as Being Excluded, Blame, Bullying, Children’s Rights, Courage, Disability, Discrimination, Duty, Freedom and Responsibility.

I suggest readers have a look at the pilot aims and outcomes document available from the St. James Ethics centre website for a clear picture of what is on offer and come to their own conclusions.

<http://www.ethics.org.au/sites/default/files/projects/pilot-aims-outcomes.pdf>

Ed.

Arm yourselves!

Where please do I get a copy of the September/October addition of THE AUSTRALIAN ATHEIST? I had a quick look in the copy at the local public library and could not put it down. I was late back to work and it was well and truly worth it! The well reasoned arguments in this issue should be in the armoury of every atheist if there is the slightest chance that he/she will get into an argument with those of a lesser intellect who have been convinced that there is an afterlife controlled by the cosmic magician.

A cousin and her husband once ridiculed the theory of

evolution on the basis of how difficult it is to believe that life could emerge without some sort of out side influence. It was not till some time late that I thought of the perfect retort (is that not always the way?) questioning why they consider their belief to be more credible. That is, that a never seen, smelt, heard, touched or proved to exist in any way, cosmic magician, waved his magic wand and produced all we know of through science in six days then settled back with a beer or two to see how it all panned out. Yes right!! I would have welcomed someone challenging me about those comments in the courts on the basis of blasphemy.

I believe a member of your organisation donates his copy of The Australian Atheist to the Launceston Library (Tasmania) and that is where I caught up with this edition.

I am trying to sort my membership to the AFA and although I appear to be making a donation on top of my membership it is really a bribe to get a copy of the September/October edition of THE AUSTRALIAN ATHEIST and I am happy to get that copy by e-mail, although I am requesting my future membership copies by post.

NB Could you encourage people to petition the Australian Bureau of Statistics to add a question to their next census to gauge the real level of atheism in Australia? The question on religion in the regular census gives skewed choices such as a selected list of popular religions, NIL or other. A friend suggested that those with no great problem with their religious upbringing might tick ‘Catholic or C of E’ if raised in a Catholic or C of E household even though they are no longer a believer.

I am going to request that at the very least the next census include the choice of ‘atheist’ or ‘non believer’ and preferably a question as has been done in the UK (I believe it was done in the UK) such as ‘Are you an unequivocal believer in an after life?’, and/or ‘Are you an unequivocal believer in a supreme divine being?’

I have been led to understand that the answers to this question greatly added to the number of non believers in the census where it was first used. I pray (sic) that with support such a question can be included in the next census and the support of your Organisation would be greatly appreciated.

Thank you for a great magazine and a fantastic and much needed organisation and I look forward to being a member.

Noel J Manning,

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What's in a name?

Dear Sir,

Having recently joined the Atheist Foundation of Australia I am intrigued to learn that the Foundation started out in 1970 as the *Rationalist* Society of South Australia and that the name was changed to the *Atheist* Foundation of Australia so as to “more accurately declare (its members’) basic philosophy”.

Having spent many hours on the Richard Dawkins’ internet forum arguing the case in favour of the term Rationalist I have some idea of the deliberations that would have taken place at the time.

Without wishing to reopen a closed, perhaps even unwelcome, debate I wonder if your readers would be interested in the internet discussion that took place and in a less often expressed personal perspective.

My reservation about the term atheist is based on two considerations. One is that the word carries with it a significant stigma - like it or not. That stigma will not disappear with time as some believe. It is one thing to be an atheist. It is another to use that word as the primary descriptor of your point of view.

My other objection is that atheist is a negative word with an inevitable negative projection. It speaks of what you are not rather than what you are. In a literal sense it is a strange way to describe yourself. To say “I am an atheist” is akin to saying “I don’t believe in something (God in this case) that I don’t believe in”. That is as about as redundant as saying “I am an atoothfairyst”.

Having raised these objections it soon became apparent to me that there is out there an army of true believers (tongue in cheek) very much attached to the word and willing to defend it to the end. Arguments in favour of the word atheist seemed to include its simplicity and directness, its lack of ambiguity and its historical usage. A significant proportion also enjoyed its potential to provoke a shock reaction and to make an adversary uncomfortable.

My feeling is that the word can be a liability rather than a help. It is a conversation stopper. It tends to alienate moderate believers as well as extremists – and for what purpose?

It is conceivable that a Rationalist may one day become President of the United States or Prime Minister of Australia even though we would recognise such a person as one of us, i.e. an atheist. It is inconceivable

that a narrowly defined Atheist ever would. Where does that leave those of us with rationally based ambitions for the world?

Words are important in politics. A simple statement or admission of non-belief in an afterlife has become acceptable and is unlikely to lose many votes at least in this country. The rest is implied and well understood to be implied. Talk about God and especially of gods in the plural, and about the supernatural, and promotion of the word atheist are not just unnecessary but likely to be counterproductive. It is the believer who has the onus to explain why he or she believes. There is no such onus on an atheist.

Two words that stand out as having positive attributes are rationalist and secular (secularist). The latter has been used and is particularly useful in the political arena. Even some believers can see the point that it is unfair to give one side special status or a free kick, as it were. Some can be persuaded or already agree that religion is a personal and community matter, and not one that demands or deserves state sponsorship or privilege.

Rationalist is a good term for the philosophical disposition of atheists. It has a good ring to it and is not inclined to alienate. Nevertheless, in my forum debates objections were raised. A recurrent one was that saying you are a rationalist implies that you think your adversary is irrational or mad. The simple answer to this, of course, is that you may well think your adversary is irrational, but only where it comes to his or her view on the supernatural. There is no insult intended or implied.

I should make it clear I am in no way wishing to proscribe use of the word atheist. It has its place. The title of the impending convention “The Rise of Atheism” would not pack the same punch if another word were used. The same may well apply to the name of the Foundation though for reasons other than the one given. It would generally be recognised that the “basic philosophy” of an atheist is well described by the word rationalist. To put it another way, an atheist is an atheist usually *because* he or she is a rationalist.

My argument relates only to the context in which the word atheist is used, the sensitivities involved and the possibility of alternative ways of expressing the same idea.

Atheists are not alone in their concern about the rise of religious fundamentalism. On our own we don’t have the numbers to turn that tide. In a practical and political

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sense we need moderate believers on side. Most of the latter are well disposed and well meaning people as is the case with most atheists. There is no reason why we should not work together.

It has been pointed out that it is this large mass of moderate believers who unintentionally open the door and give respectability and credibility to the many unpleasant and inhuman views expressed by some in their ranks. They (the moderates) have the responsibility, with our help, to deal with such views and such people.

Peter G. Beahan

God or god?

Dear Editor,

Re the Letter to the Editor submitted by Mira and published in the November – December issue and the article by the outstanding ‘Free Thinker’ P. Z. Myers quoted by Richard Dawkins in his books.

Mira says I believe in God (with a capital ‘G’) and P.Z. Myers also uses the word God with a capital G.

When people use the word God with a capital ‘G’ I believe they should state which god they are referring to. Humanity over millenniums has invented thousands of deities in human form. Several are listed in the website: “Australian Secularists” – (Sub heading) “Atheists’ Portrayal Of History” This website is structured as a book titled: “From Frozen Energy To Humanity” – Refer Chapter seven for the list of many deities.

When people say: “Thank God” I always ask: “Which god?” Christians generally, appear to think there is only one god and appear confounded when it is revealed they are referring to an invisible Judaic god they think of and speak to as their god. They usually appear unaware that the Judaic god believed other gods were in competition with him and demanded they not be worshipped. Christians are not informed if these other gods had anything to do with the creation of the observable universe or life forms and why they existed.

It took hardline Jewish monotheists centuries to vanquish Asherah, thought to be the consort of Yahweh and the putative mother of the heavenly beings, Genesis 6: regarded by various scholars as sons of the Hebrew god. Asherah is mentioned 13 times in the “Old Testament” and was worshipped by Jewish woman possibly as late as 800 C.E. according to

pottery found in the last century. It took Judaists centuries to vanquish Baal and other deities.

Thus Christians do not have a god of their own. They believe in the existence of a Jewish god they claim is their god and refer to as “Father” and his son Jesus they also regard as a god. Jews emphatically deny the “New Testament” character Jesus is a son of their god and therefore not a god.

The notion of a man being a ‘son’ of the Jewish god is the foundation dogma of Christianity with over two billion members.

Christians have never deserted the Judaic religion and cannot. Christianity is literally a Jewish offshoot cult. It cannot be anything else as it promotes the existence of ancient Jewish gods and pray to them. Thus by religion, Christians are a fraternal Judaic group.

All the very best,

Peter Plane

God the wasteful designer

Dear Sir/Madam

I refer to the letter from Mira (Nov-Dec Issue).

I would like to ask Mira whether she realises the full implication of female chastity. Every twenty-eight days is not just an inconvenience for females but is nature's call for the female to hunt for a suitable mate to fertilise the egg.

If a god designed women, why did he programme them so that as early as twelve in some cultures, females ovulate and are tempted by nature to respond. If God did not intend women to respond until they were married, why not programme them so that they did not ovulate until they had received blessings by the priest at their wedding?

The Catholic church requires no condoms to be used during sex, as the semen must not be wasted. Yet, why did God design females so that they would waste dozens of eggs before they were married? Even the compromise of masturbation is evil, according to the Bible, or even an unconscious nocturnal emission.

The Bible is full of contradictions to rational thinking.

Kenneth Hudson.



ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING of the *Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc*



will be held on

**Wednesday 24 March 2009
at 7:30pm**

**Eastwood Community Centre
95 Glen Osmond Road
EASTWOOD SA**

All members are welcome to attend.

Atheist Foundation of Australia supports Non-Believers Giving Aid: a religion-free way to help disaster victims in Haiti

The Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science (RDFRS) has set up a dedicated bank account and PayPal facility to collect donations to non-religious relief organisations. Called **Non-Believers Giving Aid**, all of the money donated will be distributed to disaster relief. Donating through **Non-Believers Giving Aid** offers two advantages:

1. 100% of your donation will go to these charities: not even the PayPal fees will be deducted from your donation, Richard Dawkins will personally donate a sum to cover the cost of these (capped at \$10,000).
2. When donating via **Non-Believers Giving Aid**, you are helping to counter the scandalous myth that only the religious care about their fellow-humans.

Donations will only be passed on to aid organisations that do not have religious affiliations. In the case of Haiti, the two organisations chosen are:

Médecins Sans Frontières
International Red Cross

Interested?

Visit: <http://givingaid.richarddawkins.net/>
or click on the link from our homepage at:
<http://www.atheistfoundation.org.au>

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IN THE NEWS

New South Wales premier Nathan Rees may have gone, but he managed to announce the decision to go ahead with a trial of Ethics classes in NSW state schools. Announcing the decision on 25 November, he remarked that “There is real concern that students not attending religious scripture classes are missing an opportunity to learn. Approving ethics classes means a simple addition to classes without diminishing the importance of religion for other families.”

The system will be trialled in ten NSW primary schools over two terms in 2010. This will be in consultation with the St James Ethics Centre, which has been campaigning for some time on this issue.

Pope John Paul II has been put on the fast track to Sainthood with Vatican insiders speculating that he could be beatified as soon as autumn 2010.

Pope Benedict waived a traditional waiting period, no doubt taking advantage of the late Pontiff’s widespread popularity.

Atheist and secularist campaigners in the Republic of Ireland thumbed their noses at a strict new blasphemy law that came into force on New Year’s Day, publishing a series of anti-religious quotations online and promising to fight the legislation in court. The quotes included those from several religious figures including those attributed to Jesus.

The law, which was passed in July 2009, means blasphemy in Ireland is now a crime punishable with a fine of up to 25,000 euros.

It defines blasphemy as “publishing or uttering matter that is grossly abusive or insulting in relation to matters sacred by any religion, thereby intentionally causing outrage among a substantial number of adherents of that religion, with some defences permitted”.

Mr Michael Nugent, head of Atheist Ireland said: “This

new law is both silly and dangerous. It is silly because mediaeval religious laws have no place in a modern secular republic, where the criminal law should protect people and not ideas.

Islamic governments are now using the wording of the legislation to pressure the UN for blasphemy laws at international level.

The UK’s National Secular Society recently complained to the Advertising Standards Authority and Trading Standards about a flyer being distributed across Manchester by the Body of Christ International Ministries (BCIM) claiming that they could cure cancer, arthritis and other diseases through the power of prayer at their meetings, a claim in direct contravention of the Cancer Act. The BCIM have now withdrawn the flyer and undertaken to avoid such claims on any future publications.

The Brumby Government of Victoria, in what can fairly be described as blatant discrimination, has refused to fund the Global Atheist Convention, despite granting \$2 million to the lacklustre Parliament of World Religions.

Despite this lack of support the convention is very likely to be sold out months ahead of schedule.

The Catholic Church in Ireland has apologised after a damning report showed it covered up child sex abuse over more than three decades. The Irish Government also apologised for its lack of action in protecting Irish children. The report uncovered shocking cases of abuse and a church hierarchy that routinely protected abusers as part of a culture of secrecy and damage control. A

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study “The Chronic Dependence of Popular Religiosity upon Dysfunctional Psychosociological Conditions” published in the *Evolutionary Psychology Journal* challenged the widely touted notion that without religion society would collapse. According to its author, Gregory Paul, the reverse is true. Religion flourishes where a society is dysfunctional and poor. When affluence is present and people feel secure through the provision of health care and social services, religion quickly loses its hold. In other words, those societies that have moved furthest away from religion have higher levels of contentment, stability and affluence.



The pill that Opposition Leader Tony Abbot sought to ban in Australia has been given the all clear in Italy despite years of protestation from the Vatican. However, the drug RU486 [mifepristone], readily available throughout much of Europe, can be administered only by doctors in hospitals. The Vatican has resorted to threatening possible excommunication for doctors prescribing the pill, as well for women who use it.



Was it a miscalculation or a testing of the waters? In what many saw as a blatant attempt to further undermine secular education, still suffering the assault of scripture classes and school chaplaincy programs, Opposition leader Tony Abbot called for compulsory teaching of the Bible. Facing some severe criticism he attempted to weasel out of it claiming that to understand Australia you needed to have an understanding of the Bible even if just from a cultural perspective.



The Russian Orthodox Church and the Vatican, long time enemies in the contest for people’s hearts, minds and pockets, have united under the banner of fighting secularism. The leader of the Russian Orthodox Church has denounced the “militant secularism” adopted by an increasingly united Europe and claimed that religion was being closed off into the “ghetto” of private devotion. He urged Christians to confront their governments on issues like abortion, euthanasia and same-sex marriage to the point of civil disobedience if necessary.



In late November 140 Christian leaders in the United States met in New York and issued the “Manhattan Declaration” pledging to campaign for the outlawing of abortion and gay marriage and cementing religious privileges into law. Their targets seem to be militant atheism, militant secularism and the rule of law.



An Age Nielsen poll of 1000 respondents shows Australia is just as credulous a nation as the US, with a potpourri of religious and spiritual beliefs. Although widely considered a secular nation, nearly half the Australian population believes in psychic powers such as extrasensory perception and 41 per cent believe in astrology. 68 per cent of us believe in God or a universal spirit, and 50 per cent say religion is important or very important in their lives. Not to be outdone nonbelievers constituted 24 per cent and 7 per cent were unsure. Christianity was still the largest faith (when taken as a whole), with 64 per cent of believers nominating it as the religion they most identified with. The next biggest was Buddhism, at 2 per cent, followed by Hinduism and Islam, which each had 1 per cent of believers. Judaism accounted for less than half of 1 per cent of those who said they were believers.



A recent poll in Canberra shows that the Catholic faith has successfully infiltrated both sides of the Federal parliament. The Catholic Church has traditionally had strong Labor ties, but the poll revealed that there are equal numbers of Catholics on the opposition front bench and in cabinet (30% of each). In stark contrast, there is no one from a non-Christian faith on either side.

Despite murmurings from religious leaders 84% of poll respondents declared that religion and politics should be kept separate.



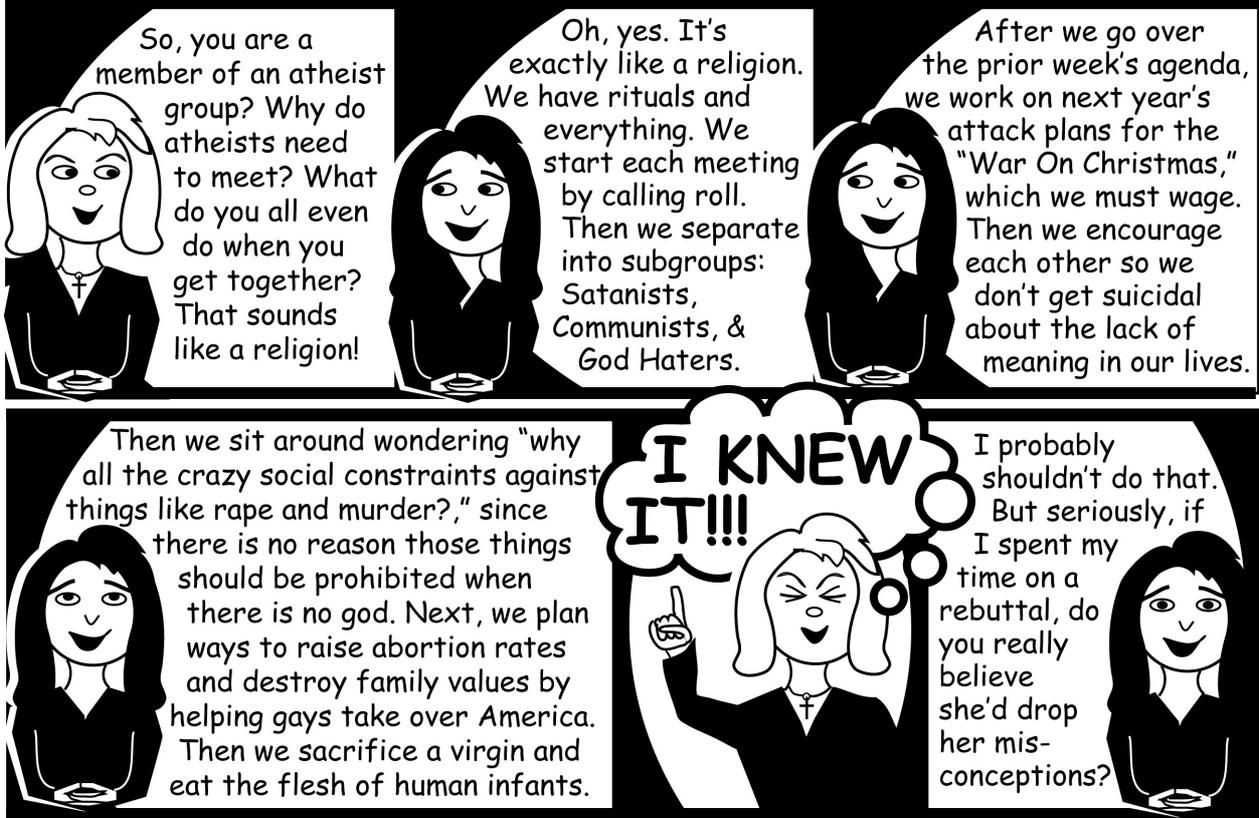
Desperate to quash any opposition, real or imagined, the Vatican has slammed the film *Avatar*, concerned that it might promote pseudo-doctrines that turn ecology into the religion of the millennium, maintaining that nature is no longer a creation to defend but a divinity to worship.



HUMOUR

ATHEIST EVE

THEDSIGN ©2010



HERETICAL HAPPENINGS

KEEPING YOU IN THE KNOW

Greetings,

Three Day Passes for the Global Atheist Convention have sold out much earlier than expected. Many people have left it too late to order their tickets. They are extremely disappointed at missing the chance of coming to this unique event. The AFA has set up a service for those who are no longer in a position to be able to attend and need to sell their tickets. We have a waiting list of folk who will buy a pass as their last chance to experience the Rise of Atheism Convention. The AFA offers no guarantees to anyone wishing to purchase. In this case, we are only the messenger or broker trying to help out. There are still Sunday Only Passes available. If Three Day Passes were an example, it would pay not to tarry in purchasing yours!

The Atheist sign; “Atheism – Celebrate Reason!” is now on the buses in Hobart Town. They look absolutely wonderful and all comments about them have been more than positive. The next challenge is have them on Victorian buses before the start of the Global Atheist Convention on 12 March. The AFA is hopeful this will be accomplished.



On 3 March there will be a debate in Hobart between the AFA and Anglican Wellspring and later on this year another in Adelaide. Two women AFA Committee Members have volunteered to have a ‘friendly fire’ debate in a coffee lounge with The Rev Paul Harrington, the evangelical rector of Holy Trinity, Adelaide and possibly Craig Broman from the City Workers Ministry. TAA will have more news on the encounter in a later edition.

The Global Atheist Convention draws very near and the assigned Committee is working incredibly hard in making this a more than memorable time for all. The number in the audience as I write is over 2,400 people. Some 700 will also be partaking of Saturday Night dinner with entertainment. This Convention will set a world-wide benchmark for others to follow and it is a moment in history for Atheism not to be missed.

Until we meet again,

David

And God created unworkable Legislation

By David Nicholls

On January 1st a new law came into effect in Ireland that make blasphemy punishable by a €25,000 fine. The new law is predictably vague, defining blasphemy as publishing or uttering material that is abusive or insulting in relation to sacred matters. The group Atheist Ireland has campaigned vigorously to highlight the disturbing reach of the law by publishing 25 quotes it claims are potentially blasphemous, including statements by people from Jesus Christ to Minister for Justice Dermot Ahern.

That such a poorly drafted law could be adopted in 2010 shows, yet again, why secularism needs to be better defended and better understood. A law that depends on the subjective appraisal of whether something is offensive is clearly open to abuse.

This does not mean Secularism is anti-religion, it merely seeks to separate church and state so religious pressure groups can't influence political decisions ...

So why bring in vague medieval regulations for the sole purpose of protecting ideas? Such a regressive step by Ireland is a classic example of the way in which misplaced religious sentiment can infect the public sphere and work against effective Government and good law. And it shows the secularism is vital to the protection of the human rights and freedoms that underpin the working of democracy.

Secularism is the belief that individuals are as important as the community, a concept supported by a growing number of freethinking groups of Atheists, Rationalists, Humanists, Agnostics.

The three monotheistic religions; Islam, Christianity and Judaism, are founded on faith in dogma. Most sects are extremely wealthy and place the well-being of their organisation above the rights of individuals.

For that reason, Secularists think religions should have no political influence in law-making or other government decisions.

This does not mean Secularism is anti-religion, it merely seeks to separate church and state so religious

pressure groups can't influence political decisions to the detriment of individual rights and freedoms.

Because Secular Democratic Governments recognise individuals, this is the only form of government that can guarantee Human Rights for all citizens, including their right to follow the religion of their choice, or have no religion.

If Australians want the right to have pregnancy terminations, divorces, contraception, Voluntary Euthanasia, equality for women and gays, laws based on science instead of ancient myths, then they must support secularism.

Violence between Christian sects caused the Australian founding fathers to declare that the state would favour no particular religion.

Instead, all supernatural cults were to be supported from the public purse with extraordinarily generous economic and political advantages.

Even Catholic Italy doesn't force every taxpayer to support religion to the tune of billions of dollars; and few democracies exempt religious

institutions from human rights and anti-discrimination laws, as is the case in Australia.

Religion and politics don't mix because religion is about absolutes; right and wrong, good and evil, whereas politics is about compromise.

Furthermore, religion is by its nature anti-scientific. Science has proved beyond doubt that there is no rational basis for treating women differently from men, but religions dispute this.

Reputable scientific studies show that sexual orientation is determined in the womb so there is no rational justification for legally discriminating against same-sex-oriented people.

Yet religious dogma decrees they are 'sinful'. And it's reasonable to assume that the belief that humans are the much loved creation of an invisible, omniscient, omnipotent god must have influenced the thinking of religious politicians in Copenhagen. God wouldn't let his faithful flock be washed away when the ice melts, would he?

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But where does this leave us today in Australia? Politicians of many flavours curry favour with and openly promote various faiths. From the Hillsong happy-clappers through the Exclusive Brethren to the garden variety of Catholicism, pollies bow and scrape, hoping a camera is recording their piety.

Unfortunately, we can't know if their sentiments are real or faked. That's one of the problems with religion. Do the purveyors of supernatural mysteries really believe them? Or is it just a vote-catching exercise to gain power, or a way to secure the religious vote in marginal seats?

Politicians engaging in such overt displays of religiosity would be surprised to learn how many people are neither impressed nor convinced. Many even wonder if someone who believes in invisible supermen is a suitable person to run the country!

There are still many voters who endured the same indoctrination as politicians and believe in the same pious absurdities.

Fortunately, they are becoming fewer in numbers as the years go by, but ego-driven politicians only hear the accolades of the diminishing faithful and ignore the embarrassed distress of the majority.

Fulsome support from Church Leaders completes the delusion that they have popular approval. Surveys tell us that only seven percent of the population bother to attend regular church, and an equally small number experience vague feelings that there's 'something' up there that prompts them to label themselves Anglican or Callithumpian simply because they were Baptised into that religion.

For the vast majority of Australians, religion plays no part in their lives and they're unlikely to be impressed by political god-stuff.

A very high proportion of the younger generation have little or no interest in organised religion, making them de facto Atheists.

Atheism is from the Greek *atheos*; 'a' without, and 'theos' deity. Without a god. Soon these young people will be taking life seriously as adults in a world less hospitable than today, so they will not appreciate politicians who make decisions based on faith instead of science-based reason, and will elect representatives who remove laws based on outmoded and irrational prejudices, and defer to scientific fact rather than the ancient rule book of Middle Eastern tribes when making decisions.

For the vast majority of Australians, religion plays no part in their lives ...

It just takes time, because the self-righteousness induced by cultural indoctrination is very powerful and causes a temporary 'blindness' to the absurdity of believing in things for which there is zero evidence.

Within the next decade, thoughtful leaders will emerge who no longer blindly follow tradition, but face reality to affect positive change in society, in the process alleviating some of the immeasurable suffering that faith-based laws have caused.

I am sure that humans are steadily progressing towards greater respect for human rights, despite our natural desire for conformity, a trait that was once an evolutionary safeguard but today has the potential to destroy civilization and much of the natural world.

Better education, political stability, the redressing of environmental degradation and assured personal security, together with the growth of freethinking secularism will eventually see both Atheism and religion disappear, to be replaced by respect for the earth and all that is on it.

This article appeared in the ABC The Drum Unleashed
<http://www.abc.net.au/unleashed/stories/s2784769.htm>

Quote

Men rarely (if ever) manage to dream up a god superior to themselves. Most gods have the manners and morals of a spoiled child.

Robert A. Heinlein



Pastors, Christians and Witch hunts in Africa

By Leo Igwe

This article appears at <http://www.culturekitchen.com> and is used with permission.

The issue of witch hunts and the ignominious role some Christian church leaders popularly known as pastors have been playing, have been in the news for a while.

In Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, Tanzania, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Malawi and South Africa, pastors are fuelling and perpetrating witchcraft-related abuses. Incidentally, for obvious reasons, few people have come out to openly and publicly condemn our so-called men and women of God who are committing, aiding and abetting witchcraft-related abuses.

In this piece, I will proffer reasons why our pastors and their church members have suddenly become witch hunters, and have made witchcraft accusation the focus of their ministries. Before going ahead with my argument, I would like to make some clarifications. The belief in witchcraft predates the advent of Christianity in Africa. Witchcraft claims are not part of those cultural “imports” from the West. The belief that people can spiritually alter or undermine the fortunes of others has been with Africans for ages. So the persecution and execution of those alleged to be engaging in witchcraft activities have been going on in Africa before its contact with the West or East.

In fact it was the traditional medicine men, oracle priests, local diviners, or witchdoctors who were carrying out witchcraft diagnosis, witch finding and identification. So why the sudden change of guards? How did our pastors and their church members turn to be witch torturers, persecutors and executors? Why are many churches fanning the flames of witchcraze and witchcraft accusation? The reasons are not far fetched. As I noted earlier, the belief in witchcraft has been with us for some time. It constitutes part of the traditional education and orientation which most Africans receive from childhood. So the pastors and their church members are spreading a superstitious belief inculcated in them from childhood. The only thing new and different in what they are doing is that they are using

the Bible to justify their actions. And why is that the case?

Because in today’s Christianity, Biblical literalism is the norm — a dominant and driving force. Most pastors in Africa preach and promote the Bible as the literal and infallible word of God that should be accepted without question, alteration or revision. And these Biblical teachings include provisions that sanction the execution and persecution of witches and wizards. For instance Exodus 22: 18 says “Suffer not a witch to live” [“Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.” — King James version.] This verse is a clear and unequivocal endorsement of witch persecution and killing which any literal believer in the Bible cannot but endorse. Meanwhile the Bible did not define who a witch or wizard is or what the term “witchcraft” means? And this has created room for so many misinterpretations, abuse and misuse by pastors and Christians in Africa. Related to the above point is that pastors promote the Bible as the standard of good conduct and behaviour. Pastors encourage their followers to believe that, as long as their actions are in accordance with what is written in the Bible, they have nothing to worry about. As if all that is written in the Bible is morally good, sound and upright.

Most pastors in Africa preach and promote the Bible as the literal and infallible word of God that should be accepted without question, alteration or revision.

So pastors and church members who indulge in witchcraft-related activities believe that they are exercising their faith; that they are fulfilling the word of God, for which God will reward them in the hereafter. Hence they do not see anything wrong in torturing, killing, maiming or burning those alleged to be witches.

Another reason for the spread of Christian faith-based witch hunts is the prevalence of ignorance among pastors and church leaders. Many pastors never received any formal education or training in theology, religion or philosophy before starting their ministry. They just woke up one morning, claiming to have received a revelation or a call from God and started a church. Some pastors are school drop-outs. They started a church out of frustration, lack of jobs and source of income. Some pastors actually attended theology schools which are glorified Bible indoctrination centres. Still, there are pastors who are experts in various fields like law, science, engineering, architecture, journalism, banking etc. These pastors mistakenly think that the expertise or excellence in their various fields confers on them the “vocation” or authority to preach the Bible, lead a church and pontificate in matters concerning religion.

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Many pastors have become witch hunters due to lack of what to preach and what to use to mobilise and tyrannise over their church members. Human civilisation has made many pastors irrelevant to the current scheme of things. So many of them are desperate to attract new members and keep the tithes flowing. So what we have today is a situation where many pastors are spreading false, dangerous and hateful messages all in the name of preaching the Bible. Many pastors have actually led their members astray all in the name of spreading the word of God. Pastors claim to know and have the solution to every problem. Of course, every problem is caused by the devil, by demons, by principalities and powers which they claim to have the power to deliver and subdue.

What we have today is a situation where many Christians commit atrocities all in name of obeying their pastors or doing what the Bible says. The time has come for Africans to abandon blind obedience of their pastors and blind belief in the Bible, and in any of the so-called holy books. Africans must begin to think for themselves and not allow pastors or the clerics to think for them. Africans must begin to apply their reason to issues. The time has come to liberate Africa from the tyranny and stranglehold of ignorant pastors and their deluded church members. The time has come for Africa to leap out of the terror of witch hunt, superstition, religious fundamentalism and irrationalism.

Leo Igwe is an executive director of the Nigerian Humanist Movement, representative of the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) in West Africa and director of Centre for Inquiry Nigeria.

He is widely known for his campaigning for Children's Rights and against Nigerian Witch Hunting perpetrated by Evangelical churches. He was attacked at a conference he helped organise by followers of Helen Ukpabio the footage of which can be found on youtube.

IMPORTANT UPDATE:

As this magazine goes to press it appears that Leo and members of his family have been arrested on a charge of murder (and subsequently bailed), supporters are labelling the charges as false—the alleged victim having died a year ago from HIV or AIDS related complications.

This is the most serious in a long line of attempts to intimidate and harass Leo and his family. Previously he and members of his family had been subjected to police bashings and false accusations.

Since 2007 Leo has been advocating on behalf of a 10 year old rape victim trying to call the alleged perpetrator to justice. The alleged perpetrator, Edward Uwah, a university teacher, has brought several police actions and allegations against Leo, his family and the family of the raped girl and their supporters.

The most recent update is that the man who has been making all the problems for Leo and his family and made the allegations, didn't even turn up for a hearing this week and the case will continue with someone having to face charges for either murder or making a false statement.

It's believed that quick action by various humanist and skeptical organisations round the world have help secure his release this time. The Nigerian State is now aware that the world is watching.

Should readers wish to know more about Leo's situation updates can be found on *Think Humanism Forum* — www.thinkhumanism.com and via the blog site of UK author Stephen Law, found at www.stephenlaw.blogspot.com

Should you wish to write and express your concern, the contact details of the Nigerian High Commission in Australia are below:

Nigeria High Commission, Australia

P.O. BOX: 241
Civic Square
Canberra
Australia

Phone:
+61-62-2866426
+61-62-2861322

Fax:
+61-62-2865332

Email:
chancery@nigeria-can.org.au

Website URL:
<http://www.nigeria-can.org.au/>

VIEW FROM AMERICA



I wonder how many of you have been monitoring the never-ending battle here in the US regarding a major reform of our health care system?

As I write this on 1 January, the issue is still in limbo as we wait until a joint House and Senate committee decides upon a final bill to send to the President.

As we witness the development of the legislation, a couple things become clear: The interests of big business, namely the insurance companies, are of paramount importance; people be damned, and religion may wind up torpedoing the whole thing!

About a month or so ago, several representatives of the Catholic Church appeared on Capitol Hill to lobby lawmakers about abortion language (what else!) in the bill. You might think that by now, with Democrats in firm control of the House, and with a 60-40 advantage in the Senate, the Catholic lobbyists might wind up with a thanks, but no thanks, and sent packing. But no, not with the Demos we have in office now! What happened in the 2006 and 2008 elections cycles was more, shall we say, "Nominal Democrats" wound up getting elected due to the extreme dissatisfaction with Bush and his gang of Republicans who damn near destroyed the country economically, and brought us the Iraq war.

Unfortunately, a lot of these new Demos are from rather conservative areas (i.e. religious nut districts!) of the country where abortion is still a sticky issue. As a result, we have a sizeable number of Demos (and virtually 100% of the Republicans) who are attempting to further limit abortion by attempting to stop any and all funding of health insurance policies subsidized by the government. If enacted, this will complicate the new "reforms" by forcing those who rely on government subsidies to purchase an additional rider or separate policy to have abortion coverage. How many of these people will actually DO that? Once again we see how religion can destroy what is actually good for real, LIVING people, by attempting to stand up for the rights of NON-existent people!

The next time you encounter some religionist babbling about the rights of the unborn, ask him where in his Bible god says that abortion is condemned? When he can't do that, you might suggest he read Psalm 137 verse 9: Happy shall

he be, that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the stones. Actually, I prefer the New Living Translation on this verse: "Happy is the one who takes your babies and smashes them against the rocks!"

If that's not enough, give 'em one more for good measure. Hosea 13:16, once again from the New Living Translation: "The people of Samaria must bear the consequences of their guilt because they rebelled against their God. They will be killed by an invading army, their little ones dashed to death against the ground, their pregnant women ripped open by swords." (Can you just imagine the Monty Python group doing a routine on either of these verses back in the day?)

Bottom line: Once again, religion stands in the way of social progress as it has done for centuries. Will American ever get ANY positive change to a health care system that is causing about 60% of all bankruptcies, and causing over 18,000 deaths per year due to lack of insurance? Stayed tuned; the US Congress will be in session shortly and the battle will be on.

One non-US item this month: Today I received an email about new blasphemy laws in Ireland of all places. Here's a brief excerpt: From today, 1 January 2010, the new Irish blasphemy law becomes operational, and we begin our campaign to have it repealed. Blasphemy is now a crime punishable by a \$25,000 fine. The new law defines blasphemy as publishing or uttering matter that is grossly abusive or insulting in relation to matters held sacred by any religion, thereby intentionally causing outrage among a substantial number of adherents of that religion, with some defences permitted.

Go to www.blasphemy.ie for the entire story.

And you thought that we here in the US and Australia had problems?

Bill

The mindset of many carrying the movement forward

By Richard Haynes

Originally published in *Secular Nation*, reprinted with permission.

Recently there's been a lot of buzz about the "New Atheists" and their influence on the world of non-theism. Some have labelled them militant, though they're never strapped with explosives. Others have dismissed them as equivalent to religious fundamentalists. Yet, the new atheists cling to no sacred script or faith-based dogma. Most recently they've been branded as the catalyst of an earth-shaking rift between themselves and the established atheist infrastructure.

The term "new atheists"

It's difficult to determine where the expression "new atheists" originated. However, based on the research of my friend, Paul Fidalgo, it's likely to have been coined by Gary Wolf, who used it in an article entitled "Church of The Non-Believers" published in the November 2006 issue of *Wired* magazine.¹

Here's an excerpt:

"This is the challenge posed by the New Atheists. We are called upon, we lax agnostics, we noncommittal nonbelievers, we vague deists who would be embarrassed to defend antique absurdities like the Virgin Birth or the notion that Mary rose into heaven without dying, or any other blatant myth; we are called out, we fence-sitters, and told to help exorcise this debilitating curse: the curse of faith.

"The New Atheists will not let us off the hook simply because we are not doctrinaire believers. They condemn not just belief in God but respect for belief in God. Religion is not only wrong; it's evil. Now that the battle has been joined, there's no excuse for shirking."

Throughout the article Wolf uses profuse generalizations, and clearly intends the moniker "new atheists" to be derogatory at best. However, much like Fred Hoyle creating the term "Big Bang" to disparage those who held a contrary theory to his own of the

origin of the universe, the label "new atheist" is now being embraced. Not only are those new to atheism referring to themselves as "new atheists," it's gaining credibility from such authors as Victor J. Stenger, whose new book is entitled *The New Atheism*.

Like most religious or philosophical views, the meaning of "new atheists" will vary greatly for each person who uses it. For simplicity, I'm going to define it as individuals who have become nonbelievers within the past five to ten years, and then use each following section to explain what I think are the philosophical and methodical differences between the new atheists and traditional atheism.

I've spent the last few years serving and communicating with theists who are teetering on the fence of faith, and those who have recently de-converted. Based on these experiences, I can assure you there are significant differences between the world views, goals and tactics of these new atheists and traditional non-theism. Consequently the vast majority of them are not joining our organizations. And, unlike their religious counterparts, the new atheists have no *de facto* leaders. So I write here as a mere representative and ask you to understand that my words are based on my opinions and philosophies. In fact, a brief account of my own enlightenment may help explain my viewpoints.

After leaving the church in which I served as an associate minister, I set off down the path less travelled, which brought me to the realm of deism, a place where I doubted if I should ever come back. As the years went by, I gradually allowed the magnificent — and often destructive — power of reason to seep into every nook and corner of my mind. In due course, even the most stubborn remnants of faith dissolved into the ether.

Once I came to terms with no longer believing in gods, I wouldn't even contemplate calling myself an atheist (even though I was). I could never be one of those! Those people were more analogous to the bulbous-eyed monstrosity who lurked in the bowels of Tolkien's *Misty Mountains*. No, it wasn't until I began devouring the writings of Harris, Dawkins, Dennett and Hitchens (some five years ago) that I realized I had been an atheist for years. Not only that, I was comfortable — and proud — to be one.

Almost immediately I "felt the calling" to share the good news of my life altering and fulfilling new belief

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system. I created my blog, *lifewithoutfaith.com*, and used it to encourage others to come out of their atheist closets. A few years later I began using my leadership role at Atheist Nexus to build a bridge for the thousands of new atheists to connect with established atheist organizations. My de-conversion aside, I want to highlight three recent events that positioned the new atheists in (or under) the spotlight.

Each will also focus on a unique arena in which the new atheists must learn to circumnavigate, and hopefully help us all to understand the mindset of our new brothers and sisters.

Paul Kurtz and his departure from CFI

There's probably no one alive today who better represents the non-theistic old guard than the Lion of Humanism, Paul Kurtz. It's no secret Kurtz was removed from his leadership role of the Center For Inquiry (CFI). Some regard this usurping as similar to Mr. Christian's (pun intended) mutiny against Captain Bligh. Others have stated publicly they wish it had happened sooner. It is above my lowly position to pass judgments against my elder statesmen. So I will leave it to you to determine why — or whether or not — this ousting should have occurred.

When I first heard the news of Kurtz's removal, I wrote an article praising him for his tremendous accomplishments and declared him one of my heroes. Niceties aside, I think we all can glean much from his "Rosebud"-esque departure. As we toil to expand our own empires, let us not — as a matter of principle — reject new and unconventional ideas. Let us never brush off the dreams and visions of our unseasoned subordinates. And most importantly, as we manoeuvre through our day-to-day battles, let's never forget the childlike love and passion that enticed us to begin our journeys.

On several occasions, Kurtz has openly stated he is not an atheist (even though he is). He calls himself a secular humanist, a non-theist, an agnostic and a skeptic. He argues we shouldn't define ourselves by what we disbelieve, but by what we do. On the surface I agree, but in practice it's seldom effective.

For quite a while after I embraced the word atheist I still avoided using it. Often in interviews I was asked if I was an atheist. I would respond by saying something like, "Well, I don't play golf, but I don't call myself an

agolffist, and I think astrology is nonsense, but I wouldn't call myself an azodiacist." Without exception, this statement was followed up with, "Yeah, but are you an atheist?" I quickly learned there was no way around it. Our society demands we answer the God question before all else. I changed my strategy so I wouldn't come across as sneakily trying to hide the truth. So now I quickly say yes, then follow up with something along the lines of "Well, that's just my position concerning gods. Now let me tell you how I define myself. I am a humanist, a skeptic, a naturalist, a Bright." This tactic has been much more successful.

The new atheists proudly embrace the "A-word," and often wear it on their lapels. They know, much like the homosexual community of the 1980s, they must confidently "Come Out." They are more than willing to share with their fellow mammals that *atheist* is simply defined as: Without god(s). They also point out that they are technically *agnostics* which, contrary to popular belief, is defined as someone who believes it's impossible to know if any god(s) exist outside of time and space.

They confidently explain why all the gods presented to them so far almost definitely do not exist.

For quite a while after I embraced the word atheist I still avoided using it.

Also, although some would not admit it, Paul Kurtz was famously not too keen on inclusiveness. He wanted all things humanist to be filtered through CFI. He didn't embrace the words of John F. Kennedy, who said, "As they

say on my own Cape Cod, a rising tide lifts all the boats. And a partnership, by definition, serves both partners, without domination or unfair advantage."

The new atheists embrace inclusiveness and are quite often found using the word *community*. They have no patience for petty differences and fighting; these remind them of the religions of their past. No, the new atheists understand the philosophy of cooperation and know it's possible to remain autonomous while working together towards a common goal.

I'm very proud to say the primary goal of Atheist Nexus — though a unique entity with its own purposes — cheerfully promotes other nontheistic organizations.

I don't think I'm exaggerating when I suggest Atheist Nexus's involvement and promotion of the 2009 AAI convention helped it become the largest convention the organization has ever sponsored. In return, AAI's rising tide lifted the ship S.S. Nexus.

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NPR rift article published

On 19 October 2009 National Public Radio published an article on its website written by Barbara Bradley Haggerty entitled “A Bitter Rift Divides Atheists.” In it Haggerty exaggerates what she calls “the schism amongst atheists” in an attempt to deliver a more titillating exposition. After reading and listening to the companion radio piece, if you didn’t know better you’d think organized atheism was going through events comparable to those experienced by the Roman Catholic Church, when on that fateful Halloween of 1517, Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses on the door of Wittenberg’s All Saints’ Church.

The NPR article featured CFI’s observance of Blasphemy Day (30 September), which was clearly a departure from Kurtz’s modus operandi. Obviously effective, it was a perfect example of how traditional nontheistic organizations can extend an olive branch to the new atheists. New atheists enjoy debating issues and discussing science, but these are not reason enough for them to join our organizations. They’re not interested in wasting time arguing semantics. They don’t care if we use words like *atheism*, *church*, or *spirituality*. Whatever terminology we use, they seek associations that sponsor social events, not just for themselves but for their families.

When NPR asked Paul Kurtz for a statement about “new atheists,” he said this:

“I consider them atheist fundamentalists. They’re antireligious, and they’re mean-spirited, unfortunately. Now they’re very good atheists and very dedicated people who do not believe in God. But you have this aggressive and militant phase of atheism, and that does more damage than good.”

I’ve already dealt with why the words *fundamentalist* and *militant* are inappropriate tags for new atheists, but to accuse them of doing more damage than good is indefensible. Based on other interviews and writings, Kurtz has expanded this view by asserting nonbelievers must work with religious groups to achieve common goals. The new atheists agree but refuse to be silent, regardless of the consequences. They feel atheists have done “more harm than good” by biting their tongues whenever the pious spew their ludicrous and often bigoted opinions.

The new atheists know that the very reasons Stephen

The new atheists agree but refuse to be silent, regardless of the consequences

Jay Gould’s non-overlapping magisterium (NOMA) has resulted in disastrous consequences are the same ones which make it nigh near impossible to live by the words of St. Rodney King: “Can’t we all just get along?” Why? Well, many new atheists have come out of evangelical churches and understand the atheist community has been ignorant of two foundational principles by which all Christians must abide.

Both can be summed up by these two biblical passages:

Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw Him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age. — Matthew 28: 16-20 (New International Version)

For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father’s glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done. — Matthew 16: 25-27 (New International Version)

The first set of verses is notoriously referred to as the Great Commission. Although not required for salvation, all Christians, regardless of being liberal or conservative, moderate or fundamentalist, must obey this commandment as much as any other. Just like Jake and Elwood Blues, “they’re on a mission from God” and their charge is to save you.

The second group of verses provides a perfect explication as to why Christians will never stick to the rules governing faith-based initiatives. For — according to the words of Jesus — what good would it be for a homeless person to be fed, a GED (general educational development) class to be taught, or a sandbag to be given to a flood victim, if the recipients forfeit their souls? Better all remain hungry, uneducated, and to die by drowning with a redeemed

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soul.

By combining both passages we are allowed a glimpse behind the stained-glass spectacles through which Christians view the world. The new atheists are more than willing to work with believers, but they remain cautiously aware their cohorts must — above all else — obey the words of Christ.

Even Rick Warren, author of *The Purpose Driven Life*, preaches what he calls the “whole-life” gospel, the aim of which is to heal disease, end poverty, stop suffering, and rid the planet of illiteracy. However, on his church’s website, he says “spiritual darkness is a larger giant to be defeated before any of these.” Shouldn’t this disqualify his church from receiving faith-based funding? Or, at the very least, cause us to question his motivations?

Frank Schaeffer’s “patience with God”

As far as the religious go, Frank Schaeffer could be called one of the good guys. In his book *Crazy for God* he explained how he, with his father Francis Schaeffer, helped create the Religious Right, something he now regrets. During President Obama’s inauguration Schaeffer said: “How can anyone who loves our country support the Republicans now?” He followed this statement with saying Barry Goldwater, William F. Buckley and Ronald Reagan would be critical of today’s religiously-controlled Republican Party in the United States.

In his new book, *Patience with God*, Schaeffer lumps the new atheists together with the religious right. He says the new atheists are merely fundamentalists in sheep’s (or is it wolf’s?) clothing. In an interview with the Rutherford Institute’s online journal *OldSpeak*, he said:

“I would go even further and say that the New Atheists are fundamentalists. They have just changed a few words and instead of trying to get everybody to believe in a certain theological idea, they are trying to enforce a kind of philosophical morality on the rest of the country. They actually argue that you are stupid if you believe in God. There is a lot of mockery involved. It is found in the tone of Bill Maher’s documentary film, *Religulous*. It is also shown in the tone of his TV show. What you are watching is the flip side of Pat Robertson or James Dobson. It is the same kind of intolerance

towards diversity and people who disagree with you as you see from the Right. In my book *Patience with God*, I make the argument that these two movements — religious fundamentalism and the New Atheism — are parallel movements. They come from the same lack of understanding of spirituality which involves celebrating paradox. It lacks mystery. We simply don’t have to answer every question.”

Then Schaeffer takes it one step further by saying:

“Basically, atheists like Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Bill Maher and others like them are building a movement of atheistic dogma that is every bit as intolerant as that from the right. In *Patience with God*, I argue that these are really part of the same movement. It is a movement of intolerance that sees the whole country as being in a civil war where your side has to win in order for it to be a better place. And I don’t feel that hopeful. I also don’t feel it’s true because I don’t think that that is how things work.”

It’s ridiculous for Schaeffer to accuse the new atheists of following the dogma of Dawkins or any other of prominent atheist. Since he uses Bill Maher in the above quote, I’ll use him as an example. There is no doubt Maher is highly respected by new atheists. However when he revealed his anti-vaccination views, he was unremittingly ridiculed. Also let’s not forget it was not too long ago when Sam Harris incurred the wrath of many nonbelievers for suggesting we stop using the word “atheist.” Even the much adored Christopher Hitchens angered many nonbelievers for his support of the Iraq war.

Rest assured, if Dawkins announces to the world he knew for a fact extraterrestrials seeded life on Earth (panspermia), he best quickly make his evidence available for verification. If he does not, the new atheists would disown him quicker than Ted Haggard’s church purged old Teddy from their assembly.

The new atheists are admittedly outspoken but feel they have no choice. They agree with the aforementioned Rick Warren, who, as moderator of the first presidential debate, said the separation of church and state does not keep an individual’s faith from their politics and that everyone brings their “world view” to the political arena. New atheists agree and believe it the duty of the citizenry to differentiate between views

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founded in religious doctrine and those based in reason and what Schaeffer negatively dubs “philosophical morality.”

The new atheists believe the people of the world should be guaranteed the freedom to practice (or not practice) religion as they choose. Nonetheless, they hold that no views — religious or otherwise — are entitled to automatic respect. When any opinion is brought into the town square, they declare discussion should not cease and arguments are not trumped when a believer tosses up the flag of religion or declares a view to be based upon his or her “faith.”

Perhaps at times the new atheists do overdo their mockery. However, they wholeheartedly disagree with Schaeffer and proclaim it is they — the nonbelievers — who are truly amazed by the beauty of nature, and overwhelmed by the awe-inspiring universe. In contrast, it is the devout who claim to hold a cheat-sheet with all of life’s answers. It is they who claim with certainty to know how the universe began, and how it will eventually end.

In conclusion, I hope we all can learn from these and future occurrences. We should diligently study our strategies and tactics to determine which are successful and which are not. We should strive to keep history from repeating itself by identifying past follies and taking the proper steps to prevent their reoccurrence.

The new atheists must eagerly shadow the old guard and serve as their apprentices. In return, it is essential for the old guard to mentor without being overbearing and to remain open to fresh ideas. Both groups must realize neither faction is wrong; they’re merely different. If the new and old strive to produce and maintain their synergy, the future will be brighter than either could have imagined or created by themselves.

If both old and new atheists learn to labour in harmony, they will diminish, if not avoid, the creation of schisms and thwart future takeovers. Both old and new, novice and seasoned, must hurriedly assume the rhythmic formation and adopt the strides of those running a relay. And it will be for the benefit of all — for when it comes time for the generational torch to be passed, neither group will stumble, and atheism’s tremendous progress will not be hindered.

1. Since publishing this article in *Secular Nation* it has come to light that this slight against atheists extends back to at least the mid eighties with the publication of *The New Atheism and the Erosion of Freedom*, by Robert A. Morey (1986)

Richard Haynes is a writer and public speaker living in Atlanta, Georgia, USA, and is the executive director of the world’s largest social networking site exclusively for nontheists, AtheistNexus.org, and writes the popular blog LifeWithoutFaith.com. He was raised in a nonreligious home, but as a teenage runaway had a “born again” experience, almost immediately became an evangelist, and personally led hundreds to Christ. He received a Bachelor of Science in Biblical Studies, and became an associate minister in a 12,000 member mega-church. In 1993, he and his wife Angela made the agonizing decision to leave their church, which was engulfed with scandal. Terrified and unemployed, they began their long and arduous journey to rationality and nontheism. Richard is now secularly ordained and has dedicated himself to building nontheist communities, encouraging others to “come out” of the atheist closet.

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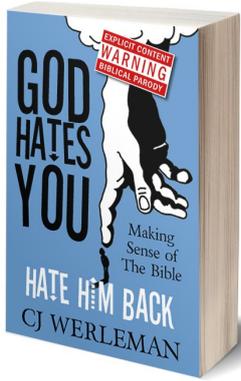
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BOOK REVIEW



God Hates You, Hate Him Back

Making Sense of the Bible

By CJ Werleman

ISBN: 9780956427601

Review by Sean Broughton-Wright

I remember somewhat fondly my formative years where I was given the “gift” of a solid Catholic Education. We studied the bible regularly, we had the bible read to us at weekly mass. Yet I don’t seem to remember the bits about God’s suggested punishment for rape – CJ enlightens us:

If a man happens to meet a virgin who is not pledged to be married and rapes her and they are discovered, he shall pay the girl’s father fifty shekels of silver. He must marry the girl, for he has violated her. He can never divorce her as long as he lives.

Deuteronomy 22:28-20 NIV

There’s the slam dunk. How fortunate for the poor young lass that is brutally raped by a male attacker that she gains a husband out of it – the guy who raped her. Furthermore what of the penalty for the rapist? Fifty shekels, that’s all? God commands in Leviticus that a man must be put to death for fucking a goat, but a payment of only a couple of dollars for raping a young girl?...

Page 72, God Hates You...

The quote above is a fair representation of the tone of the book. CJ Werleman gives us an everyman’s guide to the Bible. He readily admits upfront that he’s no biblical scholar (one could argue that you don’t need to be). This is the everyday bloke having a look at the bible and finding it’s “fuller than a Labradors lunch box” with rape, incest, violence and stupidity. Now while it’s written by the layman for the layman, don’t think that Werleman has just cobbled together some contradictions found on the Skeptics Annotated Bible and started laying the boot in. No, Werleman spent the better part of 18 months reading the bible, researching and finally writing this book.

CJ, has read the entire bible and given us a rather irreverent “cliff notes” version of it. The book is sure to offend the deeply religious, the moderately religious will opine that, “you must read the bible with a view to its historical context”, or mention something about metaphors and Atheists will have a good old snicker. If there is one danger with this book, it’s that the sheer stupidity of the source material could make Werleman’s wit and irreverence seem like the flogging of a dead horse.

I think Werleman’s wit manages to keep the reader reasonably well engaged, though I found myself dipping in and out of the book, and I’d recommend that to readers. I think it better to savour the stupidity and evaluate CJ’s commentary than to try and finish it in one sitting, indeed the way the book is written makes it easy to do so.

The first part of the book deals with the Old testament. Here CJ deals with a book at a time summarising the story, pointing out oddities, contradictions and commenting as he goes along. His handling of the New Testament differs in that the plagiarism amongst the gospel writers forces CJ to compile the narrative or risk being overly repetitive.

I am not sure about the title. I think its intention was to capture attention, but I have already read some Christian commentary on the dreadful “Atheist hatred of Christians” and the title really does not do the book justice. *God Hate’s You* is certainly more entertaining than reading the original (i.e. the Bible), illustrating well the ridiculous notion that Bible is divinely inspired.

Recommended for atheists and those without a biblical background (much of modern Christendom?).

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