

The Australian Atheist

ISSN 1035-1477

Issue Number 23

September – October 2010



**Atheist Foundation
of Australia Inc** Established
1970

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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.



Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc is a member of Atheist Alliance International

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From the Editor

Well I hope you all enjoyed the Election Campaign. While most of it tended to be completely stage managed, there were a few memorable moments. And who better to produce those moments than the churches. They never fail to let us down.

From a bishop in WA declaring that Julia Gillard's atheism could be a bad look to the ever reliable George Pell warning "One wing of the Greens are like watermelons, green outside and red inside, a number were Stalinists, supporting Soviet oppression." We will miss George when he shuttles off this mortal coil. He is such a bonus to atheism.

Of course how could we ever forget Jim Wallace from the Australian Christian Lobby pushing for Internet censorship (think of the kiddies) and the aggressive, rude and ignorant Wendy Francis from Family First. She was truly appalling when debating Fiona Patten from The Sex Party. Wendy was eventually seen for what she really was – a fundamentalist bigot when she tweeted "Children in homosexual relationships are subject to emotional abuse. Legitimising gay marriage is like legalising child abuse". Poor Wendy, apparently it was a technical error.

Atheists and secularists were dismayed when Julia Gillard promised to give \$222 million for the School Chaplaincy Program especially before the outcome of the National School Chaplaincy enquiry was finalised. With the new government made up of Labor, Independents and Greens we may see an end to the NSC once and for all.



No doubt most of you are aware of Christopher Hitchens' cancer diagnosis. Once again the religious have outdone themselves. They are praying for him – mainly that he dies. Oh, and that he repents and begs forgiveness. Christopher in his usual style has told the world that if he does repent or convert on his deathbed to ignore him.

"If that comes it'll be when I'm very ill, when I'm half-demented either by drugs or by pain and I won't have control over what I say. I mention this in case you hear a rumour later on ... I can't say that the entity that by then wouldn't be me, wouldn't do such a pathetic thing. But I can tell you: not while I'm lucid, no."

A website has been created called "Everybody Pray for Hitchens Day" on 20 September. Another is betting on whether, by a certain date, he will renounce his atheism and embrace religion. In his latest article in Vanity Fair he wrote, "I don't mean to be churlish about any kind intentions, but when September 20 comes, please do not trouble deaf heaven with your bootless cries. Unless, of course, it makes you feel better."

We won't be praying on 20 September but we sure wish him well.

Letters to the Editor

Dear Lee,

Many thanks for another splendid edition of THE AUSTRALIAN ATHEIST.

In your article, *Atheism Down Under - No! On Top of the World*, (July – August, Issue 22) describing the paranoid religious criticism surrounding the 2010 Global Atheist Convention, and the Atheist responses, it is my opinion that it is religion which should have to justify its every aspect.

Every letter or character, of every word, every sentence, every paragraph, in every language, every chapter of every holy book, every holy prayer, every holy hymn, every holy

cathedral, every holy church, every holy costume, every holy gesture, everything about every religion has been concocted and/or written down and/or built by man. It therefore follows that all this mind bending holy obfuscation and holy gibberish is nothing more than totally *meaningless superstition!*

What passes for religion is merely an interpretation and enforcement of this human invented irrelevant nonsense. And at what cost?

It is *not* atheists who should have to justify their opinion and/or position but religions & the religious!!!

Norman Kent

From the Inbox

Hello, my name is Cecilia and I am a year 12 politics student from University Senior College.

I am writing a report on 'Intelligent Design' in schools and was wondering if you could answer a few questions about it.

What is an atheist's response to calls for ID being taught in public and private schools?

How beneficial is the teaching of ID in a student's overall development?

In an already crowded curriculum, would it be a waste of time/resources?

Can science and theology coincide in public classrooms?

Would creationism teach to a range of different belief systems?

What is the likeliness of a student not considering alternative views?

Kind Regards,
Cecilia

Hi Cecilia,

My name is Tanya. I'm a member of the AFA Public Relations Team and happy to answer your questions.

What is an atheist response to calls for intelligent design being taught in public and private schools?

Intelligent Design is religion, specifically creationism from a Christian perspective. It is a view about the origins of the earth that is not supported by any credible evidence or any credible scientists. It is not an alternative scientific theory about the development of life on earth because it's not scientific (measurable, testable, verifiable etc.) Because it is religion, ID should only be included in an education curriculum in the context of a class on religion. I am in favour of comparative religion being taught in schools because religion has had an enormous impact on

human history, it would promote better understanding and tolerance of the diversity in the world and it encourages critical thinking about what people believe and why.

How beneficial is the teaching of ID in a student's overall development?

The benefit or detriment depends on what ID is taught as. If creationism is being taught as science then it's detrimental to the critical thinking capabilities of students because they're being told to accept something for which there is no credible evidence. That is exactly the opposite of the scientific method, which essentially says look at the evidence and see what it supports without pre-determining the answer. If creationism is taught as part of religion as noted above then that's fine, so long as it's taught as part of a comparative religion class where it's pointed out that many different groups of people have believed many different things over time and creationism is just one of those beliefs.

In an already crowded curriculum, would it be a waste of time/resources?

As per previous answers – comparative religion is a good idea, teaching creationism as science is definitely not.

Can science and theology coincide in public classrooms?

Science and theology should not be taught in the same class because they have opposite approaches: science seeks answers from evidence, theology claims it already knows the answers then interprets the evidence in whatever (sometimes nonsensical) way is required to support its pre-existing answers.

Would creationism teach to a range of different belief systems?

If there was such a thing a class on creationism should teach different beliefs (i.e. a part of comparative religion) because creationism as a concept is not specific to Christianity, although "intelligent design" is the

catch-cry of people who are typically fundamentalist Christians. I would expect Pastafarianism and the Flying Spaghetti Monster (www.venganza.org/about/open-letter/) to be given equal time. However, I expect if creationism was allowed as a specific class it would spend the substantial majority of its time on the Christian view of creationism, and not suggest that other creationist alternatives are equally as (in)valid.

What is the likeliness of a student not considering alternative views?

I assume you mean evolution and creationism as alternative views on the development of life on Earth. It is a common argument from those promoting ID that students should "just be given the alternatives so they can think about it for themselves". This argument is flawed because:

(a) it seeks to assign equal credibility to each alternative, contrary to the evidence;

(b) the job of a school is to educate students, not to provide equal air time to every hypothetical idea that someone comes up with; and

(c) those promoting ID aren't interested in students looking at all the theoretically possible and highly unlikely explanations for the development of life. For example: The earth was created as a super computer to answer the Ultimate Question as per *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. We are living in a Matrix-style collective delusion. The Earth is a ball in a galactic game of billiards, etc.

They are interested in promoting their particular religion. Here are some alternative views that are not taught in schools:

- geography students do not and should not spend time learning an alternative view that the world is flat.

- medical students do not and should not spend time learning an alternative view that astrology can assist with cancer treatment.

Creationism is no more supported by

the evidence than the examples above and should not be taught as anything other than one religious viewpoint in a comparative religion class. Schools have a responsibility to allocate curriculum time to education that is useful for students, based on reason and evidence.

Schools should teach students to think for themselves as that is what will serve them best in their adult life. If students want to spend their time outside school learning about creationism, astrology or other faith/supernatural/unverifiable views about their world they are entitled to do so, but those beliefs do not have a place in the classroom beyond the comparative religion point I've noted.

Tanya Smith
Public Relations Team
Atheist Foundation of Australia

To whom it may concern;

I am writing in regard to the article you have on your website about Islam and women's rights.

I am an Australian woman convert to Islam and after reading your article had to write to you.

99.9% of the so called facts in your article are incorrect. You have no idea what you're talking about.

If the religion is so suppressive then why is it that 4 out of every 5 converts to Islam are women.

It is true that women and men are not equal... we were created different for a reason, can a man carry a baby for 9 months... no... can a woman do things that only men can do... no... so we are not equal but we have been created for different purposes. All just as important as the other.

Before you write things on your website you might want to get your facts straight first.

May Allah have mercy on you all.

Bye
Renee

Dear Renee,

Thank you for your email.

This is exactly the point I am trying to make. In Islam and most other religions women are *not* equal to men.

The facts are these:

The Qur'an and Hadith assign women an inferior role.

(www.atheistfoundation.org.au/articles/islam-scraping-whitewash)

In countries where Sharia law is applied, women are targeted with brutality.

(www.rawa.org/index.php)

If you truly believe that women are inferior to males and are only for producing babies, your self esteem must be non-existent. I recommend therapy.

Alternatively, you could move to Afghanistan, Pakistan or Somalia where you will be perfectly happy!

Voula Papas
Public Relations Team
Atheist Foundation of Australia

You've misunderstood, how can we be equal when we were created for different things. Men can't do things women can do just as women can't do things men can do.

You put words into my mouth by saying that women are just here to make babies. I was just pointing out that that is a beautiful thing that has been granted to women that men can't do, how does that make *man* equal to us? Isn't it a better thing, how amazing the experience is, men don't get to experience that.

Secondly, if you want to think these links are facts, that's fine. Just don't forget that culture plays a big part in the misconception of Islam. If the religion is followed correctly, without cultural influence, there wouldn't be

these issues.

Anyway, I just wanted to voice my opinion, as a independent Islamic woman, who *chooses* to be a Muslim, wear hijab and do other things. I'm a fully educated woman working in the legal industry, paying my own bills and running my own life ... Is that suppression?

Lastly... Maybe you should get therapy.

Have a good day.

Renee

Hello again Renee,

The Qur'an and Hadith disagree with you:

"Men have authority over women because God has made the one superior to the other, and because they spend their wealth to maintain them. Good women are obedient. They guard their unseen parts because God has guarded them. As for those from whom you fear disobedience, admonish them and send them to beds apart and beat them." Qur'an 4:34

"Your women are a tilth for you (to cultivate) so go to your tilth as ye will..." Qur'an 2:223

"Men have a degree above women..." Qur'an 2:228

Religious women protest against the *ban* on child marriage – after all, didn't Mohammad marry Aisha when she was seven?

If you were living in Afghanistan you would not be able to work at all and in many other Muslim countries you would only be able to work with the permission of your *male* guardian – father, husband, brother, uncle etc.

Yes, culture is also to blame, but your insistence on keeping your head in the sand and ignoring the facts does not make them vanish.

Voula

Submission to the Consultation Process for the National School Chaplaincy Program

The Atheist Foundation of Australia (AFA) is pleased to have the opportunity to provide a written submission to the National School Chaplaincy Program discussion paper.

The AFA is the largest freethinking organisation in Australia, representing the desire of a significant proportion of the population that wants Australia to become a truly secular democracy in which laws are based solely on facts and evidence, and all citizens are free to hold whatever belief or unbelief they choose. If the chaplaincy program was properly understood, a majority of Australians would call for its cessation.

A. Support for Students with problems.

The AFA recognises the need for a national support system for students suffering social and mental problems, because failure to provide properly trained professional assistance can lead to academic and social failure; dangerous behaviours such as increased risk taking and alcohol and drug abuse; and, in some cases, homelessness, criminal behaviour, self-harm and suicide.

The AFA considers that only properly trained, supervised and accountable professionals should be entrusted with the delicate task of counselling children facing difficult personal or family issues.

On 27 July 2010, the Prime Minister committed a large sum of money to mental health and suicide prevention programmes. It is widely accepted that many adult mental problems leading to suicide originate in childhood. If children's problems were diagnosed and treated by properly trained and accountable professional school guidance counsellors, then it is reasonable to assume they would have far fewer problems as adults.

B. Chaplain Qualifications.

In the Department of Education's FAQ website response to the question, 'who can be a chaplain?' there is no mention of the special training needed to deal with the difficult mental and social problems afflicting school students. It merely states that the local school and parents should be satisfied that the applicant is suitable for the position, and he or she must be endorsed by a religious institution. The AFA considers that experts in the field of youth guidance and counselling should decide the competence of applicants. Endorsement of an applicant's faith by a religious institution has no bearing on their value as a counsellor.

C. The value of religious belief in a chaplain.

1. The requirement that schools explore every possible avenue to find a religious applicant, no matter how ill qualified, before it is permissible to appoint a secular chaplain, is reprehensible. There is neither logic nor sense in this because there is no evidence whatever to support the notion underpinning the chaplaincy program, that holding religious beliefs has a positive influence on moral character; morality is independent of religion and gods. Nor is there the slightest evidence that people with religious beliefs can better understand and counsel young people in distress than freethinkers. Indeed, the sorry record of child abuse in religious orphanages and schools suggests the opposite to be the case.

2. Perhaps the strongest argument against appointing religious chaplains instead of properly trained and accountable psychologists is the fact that organised religions are notorious for their lack of support for many Human Rights such as: equal rights for women, voluntary euthanasia, democracy within their organisations, pluralism, secularism, religious tolerance, free speech, and equality for same-sex-oriented people. Most are also opposed to family planning, pregnancy termination, and sex outside marriage. The list is extensive and distressing and the long-term effects on at-risk students if 'counselled' by people with such attitudes could be calamitous.

Can a student from a broken home receive objective support and advice from a person who believes divorce is wrong? Is it likely that a pregnant schoolgirl will approach a chaplain who condemns sex outside marriage and opposes abortion? Is an abused same-sex-oriented student going to confide in someone who believes homosexuality is the greatest evil facing humanity?

Adding fat to the fire, Education Department guidelines recommend that some schools might appoint an imam instead of a chaplain, despite the fact that there has been no public condemnation of Indonesian Koranic laws compelling women to wear a headscarf, and punishing adultery with 100 lashes or stoning to death. Nor of the torturing and beheading of gays in Uganda. What reception will a pregnant, gay or sexually abused student receive from an imam who does not even condemn the sickeningly severe punishment of rape victims in countries ruled by Islamic law?

3. The absurd assumption that people who subscribe to a religion are morally superior and better equipped to deal with students' personal problems than people of no religious faith, permeates the entire chaplaincy program and is a clear indication that chaplaincy is primarily about reinforcing religious belief.

Schools should be providing properly qualified psychologists who, because of their training, constant upgrading of skills and accountability to their professional organisation, would provide the best possible counselling and support for all students, regardless of race, gender or religious affiliation.

4. The Education Department's Guidelines for chaplains states, among other things; It is not the purpose of chaplaincy services to bring about or encourage commitment to any set of beliefs.

And yet, in the words of Scripture Union Australia (SUA) a major provider of chaplains in schools:
"SUA is part of a global movement that has been working for the cause of the Christ since 1867 and is currently in over 130 countries.

Working with the churches, Scripture Union aims:

- a. to make God's Good News known to children, young people and families and*
- b. to encourage people of all ages to meet God daily through the Bible and prayer so that they may come to personal faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, grow in Christian maturity and become both committed church members and servants of a world in need.*

Scripture Union pursues these aims through a variety of specialist ministries around the world in obedience to our Lord Jesus Christ and in reliance on the Holy Spirit. In Australia, SU operates in every state and territory and mobilises thousands of volunteers each year to engage young people and families in holiday programs at beaches and in urban or rural townships, camps, secondary and primary schools, through sports, recreation, outdoor education and school chaplaincy" (2010).

5. The Education Department's guidelines also state that school chaplains may not provide services for which they are not qualified, for example, counselling services or psychological assessment, or medical assessment. Why, then, are these qualifications not part of the requirements for the position of chaplain? Who is to pay for suitably qualified people to perform these services? Why, knowing the many dire problems facing school counsellors, is adherence to a religion virtually the sole requirement for applicants to chaplaincy positions? According to the Australian Psychologists Society Ltd. chaplains are ignoring the guidelines and taking on responsibilities for which they are not qualified! Alarm bells should be ringing.

6. The requirement that chaplains assist students to 'explore their spirituality and provide guidance on religious, values and ethical matters,' is in direct opposition to the requirement that chaplains not encourage any set of beliefs.

While it is not compulsory for students to use the chaplain, they have no alternative if there is no secular, properly qualified professional for them to consult.

7. The guidelines state that chaplains must respect the religions and faiths of students, but nowhere does it state that they must accept lack of faith or religion. The entire program is based on an arrogant assumption that everyone has religious beliefs, that these are essential to well-being, and a religious person is more likely to provide helpful advice and support than a properly trained, accountable secular guidance counsellor. This baseless notion fails to consider the complicated nature of mental illnesses that require the services of properly trained professional psychologists, not a well-meaning amateur who believes Jesus is the solution to all problems.

Conclusion:

The chaplaincy programme appears to be a cynical exercise in cost cutting. Instead of providing the professional support for troubled students desperately needed in schools, the government has decided that poorly trained religious amateurs are a valid [and much cheaper] alternative.

Inadequately skilled chaplains may be able to deal with minor problems, as long as they don't proselytise, but they have

no business dealing with students' serious personal difficulties. Belief in an invisible superman in the sky is not a substitute for professional training and accountability.

If the government genuinely desires the best possible guidance for students, then the current potentially dangerous chaplaincy program must be stopped, and adequate funding provided to all state schools to employ properly trained, accountable secular counsellors whose aim is the well-being of the students with no underlying agenda of religious persuasion.

Related issues:

It is not clear whether the writers of our Constitution wanted Australia to be a secular nation. Section 116 of the Constitution states: The Commonwealth shall not make any law for establishing any religion, or for imposing any religious observance, or for prohibiting the free exercise of any religion, and no religious test shall be required as a qualification for any office or public trust under the Commonwealth.

Organised religions have exploited this ambiguity to argue successfully for State support of their schools, hospitals and 'charitable' services, as well as to cement their tax-free status, regardless of the magnitude of their commercial profits. Clever politicking has given them clout in marginal electorates and more influence in government than the numbers of their active members warrant.

Not content with their right to educate their own in sectarian schools, religions also demand the right to evangelize in state schools through Religious "Education", where the few students who dare to opt out are usually dumped in classrooms with nothing to do.

The imposition of chaplains on state schools is another nail in the coffin of secular government in Australia. If children are subjected to religious instruction in class, and then counselled by religious counsellors, what hope have they of deciding for themselves what to believe, or understanding the frightening consequences of religious influences on politics and law making?

Only a truly secular government can guarantee the right of all religions to flourish. The proliferation of religious schools and subtle indoctrination of state school students through the chaplain program is dangerous. Historically, religions have always been part of humanity's problems, not part of the solution. If we don't want to return to theocratic rule, then it is time to curb the influence of organised religions. No theocracy ever embraces principles such as those enshrined in the UN Declaration of Human Rights. All have been, and are, tyrannical, cruel dictatorships.

Statement from the Australian Education Union

School Chaplaincy Program

The Australian Education Union has described as misguided and wrong the decision by Labor to extend the school chaplaincy program.

AEU Federal President Angelo Gavrielatos said the program did not address the real needs of students.

"Apart from undermining the secular traditions of public schools, this announcement fails to acknowledge what our students really need — qualified school counsellors, psychologists and welfare workers who can meet their complex needs," he said.

"The Labor Party extended this misguided policy without even waiting for the outcome of a review of the chaplaincy program that it established.

"Once again the Labor Party has followed the Coalition in education rather than addressing the real needs of students.

"Urgent resources are needed to achieve more manageable caseloads for staff in schools dealing with welfare issues.

"In NSW, for example, the school counsellor to student ratio stands at about 1 to 1000."

A Place for Delusion

By Stafford Ray

Religions' performing
Artistes,
Are useful at weddings
and feasts.
But our public schools,
Should not become tools
Of Reverends, Imams
and Priests!

“God’s Good News is Bad News for Students”

Atheist Foundation of Australia president David Nicholls today expressed deep concern over Prime Minister Gillard’s announcement over the weekend to increase funding to school chaplains by \$222 million.

In a submission to the public consultation process about the National School Chaplaincy Program, the Australian Psychological Society (APS) raised concerns about the credentials of many chaplains providing counselling services as part of the chaplaincy program in Australian schools.

In their submission they state that the “government is supporting a scheme which allows unregistered and unqualified school chaplains to work outside their boundaries as spiritual and religious personnel”^[1] and point out that there is clear evidence that school chaplains are engaging in duties for which they are not qualified.

Although the government guidelines state that “school chaplains cannot provide services for which they are not qualified, for example counselling services or psychological assessment”^[2] it also states that school chaplains are employed to support students for issues such as “grief, family breakdown and other crisis situations”^[3]

“Evidence shows that chaplains with as little as 36 hours training^[4] are counselling students and providing funding to support these chaplains is irresponsible and dangerous,” said David Nicholls.

“There is a reason that Psychologists have a minimum of 6 years training before being able to provide psychological support services and to think that a two day course and belief in an imaginary being will help these children is ridiculous,” he said.

One of the major providers of school chaplains, the Scripture Union of Australia, has as one of its aims to “make God’s Good News known to children, young people and families.”^[5]

“Providing funding to a scheme that supports this religious indoctrination in schools is a clear breach of the separation of church and state, and atheists, freethinkers and secularists across Australia will be extremely disappointed in Prime Minister Gillard’s conservative and risky stance,” said David Nicholls.

[1] Australian Psychological Society’s “Submission to the Consultation Process for the National School Chaplaincy Program” July 2010.

[2] Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations NSCP “FAQ” page outlining the school chaplain’s roles.

[3] Ibid page 2.

[4] ACCESS Ministry course brochure 2010.

[5] SUA website

Email

9 August 2010

The Media Release upset some people and one in particular wrote to the AFA informing us where we were wrong. Peter Taylor from Public Relations was assigned the task of replying. All emails sent by our PR Team representatives are signed with only first names.

Editor.

It is an observable fact that chaplaincy in schools is growing and that it is the schools that want more chaplains. But one of the main reasons for this has nothing much to do with religious education. Teachers, parents and others in schools are finding that chaplains are often the only people in schools who are trained, ready and able to handle the personal problems of teenagers.

I am talking about depression, bullying, lack of meaning, and youth suicide.

The level of youth suicide due to the challenges of sexual identity, for example, is being reduced by the unseen and often unacknowledged work of chaplains who are the only ones, sometimes in quite hostile environments, who will care and counsel these children. This is

knowledge that should be more widely known, but meanwhile we have atheists with all the self-righteousness of pharisees who think it's all about "indoctrination". Fortunately, the Prime Minister and her Government are better informed about this reality than members of your Foundation. Unlike the Foundation, in its blind accusations of "conservative and risky stances", Julia Gillard is connected to the reality of Australian life and the realpolitik of the school as it often exists in 2010.

What I am telling you is not a big secret.
Philip

Hello Philip.

Thanks for your email. This is a most important issue, and deserves a serious response.

We agree on the basic point of your communication, that there is a desperate need for properly-trained counsellors to handle the personal problems of teenagers, such as depression, bullying, lack of meaning, and youth suicide, because failure to provide properly-trained professional assistance can lead to academic and social failure; dangerous behaviour such as increased risk taking and alcohol and drug abuse; and, in some cases, homelessness, criminal behaviour, self-harm and suicide.

But for the rest, we disagree. You think a few hours of training and religious faith are sufficient to make a person an adequate counsellor. We do not!

The Atheist Foundation of Australia is so concerned about the problem that it urges the government to take adolescent problems seriously and provide adequate funds to appoint *properly trained and accountable psychologists to every school*.

Perhaps you are a chaplain? You appear satisfied with the work done by every chaplain. There is no dispute about the value for any distressed person of having a shoulder to lean on and a receptive ear when in trouble. However, the scary part is the sort of advice and counselling that ensues.

Anyone who is endorsed by any religious institution can be a chaplain. There's no requirement for the long and special training essential to deal with the difficult mental and social problems afflicting some school students, yet there is evidence that not only do most chaplains have no adequate qualifications, but they are trying to deal with problems for which they have

no training whatever!

There is neither logic nor sense in assuming religious belief has a positive influence on moral character. Morality is independent of religion and gods. Nor is there the slightest evidence that people with religious beliefs can better understand and counsel young people in distress than freethinkers. Indeed, the sorry record of child abuse in religious orphanages and schools up to the present day suggests the opposite to be the case.

Furthermore, all organised religions are notorious for their lack of support for many Human Rights, such as; equal rights for women, voluntary euthanasia, democracy within their organisations, pluralism, secularism, religious tolerance, free speech, and equality for same-sex-oriented people. Most are also opposed to family planning, pregnancy termination, and sex outside marriage. The list is extensive and distressing and the long-term effects on at-risk students if "counselled" by people with such attitudes are often calamitous.

This brings me to your words: "*the challenges of sexual identity*". What do you mean by this? Left to themselves, no one finds their sexual identity to be a challenge. Everyone accepts their desires and behaviour to be "normal" – which, for the most part, they are! The problem only arises when they are told that what they "are" is wrong. I have had direct and indirect contact with many hundreds of same-sex-oriented adolescents in my life, and in every case their sexual identity problems derive from religious intolerance and religion's refusal to accept the fact that sexual orientation is a natural variation of human sexuality.

Always gay students with problems have been told they are sinful, that god will hate them, that if they persist in their "affliction" they will be unhappy and miserable and go to hell. "Tolerant" religions may say it is OK to be gay as long as they don't do anything about it. This is mental cruelty! It is widely accepted by those who have properly studied human behaviour that sexual orientation is determined in the womb and is as fixed as eye colour. Thus it is as sensible to tell grey-eyed people never to open their eyes as to tell same-sex-oriented kids they must never fulfil the most basic instincts of all animals – enjoy sexual activity.

Yes, I know that loads of people who are not overtly religious are also homophobic, but the ultimate source of their prejudice is religion. Despite this, you are suggesting that a religious person who believes in an invisible superman in

the sky and the hatred of Leviticus is a suitable person to counsel young people already traumatised by fear because they've been told they're bad because of the way they were born. It isn't for nothing that although fewer than one in ten kids are gay, gay suicides make up half of our obscene total, and that thousands of gays in Australia are bashed and too many murdered in gay hate crimes by people indoctrinated with the religious notion that gay is bad.

It is naïve in the extreme for you to suggest that a chaplain who is endorsed by a religious organisation will ignore the basic dogmas of that religion. What advice is a pregnant 15-year-old going to get from a Catholic or Seventh Day Adventist or Jehovah's Witness chaplain? Is an abused same-sex-oriented student expelled from his family and forced to live on the street going to confide in someone who believes, as the Pope does, that homosexuality is the greatest evil facing humanity?

I'm considered reasonably intelligent, yet I'm completely unable to make sense of the advice given to so many young people when faced with dire problems: "Accept Jesus into your heart." Seriously, what on Earth does that mean? I've tried to get my mind around that sort of statement and it sends me bonkers. It has the same effect on children. They want to know what to do in the real world to solve their problem. They want to be told they are OK, that they are not bad, stupid, wrong. They want to know that love is better than Leviticus, that there are others like them in the world – they don't need to be faced with the incomprehensible demand that they "let god/Jesus 'in' and pray for guidance".

What do you reckon is going to be the result of appointing an imam to the role of cheap counsellor as the government is proposing? There's been no public condemnation of Indonesian Koranic laws compelling women to wear a headscarf and punishing adultery with 100 lashes or stoning to death. Nor of the

torturing and beheading of gays in Uganda. What reception will a pregnant, gay or sexually abused student receive from an imam who does not even condemn the sickeningly severe punishment of rape victims in countries ruled by Islamic law, or the recent slicing off of the nose of a young girl who didn't want to get married?

Schools should not be giving tacit support to such religious notions by providing religious "advisors". They should be providing properly qualified psychologists who, because of their six years training, constant upgrading of skills and accountability to their professional organisation, would provide the best possible counselling and support for all students, regardless of race, gender or religious affiliation.

Chaplains are required to respect the religions and faiths of others, but *there's no requirement to respect a lack of faith*. Doesn't this worry you?

Schools are accepting chaplains because they are desperate for help with distressed students. They have no funds to provide properly-trained counsellors, so reluctantly accept chaplains. Given a real choice, I'm certain there would be no untrained religious chaplains in state schools.

You appear to believe that the Atheist Foundation of Australia is against religion. This is not the case. We are adamant that every adult has the right to choose for themselves what to believe or disbelieve, but we think it is better to wait until adulthood before telling children that some people believe there is an invisible, omnipotent, omniscient man somewhere who demands total obedience and constant worship and is prepared to punish those who have the wrong ideas or fail to worship him correctly.

What religious folk don't appear to (or don't want to) realise is that the basic doctrines of organised religions are not interested in individuals and their happiness and welfare, they care only about control and power. Religions started the first schools as a

way of creating a literate priestly caste to spread their influence. Religions offer charity as a way of gaining supporters and believers, but they have never been interested in attacking the sources of poverty and misery. Pakistan today is a classic case. After murdering and maiming and flogging and cutting off hands and raping and pillaging all who they decide their god dislikes, they are now offering more assistance to flood sufferers (regardless of their religion) than the government, because this is gaining them support for their campaign of terror, a campaign equal to the horrors of the thousand-year Papal dictatorship and the terrorist regimes of Calvin and Knox.

You will say that religions have changed, that most Christians are not like that. But most Christians living in Africa where torture and abuse of gays, women, other religions and atheists, are as violent as Muslims in Saudi Arabia. And the growing influence of Christian tele-evangelists in the U.S.A. who advocate Old Testament retribution for every infringement of their god's awful laws are a fact, not fiction.

I am sure that people who volunteer as chaplains are well-meaning folk who desire nothing more than the welfare and good of the children they try to assist. I don't for a minute doubt their good intentions. But the road to hell is paved with good intentions, and the misery inflicted by inappropriate advice dictated by religious convictions are a path to hell for many an unfortunate student.

Whether you like it or not, only a truly secular government can guarantee the right of all religions to flourish. The proliferation of religious schools and subtle indoctrination of state school students through RE and the chaplain program is a social time bomb. Historically, religions have always been part of humanity's problems, not part of the solution. If we don't want to return to theocratic medieval misery then it is time to curb the influence of organised religions.

No theocracy ever embraces principles such as those enshrined in the UN Declaration of Human Rights. All have been, and are, tyrannical, cruel dictatorships.

If you haven't already done so, I suggest you read the submissions to the Consultation Process for the National School Chaplaincy Program by the Australian Psychologist Association, here:
<http://www.psychology.org.au/Assets/Files/APS-Submission-School-Chaplains-July2010.pdf>

The Atheist Foundation of Australia has also written a submission but is not yet available for public viewing.

Best wishes,
Peter
Public Relations Team
Atheist Foundation of Australia

Dear Peter,

Thank you for your quite extensive and heartfelt reply to my email about school chaplains.

I think one of the main problems in this discussion is that we share a dislike, if not total antipathy, to fundamentalism. A vast majority of so-called religious people share this disapproval of fundamentalism with atheists. Much of what you are saying about religion is based on a very narrow definition of religion, but this definition is used as though it described all religions and religious behaviour. From a rational perspective, this is unacceptable. Many of the resulting assumptions that are made in your argument betray mistaken generalisations that can be disproven. Indeed, one of the real problems in atheist discourse today is a kind of fundamentalist gnosticism, every bit as dangerous to the health of society as the fundamentalism it is attacking. This reveals itself in an attitude of "we know best", "we know what's right and you don't", and "everything anyone else says about religion is rubbish". The central social problem in all of this is

a failure by atheists to engage in intelligent dialogue, free of prejudice.

I am not a school chaplain. Psychology should be a prerequisite in chaplaincy, I would have thought that was a given. I am no more certain that chaplains do a 100% great job than anyone else in the community, of course they don't. The ultimate source of homophobia is not religion, though certain kinds of religious people are anti-gay and this is a cause of scandal, if you ask me. Your bloody portrait of Christianity is selective and ignores more than it includes. But why should I spend time defending such a gigantic and mercurial reality as Christianity, any more than any other religion? One thing that always interests me about critics of Christians is that they seem unaware of the internal questioning of religion itself that goes on in the Gospels. Jesus spends enormous amounts of his time warning against hypocrisy and "religious" behaviour. It's part of the tradition. Indeed, much of the attack levelled at Christianity comes internally direct from this self-questioning written into the religion itself. It is amazingly well self-regulated. When atheists first started mocking Christianity in the 18th century it really was hilarious. But Voltaire and others were playing out precisely the example set by the original example of the religion itself.

I send you best wishes and good travels in your pursuit of the truth.

Sincerely,
Philip Harvey

Hello again Philip.

I asked you 12 questions, none of which you responded to.

If, as you aver, the vast majority of so-called religious people dislike fundamentalism, why is there no public denunciation of fundamentalism by the respective hierarchies?

Are you telling me that the Pope's

announcement that "the greatest threat facing humanity is homosexuality", is not a fundamentalist statement? Are you suggesting that his declaration that "the ordination of women is as great an evil – albeit of a different nature – as child sexual abuse", is not a fundamentalist stance? And do you really think these sorts of statements are ignored by the followers of that religion – especially those entrusted with the teaching of young people? The same questions apply to all the other sects clamouring for the right to groom children with religious beliefs.

You agree that psychology should be a prerequisite for chaplains, but despite the fact that it isn't, you still support the program!

You say my response is based on a very narrow definition of religion, and that I make generalisations based on this. However, I was careful not to define religion, commenting only on what I see and hear – the reality. At least give examples of my failures and mistaken generalisations – how else will I learn?

Fundamentalist Gnosticism? Goodness, you do draw a long bow in defence of the indefensible. Gnosticism was a nebulous and diffuse cult whose adherents believed they enjoyed a special revelation of Christian knowledge that was only available to the elite few. Your ignorance of atheism does you little credit. No atheist relies on "revelation" for their opinions, they consider facts; real life experiences in the natural world we inhabit. How you can construe this to be dangerous is intriguing, but unsurprising I suppose.

They say attack is the best means of defence, and that may be true in warfare, but it is a sign of failure in intellectual debate. I point out the inadequacies of the chaplaincy system and the possible consequences; you respond by telling me I hold dangerous fundamentalist views and think "I know best". I shove your criticism back at you; your response "is an example of the central social problem in all of this is a failure by religious people to

engage in intelligent dialogue, free of prejudice". What, for example, is the source of homophobia in our society, if not religion?

I didn't give a bloody portrait of Christianity, I showed that today's Islamic excesses were not unusual in the history of theocracies. The only time organised religions do not act like cruel tyrants is when they are held in check by the laws of more or less secular governments. Disprove that if you can. (Note I am not referring to individuals, but the "Church"...the "organisation", the political business end of religion that sets the rules.)

The "gigantic and mercurial reality" that is Christianity is merely a symptom of internal conflicts that inevitably arise when the holy book offers readers any desired interpretation of what is good and bad. There are passages in the Bible that support every possible human activity from usury to asceticism, from slavery to fair trading, even genocide. For every quote about peace and kindness there are as many in favour of war and retribution.

Finally, your assertion that there is a tradition of internal questioning of religion that results in Christianity

being amazingly well self-regulated is arrant nonsense. It is the abysmal and total lack of any meaningful self-criticism that has resulted in the plethora of sects spawned by the original Roman Catholic Church, sects that have caused far more misery and pain than happiness and love.

Your response has, unfortunately, confirmed my fears about religious involvement in human affairs; nonetheless, I wish you luck in your pursuit of a good life.

Peter

Dear Peter,

A circular and abusive discussion going nowhere on email is not a useful way to spend my work hours. I have lodged my complaint with the Foundation about what I see as an inappropriate public criticism of the Prime Minister. It would seem that the Atheist Foundation is just as interested in politics and using its leverage as everyone else, thus making a mockery of its appeal to the division of church and state when it comes to public debate. Atheists can have political opinions, but non-atheists

cannot apparently – now there's democracy at work! A good place to start learning about the history of Christianity is in Diarmuid MacCulloch's most recent book. It's a big book, but every page has something original to say. I recommend it to your reading.

One of the curious things about this correspondence is that I don't even know your second name.

Sincerely,
Philip Harvey

Hi again Philip.

I thought this cartoon might amuse you.

Cheers,
Peter

Subject Line:
As the Italians say: Basta!

Dear Peter,

You are writing to someone, but it isn't me. You need to think about who you are writing to.

ATHEIST EVE

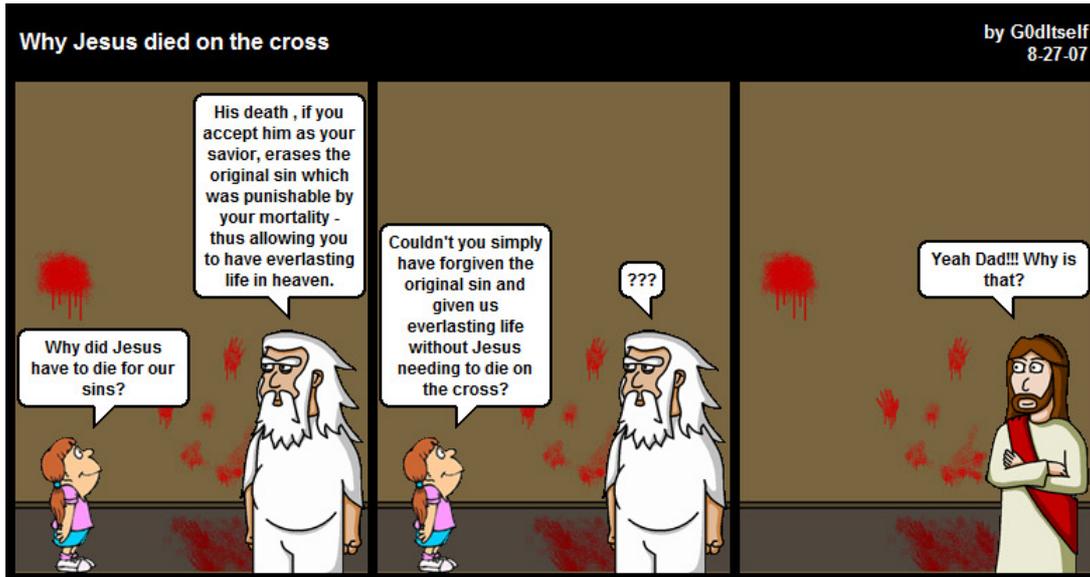


This is the last email I will send. If you persist in sending emails I will write an official complaint about your behaviour to the Atheist Foundation.

Your behaviour is not appropriate for the public relations of a reputable professional organisation.

Yours faithfully,
Philip Harvey

Humour



Religious Cartoons. (c) 2007 Godtself, All rights reserved. <http://www.religiouscartoons.net>

Three prospective churchgoers attend a meeting with the clergy of a local church and ask to become members. The three, an older couple, a middle age couple and a young newlywed couple, are told that to become members it is required that they abstain from sex for two full weeks and then return.

Two weeks pass and all three return and the clergyman asks each couple if they have fulfilled the requirement laid out at the first meeting.

The elderly gentleman says that they have and are ready to join the church.

The middle age couple advise that the first week was okay but during the second week the husband had to sleep on the couch. Nonetheless, they made it and are ready to join the church.

The newlyweds hang their heads and the husband says, "Well, father, my wife was bending over taking something from the freezer the day after our meeting and I couldn't stop myself. I took her right on the spot."

"I'm sorry," says the clergyman to the young couple, "but you are forbidden from coming back to this church."

"I figured that," says the husband, "'cause we can't go back to the grocery store either."

B.Z. Toons by Brian Zaikowski
www.bztoons.com



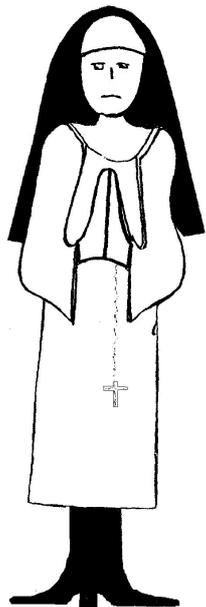
Allah. We don't seem to have enough virgins to go around for all the suicide bombers. What if we gave out these instead?

B.Z. Toons by Brian Zaikowski
www.bztoons.com



The Fear of God.

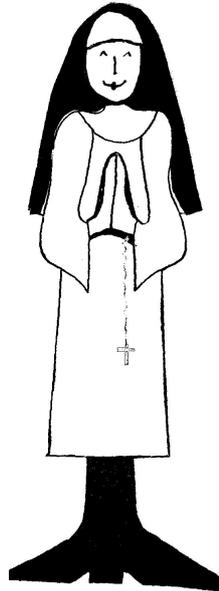
Humour



The head nun of the convent called all one hundred nuns into the foyer for an emergency meeting.

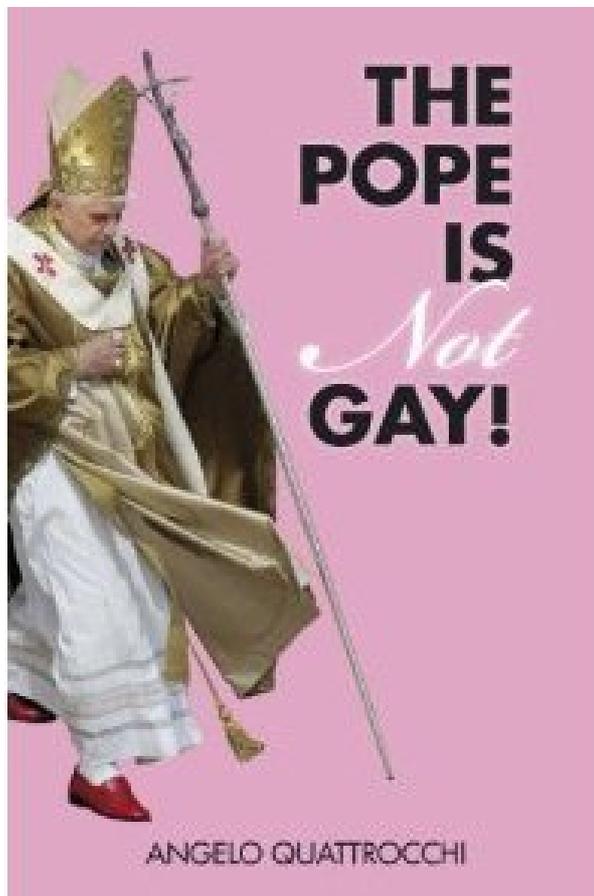
“Last night,” she started
“I found something terrible
in one of the sister’s rooms.”
Ninety-nine nuns “Oh no”
One nun “Hee, hee”

“A condom!” said the head nun.
Ninety-nine nuns “Oh no”
One nun “Hee, hee”



Head nun “And it was used!”
Ninety-nine nuns “Oh no”
One nun “Hee, hee”

Head nun
“And it had a hole in it!”
One nun “Oh no”
Ninety-nine nuns “Hee, hee”



The Pope is Not Gay!

By Angelo Quattrocchi

Reviewed by Michael K. Harvey
at Amazon.com

I saw an ad for this hilarious book in Private Eye. I instantly put in an order, as the Catholic Church is constantly in the news for inappropriate husbandry of the flock I couldn't resist the title's promise.

The book, though small, does not disappoint. The anger of the author is sublimated to pointing out the absurd medieval stances of the church on issues of homosexuality, with a very strong dash of irony: as someone so obsessed with his personal appearance, material comfort and hilarious platonic lover, Ratzinger looks a hypocritical fool, especially when pontificating on tolerance, poverty, compassion, homosexuality, contraception and other mainstays of this most conservative and damaging religious leader of recent times.

There are oodles of examples, careful observations and appendices to support the undercurrent suggestion: “takes one to know one”.

Heretical Happenings -

Keeping you in the know.

Greetings,

The next Australian Census is planned for 9 August 2011. There is no reason to think that the nonreligious portion of society will not numerically increase, continuing the steep upward trend of the last decade or so. It may even be the largest swelling of godless numbers ever. But it will not surpass the New Zealand census this year, which is expected to reach or pass fifty percent of the population in this regard. That will be a first for any Western-style democracy on the planet. Good on them, but it should be us. Australia is lagging somewhat behind on paper, although the Census question itself does create a situation where answers may not reflect a present stance.



“What is the person’s religion?” is a leading question as it assumes the “person” has a religion. Many will tick their religion of baptism even though dutifully attending faith-oriented weddings and funerals may be the only form of forced piety expressed in their lives. A religious person filling out the form would hardly state that her or his partner or an adolescent offspring was nonreligious or, heaven forbid, an Atheist. What if God spotted that indelible mark and placed it on their record. No, no, no folks, that would never do, there are immortal souls at stake here. An interesting fact is that the highest numbers of non-religious people are in the demographic from adolescence to middle age.

Twenty percent of the population are children under the age of fourteen years. Surprisingly, but only to those wishing to boost the faith statistic, these children follow the religion of their parents. Either the clerics who dismiss this are totally deluded, not recognising how geographic location determines one’s religion or they don’t mind lying for their god. As Richard Dawkins has rightly pointed out, children are not little Buddhists, Muslims or Christians; it is more to the point that they are little robots with their minds moulded by parents, peers and culture. A child cannot know to what it may be agreeing to in regards to religion. Even mature adults suffer confusion about matters of faith.

Given all of this, the nonreligious portion of the Australian population may well be fifty percent or higher. This is a message that needs widely broadcasting. The privileges, perks, grants and tax relief afforded religions depend to a large degree on the false picture painted by the Census figures.

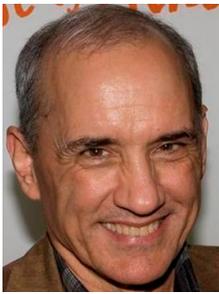
Even though the “official” nonreligious quotient is substantial, it does not reflect the truth. How do we change this to demonstrate better that godlessness is more prevalent than recorded? There are many ways available and now is the time to start implementing them.

Letters to editors of newspapers and talk-back radio are excellent consciousness-raising avenues. Politely broaching the subject with family, relations, friends, workmates and acquaintances where possible is another. If you are looking for a lively discussion topic for a special dinner, then maybe this could be it.

I cannot express the magnitude of changing the culture of governments accepting false Census figures on religion and using them to make bad decisions for all of us. Lives are being adversely affected and thirty billion dollars annually of untaxed and unaccounted-for money are direct results. The next Census is nearly one year away, giving us all plenty of time to affect change in public attitude on how that very important question on religion in the Australian Census is answered.

Until we meet again,

David



Freedom From Religion Foundation Asks Televangelist Pat Robertson For An Apology

24 August 2010

The U.S.A. Freedom From Religion Foundation has sent a letter to televangelist Marion "Pat" Robertson asking for a public retraction and apology for his prejudicial remarks broadcast on his national television program, specifically his advice that no Christian should ever marry an atheist. You can view the broadcast at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Zv9AgwKAE0>

Dear Rev. Robertson,

On behalf of our organization's more than 16,000 members nationwide, and representing millions of atheists and agnostics, I am writing to protest your inflammatory and slanderous hate speech against nonbelievers, specifically your advice that no Christian should marry an atheist. During a program aired last year on the Christian Broadcast Network that has been recently rebroadcast, a woman with an atheist fiancé asked, "How do you think we can interact with each other peacefully when it comes to spiritual matters?" You responded unpeaceably:

I'm sure this is a nice guy, and you like him a lot, but the Bible says, "What fellowship hath Christ with Belial?" There is no fellowship between an atheist and somebody who is a believer in God ... I hate to tell you, you've got to go find somebody else ... I mean, he's gonna be serving the Devil and you're gonna be serving God. It's just that simple.

That remark is a blanket prejudicial smear against the character of all nonbelievers. If you had said the same thing about other minority groups – such as the recent controversy caused by Laura Schlessinger's thoughtless use of the N-word on her show, suggesting to a caller that she should not have married "outside your race" – the country would be demanding your resignation, asking affiliates to cancel your show and calling on viewers to boycott your extremist, intolerant program. If you had told the woman to break up with a Jewish fiancé because Jews are "reprobate, dissolute and uncouth" (which is what "Belial" means), you would be properly branded an anti-Semite. If you had told her to dump her African-American fiancé because blacks are "worthless and useless" (which is also what "Belial" means), you would be quickly exposed as a racist. Likewise, labeling the entire class of nonbelievers as "demonic and evil," and as the Devil itself (the meaning of "Belial" in the verse you misquoted), is equally abhorrent.

Discrimination is no longer socially acceptable. If it is shameful to be racist, sexist, anti-Semitic, anti-Catholic or homophobic, why is it laudable to be "atheophobic"? What gives you the freedom to engage in the irrational, fearful hate-mongering against secular people?

Atheists and agnostics are good people, at least as good as Christians, and in many ways better. It is a fact that we atheists have a lower divorce rate than born-again Christians. Atheists commit fewer crimes. We contribute

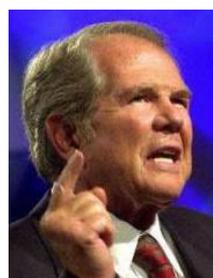
as much, if not more, to charity, and work to solve social problems. We serve in the military and sit on juries. We are members of the police force that protect your life and property. We vote in elections and serve in government. We write many of the songs you love to sing and the lullabies that soothe your children to sleep. We teach your children and grandchildren, minister to your medical needs, investigate the science and forge the technology that makes our world a better place to live. Is it moral to shun thoughtful, productive citizens merely because they reject your dogma?

You said you were sure the fiancé was "a nice guy", but with no further evidence of his character you pronounce that he is "serving the Devil". Atheists are not superstitious and reject the primitive notion of a "Devil", so your prejudice is doubly defamatory. Your callous anti-family advice may have broken up a good marriage, a union between two people who obviously love each other and are searching for a peaceful way to live in tolerance. Instead of harmony, you preach exclusivity, Christian superiority and cultish segregationism. You said there is "no peace in that situation" where believers are yoked unequally with nonbelievers. But I know of many "mixed marriages" where the couples choose to embrace each other in spite of their differences, respecting their partner's freedom of thought. Instead of hatred, you should have advised love.

On behalf our members nationwide, I ask you to retract your bigoted statement and make a public apology for your callous religious denunciation of an entire group of people. It is no longer morally permissible to vilify nonbelievers.

**Dan Barker
for the Freedom From Religion Foundation**

Note: Definition of "Belial" from The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible (Abington Press, 1986) p. 377



Reply from Pat Robertson 2 September 2010

Dear Mr Barker,

Thank you for your letter.

If you don't agree with the Bible, I suggest you contact the author and see if He won't change His mind.

Sincerely
Pat Robertson

Religion, Atheism and Morality

By Charles Cornwall

My life of 74 years can be divided roughly into halves. For the first half I was a Christian, culminating in graduation from theological college, ordination to the Christian ministry and several years as a practicing minister of the Baptist Church. The second half ranged through agnosticism to rejection of my former faith-held beliefs to atheism, culminating in membership of the committee of the Atheist Foundation of Australia. I believe, therefore, that I can speak with some authority from both sides of the divide on the matter of religious and nonreligious attitudes to the subject of morality.

On this subject, it is the Church that takes the high moral ground, claiming that the Christian religion is the source of all true morality and that any moral behaviour exhibited by non-believers is as a result of the influence of Christianity. Some Christians go even further and claim that nonbelievers – atheists, rationalists, humanists, freethinkers, call them what you will – have a licence to live immoral lives and often do so. Some of these latter people like to support their view by reference to notable atheists who were responsible for terrible deeds (they often don't get this right – e.g., Hitler was raised a Catholic and there is no evidence that he ever became an atheist). This attitude that true morality resides within the Christian framework requires serious examination.

First of all, to claim that true morality resides within the Christian teaching is to ignore the fact that the



Christian source book – the Bible – is full of the most dreadful immorality. A cruel, vengeful, jealous God who plays favourites is to be found there. God-directed and at times God-assisted genocide, pillage, bigamy and rape are contained within its pages. The subjugation of women, the condoning of slavery and the “sinfulness” of homosexuality are there, too.

Christianity having a mortgage on morality also overlooks the facts of history. The Crusades, the Inquisition, the burning of “witches” at the stake were all carried out at the direction of the Church. Of course, other religions that claim to be the true repositories of morality have made similar contributions to the suffering of humanity – Islam and Judaism being outstanding examples. Countless wars have been, and still are, fought in the name of religion – with opposing sides believing they have God, Yahweh or Allah on their side. In blinding contrast, organised atheism (there is really no such thing) has never waged war in the name of atheism or sought to impose by force its views on others. The only war waged by atheists is a war of words and this is not directed at religion per se or in an attempt to coerce people into acceptance of our rejection of the notion of a god. Our war of words is only waged against

the evils perpetrated in the name of religion such as its opposition to humanising practices (e.g., birth control, voluntary euthanasia, stem cell research, etc.) and its attempts to impose its beliefs on others.

The Christian church's claim to the high moral ground is still proclaimed today in our own land of Australia. However, the Church – very conveniently – overlooks a number of glaring inconsistencies in its application of corporate morality. “Thou shalt not steal” proclaims the Church and then hypocritically accepts government hand-outs, tax exemption for its lucrative commercial enterprises and non-accountability for the profits there from. This stealing (what else can it be called?) is at the expense of honest taxpaying individuals and businesses. Another instance of the Church's overlooking of its corporate immorality is evidenced by the sad litany of sexual abuse cases of children under its care over many years. Only public pressure has brought this to light and forced an otherwise silent church into public acknowledgement.

The Church is still up to its immoral tricks in Australia as it brings its considerable lobbying influence to bear on the political scene. This is seen, for example, in its attempts to stymie humanising measures, such

as voluntary euthanasia, being brought into law. Immoral? Of course it is. Why? Because it believes it has the God-given right to impose its minority view onto the 80 percent majority of Australians who are in favour of legalisation. To use their considerable lobbying power, with its implied unwelcome consequences for political parties that don't fall into line, is both undemocratic and immoral, especially when their views are unrepresentative of the majority of Australians. The Church may well believe it is acting in accordance with the will of its God but they do well to remember that the majority of Australians care so little about the church's God that they rarely darken the doorstep of a church. Christians, of course, are entitled to their views and to express them loudly, but that is where it should end, leaving politicians and political parties, undaunted by the threat of adverse political consequences, to listen to the opinions of their constituents and vote accordingly. Sadly, thus far the Church has succeeded with its undemocratic behaviour due to the kowtowing of political parties frightened of offending the powerful lobbying force of Christendom.

That true morality begins with the Church is utterly false for yet another reason. To threaten with eternal damnation in the fires of Hell and hold out the promise of eternal bliss in Heaven in order to induce conformity to God's rules can by no means be called *true* morality. I support this contention with a simple illustration. Mr. X and Mr. Y are driving to work. Both are observing the speed limit. Both are stopping at Stop Signs, giving way at Give Way signs and using their indicators correctly. Neither of them is abusing other drivers or using their mobile phones while driving. In short, both are driving in a responsible – that is moral – manner. However, it is known by those who are acquainted with both men that Mr. X always drives in this fashion while Mr. Y only does so when he knows there are traffic police on patrol in the area along with speed detectors and

cameras at intersections. At other times he is known to flout the laws of the road without any compunction. Which of the two was acting in a truly moral way as they drove to work? The answer is obvious.

I hasten to point out that I am not saying all Christians act in a moral way because of the fear of Hell and hope of Heaven. That would be a monstrous thing to say and this is where I have the advantage of having been deeply involved in both the cause of the Church and, subsequently, the cause of atheism. From my time in the Church I can say unhesitatingly that many Christians known to me lived moral, good, unselfish, decent lives regardless of what they may have believed about Heaven and Hell. They did good simply because they were good. As the following lines exhort, doing good for goodness sake was all the motivation they needed.

*Do good, for good is good to do.
Spurn bribe of heaven
And threat of hell
In all the good you do.*

-Author unknown

The point I make, however, is that the Church as an entity, and its source book the Bible, do use the threat of Hell and promise of Heaven as inducements and thereby the Church has forfeited any claim to being the one true source of true morality.

Neither Christianity nor any other religion can justifiably claim to have a mortgage on morality. But where does atheism stand on this issue? First, as a matter of clarification, it should be pointed out that there is no such thing as an organised body or entity called Atheism in the sense that there is an entity called the Christian Church (albeit with many branches), another called Islam, and so on. All of these have their rabbis, imams, popes and pastors. They have their creeds and text books containing the minutiae of their doctrines. In contrast, while there are many individual atheists there is no corresponding atheist organisation that compares to these religious establishments. Some atheists do like

to gather together for mutual support and in the cause of combating the evil influences of religion (not religion per se or the right of people to embrace a religion – only those acts of religion that are detrimental to the well being of the community.) Apart from their common acceptance that there is no evidence for the existence of god, gods or the supernatural, atheists are not bound together by any over-arching organisation, creed or other commonality.

As I have already pointed out, atheists have never gone to war in the cause of atheism. This is a claim the neither Christianity nor Islam can make. On an individual level – and here I speak from personal experience – many atheists are people of high moral standing. I now know quite a large number of atheists, either personally or by repute, and not one of them could by any standard be classed as immoral. Indeed, those I know include people of great integrity, people who care about justice and the well being of their fellow humans and of our planet, people who live simply so that others may simply live, people I am proud and honoured to call my friends.

I know of no evidence that supports the view that religion makes people act better or that atheism makes people act worse. It is my lifetime observation from both sides of the fence that religious people are not more likely to behave more decently than nonreligious people. The simple fact is that in this world there are people who endeavour to live moral lives while others pay scant respect to conventional morality. Neither religion (of whatever brand) nor atheism can lay claim to having a mortgage on morality. There are good Christians and bad Christians. There are good Muslims and bad Muslims. There are good atheists and bad atheists. It has nothing to do with religion.

Charles Cornwall is on the AFA Committee and is a member of the Public Relations Team.

Critical Thinking Unveiled - a night with Ayaan Hirsi Ali

By Kim Trainor



High profile Islam critic Ayaan Hirsi Ali first came to my attention about two years ago when my partner showed me her book, the best selling autobiography *Infidel*. I tried to read this book, initially with little success, as at every turn I was confronted with accounts of cruelty and violence the likes of which I could never have imagined. The images of violence seemed to stop me mid-paragraph, unable to turn the page. It was only after attending her talk in Melbourne that I felt comfortable finishing *Infidel*; perhaps seeing Hirsi Ali on stage was confirmation of her survival. In effect I had skipped to the end of the book and reassured myself that this courageous woman had survived.

So on a brisk July Melbourne evening I joined a sell-out crowd to see Ayaan Hirsi Ali speak on a publicity tour for her new book, *Nomad*. I was there to see a survivor, a strong, passionate woman talk about matters of reason and religion. Her speaking engagements, while not rare in certain parts of the world, are always a concern for security, which is why I was surprised that there was not even a bag search before entering. Understandably her entrance was understated: only the arrival of some burly bodyguards a signal of her imminence.

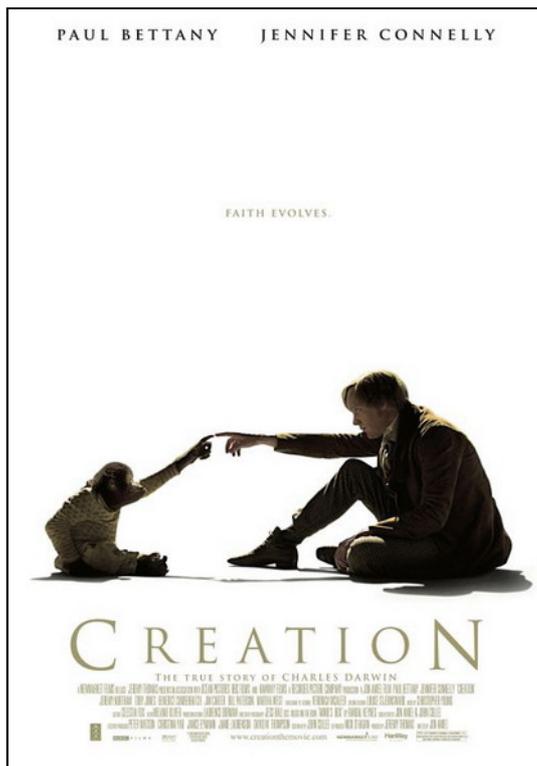
Hirsi Ali gracefully took her seat besides Jennifer Byrne, a seasoned interviewer and known feminist mouthpiece. There was some chance our brief time in Ayaan's presence would be engineered only towards this agenda, but happily Byrne navigated us through Ayaan's journey. At times it appeared more a rephrasing of her literary works rather than a probing interview, yet how could we blame Byrne? Ayaan's journey is well worth hearing in person and we imbibed without censure.

Ayaan is no stranger to controversy; the extraordinary and savage life she endured left her with no choice but to pursue the uncertainty of freedom over subservience. From abject beginnings in Somalia, where she suffered female circumcision (genital mutilation), she has negotiated through life in Ethiopia, Saudi Arabia and Kenya before she migrated to the Netherlands, where her strong sense of self and unwavering dedication saw her earn a master's degree in Political Science from the prestigious Leiden University. In only twelve years Ayaan had gone from a refugee to a citizen and MP in the Dutch parliament. Her voice was being heard on a level where perhaps change could happen. Unfortunately, personal change also accompanied her efforts for parliamentary change, and her unflinching attacks on Islam and the Koran caused her to be under siege and the subject of a fatwa.

Her writings suggest a woman who is perhaps better described as anti-religion or anti-fundamentalist religion rather than only anti-Muslim. No doubt she speaks predominately about the Islamic faith as the result of her childhood, but after reading her autobiography and hearing her talk I'm convinced she advocates a world free of all religion.

Byrne brought up the topic of immigration, a hot issue dividing the country in pre-election Australia. Hirsi Ali is of the view that fleeing a war-torn country must be coupled with a genuine attempt at assimilation, and in this regard Australia should learn from the mistakes of Europe where religious indulgence and magnanimity have created enclaves of Islamic political movement. Hirsi Ali suggests that when asylum seekers, refugees or immigrant seek entry into Australia they should also consent to abide by the Australian way of life and more particularly abide by Australian law and not Sharia law. To Hirsi Ali, Islam's refusal to engage in advancement and its profound sexism render it unable to allow immigrants to assimilate easily. Where an immigrant's tie to tribal and cultural norms led him or her to reject the Australian way of life, Hirsi Ali does not believe he or she will become successful citizens. UNHCR estimates there are over 40 million displaced people around the world today including refugees, the internally displaced, stateless people and asylum seekers. Of these approximately 70 percent are Muslim. Accordingly, as the Islamic faith appears to actively oppose progression, it is an issue that cannot be ignored.

Book and Film Review



Creation

By Jon Amiel

DVD release

November 2010

Annie's Box: Charles Darwin, His Daughter and Human Evolution

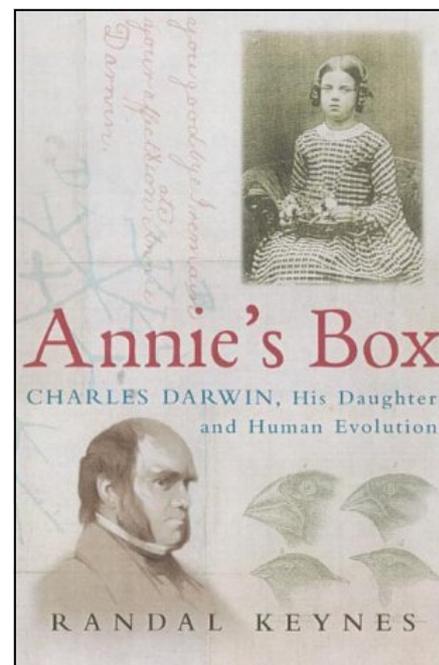
By Randal Keynes

ISBN: 9781841150604

Publication Date: 27/6/2001

Publisher: HarperCollins Publishers Limit

RRP: \$22.95



Reviewed by Terry Kelly

President

Victorian Skeptics

I was excited to be invited to a preview screening of the film *Creation* at the Nova Cinema (6 July). It was free for the privileged few who were offered the promotional tickets. As soon as I got out of the film, however, I immediately rushed into Borders and spent twice as much money as the ticket would have cost by buying a copy of the book on which the film is based. Apparently I picked up the last one in the store. It was money well spent.

The exquisitely written book is *Annie's Box Darwin, His Daughter and Human Evolution* by Randal Keynes, a great-great-grandson of Charles Darwin and a great nephew of John Maynard Keynes (the very influential economist) – what a pedigree.

Creation (the title is, I suspect, deliberately ironic) focuses on the human side of Darwin and the excruciating, agonising trauma of the death of his adored, and adoring, eldest daughter, Annie; his struggle with his friends and family in the church; and the obviously troubled, but ultimately deeply loving and respectful relationship with his very religious wife, Emma. In his introduction to the book Keynes says: “The book explores the interweavings around Annie and her memory” and “There is one idea at the heart of my account. Charles’s life and his science were all of a piece...” And in relation to Annie’s death: “He learnt from his feelings for her about the lasting strength of the affections, the paradox of pain, the value of memory and the limits of human understanding”.

The film is not science education. It’s an attempt at a moving drama. In an interview, the Director John Amiel (mostly

famous for directing the ground-breaking, weird and innovative musical TV series *The Singing Detective*) said something along the lines of what a boring, laborious, slog of a film it would have been if there were two hours of a bloke observing barnacles, which Darwin spent a considerable slice of his life doing. The book and the film suggest that Darwin learnt not only from his painstaking scientific research but from the depths of his emotional life. The unbearable, inexpressible grief of losing his daughter is central to the story. I'm reminded of Leonard Cohen: "...it's stronger than drink and deeper than sorrow, this darkness she's left in my heart." Darwin apparently suffered emotionally and physically for a long time and his reluctance to publish seems to have been affected by many influences, such as his paralysing grief, his slightly hesitant personality, an unwillingness to upset his wife, and his highly commendable scientific conscientiousness – he wanted to be sure he had his facts right. And his fear that society might disintegrate because, for all its shortcomings, he suspected that the church was what held society together.

There is some cultural and political perspective. It may be hard for us to appreciate the impact of the publishing of *On the Origin of Species* at the time. Darwin's friend, supporter and champion, T. H. Huxley, in exhorting him to get on with finishing the book and publishing quickly, tells him triumphantly "You've killed God!" Darwin's supporters wanted a secular world and reckoned his book would set things right. (I wonder what they would think about what's going on in America today. God seems to be a real "die hard" there and in Australia we still say prayers in Parliament).

Structurally the film gets a bit confusing and messy at times with some flash forwards and flash backs, and sometimes you're not sure if Darwin is talking to Annie in a real life memory or to an imaginary Annie after her death. But I did like the way the film mainly concentrates on a short, but significant, period of crisis in his life rather than doing a very broad, superficial sweep. I feel you get to know Darwin better this way. And *Creation* has a couple of the most powerful and touching scenes you'll ever see in a film. I won't spoil it for anyone who is likely to see the film (and I recommend you do) but let's just say this is a film about love and death.

The relationship with his wife is interesting and tense. She's burdened and horrified by the fear that his lack of religious belief might mean that they could have to spend the rest of eternity separated. But when it comes to the crunch he virtually forces her into making a decision (this may not have happened in real life and may have been a device concocted by the filmmakers) which means she is forced to make a choice more aligned to basic principles of human secular ethics rather than being guided solely by her religious beliefs. She does the fair and compassionate thing: the human thing, not the spiritual thing. There is tension aplenty in the relationship but they must both have been extraordinarily generous, empathic and loving people to have lived together for so long in relative harmony with such violently different views. Intriguingly, Paul Bettany (Darwin) and Jennifer Connelly (Emma) are a married couple in real life. Some real chemistry does develop on the screen.

What I seem to have taken from the film, and the book, is that Charles Darwin is a fascinating, complex, emotional, multi-dimensional, flawed, charismatic, troubled, anxious and, ultimately, inspiring character. Today we refer to "Darwin" but in the book Keynes calls him "Charles" and in the film his kids call him "Daddy". He was interested in a lot more than Science, which is possibly what helped him to be such a great scientist. He had perspective. He loved (passionately) his wife, fun, sex, music, poetry (he was friends with Wordsworth – that's in the book not the film), he valued friendships and he loved his travels and particularly, his kids (they enjoyed hearing his travel tales and about his scientific adventures much more than having silly old fairy tales read to them). Charles Darwin's sense of justice, his curiosity, his basic human decency and his yearning for truth ultimately meant that he could not abide religion.

Maybe the film tries too hard to tell the human story. The view has been expressed that Darwin is made to look a bit "crazy". It could be criticised for being melodramatic. The meticulous and pedantic might want to focus on the various historical inaccuracies. But seeing this film is a satisfying cinematic experience, for all its flaws. It's beautifully filmed and well acted, with a couple of genuine "scene stealers". Martha West as the enchanting, doomed and uplifting Annie is wonderful; and Jenny the orang-utan, in a heart-wrenching performance, is one of the most endearing non-humans ever to star in a film. I was reassured to learn later that her scenes were shot by a special crew on location in Thailand and the money raised by the orang-utans who appear in the film goes back into enrichment programmes for NHPs (Non Human Primates). "Charles" would be happy with this. According to Keynes, "When he saw cruelty (to animals) Charles could not restrain his anger".

Charles Darwin was also a sceptic, of course. Despite experimenting with a dodgy "water treatment" for his own illnesses, according to Keynes Charles wrote that homeopathy was "a subject which makes me more wrath, even than does clairvoyance: clairvoyance so transcends belief, that one's ordinary faculties are put out of question, but in homeopathy, common sense and common observation come into play, and both these must go to the dogs, if the infinitesimal doses have any effect whatever".

See the film *and* read the book.

Copenhagen Declaration on Religion in Public Life

We, at the World Atheist Conference: “Gods and Politics”, held in Copenhagen from 18 to 20 June 2010, hereby declare as follows:

We recognize the unlimited right to freedom of conscience, religion and belief^[1], and that freedom to practice one’s religion should be limited only by the need to respect the rights of others.

We submit that public policy should be informed by evidence and reason, not by dogma.^[2]

We assert the need for a society based on democracy, human rights and the rule of law.^[3]

History has shown that the most successful societies are the most secular.^[4]

We assert that the only equitable system of government in a democratic society is based on secularism: state neutrality in matters of religion or belief, favoring none and discriminating against none.^[4]

We assert that private conduct, which respects the rights of others should not be the subject of legal sanction or government concern.^[5]

We affirm the right of believers and non-believers alike to participate in public life and their right to equality of treatment in the democratic process.

We affirm the right to freedom of expression for all, subject to limitations only as prescribed in international law – laws which all governments should respect and enforce.^[6] We reject all blasphemy laws and restrictions on the right to criticize religion or nonreligious life stances.^[7]

We assert the principle of one law for all, with no special treatment for minority communities, and no jurisdiction for religious courts for the settlement of civil matters or family disputes.

We reject all discrimination in employment (other than for religious leaders) and the provision of social services on the grounds of race, religion or belief, gender, class, caste or sexual orientation.^[8]

We reject any special consideration for religion in politics and public life, and oppose charitable, tax-free status and state grants for the promotion of any religion as inimical to the interests of non-believers and those of other faiths. We oppose state funding for faith schools.

We support the right to secular education, and assert the need for education in critical thinking and the distinction between faith and reason as a guide to knowledge, and in the diversity of religious beliefs.^[9] We support the spirit of free inquiry and the teaching of science free from religious interference, and are opposed to indoctrination, religious or otherwise.

**Adopted by the conference
Copenhagen, 20 June 2010.**

[1] Article 18 of the Universal declaration of Human Rights and Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

[2] Societies in the 21st century must be built on a culture of objective knowledge and rational thinking based on evidence provided by the sciences within the legal framework of international human rights. Religions are inherently based on faith and guided by myths and hearsay interpreted by a self-established clergy. Religions should therefore be relegated to the private sphere and have no role in public affairs.

[3] The Brussels Declaration 2007.

[4] Research in social science show that strongly religious modern nations have been unsuccessful in terms of basic social and economic indicators such as levels of crime and incarceration, life expectancy, the adverse consequences of sexuality and in securing prosperity. The most secular advanced democracies are consistently the most successful.

[5] The State should neither punish nor favor any group for any reason.

[6] Articles 19 and 20 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

[7] Recommendation 1805 (2007) of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

[8] Article 14 of the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms.

[9] Article 14 of Recommendation 1720 (2005) of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

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**Secular
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The Potential Wedding Album

seeking your help to promote marriage equality in Australia



Earlier this year the female partner of a woman died. The woman paid for the funeral of her partner, but had to argue with the partner's (biological) family to have their relationship recognised in the context of the estate.

A mother living in Julia Gillard's electorate wants to answer her child's question of "Why aren't you married?" by walking into her representative's office and asking Julia to provide an answer to the child.

At the launch of a company's internal gay and lesbian network a few months ago, a man stated: "I am an Australian citizen. I deserve equal recognition under the law for my relationship." He was referring to his partner of over forty years.

The absence of marriage equality in Australia is discriminatory. These stories and others have inspired me to start a project, "The Potential Wedding Album", to collate information from same-sex couples who want the option to marry.

The album will be professionally printed and delivered to the Prime Minister, Opposition Leader, Bob Brown, Adam Bandt, Andrew Wilkie and various other supportive Parliamentarians and organisations. As the album grows it will be reprinted again and again with new material, and delivered regularly.

The purpose of the album is to add to the excellent work being done by Equal Love, Australian Marriage Equality and many other organisations by helping to humanise the issue of same-sex marriage and to keep the pressure for change on Parliamentarians.

I appreciate that not everyone wants to get married, but I see this as about providing equal options to same-sex-oriented people rather than pushing people into social convention if they don't want it. I want to live in a society of equal opportunity and this will be one more weapon against discriminatory attitudes if same-sex couples have the fully equal option of social and legal recognition for their relationships through marriage.

I have applied to register the domain name *thepotentialweddingalbum.org*. Other AFA members are kindly working on the technical aspects to have the website up and running as soon as possible.

I'm looking for same-sex couples who are willing to contribute to the album, which involves publication on the website of:

- ◆ first names;
- ◆ location (Australia only, given the parliamentary audience);
- ◆ photo or other image that you feel represents your relationship;
- ◆ words about your relationship (optional).

You don't need to be straining to get to the altar to be included in "The Potential Wedding Album". It is to show support for marriage equality. Exercising that option if it was legally available is, of course, a personal choice.

If you know people who would be willing to be in "The Potential Wedding Album", I would appreciate you alerting them to this project.

Also, if you or people you know are supportive of marriage equality, I'd appreciate any messages for the Supporters' Page, noting:

- ◆ name (or screen name),
- ◆ location,
- ◆ message of support.

Couple and supporter entries for "The Potential Wedding Album" should be e-mailed to me at tanyanataliesmith@yahoo.com.au. Once the website is up and running, people will be able to submit entries for the album and messages of support via the forms on the website.

"The Potential Wedding Album" has the potential to be effective in the fight for marriage equality in Australia. But the reality is that the website can only go live and "The Potential Wedding Album" will only make a difference if it receives a large number of entries from couples and supporters. Please take a few minutes to e-mail an entry. I appreciate your support to help continue the fight for marriage equality in Australia.

Tanya Smith
AFA Public Relations Team

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FESTIVAL OF DANGEROUS IDEAS

Alan Dershowitz v Geoffrey Robertson

The Sins Of The Fathers: Should The Pope Be Held To Account?

Since the scandal of the sexual abuse of children within the Catholic Church has come to light around the world, almost 12,000 allegations of child abuse have been settled in the US alone. Many perpetrators were protected by the Church which moved them and swore victims to secrecy. Who should be brought to account for these terrible acts? And what responsibility does the Pope himself bear as head of the Church? Although the Pope has been protected thus far from legal consequences by the notion of his sovereign immunity as a “Head of State”, should he be held accountable?

Alan Dershowitz and Geoffrey Robertson are two of the most extraordinary advocates of our time. In a unique debate, they will tackle both sides of these fundamental moral, ethical and political questions with fearless eloquence.



Alan Dershowitz, the Felix Frankfurter Professor of Law at Harvard Law School, is one of the United States foremost appellate lawyers and a distinguished defender of civil liberties. As a criminal lawyer, his clients have included Claus von Bülow, Mike Tyson and OJ Simpson. His many books include the New York Times bestsellers *The Case for Israel* and *Chutzpah* as well as *Why Terrorism Works* and *America on Trial*.



Geoffrey Robertson is head of Doughty Street Chambers, the largest Human Rights practice in Britain, and is a Master of the Middle Temple, a Recorder of London and visiting professor at Queen Mary College. His books include *The Justice Game*, *The Tyrannicide Brief* and *Crimes Against Humanity*. His new book *The Case of the Pope* warns that religious leaders too, are not immune from international justice.

Venue: Concert Hall

Dates: Saturday 2 October 8:00pm

Duration: 90 minutes

Eric Kaufmann

Why The Religious Will Inherit The Earth

“Atheism is doomed: the contraceptive pill is secularism's cyanide tablet” shrieked the UK Daily Telegraph’s headline in response to Eric Kaufmann’s latest book *Shall the Religious Inherit The Earth?*. His theory will come as somewhat of a shock to the rising tide of New Atheists like Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens, who have convinced many Western intellectuals that secularism, is the way forward.

But most people don’t read books before deciding whether to be religious. Instead, they inherit their faith from their parents.

By degrees, the religious are expanding their share of the population, because secular birth rates have plunged. The more religious people are (and the more extreme in their beliefs), the more children they have. This, combined with immigration, will reverse the secularisation process in the West that many had thought was inevitable and unstoppable.

Islamists have won the culture war in much of the Muslim world, and their success provides a glimpse of what awaits Christianity in the West and Judaism in Israel – a majority of conservative evangelical and ultra-orthodox respectively. Considering questions of multiculturalism and terrorism, Kaufmann looks at the implications of the decline in liberal secularism as religious conservatism rises, and what this means for the future of Western modernity.



Eric Kaufmann is a writer, researcher and teacher of politics and sociology at Birkbeck College, University of London. He is the author of *Shall the Religious Inherit the Earth: Demography and Politics in the Twenty-First Century*, *The Orange Order: A Contemporary Northern Irish History* and *The Rise and Fall of Anglo America*.

Venue: Opera Theatre

Dates: Sunday 3 October 11:00am (Please note daylight saving commences Sunday 3 October)

Duration: 1 hour including Q&A

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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.

2010 Global Atheist Convention

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Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc

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