

The Australian Atheist

ISSN 1035-1477

ISSUE NUMBER 27

MAY - JUNE 2011



**Atheist Foundation
of Australia Inc** Established
1970

Private Mail Bag 6
Maitland SA 5573

Phone: (08) 8835 2269
International: +61 8 8835 2269
Email: info@atheistfoundation.org.au
Web: www.atheistfoundation.org.au

ATHEISM:

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



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

In this Issue...

From the Editor	3
Letters to the Editor	4
President's Report to the Annual General Meeting	5
2012 Global Atheist Convention - Speakers	6
Debate - Can There Be Good Without God? Flinders University	7
Percy Bysshe Shelley By Peter Taylor	8
The Necessity of Atheism - Percy Bysshe Shelley	9
The Good Book - A.C. Grayling	10
Theology - Why? By Dennis Southam	12
AFA Media Spokespeople	13
Humour	14
Letters in the Papers	16
A Sequel to Draw Muhammad Day	17
American Atheists Convention - Letter from Christopher Hitchens	18
If God Exists is He Worthy of Worship By Charles Cornwall	19
The Abimelech Society	21
Book Review	22
Freedom of Religion and Belief in 21st Century Australia - Review	23
Atheist Alliance International	26
Membership Form / Philosophy / Aims	27

PRESIDENT David Nicholls | VICE PRESIDENT Michael Boyd | HON. SECRETARY Karen Joyce | TREASURER Lee Holmes

COMMITTEE OF MANAGEMENT

John Amadio | Rebecca Barnes | Eustace Black | Bob Creek | Jac Dittmar | Dean Dowling | Donna Ettrick | Grant Ettrick | Dave Fregon | Janine Gébert | Mark Gilroy | Joel Kilgour | Dennis Southam

PUBLIC RELATIONS TEAM

Jason Ball | Rebecca Barnes | Michael Boyd | Jac Dittmar | Mike Downes | Harry Edwards | Lee Holmes | Michael McGrath | David Nicholls | Voula Papas | John L Perkins | Nigel Sinnott | Tanya Smith | Dennis Southam | Peter Taylor

EDITORS

The Australian Atheist – Lee Holmes | Website – Grant Ettrick | Dave Fregon | Lee Holmes

FORUM MODERATORS

Protium | The Irreverent Mr Black | Davo | Fearless | Praxis | wolty | atheist_angel

PROOF READERS

Nigel Sinnott | Tom Melchiorre | Trevor Treharne

 <p>AJB AJBartlettCachia CHARTERED ACCOUNTANTS</p>	<p>276 Keira Street WOLLONGONG NSW 2500</p> <p>Email: info@ajbca.com.au Web: www.ajbca.com.au</p> <p>Phone: (02) 4226 1000 Fax: (02) 4228 0907</p>	<p>ATHEISTS PROVIDING FOR ATHEISTS</p> <p>AFA Member Anthony Pickham Managing Partner of the firm 'AJBartlettCachia'</p> <p>Chartered Accountants can assist with all your accountancy, taxation, business and management needs.</p>
--	---	---

From the Editor

Go on. Off you go. I won't be offended if you skip my editorial to have a peek at page 6. Just make sure you come back. ... *2 minutes later...* Well? What did you think? Fantastic isn't it. We all reckon it is anyway. So are you coming to the Global Atheist Convention – 'A Celebration of Reason'? What a silly question, of course you are!

The other good news for AFA members is you have first bite at the tickets. We plan on having them go on sale to the public in September and AFA members will have a two week head start. Exact dates will be finalised later and posted in the magazine and via email.

I think we should all make a cup of tea before continuing on. It's so exciting I can barely type.

In anticipation of the 2012 Convention the GAC Committee decided to release free of charge all the talks from the 2010 Convention. They will be uploaded over the next few months to www.youtube.com/user/AtheistFoundation and vimeo.com/atheistaustralia. The talks from Taslima Nasrin, Richard Dawkins, PZ Myers, Peter Singer and A.C. Grayling are on the sites now and are attracting an amazing number of viewers.

It is extremely encouraging reading some of the newspapers around the country and especially Letters to the Editors. Hardly a day passes without a reference to religion and its unhealthy presence in Australia. The issue of Religious Education in Victorian public schools caused a flurry of complaints from parents and 90 per cent of the letters to papers were against having RE and also Chaplains posing as counsellors.

Speaking of unhealthy presences ... Jim Wallace, Managing Director of the Australian Christian Lobby reared his ugly head on ANZAC Day. He 'tweeted' – *Just hope that as we remember Servicemen and women today we remember the Australia they fought for – wasn't gay marriage and Islamic!* Not unsurprisingly his comment went down like a lead balloon. Feel that Christian love!

The 'love' that Roman Catholics have for the late Pope John Paul II is another unhealthy non-presence. Millions of people world-wide watched as the current pope declared that a nun from France was cured of Parkinson's disease by praying to JP II. They've even got a vial of his blood. Thank goodness they are against cloning...

Don't forget to spread the word about the Census campaign. The billboards will be going up in June. Unfortunately Tasmania had to miss out on having a billboard but thanks to the Launceston Skeptics the word will reach the Apple Isle. They have offered to set up a stall in the local Mall with pamphlets and posters and will answer questions from the public about the campaign.

If you are reading this sentence, thank you for coming back from page 6. You are now free to continue with the rest of issue.

GST

Due mainly to the Bus and Billboard campaigns as well as the Global Atheist Conventions the AFA will now be including GST on all our merchandise as well as membership fees.

The fees will remain the same but will have a GST component. All donations are GST free.

A huge thank you must go to our wonderful accountant and AFA member Anthony Pickham. He has been incredibly generous with his time and with software to make my life as Treasurer so much easier.

As you obviously realise, Anthony is another one of those amoral atheists who care only about themselves. Thank you Anthony, I appreciate your selfishness.

Lee (Treasurer)

Letters to the Editor

Cripes PZ!

Just what is going on in the not-so-hallowed realm of atheism? It seems hardly an edition of *The Australian Atheist* arrives which doesn't include some self-declared arbitrator agonising over what atheists should refer to themselves as: "rationalists", "secularists", "humanists", "rational-secularists", "secular-humanists", etc. etc. ad infinitum.

And now in the March 2011 edition we have PZ Myers belting folk around the ears because he has defined a new category of non-believers as "Dictionary Atheists". You just can't stop those biologists from classifying things, can you?

I have been a lifelong and enthusiastic amateur student of earth and planetary sciences. But it wasn't this enthusiasm or what I've learned through it that led to my atheism. I simply never believed. My appreciation of science has undoubtedly firmed and given great meaning and self-assurance to my atheistic outlook. But given I can't honestly boast an atheism deriving from scientific interests, does that make me just one of your "Dictionary" atheists?

I observed a lot of this "True Atheist" posing at last year's Melbourne Convention. There seems to be an awful lot of "authorities" strutting about and thrusting checklists of "approved" ideological stances, political persuasions, personal perspectives and pet enthusiasms into other peoples' faces and demanding that they sign-up or piss off.

At the very time when those escaping religion should be met with open and welcoming arms, we certainly like throwing up stupid, hostile and needless barriers. PZ, perhaps we should issue official Atheism application forms and product disclosure statements just so we don't end up with any of that "Dictionary Atheist" riff-raff.

Almost sounds bloody religious!

John Regan



President's report delivered at the Annual General Meeting 16 March 2011

The Atheist Foundation of Australia is going from strength to strength. The outstanding success of the Global Atheist Convention last March brought with it a flurry of interest in Atheism from the media and the public.

Our membership has increased markedly, Atheism in newsprint and the internet is becoming quite passé and even the Prime Minister openly declared her godlessness to the electorate. The latter occurrence was no doubt in part helped along by the greater interest in Atheism brought about by the Global Atheist Convention which attracted considerable press attention.

People are no longer so reticent to declare their Atheism to the wider community. An offshoot of this change in attitude has been consistent attacks on Atheism by the clergy. We have been accused of hating their god to causing the destruction of the moral fibre of civilisation. Their protestations have hardly caused a ripple of concern in the population; rather, it has demonstrated a desperate side to religion, a side that has not existed with such magnitude in recent times.

In the past year, the AFA has fielded about seventy radio and magazine interviews including some television appearances and responded to an increasing demand from the media for articles on current issues. Responsible for this are the AFA's media releases covering the plethora of topics the leaders of religion and various politicians have amply supplied. These ranged in scope from canonising a saint by the Catholic Church to political rejection of equality for same-sex oriented people and many things in between; in a never-ending smorgasbord of nonsensical material worthy of comment by the Atheist Foundation of Australia.

An important contribution by the AFA to Atheism, and one which has not received deserved recognition, is the asking by the Australian Senate to give an opinion on the tax-free status of religion. This was a first step by Atheism in Australia into the Federal halls of power. Let us hope there are many more. See page 16 for the latest news.

Future plans with the Census Campaign carries with it the promise of achieving accurate Census data of those professing a religion and those who do not. The expense is considerable but we are hopeful for positive results. Both Britain and Ireland are engaged in similar campaigns.

As most will know, we are in the early stages of planning another convention next year. The 2012 Global Atheist Convention – 'A Celebration of Reason' promises to eclipse the very successful Convention of March 2010. If it goes ahead, this endeavour will test the 2012 GAC Committee to its limits. I know they will be up to the task.

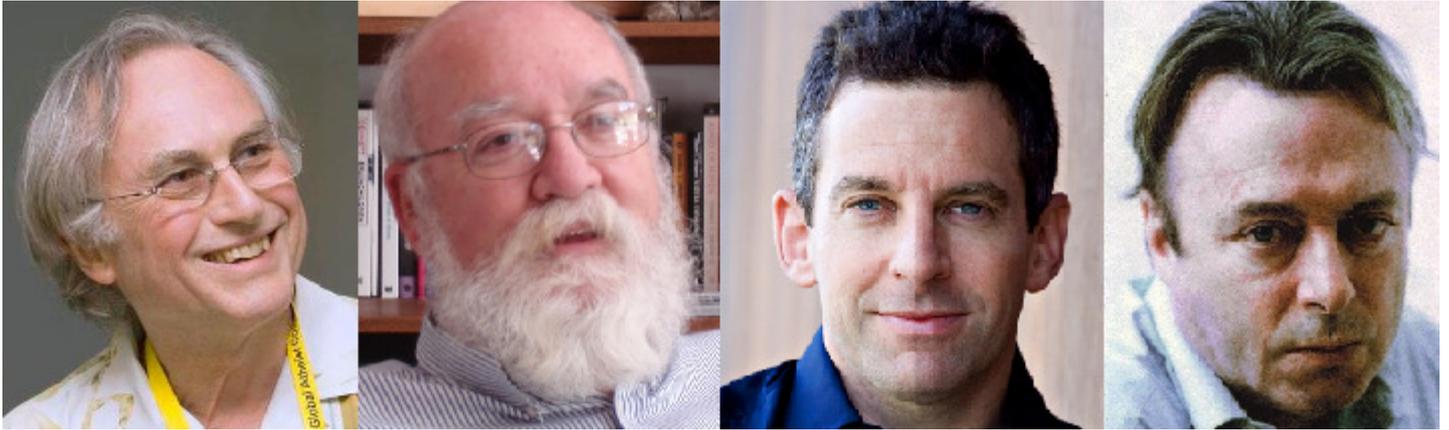
Because of the many dedicated and competent people the AFA can call upon, whether that be the Management Committee, magazine and web editors, Forum personnel, internet technicians, the Public Relations Team, the Global Atheist Convention Committee, proof readers, graphic designers, Facebook managers, writers and numerous other people, we are gaining a status in the Australian psyche that is lifting Atheism into the limelight of deserved involvement in societal matters.

I would also like to thank AFA Members who have responded to requests from me for interviews by the media. It can be a daunting task to face journalists when unused to it. The opinions of individual Atheists is a very effective way to humanise Atheism in dispelling the negative connotations religions are all too ready to place upon us.

Overall, the Atheist Foundation of Australia is making a significant indent on the polity and make-up of society. There is no reason to think that this will not continue at the same rate or, hopefully, even more rapidly.

The quality of our team effort is something with which we should all be delighted. We can be extremely proud of those who have contributed to the success story that is the Atheist Foundation of Australia. We can be equally proud as well of our members and supporters as they are the backbone of the organisation. I sincerely thank you all.

"The Four Horsemen of the Anti-Apocalypse"



Dawkins, Dennett, Harris, Hitchens announced as speakers for the 2012 Global Atheist Convention – 'A Celebration of Reason'

The Atheist Foundation of Australia is excited to announce that the next Global Atheist Convention – 'A Celebration of Reason' will feature headline speakers Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens (health permitting).

The Global Atheist Convention will be held once again at the Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre from 13 -15 April 2012.

"This is the first time that the Four Horsemen have spoken together publicly in five years," said Atheist Foundation President David Nicholls. "Their best-selling books on atheism earned the group the moniker 'The Four Horseman of the Anti-Apocalypse', and fittingly so as they have been instrumental in bringing forth a new enlightenment in the face of growing irrationality, fundamentalism and superstitious thinking around the world."

The 2010 Global Atheist Convention gave local, interstate and international attendees the opportunity to hear first-rate speakers from a range of fields including science, philosophy, politics, education, stand-up comedy and more.

"Atheism has provided the perfect foundation in which people can come together to celebrate science, reason and secular values in today's society. With the planet in a state of organised chaos and the menace of religious extremism threatening everyone's quality of life, this 2012 world-class event will once again provide rational discussion and debate about what can be done to address the issues facing the globe," said Nicholls.

"The 2012 Global Atheist Convention – 'A Celebration of Reason' will also send an important message to Australia's political institutions that freethinking Australians are a growing force to be reckoned with."

The entire line-up for the convention will be released gradually via official social media streams in the lead-up to tickets going on sale later in the year. The last convention sold out well in advance, leaving many people disappointed to have missed out. The Atheist Foundation of Australia expects this event will also sell out very quickly and encourages prospective attendees to purchase their tickets as soon as they go on sale.

The Atheist Foundation has succeeded in obtaining financial support from the Victorian Government for the convention.



Debate

'Can There Be Good Without God?'

Flinders University South Australia

Date: Tuesday, 7 June 2011
Time: 3:30 pm - 5:30 pm
Place: Lecture Theatre North 3, Social Sciences North
Main Campus, Flinders University
Sturt Road, Bedford Park, South Australia

Speakers on the Affirmative



Ian Robinson
is President Emeritus of
the Rationalist Society of
Australia.



Leigh Raymond
is a classical musician and
is studying Psychology and
Philosophy at
Melbourne University.



Matthew McArthur
is a marine ecologist and
debater in his spare time.

Moderator



Geoff Anderson
Snr. Lecturer.
School of Politics
and
Public Policy
Flinders University.

Speakers on the Negative



Steve Taylor
is Director of Missiology
Uniting College for
Leadership and Theology.



Steve Parker
is Senior Lecturer School
of Nursing and Midwifery
Flinders University.



Robert Potter
is a part-time academic
at Flinders University
Department of
International Relations.

The Atheist Foundation of Australia was contacted by Robert Potter asking if we would be interested in participating in a debate at the Flinders University in South Australia.

The wheels were set in motion and we have secured the mighty talents of three AFA members, Ian Robinson, Leigh Raymond and Matthew McArthur.

After a barrage of emails back and forth with the team members on both sides a topic was finally agreed upon. See, miracles do happen.

This is a free event and we encourage all SA members to attend. It will be filmed and made available to the AFA.

The debate, in part may be aired on radio 5AA 1395 in their Midnight to Dawn program. It will also be covered by *The Advertiser*.

Percy Bysshe Shelley

By Peter Taylor

*B*orn in 1792 to wealthy parents, Shelley was educated at Eton and Oxford. He is usually known only for his lyrical poems, although he also wrote poetry about his hopes for inspiration and humanity. He defended imaginative poetry with a famous essay, *A Defence of Poetry*. His later works were grim and sorrowful, filled with hopelessness.

He could be very outspoken. His early rebellious nature got him expelled from university when he penned *The Necessity of Atheism* (reprinted on page 9) exactly 200 years ago (1811). In it, he refuted "creationists" by writing: "Design must be proved before a designer can be inferred." His whole essay is such a masterpiece of logic and reason that it seems incomprehensible that he is not equally well known as a philosopher.

A few quotes to whet the appetite:

- ♦ *The assumption that the Universe is a design, leads to a conclusion that there are [an] infinity of creative and created Gods, which is absurd.*
- ♦ *[The churches] falsely imagine the mind is active in belief; that belief is an act of volition ... [and because] of this mistake, they have attached a degree of criminality to disbelief.*
- ♦ *In a discussion where two propositions are diametrically opposite, the mind believes that which is least incomprehensible; ... it is easier to suppose that the universe has existed from all eternity than to conceive a being beyond its limits capable of creating it: if the mind sinks beneath the weight of one, is it an alleviation to increase the intolerability of the burthen?*
- ♦ *It is required that testimony should not be contrary to reason.*
- ♦ *atheism leaves to man reason, philosophy, natural laws, reputation and everything that can serve to conduct him to virtue; but superstition destroys all these and erects itself into a tyranny over the understandings of men: hence atheism never disturbs the government, but renders man more clear-sighted, since he sees nothing beyond the boundaries of the present life. [from Bacon's Moral Essays]*
- ♦ *Every time we say that God is the author of some phenomenon, that signifies that we are ignorant of how that phenomenon is caused or operates.*
- ♦ *All religious nations are founded solely on authority; all religions forbid examination and do not want one to reason ...*
- ♦ *In fighting for his god, everyone, in fact, fights only for the interests of his own vanity ... which of all the passions is the quickest to take offence and the most capable of committing the greatest follies.*
- ♦ *If God is infinitely good, why should we have to fear him? If he is infinitely wise, why should we have doubts concerning our future? If he knows all, why ...* and so he continues to complete the questions: wonderful stuff.

Shelley's thoughts on life and his conviction that all life is in some way "one", presage the supposedly modern idea of a natural unity, or biosphere of which we are an intrinsic part and either cherish or perish.

He mentions that while creationists declare that beauty and perfection (order) had to be designed, they ignore evil and destructive forces (disorder).

Preceding Darwin and others, he therefore had no knowledge of evolution, admitting that the how life began and its exuberance are incomprehensible; but to say some omniscient being is responsible, he declares to be even more incomprehensible.

He attacks human superstition and demands reason. Intelligence is that attribute of the deity which creationists hold to be most apparent in the Universe. To assert that God is intelligent, is to assert that he has ideas. But only an organised body (a brain, made of matter) can have ideas.

For publishing this excellent, rational proof of the absence of evidence for a god, Shelley was expelled from his Oxford College. So much for free thought. He died aged 30 (1822) from a sailing accident in Italy.

T
H
E
N
E
C
E
S
S
I
T
Y
O
F
A
T
H
E
I
S
M

A close examination of the validity of the proofs adduced to support any proposition, has ever been allowed to be the only sure way of attaining truth, upon the advantages of which it is unnecessary to descant; our knowledge of the existence of a Deity is a subject of such importance, that it cannot be too minutely investigated; in consequence of this conviction, we proceed briefly and impartially to examine the proofs which have been adduced. It is necessary first to consider the nature of Belief.

When a proposition is offered to the mind, it perceives the agreement or disagreement of the ideas of which it is composed. A perception of their agreement is termed belief, many obstacles frequently prevent this perception from being immediate, these the mind attempts to remove in order that the perception may be distinct. The mind is active in the investigation, in order to perfect the state of perception which is passive; the investigation being confused with the perception has induced many falsely to imagine that the mind is active in belief, that belief is an act of volition, in consequence of which it may be regulated by the mind; pursuing, continuing this mistake they have attached a degree of criminality to disbelief of which in its nature it is incapable; it is equally so of merit.

The strength of belief like that of every other passion is in proportion to the degrees of excitement.

The degrees of excitement are three.

The senses are the sources of all knowledge to the mind, consequently their evidence claims the strongest assent.

The decision of the mind founded upon our own experience derived from these sources, claims the next degree.

The experience of others which addresses itself to the former one, occupies the lowest degree, –

Consequently no testimony can be admitted which is contrary to reason, reason is founded on the evidence of our senses.

Every proof may be referred to one of these three divisions; we are naturally led to consider what arguments we receive from each of them to convince us of the existence of a Deity.

1st. The evidence of the senses. – If the Deity should appear to us, if he should convince our senses of his existence; this revelation would necessarily command belief; – Those to whom the Deity has thus appeared, have the strongest possible conviction of his existence.

Reason claims the 2nd. place, it is urged that man knows that whatever is, must either have had a beginning or existed from all eternity, he also knows that whatever is not eternal must have had a cause. – Where this is applied to the existence of the Universe, it is necessary to prove that it was created, until that is clearly demonstrated, we may reasonably suppose that it has endured from all eternity. – In a case where two propositions are diametrically opposite, the mind believes that which is less incomprehensible, it is easier to suppose that the Universe has existed from all eternity, than to conceive a being capable of creating it; if the mind sinks beneath the weight of one, is it an alleviation to increase the intolerability of the burden? – The other argument which is founded upon a man's knowledge of his own existence stands thus. – A man knows not only he now is, but that there was a time when he did not exist, consequently there must have been a cause. – But what does this prove? we can only infer from effects causes exactly adequate to those effects; – But there certainly is a generative power which is effected by particular instruments; we cannot prove that it is inherent in these instruments, nor is the contrary hypothesis capable of demonstration; we admit that the generative power is incomprehensible, but to suppose that the same effect is produced by an eternal, omniscient Almighty Being, leaves the cause in the same obscurity, but renders it more incomprehensible.

The 3rd. and last degree of assent is claimed by Testimony – it is required that it should not be contrary to reason. – The testimony that the Deity convinces the senses of men of his existence can only be admitted by us, if our mind considers it less probable that these men should have been deceived, than that the Deity should have appeared to them – our reason can never admit the testimony of men, who not only declare that they were eye-witnesses of miracles but that the Deity was irrational, for he commanded that he should be believed, he proposed the highest rewards for faith, eternal punishments for disbelief – we can only command voluntary actions, belief is not an act of volition, the mind is even passive, from this it is evident that we have not sufficient testimony, or rather that testimony is insufficient to prove the being of a God, we have before shewn that it cannot be deduced from reason, – they who have been convinced by the evidence of the senses, they only can believe it.

From this it is evident that having no proofs from any of the three sources of conviction: the mind cannot believe the existence of a God, it is also evident that as belief is a passion of the mind, no degree of criminality can be attached to disbelief, they only are reprehensible who willingly neglect to remove the false medium thro' which their mind views the subject.

It is almost unnecessary to observe, that the general knowledge of the deficiency of such proof, cannot be prejudicial to society: Truth has always been found to promote the best interests of mankind. – Every reflecting mind must allow that there is no proof of the existence of a Deity. Q.E.D.



The Good Book

A.C. Grayling speaks about his new book.

When and why did you become an atheist?

I was brought up in a non-religious family, and when I first encountered religion it simply seemed incredible, no more believable than the fairy stories and Greek myths that I had read and enjoyed as a child.

*What motivated you to write *The Good Book*?*

Several decades ago, while studying the ethical theories and systems of the world, I saw a fundamental difference between religion-derived ethics and what I call 'humanism', that is, non-religious ethics, namely, that the former present themselves as the commands and requirements of a monarchical deity whereas the latter premises itself on efforts to understand human nature and the human condition – and whereas the former typically cut across the grain of human nature by requiring self-denial and control of functions, the latter is more sympathetic and reasonable by far.

How much time did it take you to organise all the information available to make the book and to write it?

I started to gather the materials for *The Good Book* about 30 years ago, after the realisation described above, and as time went by began the process of selecting and editing – going from a great quantity of material to the final selection and arrangement that constitutes *The Good Book* now.

Why did you decide to publish it now? Has it something to do with the 400th anniversary of the King James Bible?

The 400th anniversary of the KJB is coincidental; unlike sending a rocket to the moon where precision of timing is possible, I couldn't have planned that this would be the year of publication when I began this so long ago! But it is a useful coincidence, because the KJB provides a good example of how the religious Bible was made, and why it is printed as it is, and why its language is deliberately archaic (even in 1611 the English of the KJB was 100 years out of date, on purpose to give it that authoritative, vatic, somewhat heightened tone).

Aren't you afraid of being called pretentious or arrogant for this ambitious initiative?

I've already been called even worse things than either of

those! – I don't expect that anyone who is hostile to the idea of *The Good Book* will readily believe this, but I have done it in a sober and collegial spirit. After all, almost all the words in *The Good Book* are from great minds of the past, from people who experienced much and thought deeply, and in almost all cases were people of great intellect – so when people attack *The Good Book* they attack Aristotle, Pliny, Seneca, Cicero, Confucius, Mo Zi ... all the way to Spinoza, Hume, Chesterfield, Mill and Pater. If they read these people outside the context of *The Good Book* they would be struck by their insight and wisdom – so if they give *The Good Book* a fair chance, they would see that I have collected and arranged these valuable texts as a resource for everyone, so that even religious people would find good things in it.

In your opinion, do atheists really need their own bible?

No one needs a bible, because everyone has the potential to find things out and read for themselves. Since atheists are more likely than religious people to be independent-minded, they are even less in need of guidance and help, because they can go to libraries, learn, and think for themselves. But even atheists need to read and study, and a distillation of the past's insights and experience relating to questions about how to live (Socrates' question!) might be of use to some. No-one is under an obligation to read *The Good Book* given that they can do the work for themselves, and indeed this latter would be the best way; but I offer it anyway as a resource should it be of value to some. And given the wealth of insight, inspiration and consolation that the book gathers together, I have good hopes that some will indeed find it useful, as a starting point for their own reflections. The one demand that *The Good Book* makes is for people to go beyond all teachings and teachers (and therefore beyond books like *The Good Book*) and think for themselves.

*Is *The Good Book* made for everyone? Can a religious person read it?*

As just indicated, yes, definitely: there is nothing in *The Good Book* that a religious person could or at least should disagree with – except for those who say we must not think for ourselves but must submit our will and intellect to the doctrines of a religion.

What do you want to achieve with the good book?

Again as noted in the preceding remarks, *The Good Book* is intended as a resource to help anyone who cares to use it as such on their journey to autonomy and independence of mind.

Don't you fear that it will be considered a self-help book, full of prescriptions for a good life?

Not prescriptions, but suggestions; and from very great minds of the past.

Have you faced any criticism from atheists or harsh reactions from religious communities?

Those atheists and theists who have not seen the book or who have not grasped its purpose, and either think it is a rule-book for atheists (so some atheists might think) or an attack on the religious bible or religion itself (so theists might think) have of course been critical – but the kind of criticism that would be truly germane would concern itself with the choice of texts, their arrangement, the translations used, etc., unless the critics in question are so authoritative that they disagree with what Aristotle et. al. have to offer in the way of suggestions for reflecting on ethical questions.

You say that religious influence is overinflated in our society. What are the biggest consequences of this in our lives?

This question is almost too big to answer in a few lines. All the way from distortion of education (opposition to evolutionary biology, false views of the nature and origins of the universe, corruption of science etc.) to oppressive moralities (think of teenagers fearfully struggling with ‘sinful feelings’ because of their burgeoning sexuality) to policies on contraception, AIDS prevention, abortion and stem cell research, to persecution of gays, to murderous interreligious conflicts in many countries (Christians versus Muslims versus Hindus – and Protestants versus Catholics, and Sunnis versus Shias, attacking each other in Nigeria, Iraq, Pakistan, India, Ireland, Croatia ...) to religious leaders (e.g. mullahs) inciting hatred, terrorism and mass murder – where are the aspects of our lives that are not in some way affected by the toxin of religion?

In an interview in The Guardian, you joked about being a god in five centuries. Do you believe that The Good Book message can and will last as long as great philosophical books?

The message of the great philosophical books will last as long as there are intelligent minds to appreciate them. Whether *The Good Book*, which is a distillation of some of the best of these books, will last with them, is an open question. I certainly hope not to be a ‘god’ because, even though history shows that the bar has not been set very high in this regard, I would not be a good one, and anyway if I have a message it is ‘think for yourself, take responsibility for yourself, do not be a disciple, do not abdicate your mind and put it under the feet of someone else’s ideology’.

In the same interview, you said that being a ‘militant atheist’ was like ‘sleeping furiously’. But haven’t you worked and still work really hard to defend the atheist point of view?

‘Militant’ is a term used by religious people who wish that they could continue to enjoy the status and privileges which the now-lost ‘respect agenda’ (‘I think weird thoughts so respect me, I am a man of faith’) once protected for them. My friends Richard Dawkins and

Christopher Hitchens do not burn people at the stake for holding opposite views, but criticise them by speaking frankly and bluntly; and I have done the same in other places. There are three areas of debate: metaphysics (does the universe contain supernatural agencies? Answer: No; learn some science) secularism (what is the place of religion in the public square? Answer: it has every right to have its say, but no greater right than anyone else – yet for historical reasons it has a massively over-amplified voice there) and ethics (do you need a ubiquitous invisible policeman watching everyone for people to be good? Answer: No, read e.g. *The Good Book*). My interest is in all three, but as just noted *The Good Book* addresses the third of these, by showing that there is a rich, deep, serious non-religious tradition of thought about the good, which is in fact richer and deeper than religious ethics (New Testament ethics says ‘give away all you own, make no plans, do not marry ...’ i.e. the ethics of a people who thought the Messiah was very soon going to return; after four centuries Christianity had to borrow great swathes of Greek non-religious ethics to bolster itself.)

What do you say about the thesis that new atheism looks like a religion?

That is nonsense. As has been well said, atheism is to religion what not collecting stamps is to stamp collecting. Not collecting stamps is not a hobby. Not believing in gods and goddesses is not a religion.

Can we live completely guided by rigorous reason and rationality? Do you yourself try to live that way, without emotional subjectivity?

Of course we need emotion; who said that we do not? This is the most important part of our lives: loving, responding to beauty, feeling joy, coping with grief and loss, being human. But we know that a partnership of emotion and reason makes our emotions deeper and finer; the emotions can be educated by reflection – as when we read thoughtfully, learn, study science, acquire greater appreciation of music and painting – recognising the central importance of emotion does not exclude being rational where rationality is called for (from science to thinking about our children’s health and education to voting to planning our pensions – these are not matters for emotion) and emotion is not mere thoughtless whim and arbitrariness. To go from the thought that emotion is central to life to saying that therefore we can believe any old nonsense is an example not of emotion but of irrationality or even stupidity.

Any special message to an atheist reader?

I congratulate any atheist on being one, and wish him or her well.

Reprinted with permission from A.C. Grayling.

Theology - Why?

By Dennis Southam

I own a boat. It's only a little boat, but it still needs to be insured, and to get the insurance a marine survey report is required. Having recently found a suitably qualified person to do this, I was sitting in the boat with the gentleman as he made his inspections. He was quite chatty and it soon became obvious that he was religious, and for some unknown reason made the assumption that I must be the same. It came out in conversation that he had a problem, and it was quite worrying for him. It seems that his wife had died and now that he had remarried his problem was this: when he and this new wife also eventually die and they both end up in heaven, how will he be able to decide with which wife to spend the rest of eternity (demonstrating an interesting mix of both delusion and chauvinism)! I imagine that this is the type of question that can only be answered by a theologian.

I have written before about theology and what I think of theologians. To me it would seem that theology is the art of using language to make nonsense sound almost believable, and the impossible sound almost plausible, at least to willing ears.

For example, here is an answer from the well-known theologian, Alister McGrath during a debate with Christopher Hitchens, to a question from a member of the audience about how to reconcile the violence, ordered by God, in the old Testament – *"a fundamental theme here is that Christ is the fulfilment of a law of the prophets – in other words not simply that he brings to fulfilment their intentions but in some way he is authorised to show us what these are really meant to be like. In other words that there are other interpretations but these are relativised or placed to one side because of who Jesus is and what he did and therefore I would want to look at the Old Testament through this lens and say that I believe it allows us to look at these passages and challenge the most natural interpretations. For me one of the great themes of Christian history is the idea that, – or what I call progressive revelation – that we gain a firmer understanding of what God is like as time goes on and above all for example through the revelation of Christ and again whether you are a Protestant or a Catholic you might talk about the continued guidance of the spirit or indeed continued reflection on the part of the church but the engagement of scripture is dynamic and ongoing. It's not really something that's been ended in the past"*.

This must be what's known as "sophisticated" theology, because I didn't understand a word of it. If McGrath ever gets tired of theology, he has a brilliant career ahead as a politician. I have given some thought before to what theology is, but I have never given any thought before to the reason why there are theologians. Why have we ended up with otherwise presumably intelligent people, like McGrath above, blurting out the most ridiculous waffle you have ever heard? While recently watching a YouTube presentation by Daniel Dennett at the Atheist Alliance International conference in 2009 titled "The Evolution of Confusion", I heard this question asked and answered, and the answer that Dennett gives seems to make a lot of sense.



The First Council of Nicaea

It apparently comes as a surprise to some young men when they first enter the seminary that the Bible was not "poofed" into existence by a magician in the sky all in one go. It was cobbled together by a committee (the council of Nicaea in AD325 under the reign of Constantine the Great). Decisions were made by mere mortals about which texts would go in and which would be left out. But the process lacked a certain amount of quality control, and there was apparently no proof reading at the end to check for consistency or accuracy, or for truth, although that may well not have been on their check

list even if they had one. There are, for example, more than four hundred contradictions (there is an excellent graphical representation of this at: www.project-reason.org/gallery3/image/105/).

Then there is the issue of the Old Testament, with its warrant for murder, for rape and for slavery, which was the subject of McGrath's non-answer above. And what about such things as the many requirements for stoning to death, such as anyone who blasphemes the name of the Lord (Leviticus 24:16), a man who happens to meet in a town a virgin pledged to be married and sleeps with her (Deuteronomy 22:23-24), someone who entices you to worship other gods (Deuteronomy 13:6-10), and many others? From the last issue of the magazine there are these two little gems: "Blessed is the one who grabs your little children and smashes them against a rock" – God, Psalm 137:9; and "No one whose testicles are crushed or whose male organ is cut off shall enter the assembly of the Lord" – Deuteronomy 23:1. And of course there are many other issues that simply don't lend themselves to rational thinking. Daniel Dennett mentions the following quote from a book by Bart Ehrman: "Oh, you can't get through seminary and come out believing in God!", and it's not surprising that this may be so.

How are the clergy to make sense of this? How are they to answer the inevitable difficult questions that will come from those parishioners who have actually taken the trouble to read the Bible? Enter the theologian. His role is to provide the answers to these tricky and possibly embarrassing questions. Dan Dennett describes theologians as religion's "spinmeisters", and cites the following "canons of good spin":

- it must not be a bare-faced lie;
- you have to be able to say it with a straight face;
- it has to relieve scepticism without arousing curiosity, and –
- it should seem profound.

After watching Alister McGrath give his answer above, the best I could concede is that he said it with a straight face, but then again, I don't have willing ears. But I would still like to hear his answer to the question asked by the man in the boat. Now that would be interesting.

Dennis Southam is a member of the AFA Committee and Public Relations Team.

AFA Media Spokespeople

The task of interacting with the media has been one that traditionally has fallen on the shoulders of the president of the Atheist Foundation of Australia. It is not a job I relish but to give a broader idea of Atheism to a wider public, it is a position that has to be filled. The AFA does dozens of media interviews for radio, podcasts and television every year and the encounters are increasing.

The very presentable Vice-president, Michael Boyd, has been marvellous at stepping up for television interviews and we are very lucky to have him. But Michael and I are not always available because of other commitments and it has clearly become necessary to find a third person capable of accurately expounding AFA policy.

Luckily, because of the last Global Atheist Convention, one of its committee members, Jason Ball, has shown a remarkable talent when speaking to the press. Jason is young, intelligent and understands the nuances of Atheism better than most. He has fielded many interviews since that time with a vitality and commitment of which we could expect no more.

Jason is the future of Atheism and we are all very proud to have him represent the AFA in such an outstanding manner. Links to some of Jason's interviews are listed below.

David

<http://bmediaradioadelaide.com/y/y6/>

<http://syn.org.au/>

http://www.4shared.com/audio/Kw2rq6PB/01_Faith_Doco.html

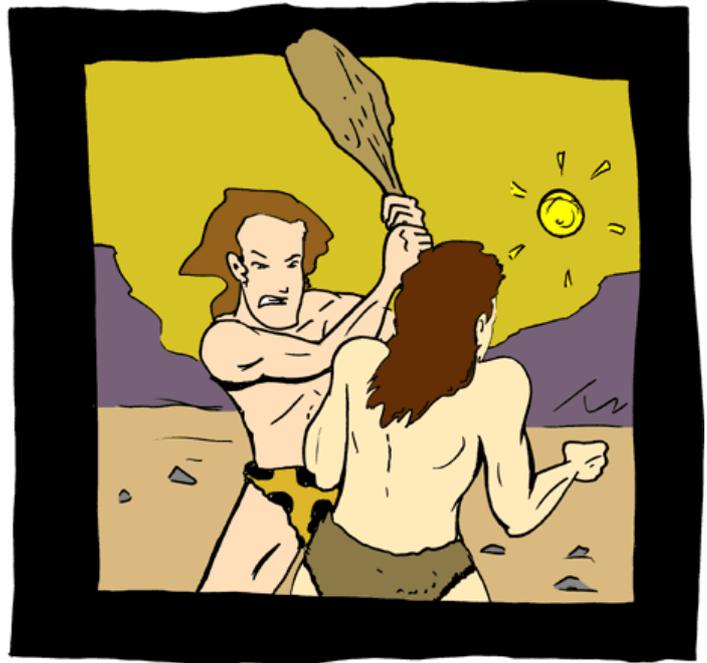


GOOD KID

Dear Baby Jesus,
Thank you for forgiving
everyone.

SMART KID

Baby Jesus!
Thank God I got to you
before it was too late. In
about 30 years, stay the
heck away from the
Romans!



Early circumcision.

S M B C

SATURDAY MORNING BREAKFAST CEREAL

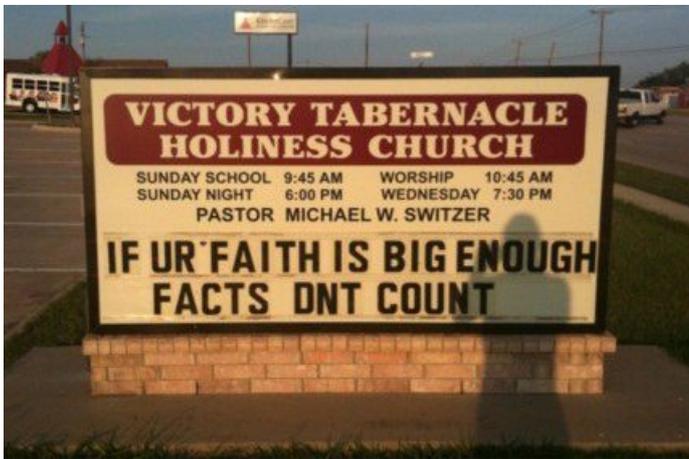
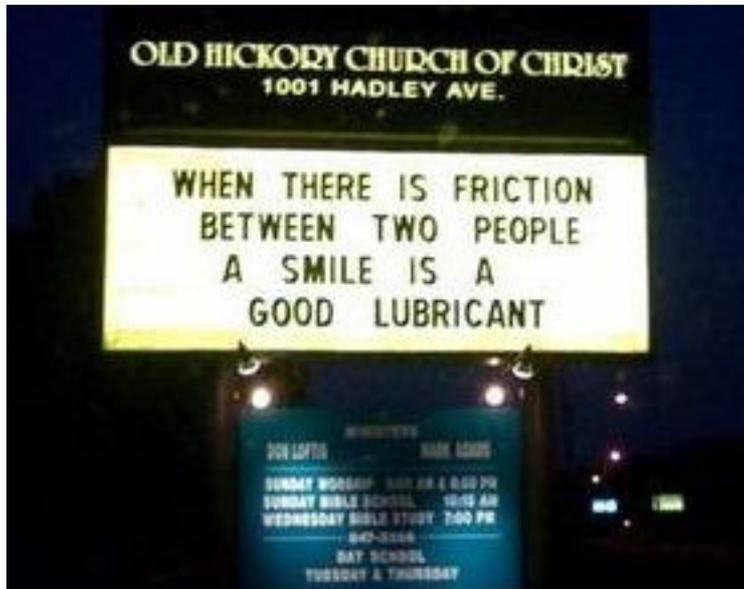
www.smbc-comics.com/



Dad explains why there is no ghost under my bed.



At this point, Jesus realized his sandals were stuck to the ice.



In the News

Religious organisations to be taxed on profits from non-charity work



Under new guidelines handed down in the Federal budget not-for-profit organisations will have to pay tax on the profits made from their commercial enterprises if that money is not fed back into their charity coffers.

Hillsong and the Seventh Day Adventist churches will eventually pay their fair share on profits from Gloria Jean's coffee shops and Sanitarium foods. At the moment the new tax system will apply only to new ventures. Existing businesses will be included in the future.

This is a huge victory. Last year President David Nicholls was asked to appear before a Senate inquiry into tax laws. While the Federal government has not addressed the issue regarding accountability of monies received by religions, this tax change is a significant first step.

Public Relations Team member Peter Taylor was instrumental in formulating the AFA's no-holds-barred submission.

The AFA is indeed very pleased with the outcome.

Letters in the Papers

Too Much More Than Faith

The Age 10 April 2011

The article by Evonne Paddison asserting that "Religious instruction teaches much more than faith" is, unfortunately, so true (*The Sunday Age*, 3/4). Depending on the instructor's Christian affiliation and personal psychological make-up, this can and does lead to overt or subtle insinuation that the Earth is 6000 years old, that hell waits for unbelievers, that women are the chattels of men, that same-sex oriented people are evil, that science in regard to stem cell research is wrong etc. These ideological positions set the stage for future disharmony in society as well as creating a stifled mindset in students.

A "vast majority" of Australians do not belong to a religious group at all. The real indicator of religiosity in a society is the number of regular church attendees. That figure is about 7 per cent and mainly from an older demographic. This clearly shows there is hardly enough interest in religion to warrant the government sanctioning the indoctrinating of students in state schools.

David Nicholls, President, Atheist Foundation of Australia

An Open Mind Is The Best Defence

The Age 26 April 2011

Philip Freier is wrong to claim that all children benefit from learning about Christianity (Comment, 25/4).

I would suggest that many more children would benefit from the knowledge acquired through the skills of critical thinking and application of process and objective inquiry. In doing so, they will read his contribution, query the many questionable claims, and find the numerous faults. More importantly, they will unearth the none-too-subtle agenda of organised religion to curtail the virtues of an open mind.

As a parent, I will ensure that my children will have as little working knowledge of the Bible as possible. Instead, I will offer them the opportunity to read and be amazed by advances in science, or view documentaries from David Attenborough or Brian Cox. I will exercise my parental obligation to teach them on what I think is right and wrong, inform them of the true origins of morality, and provide them with the analytical and social tools to live and coexist in mainstream society.

As a result, not only will their minds be free from the shackles of superstition and the servility of religion, but they will know both, as I do, when they see it – or read it.

Royce Symons, Geelong West

A Sequel to Draw Muhammad Day

www.SketchSepahi.com



By Hemant Mehta

Last year, it was important as ever to draw an image of Muhammad.

Those who had suggested doing it were being threatened. College students who actually drew Muhammad were accused of committing hate crimes.

All of it for drawing a picture – stick figures, even! – that some deemed offensive.

Islam forbids the drawing of Muhammad, so I understand if Muslims don't want to do it. But they have no right to silence your free speech.

This was never about pissing off Muslims. This has always been about standing in solidarity with everyone who wants to draw such an image – political cartoonists, the people behind South Park – but are forbidden from doing it. The extremists can't attack everyone, right?

So, once again, I'm asking you all to draw an image of Muhammad. It doesn't need to portray Muhammad in a negative way. Clever and funny images are far more effective. Stick figures are enormously popular. Be creative. Be brave.

After you draw Muhammad, send it to me. friendlyatheist@friendlyatheist.com

I'll compile as many as I can and post them on this site on May 20th, the anniversary of Draw Muhammad Day. I will protect your anonymity unless you tell me otherwise. It would be tough to surpass, but can we do better than last year?



Hemant Mehta graduated from the University of Illinois at Chicago with degrees in Mathematics and Biology. While there, he also helped establish their first secular student group, Students WithOut Religious Dogma (SWORD). He earned his Masters in Math Education at DePaul University and currently teaches high school math in the suburbs of Chicago.

He has worked with the Center for Inquiry and the Secular Coalition for America, received scholarships from American Atheists and the Freedom From Religion Foundation, and now serves on the board of directors for Foundation Beyond Belief (a charity organization targeting non-theistic donors) and the Secular Student Alliance (which creates and supports college atheist groups nationwide).

Hemant appeared on the front page of the Wall Street Journal and his book, *I Sold My Soul on eBay* (WaterBrook Press), was released in 2007. His blog, the winner of the 2011 Bloggie award for Best Weblog About Religion, can be read at FriendlyAtheist.com.

Leo Igwe in Australia



Leo Igwe is the director of the Centre for Inquiry in Nigeria. His humanitarian activities have seen him arrested and imprisoned by Nigerian authorities.

Canberra Skeptics has organised a speaking tour in every Australian state as well as the ACT in August and September 2011.

For further information on Leo's speaking dates please contact your state or territory Skeptics or Humanist organisation.



American Atheists Convention

Christopher Hitchens was scheduled to appear at the American Atheists convention, but had to cancel because of his illness. He sent this letter instead.

Dear fellow-unbelievers,

Nothing would have kept me from joining you except the loss of my voice (at least my speaking voice) which in turn is due to a long argument I am currently having with the spectre of death. Nobody ever wins this argument, though there are some solid points to be made while the discussion goes on. I have found, as the enemy becomes more familiar, that all the special pleading for salvation, redemption and supernatural deliverance appears even more hollow and artificial to me than it did before. I hope to help defend and pass on the lessons of this for many years to come, but for now I have found my trust better placed in two things: the skill and principle of advanced medical science, and the comradeship of innumerable friends and family, all of them immune to the false consolations of religion. It is these forces among others which will speed the day when humanity emancipates itself from the mind-forged manacles of servility and superstition. It is our innate solidarity, and not some despotism of the sky, which is the source of our morality and our sense of decency.



That essential sense of decency is outraged every day. Our theocratic enemy is in plain view. Protean in form, it extends from the overt menace of nuclear-armed mullahs to the insidious campaigns to have stultifying pseudo-science taught in American schools. But in the past few years, there have been heartening signs of a genuine and spontaneous resistance to this sinister nonsense: a resistance which repudiates the right of bullies and tyrants to make the absurd claim that they have god on their side. To have had a small part in this resistance has been the greatest honour of my lifetime: the pattern and original of all dictatorship is the surrender of reason to absolutism and the abandonment of critical, objective inquiry. The cheap name for this lethal delusion is religion, and we must learn new ways of combating it in the public sphere, just as we have learned to free ourselves of it in private.

Our weapons are the ironic mind against the literal: the open mind against the credulous; the courageous pursuit of truth against the fearful and abject forces who would set limits to investigation (and who stupidly claim that we already have all the truth we need). Perhaps above all, we affirm life over the cults of death and human sacrifice and are afraid, not of inevitable death, but rather of a human life that is cramped and distorted by the pathetic need to offer mindless adulation, or the dismal belief that the laws of nature respond to wailings and incantations.

As the heirs of a secular revolution, American atheists have a special responsibility to defend and uphold the Constitution that patrols the boundary between Church and State. This, too, is an honour and a privilege. Believe me when I say that I am present with you, even if not corporeally (and only metaphorically in spirit ...) Resolve to build up Mr Jefferson's wall of separation. And don't keep the faith.

Sincerely
Christopher Hitchens

Reprinted with permission from American Atheists. www.atheists.org

If God Exists, is He Worthy of Worship?

The Response of a Devil's Advocate

By Charles Cornwall

Let me say at the outset that I don't believe in the God of the Bible, or any other god for that matter. But, to get the brain cells working, let's just for a while and for the sake of argument pretend that the God of the Bible does exist and that the Bible is God's Word. I then ask: is this God worthy of our worship, homage, love, adoration and allegiance as the Church teaches and Christians believe? For this article I'm going to pretend that the God of the Bible is true. Then by using a devil's advocate approach I'll attempt to demonstrate from that same Bible that he is not – I repeat *not* – worthy of the veneration Christians give to him.



God, according to the Bible, has always been. He was never created and has always existed (Genesis 21:33, Psalm 90:2, Isaiah 40:28 etc.). Furthermore, from all eternity past, he has been omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent and a God of love (Genesis 17: 1, Psalm 139:7-8, Romans 11:33-36, 1 John 3:20, 4:16, Revelation 4:8, etc.). Now, if this God is eternal then these attributes were not of his doing for he always was and always was what he is now and ever shall be. There was nothing he did to make himself what he is because he has always been what he is.

Let me illustrate the point in human terms. There are two young ladies, one is beautiful and the other plain. Now while we might well admire the first one's beauty it is no credit to her. Her beauty is the result of her genetic makeup inherited from her parents. She deserves no more respect than does the plain lady unless she has done something to deserve respect. The two should be treated as equals. Conversely, if the plain lady uses her time and abilities for the benefit of society while the beautiful one selfishly uses her beauty solely to gain

popularity and make money to spend selfishly on herself, then it is the plain lady who deserves respect.

A person deserves respect for what they do not for what they are in essence – genetically prettier, stronger or more intelligent – with no input on their part. Certainly a person or thing can be admired for what they are in essence with no input on their part, but admiration is one thing, worship, veneration and allegiance another. Near our place is a truly magnificent gum tree, I admire it but I don't worship it as some ancient peoples would have done. It is not our duty, therefore, to worship the God of the Bible for being what he is because the nature of his eternal being could not have been of his doing – he just always was and always was omnipotent, etc. (difficult to swallow I know, but just remember the Bible is my source and I'm acting as devil's advocate). God, however, might be worthy of our veneration for what he has done (a matter I will address directly) but not for what he has been for all eternity past.

The unreasonableness of the adoration and worship of God can again be illustrated in human terms by reference to the British class system over the centuries. In medieval times the nobility controlled vast country estates. These lords of the manor lived lives of indulgence because their tenant farmers (vassals) did all the work. These poor folk were virtually owned by their masters, being treated almost as slaves. They could not leave their lord's employ or marry without his permission. They had to bow and scrape and tug their forelocks to their masters and lived in constant fear of being summarily dismissed, which meant losing their homes, if they somehow displeased their lord and master. In most cases the nobility did nothing to warrant the display of respect that was demanded of their vassals.

Then there is the matter of hereditary peerages. Because a man was born the eldest son of a Peer he became a Peer himself by right of birth. This entitled him to all sorts of privileges denied to common folk. This included being bowed to, spoken to reverentially and waited on hand and foot while he, in turn, could treat the commoner with disdain and disrespect. Many Peers did nothing to deserve this respect for, in many cases, they lived profligate lives. But woe betides the commoner who failed to show the respect the nobility "deserved".

Then there is the Sovereignty itself. Looked at

dispassionately, what automatic right has a queen or king to the homage paid to them just because they were born of Royal lineage? History records that many Sovereigns were cruel, sadistic, profligate and deserving only of being despised. By contrast, think of the "reluctant king", George VI, and how he battled to overcome his speech defect in order better to serve his people (brilliantly portrayed in the film *The King's Speech*). Then, during the London blitz, when the government wanted to relocate the Royal Family to Canada, the King and Queen refused and put their lives at risk in order to be with and bring comfort to their people. In doing so they earned the love and respect of the people by what they did. (While a much more egalitarian situation now exists in Britain, significant remnants of the class system still remain – life peerages, the House of Lords and the Sovereignty itself are all hangovers.)

From the two human examples given (genetic inheritance and the class system) the principle can be extrapolated that a person or god is not worthy of veneration for something that was not of their doing in any way at all. Homage, respect, worship has to be earned by what one does, not by what one is in essence. Thus God does not deserve our worship on account of what he is because, being eternally what he is, and having eternally had the divine attributes the Bible ascribes to him, his being and his attributes are none of his doing (Gobbledygook? Well just remember I'm temporarily acting as the devil's advocate with the Bible as my source). If God is deserving of our worship it has to be for something he has done.

This worship of God for what he is in essence rather than what he has done is based on the ancient idea of those who are deemed greater meriting the veneration of those who are deemed lesser. So far we have looked at this issue from the side of the deemed greater (in this case God), now let's look at the issue from the side of the deemed lesser (in this case humans).

The first thing we need to bear in mind is that, according to the Bible, it was God who made us. So God made us (Genesis chapter one etc.) and he made us in his image (Gen. 1:26). But he also made us "a little lower than the angels" (Psalm 8:5, A.V.). Now

there's a contradiction for you! First, we are made in the image of God (whatever that may mean) and then we are made a little lower than the angels – but it's what the Bible says. Putting aside this contradiction, the Bible, taken as a whole, makes it quite clear that we are inferior to God. But it was God who made us! If God made us as inferior beings does that give him the automatic right to our veneration? The situation was not of our doing.

Christians would respond by saying that worship is our duty because we are all sinners (Romans 3:23). Well, hang on a moment – whose fault is that? God, who made everything "very good" (Gen. 1: 31), also made the evil Devil and disguised him as a snake (Gen. 3:1) – yet another contradiction!. God then deliberately put this Devil or snake in the Garden of Eden with the calculated aim of tempting Eve, and because she succumbed all humankind thereafter must suffer (Psalm 51:5, Romans 5:12-21, 1 Corinthians 15:22). Not very sporting methinks. Does this piece of trickery on God's part mean that we lesser creatures owe him our veneration? As I see it, we have "sinned" because God stacked all the cards so heavily against us. We were born as imperfect, fallible beings tainted by Original Sin, that is, through no fault of our own, and we were born into a world of full of "sin and iniquity" (Psalm 51:5). Of course we are going to foul up at times: it is inevitable. It is our very fallibility that results in a predisposition to not always behaving as we should. If this is sinning, and the Bible says it is, then our sinning is, in the first instance, God's doing and not ours.

There are many truly evil people in this world but it sickens me when religious people who I know to be good, decent folk refer to themselves as "miserable sinners" and fall on their knees begging God's



Original sin - Tintoretto (Jacopo Robusti) (1552)

forgiveness. And what about that wretched hymn "Amazing Grace"? To hear good, decent people indulging in this unhealthy self-disparagement as they sing, "Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me" is sickening. There are wretches in this world but they are people who do wretched deeds. But for good, decent people who occasionally act in a less than worthy way simply because they are fallible human beings to think of themselves in this way is just sad, unhealthy nonsense. God does not merit our worship on account of what he is for that was not of his doing. By the same token God does not merit our worship for what we are because, in the first instance, that was his doing.

So this brings us to the next issue: is the God of the Bible worthy of our adoration for what, according to the Bible, he has done? Well, one could cherry-pick the Bible, as Christians are wont to do, and "prove" that he is. But if it's legitimate for Christians to indulge in this method of debate to prove their point then it's legitimate for me to do likewise to present the opposite point of view. So here goes:

- God created evil: Genesis 3: 1, Proverbs 16: 4, John 1:3
- God favours one nation (Israel) over others: Exodus chapter 3, Deuteronomy 7:6, 20:1-4, etc.
- God is a cruel and vicious murderer: 1 Samuel 15: 1-3, Joshua chapters 11 & 12, etc.
- God requires belief in Jesus as the only right of entry into heaven – the alternative being the fires of Hell, even for good people: Matthew 22:1-14, John 3:15-18, 8: 24, Mark 16:16 (A.V.), Revelation chapter 19

- God views women as lesser than men: 1 Corinthians 11:3, 7-10, 14:34-36, 1 Timothy 2:11-14
- God demands the death penalty for homosexuals and denies them entry into Heaven: Leviticus 20:13, 1 Corinthians 6:9-10
- God endorses slavery: Leviticus 25:44-46, Ephesians 6:5-8, Timothy 6:1-2

If space permitted I could go on and on with many similar references; nevertheless these few Biblical passages are sufficient to strike directly at the very core of the Christian claim that "God is love" (1 John 4:8). So, even if the Bible were reliable, it can be demonstrated from the Bible that God does not merit our veneration for what he has done any more than for what he is in essence. And to this can be added the fact that my cherry-picked passages from the Bible directly contradict those cherry-picked by Christians. This, of course, demonstrates the fallacious nature of the Bible and so the question of God's right to our veneration is, in fact, not even relevant in the first place. So, when all is said and done, the most sensible thing to do is not to believe in the God of the Bible at all.

This is the finding of this devil's advocate, theological graduate, former ordained minister of religion and, for the last twenty years or so, confirmed atheist, Charles Cornwall.

(All references are from the 1962 Revised Standard Version of the Bible except where signified otherwise, viz., A.V. = Authorised Version of 1611)

Charles has had to resign from the Committee and Public Relations team due to ill health but still hopes to submit articles for the magazine from time to time . Ed

The Abimelech Society

The Abimelechs are an association of Atheist men and women who remove the Holy Bible from hotels, motels, hospitals, jails, and many other places.

The association was founded in Canada in the 1960s by a couple of Freethinkers who, in a hotel room, found the only reading material to be a Gideon Bible. Angered by this overt propaganda, they moved into action.

Thousands of Bibles have been withdrawn from circulation and destroyed.

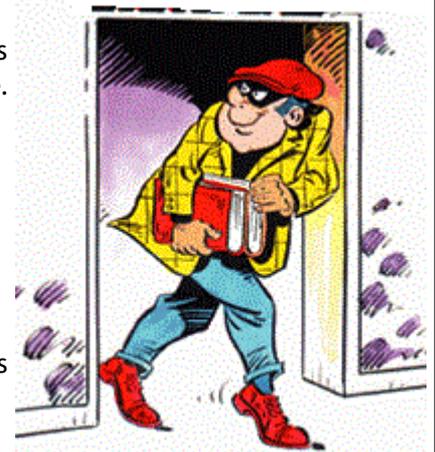
The Abimelechs are named after the bastard son of Gideon.

In Judges 9, Abimelech thwarts the work of Judge Gideon.

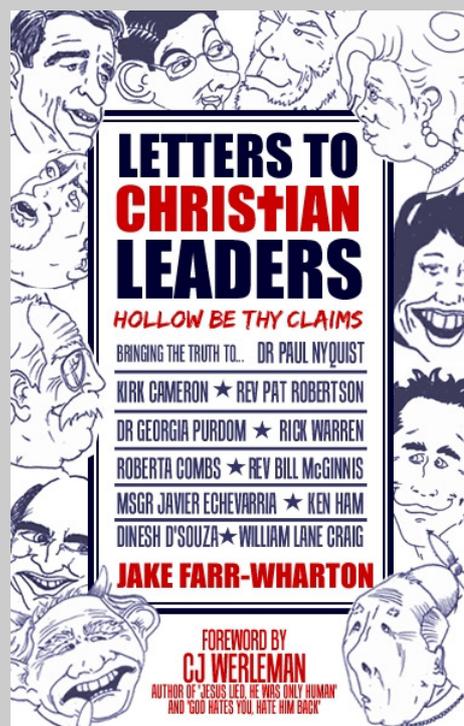
Gideon had destroyed many tribes whose religious beliefs differed from his conviction that Yahweh was The One True God.

Source: Cliff Walker

Positive Atheism www.positiveatheism.org



Book Review



Letters to Christian Leaders

By Jake Farr-Wharton

The arbitrary persecution of Christians, perpetrated by Atheists, has gone on long enough. It is totally, completely and utterly unfair that Christians receive this constant barrage from Atheists who base their attacks on what they think Christians believe. With this in mind, this book analyses the sermons and articles of some of the most prominent Christians in America (and those other inconsequential 'non-American' countries).

Using facts, evidence and logic – and a dash of toilet humour – this book eviscerates the statements and claims made by these 'Christian Leaders' – these fishers of men and shepherds of 'sheeple'. The only reason you would still call yourself Christian after reading this book is if your name is Christian, which is regrettable, but understandable (though you should really consider changing your name). Blind faith is not a virtue; it's a delusion.

The brilliant mind of Jake Farr-Wharton has targeted its wrath toward Christian leaders and it's not a fair fight. "Letters to Christian Leaders" is a flip of the light switch that illuminates and reveals the destructive, irrational and immoral substance of so much that comes from prominent Christians.

"Letters to Christian Leaders" is a book that needed to be written. Jake Farr-Wharton takes on several Christian leaders directly and rips their positions to shreds. This is no mere analysis or summary of what prominent Christian leaders think, say and write. This is all-out nuclear war. Jake takes no prisoners and shows no mercy. He doesn't want to defeat these people in debate; he wants to expose them as village idiots and turn the mob against them.

Jake's intelligent assault on various religious leaders is as ruthless as it is relentless. On page after page, he pummels them with reason, facts, science, common sense and arguments from the moral high ground. I almost felt sorry for Rick Warren (almost) while reading Jake's response to the popular preacher's nonsensical teachings. The chapter on Dinesh D'Souza is excellent. Jake presents the perfect response to D'Souza's oft-repeated stupid/dishonest claim that atheism is the greatest evil force and killer of innocents in all of history.

What makes this book special is that its no-holds barred, burn-down-the-house tone is easy to digest because of the humour. What could have felt like a bitter and hateful rant by the midway point is instead a fun ride the whole way. The book achieves this thanks to frequent jokes sprinkled amidst raging condemnations of influential people who spend every day working hard to make the world dumber and more dangerous. Jake Farr-Wharton is as funny as he is intelligent.

"Letters to Christian Leaders" is an enlightening and entertaining gem of a book that has the potential to make the world a little less crazy. I highly recommend it.

Guy P. Harrison, author of *50 Reasons People Give for Believing in a God* and *Race and Reality: What everyone should know about our biological diversity*.

Letters to Christian Leaders; Hollow Be Thy Claims (2011), is published by Dangerous Little Books (www.dangerouslittlebooks.com) and distributed/sold through Amazon.com.

Freedom of Religion and Belief in 21st Century Australia A Review of the Report

By Peter Taylor

During 2010, two hundred and seventy-four religious organisations, nine non-religious organisations, and thousands of individuals sent submissions to the *Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission* inquiry called: *Freedom of religion and belief in 21st century Australia*. The report that finally surfaced at the end of March 2011 is a selection of quotes from submissions, followed by a summary and conclusions but no recommendations.

While the content of both religious and secular submissions held no surprises, the Report's definitions of *religion* and *secular* did astonish. According to the researchers; "Religion can be taken to refer to an organised form of maintaining, promoting, celebrating and applying the consequences of engagement with what is taken to be ultimately defining, envioning, totally beyond, totally other, and yet profoundly encountered within life. These activities are usually done by or in association with a group, an organisation and/or a community."

After untangling my brain I discovered that the HREOC researchers prefer to speak of "civil society" (in which it is assumed that religion and state are separated in some way) rather than use the term "secular society", because of confusion about the meaning of secular, which they define in the following four ways:

(i) The common practices and institutions – including the state – which are not grounded in some faith or adherence to God and where religious institutions are separate from political institutions, religion is largely a private matter, and politics can be done without God.

(ii) The absence of reference to God from public debate about economic, cultural, political, educational, professional, recreational ... activities. These spheres acting on their own internal principles without reference to any authoritative prescriptions of religious authorities. *In this sense, secularity means the turning away from God, the denial of God's existence and the fall in religious practice. It can imply an aggressive antipathy towards religion.* [My emphasis]

(iii) A move away from a traditional society where belief in God is unproblematic and a world without

God incomprehensible, to a changed modern society where theism is one option – albeit perhaps embattled – among others, and difficult to accept. Other options emerge from science or different forms of reasoning. This third meaning takes a more holistic perspective, emphasising how cultures differ in the degree to which they enable or discourage belief in God or openness to mystery.'

(iv) A belief in no religious belief – such as is found in atheism, agnosticism, secular rationalism or Humanism. [Yes, that's right, a belief in no religious belief.]

As expected, many Christians claim that Australia was founded as a Christian Nation and remains so, although statistics included in the report deny this.

The *2009 Australian Survey of Social Attitudes* by the *Australian National University*, found that 56 per cent of Australians disagree with the proposition that: 'there is something beyond this life that makes sense of it all'. Furthermore, a massive 61 per cent of Australians said that religious faith or spirituality *are of little or no importance* in shaping life's decisions, such as career, relationships and lifestyle.

In response to the question: 'Which philosophy of life has had most influence on how you live today?' 40 per cent of Australians were influenced by non religious philosophies such as humanism, 'nature' etc. Or did not nominate any influencing philosophy. Only 39 per cent nominated Christianity.

According to the authors of the report, the growth rate of the Australian population is 5.79 per cent per annum. The growth rate of atheists is 29.2 per cent; agnostics: 22.2 per cent; Humanists: 60 per cent; Christianity, on the other hand, is moving backwards, their 'growth' rate being minus -0.62 per cent per annum.

The main body of the report is composed of excerpts from submissions from organisations and individuals. The Atheist Foundation of Australia, the Council of Australian Humanist Societies and the Rationalist Society of Australia are among the secular organisations quoted, while submissions suggested by numerous groups and individuals were usually prefaced by a comment such as; 'Many secularists thought...'

Secularists argued for the need to not only consider freedom of religion, but also to uphold the right to 'freedom from religion', and disputed the notion that religion has a monopoly on morality. Secularists also dislike their placement within the framework of religion, especially in the Census.

Some faith groups argued that secularists or atheists have strong world views akin to religious views, and should be seen as such. (Perhaps atheists should pursue this line and demand the same financial benefits as religious organisations.)

The Humanist Society of Western Australia said that those who speak on behalf of religious organisations or groups are entitled to speak only on behalf of their organisation ... They are not entitled to speak (as many of them do) on behalf of someone they call God. In making the claim to speak on behalf of a higher authority (whose existence is open to severe doubt), they avoid the necessity to argue their case on rational grounds.

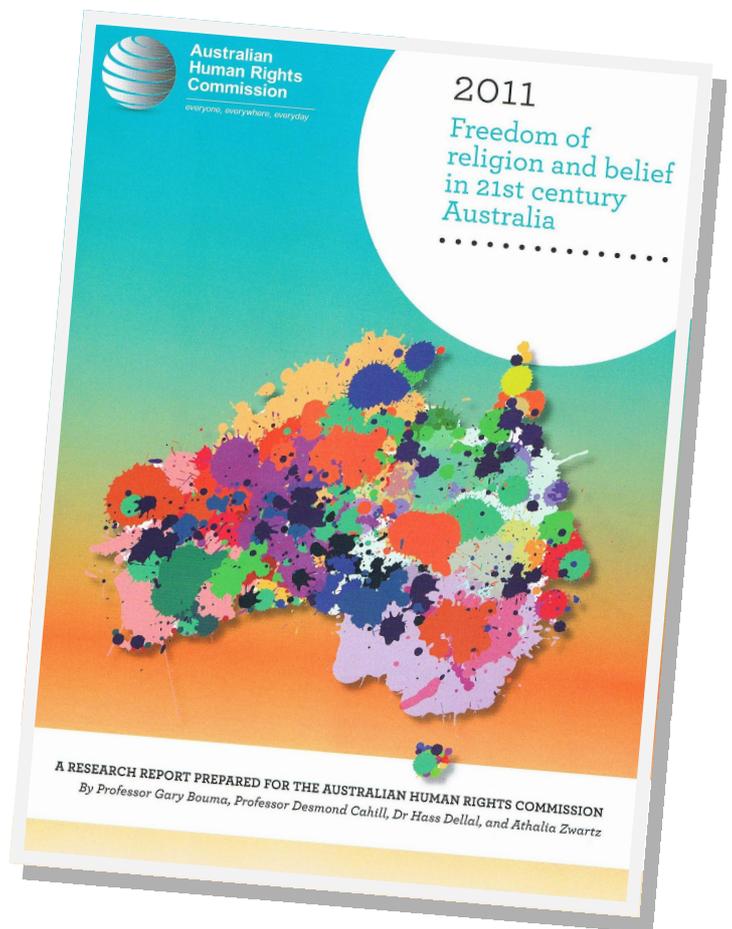
Several Christians were concerned by "aggressive secularism", which they see as being opposed to democratic principles in that secularists do not respect different views and, as such, are holding to a double standard whereby Christian views are dismissed because they are religious, and secularist views are unchallenged.

No religious submission appeared to understand or appreciate the nature of a secular government.

The Presbyterian Church in Western Australia wrote: "In general, the Presbyterian Church of Australia does not typically participate in interfaith initiatives, partly because of concern that such initiatives are often predicated upon a theoretical commitment to philosophical pluralism which is problematic from our theological perspective."

Trevor Sullivan appeared unconcerned about political correctness when he wrote: "We respect people of all faiths and love them as we love all men, but this absurd assumption that we can work together to make the world better by compromising our own faith and accommodating the many and varied faiths of others is unacceptable and deeply offensive to Bible believing Christians ... Christ did not advocate this mingling and working together with the heathen for the betterment of society. He taught that we should tell all men that He is Lord and that every knee shall bow to Him!"

The Major Issues and Theology Foundation insisted that the notion of human rights had roots in medieval theology, and declared that the right to freedom of belief



was more foundational to the human person than rights of a political and economic nature.

Many Christians demanded that religions be free to follow their doctrines, even if opposed to human rights.

Many secularists were concerned about the undue closeness between the institutions of the Christian church and the government in running welfare. One participant recalled his experiences of looking for work and finding that employment services were dominated by Christian organisations. He stated that, when his faith was known, he received no assistance. Anecdotal examples were given of people turned away, treated differently or ostracised because of lifestyle choices, or judged and deemed as wrong and immoral, and not receiving the assistance that the organisations were funded to provide.

Most religious organisations thought religious freedoms for maintenance and practice of their faiths needed better protected in legislation.

Secularists argued that legislation should protect people from religion's desire to impose its views on all people. Freedom from religion was a commonly articulated phrase in considering freedom of religion and belief.

Some religious *people* reckoned anti-vilification laws were anti-democratic because rather than increasing

understanding and building relations between religious traditions, they tended to increase ignorance and breed hostility and mistrust.

One of my favourite quotes was: "I think the Christian faith is reasonable. I don't think the view of God in other religions is reasonable."

Secularists argued that courses in comparative religion should be developed and introduced into all public and private schools to break down ignorance and foster spiritually literate children. The introduction of such courses should be a condition of government funding to non-government schools.

The Christian Brethren Churches endorsed the decision of government to provide chaplaincy, and asked that nothing be done to suppress religious freedom on those chaplains in carrying out their tasks.

Many faith-based schools said they believed that teaching was not just about transmitting facts to students, but depositing faith in students, having a faith and an ability to articulate and communicate that faith and pass it on, and that this was a legitimate function of schools.

Secularists stated concern about the indoctrination of children because it was their right to grow up and make up their own minds – but with the funding of faith schools, the state was paying for the indoctrination of children.

The Ad Hoc Interfaith Committee wrote that religious beliefs about sex and sexuality may need protection as a right of the manifestation of religion. This includes the religious belief that homosexuality is wrong.

Several church groups defended gender inequality by stating that biblically there was equality in salvation, but not in terms of roles performed. The Anglican Deaconess Institution Sydney Ltd shared this view.

Several Christians expressed significant distrust of Muslims and Islam.

Muslims reported discrimination against them and other religious minorities.

People of pagan belief reported high levels of prejudice, discrimination and a lack of recognition of their beliefs. These statements were validated by the sentiments expressed in some submissions.

All religions exhibited some prejudice and hostility toward gay people, including employing gay people,

particularly in faith-based schools.

Some Conclusions of the Researchers.

(There are no recommendations.)

- Increase in religious diversity and the emergence of significant religious communities have changed the context of the consideration of issues related to freedom of religion and belief.
- The accommodation of genuine religious differences has not become easier.
- Religious leaders have a key role to play, through both example and teaching.
- The Australian Human Rights Commission needs to continue to monitor issues of freedom of religion and belief, including non-belief.
- The Commission also needs to foster a discussion about the view that religious rights are absolute.
- There is a need to develop appropriate responses to the unique and varied Australian religious contexts and settings, including ancient indigenous traditions, Christian heritages, and minority faith communities.
- There is a pressing need for education about religions to reduce ignorance and fear while promoting intergroup respect.

After reading the report I felt disappointed but then realised I tend to project my own values onto others, thus I imagined that a human rights and equal opportunity commission would be dedicated to fostering those things. But nowhere in the name is that actually suggested. In the present instance, it is difficult to believe that the commission was impartial in its approach when you read on the inside cover under acknowledgments: "The Commission and the Australian Multicultural Foundation would like to thank all those who participated in the research process, and Jim Wallace of the Australian Christian Lobby for assisting with organising additional consultations."

This frank admission of bias is a timely reminder that devoutly religious people, like gays, are everywhere, and often in pivotal positions, leaving me less than confident about Australia's secular future. Perhaps, like our triennial-popularity-poll version of democracy, the real purpose of some reviews and enquiries is simply to allow the disgruntled to let off steam, permitting bureaucracy to continue as usual.

Atheist Alliance International

It's an exciting time for Atheist Alliance International (AAI) as it evolves from a largely US group with international members into a separate US group and an international group. The new AAI, to be launched at the Dublin convention in June 2011, will be a network of national and large regional atheist and other freethought groups from around the world (including the US group formed from the separation, which is yet to be formally named). AAI will be a positive voice for atheism at the global level, with activities including:

- facilitating cooperation and information flow between its members.
- supporting atheist conventions around the world, such as the one hosted by the Atheist Foundation of Australia (AFA) in Melbourne last year.
- assisting the establishment of new atheist/freethought organisations in developing countries, including projects such as the Kasese Humanist Primary School in Uganda.

Post separation AAI will be guided by its new board, to be approved by members at a meeting on 3 June 2011 in Dublin. The nominees for the new board, including three AFA members, are:

Officers
President: Tanya Smith (Australia) AFA Public Relations Team member and committee member for the 2010 Global Atheist Convention.
Vice President: Bill Ligertwood (Canada) Director, Kamloops Centre for Rational Thought.
Treasurer: Stuart Bechman (USA) Former AAI President.
Secretary: Shelley Mountjoy (USA) President, District of Columbia Atheists. (DCA)

Board-appointed roles
Secular World representative: Lee Holmes (Australia) AFA Treasurer, Editor *The Australian Atheist*, committee member 2010 and 2012 Global Atheist Conventions.
Individual members representative: Victor Franco (Australia) AFA member.

General
Carlos Alfredo Diaz (Argentina) Argentine Atheist Association.
Leandro Yampolsky (Argentina) Argentine Atheist Association.
Rene Hartmann (Germany) IBKA.
Kirumira Mpagi Micheal (Uganda) President, Atheist Association of Uganda.
Justin Trottier (Canada) Executive Director of CFI Ontario.
Boaz Adhengo - (Kenya) Executive Chair of Board, Jahwar Amber Humanist Fund.
Rupert Young (UK) Board member, Atheism UK.

We look forward to getting the new AAI up and running and hope you will support it!

Tanya Smith
The AAI Transition Team



\$40 What it'll cost you to send emails to loved ones left behind after the Rapture takes you to heaven, at youvebeenleftbehind.com

\$30 What it'll cost you for a year's subscription to **Secular World** magazine at www.AtheistAlliance.org/members/join-aa

Secular World

For Those of Us Living Life in the Here & Now

Annual Ezine Subscriptions*

Individual	\$30 USD
Household	\$40 USD
Supporting	\$50 USD



Add'l Years (paid at same time)

Individual	\$25 USD
Household	\$30 USD
Supporting	\$30 USD

*Ezine & Print Premium: USA add \$15/Year

Canada & Mexico add \$20/Year USD; Outside N. America add \$25/Year USD

*FT Student Rate: \$15 USD/Year (ezine only) Age 25 or younger, Photo ID from accredited educational institution required

www.AtheistAlliance.org/members/join-aa

ATHEIST FOUNDATION OF AUSTRALIA INC

MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

I/We agree with the Aims and Philosophy of the *Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc* and hereby apply for Membership

Full Name <input style="width: 90%;" type="text"/>	Forum Name <input style="width: 90%;" type="text"/>
Address <input style="width: 90%;" type="text"/>	
Suburb/ Town <input style="width: 90%;" type="text"/>	State <input style="width: 20%;" type="text"/> PC <input style="width: 20%;" type="text"/>
Email <input style="width: 90%;" type="text"/>	Phone <input style="width: 90%;" type="text"/>

Annual Subscriptions

Single (Inc. GST)	\$25.00	<input type="text"/>
Double/Couple/Partner (Inc. GST)	\$30.00	<input type="text"/>
Pensioner/Student/Unwaged (Inc. GST)	\$15.00	<input type="text"/>

5 Year Subscriptions

Single (Inc. GST)	\$105.00	<input type="text"/>
Double/Couple/Partner (Inc. GST)	\$135.00	<input type="text"/>
Laminated Membership Certificate (Inc. GST)	\$5.00	<input type="text"/>
Sticker - ATHEISM Celebrate Reason (Inc. GST)	\$5.00	<input type="text"/>

Donation

Total

Would you prefer your magazine sent by email? Yes No

Signature.....

Cheques/Money Order to - Atheist Foundation Of Australia Inc | Private Mail Bag 6 | Maitland SA 5573

Direct Deposit - Commonwealth Bank | Atheist Foundation Of Australia | **BSB: 065503 | Acc No. 10120389**

PLEASE enter your NAME into the reference section.

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.



a Celebration of Reason

GLOBAL ATHEIST CONVENTION
MELBOURNE • 13-15 APRIL 2012

www.AtheistConvention.org.au

www.facebook.com/atheistconvention

<http://twitter.com/atheistcon>

We welcome original articles, book reviews, letters to the editor, quotes and snippets for possible inclusion in *The Australian Atheist*.
All contributions are subject to Editorial approval.

Printed by Copy King



Digital Print Centre
18 Graves St
KADINA SA 5554
Ph: 08 8821 1781
Fax: 08 8821 1166
copyk@bigpond.net.au

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