

# The Australian Atheist

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**Atheist Foundation  
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Private Mail Bag 6  
Maitland SA 5573

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

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#### PROOF READERS

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 <p><b>AJB</b> AJBartlettCachia CHARTERED ACCOUNTANTS</p>	<p>276 Keira Street WOLLONGONG NSW 2500</p> <p>Email: <a href="mailto:info@ajbca.com.au">info@ajbca.com.au</a> Web: <a href="http://www.ajbca.com.au">www.ajbca.com.au</a></p> <p>Phone: (02) 4226 1000 Fax: (02) 4228 0907</p>	<p><b>ATHEISTS PROVIDING FOR ATHEISTS</b></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>
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# From the Editor

All systems are go! Everything is moving along smoothly with preparations for the 2012 Global Atheist Convention. With the announcement of a new speaker each Monday the excitement is building. We certainly have a fantastic line-up so far. And there are more to come. No, I can't tell you who they are yet: you'll just have to keep checking the Convention website each week. [www.AtheistConvention.org.au](http://www.AtheistConvention.org.au)

AFA members will be able to purchase tickets two weeks before the general public. All the details are on page 7.

The debate at Flinders University was very successful. Many AFA members came along, even from interstate. Our speakers were fantastic. Edited versions of their speeches as well as a review begin on page 8. It was a very busy day for David and me, the very early morning alarm (after a GAC Committee meeting the previous night), the nearly three-hour drive to pick up our speakers from the airport, on to the University for lunch, attending the debate, heading back to the hotel where our interstate member was staying for celebratory drinks and nibbles, taking Ian and Leigh to the airport and Matt to a backpacker hostel, and finally the long journey home. We sincerely thank our speakers for the incredible contribution they each made to make the debate an entertaining and thought-provoking afternoon.

The Census campaign is certainly making a splash on the social media pages. The Facebook page has received over 10,000 "I will be marking 'No religion' on the census" clicks which is very encouraging. When the billboards were erected many media outlets contacted the AFA and once again David and Jason took to the airwaves.

I haven't seen a billboard in all its glory yet but look forward to doing so. The comment we most hear about them is "they are big!" As is usual we receive emails either thanking us or condemning us to Hell. One disturbing email doing the rounds is telling everyone to mark Christian so the Muslims don't build a mosque in your suburb. Fortunately most people see it for what it is – xenophobic scare-mongering. Then there are others who want to think we are telling religious people to mark no religion. When explained that this is not the case and to read what we actually have to say, most see they have jumped in without knowing the facts. Then there are the people who, no matter what, won't concede that the campaign is directed at non-religious people and not to those who have a belief.

There are a couple of interesting talks in the near future, with the details on page 16. The Leo Igwe talks arranged by the Canberra Skeptics will undoubtedly be heart-wrenching, with stories of children accused of being witches and killed. The debate organised by St James Ethics Centre has the wonderful title "Atheists are Wrong." Jane Caro and Tamas Pataki, both speakers from the 2010 Global Atheist Convention are on the atheist side. A third speaker is yet to be announced.

The new Atheist Alliance International was launched at the World Atheist Convention in Ireland on 3 June. They had great speakers and I have included some of the talks in this issue.

Sit back, relax, and wait for the all-important email or letter with your personal code to purchase tickets for the 2012 Global Atheist Convention.

## Accommodation in Melbourne Important Notice

The 2012 Global Atheist Convention is being held one week after Easter. It is also the last week of school holidays in Victoria. Many people from interstate have already booked their plane flights and accommodation even though tickets are not on sale yet.

Be sure you make arrangements well before the event.

# Letters to the Editor

Dear Lee,

With reference to John Regan's letter (Issue 27 May – June 2011). I stared with disbelief (is that the right word?). Are we, as atheists, now dividing ourselves up into sects and cults as the do? I always thought our strength was that we were all individuals and now we are approaching 'My atheism is better than your atheism'. Where will it all lead? To an atheist pope who tells us the true atheism. The burning of heretic atheists.

**Garth Slade**

Dear Lee,

This is just a short note to express my deepest appreciation for the magazine.

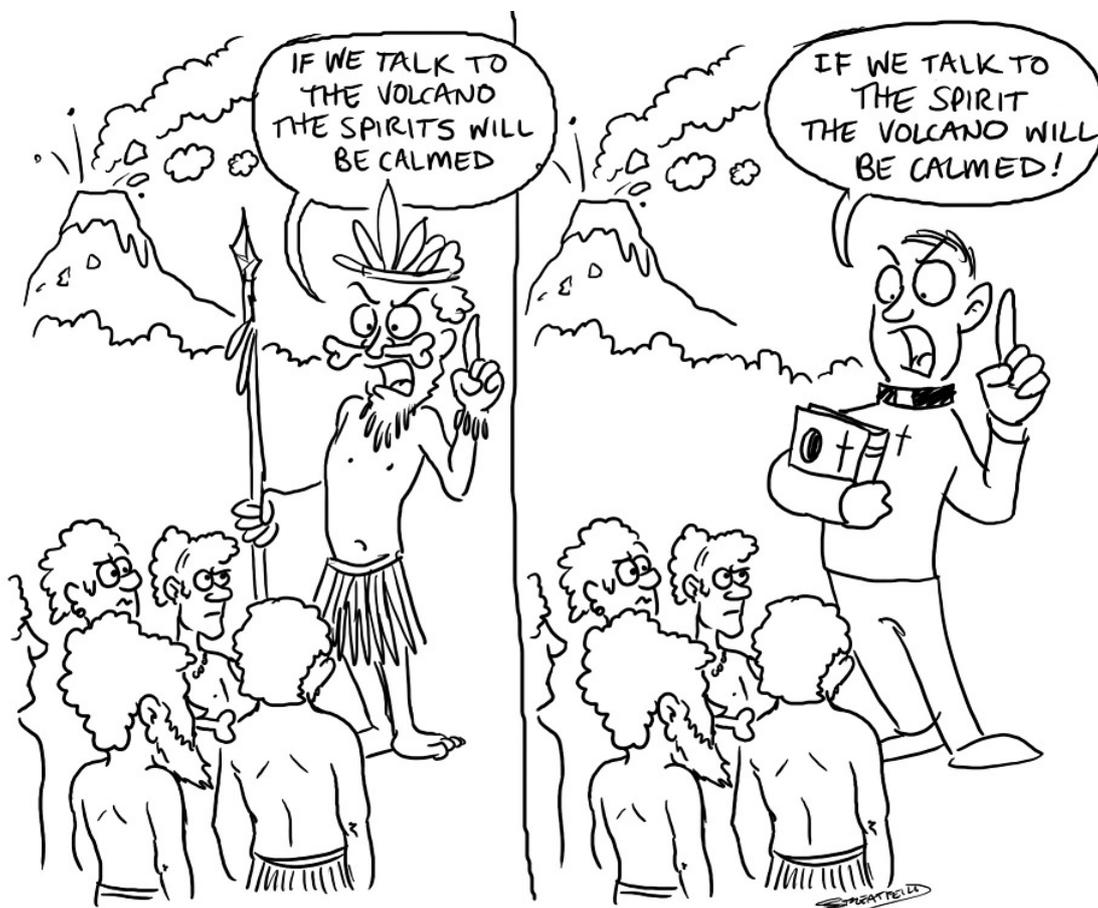
As the lone atheist within a family, plus cousins of religious zealots, the arrival of *The Australian Atheist* is a moment I have begun to cherish.

While my family have just about given up attempting to 'convert' me, a cousin still continues to bombard me with nonsense.

Recently she sent me a really 'delightful' DVD in which a US evangelist describes to his audience a visit to heaven at the invitation of god! Here he meets Abraham, King David, Paul and the two biggies. This trip, to and from, took 5 hours and 15 minutes, and, as he describes heaven as a planet, I believe that some science will need to be rewritten. On his return to Earth strangers reported to him that they noticed an unearthly glow to his face. He does not report that non strangers noticed the same effect.

It is incredibly sad that in our time people can still believe this absolute rubbish. So now you will understand why I welcome every copy of your excellent magazine.

**Barry**



# Media Release

The Atheist Foundation of Australia today erected billboards in nearly all Australian capital cities highlighting the 'Mark No religion' on the Census Campaign.

The President of the AFA, David Nicholls, said he hoped the signs would help the public at large to think about how they fill out the Australian Census this coming August on the question concerning religious affiliation.

"The question on religion asking 'What is the person's religion?' is a leading one," he said, "and it could sway people to mark their religion of baptism or early youth and not their present stance, which may be devoid of any faith.

"This can cause a distortion of Census statistics whereby religious people appear to be more numerous in society than they really are. Public policy can and does reflect these figures, which disenfranchises many groups in the community and unfairly favours religion," said Nicholls.

Only 7 percent of Australians regularly attend a church yet laws on voluntary euthanasia, equality for lesbians and gays, abortion, chaplaincy, effective sex education, religious indoctrination in state schools, stem-cell research and other areas are continually interfered with by some politicians following Christian dogma rather than empirical evidence.

People who are more interested in the contents of their pockets might like to reflect on the untaxed \$30 billion annually that goes to religion. Only a small unaccounted for percentage is used for charity. Every Australian is financially propping up religion to a massive degree.

"It is very important that people be honest with their answer to the question on religion in the Census," said Nicholls, adding, "No one has ever gone to hell for being honest."

## Where to view the Billboards

### NEW SOUTH WALES

75 Parramatta Rd,  
**Annandale**  
Pennant Hills Rd,  
**West Pennant**  
Victoria Road,  
**Gladesville**



### QUEENSLAND

147 Abbotsford Rd,  
**Bowen Hills**  
1015 Fairfield Rd,  
**Yeerongpilly**



### SOUTH AUSTRALIA

280 – 290 Hindley St,  
**Adelaide**



### VICTORIA

Western Hwy (Ballarat Rd),  
**Ardeer**  
2 North Rd (Overpass),  
**Huntingdale**



### WESTERN AUSTRALIA

509 Charles Street,  
**North Perth**



## CENSUS NIGHT IS 9 AUGUST 2011

This is a once in a five-year chance to make a difference to the false statistics supporting religion.

Write letters to the editor, phone talk-back radio, blog, Facebook and Tweet.

Make people aware of the AFA's  
"Mark No religion"  
campaign.

You can make a difference.

Thank you.

[www.CensusNoReligion.org](http://www.CensusNoReligion.org)

# Something From Nothing

By Dennis Southam

In almost every debate with religious apologists you will hear the argument 'How can something come from nothing?'. A variation on this is the question 'Why is there something rather than nothing?', but that requires the universe to have a purpose, which is a different discussion.

At first sight the 'how can something come from nothing' question seems convincing, and as a stand-alone question it is certainly a difficult one. Of course the unspoken answer from the religious apologist is: 'It can't, therefore God did it'. This is actually a rather weak argument. First, obviously something has come from nothing, but this is no reason to rush to the conclusion of a supernatural cause – there is simply no basis for that except laziness. Second, if you accept the 'God did it' answer, then clearly God did make something come from nothing, which sort of negates the original statement. The whole thing needs to be rephrased as 'something came from nothing, how did that happen?'

Christopher Hitchens generally answers the 'how can something come from nothing' question along the lines of maybe we don't know how something came from nothing, but there's a whole lot of nothing ahead of us. This is specifically to counter the argument that the universe is designed with us in mind. After all, we know that in about five billion years the sun will run out of hydrogen, and with its internal energy source shut down, gravity will cause the core to collapse. That collapse will generate enough heat to expand its outer layers, turning our Sun into a red giant that will expand beyond the Earth's orbit. We will be obliterated. But we may not last that long. We may well go the way of the dinosaurs, with all life on the planet wiped out by the

impact of a large meteor. Our galaxy, the Milky Way, and the Andromeda galaxy are on a collision course, and in about 3 billion years the two galaxies will collide. And if we somehow avoided all of these things by escaping to another galaxy, the universe will continue to expand forever, leaving us in a cold, dark place, very much filled with nothing. As Christopher Hitchens has observed, 'that's some design!'

But as it happens science now has some answers to this 'how can something come from nothing' question. One of the first things we need to do when addressing the idea of something from nothing is to realise that our intuitions about some natural phenomena are not necessarily a good guide to reality. We live in the macro world, but subatomic particles live by their own rules in the quantum world, and they make no sense to our macro-world brains. An electron, for example, can be in two places at the same time, which seems ridiculous based on our everyday understanding of the world around us, and yet it is true. In the same way we need to keep an open mind, and throw out all preconceived notions, when addressing the issue of 'nothing'.

When we try to visualize nothing, most people think about empty space, the region between stars and between galaxies. Here there is no matter, no radiation, just nothing. But this is where our intuitions already start to let us down. 'Empty' space is in fact a seething mass of virtual particles, particle-antiparticle pairs which pop in and out of existence. This is not just speculation, this is a verifiable fact and in accordance with quantum theory. Because of this phenomenon empty space, or 'nothing', actually weighs something, again stretching our intuition to the limit. But it gets worse, if that is the right word. A proton, one

of the main building blocks of atoms, has an internal structure consisting of smaller particles called quarks. But about 90 percent of the mass of a proton comes from the empty space between the quarks, not from the quarks themselves! Empty space is therefore responsible for about 90 percent of the mass of our bodies. This, by the way, provides one of the most accurate comparisons between theory and observation in science, being in agreement to some 10 decimal places.

Expanding this out to the universe as a whole, it turns out that about 70 percent of the total energy of the universe resides in empty space. This is what scientists call dark energy. Another approximately 30 percent of the universe is dark matter, leaving a little less than 1 percent for 'normal' matter and energy, i.e., us and the stars and planets. We are in fact substantially less significant in the scheme of things than we thought when we learned that Earth was just another planet in just another solar system, one of billions, of just another galaxy, one of about 100 billion in the universe. The universe was not really designed with us in mind, you would have to conclude.

Now here is the truly interesting bit. All of the positive energy of matter is exactly balanced out by the negative gravitational energy in the universe, such that the net energy of the universe is zero. Quantum fluctuations allow a zero energy universe to begin from nothing. The universe is in fact the ultimate free lunch. Something can come from nothing.

*Footnote:* Lawrence Krauss, the well-known American theoretical physicist, is bringing out a book on this subject early next year.

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



13-15 April 2012

2012 Global Atheist Convention ▶ Melbourne, AUSTRALIA

## Tickets for the 2012 Global Atheist Convention

AFA members will be able to purchase tickets commencing 18 August 2011.

This is two weeks before being officially available to the general public.

You will be sent a personal code by email, or for those not on the internet by hard mail in early August.

Please read the following carefully:

- ONLY financial members of the AFA will be given access to the code.
- Tickets will be sold online via [www.AtheistConvention.org.au/tickets](http://www.AtheistConvention.org.au/tickets).
- For those wanting to purchase tickets by phone a telephone number will be included in the mail out.
- There are three classes of tickets – Gold, General and General Concession. There is *no* Concession on the Gold.
- There are no One-Day Tickets.
- Current CentreLink pension/unemployment/carer/health care cards and Student Cards are accepted.
- Seniors Cards do NOT qualify as Concession.
- You will need to bring your Concession Card to the event. If you have purchased a Concession ticket but do not bring your card for verification you will have to pay the difference.
- All tickets will be sent by Registered Mail.
- Keep your ticket in a safe place. If you fail to bring your ticket to the event you will not be allowed to enter.
- The Saturday Night Dinner ticket is a separate ticket to the Convention ticket.
- Please choose your ticket carefully as all ticket sales are final. If you have purchased a ticket but are no longer able to attend the Convention no refund is available. In the unlikely event the Convention is cancelled, or a refund is required by law, liability is limited to a refund of the purchase price only. However, Convention tickets are fully transferable – you may sell or give your ticket to another person.
- If you purchase a concession Pass and then sell or give away the Pass, the person who receives it would either need to be entitled to a concession price or they would have to pay the difference upon collection of their Pass at the Convention.
- There is more information on the FAQ page at [www.AtheistConvention.org.au/faq](http://www.AtheistConvention.org.au/faq)

# DEBATE:

## Can There Be Good Without God

Flinders University,  
Adelaide  
7 June 2011



## Review

By Luke Murtagh

On a cold afternoon at Flinders University in the southern suburbs of Adelaide, South Australia, the debate started between the Theists and the Atheists. The topic was “Can there be good without God?”. Upon approaching the lecture theatre, there were flyers visible everywhere around campus. For the affirmative were the Atheists, represented by Ian Robinson, Leigh Raymond and Matthew McArthur. For the negative were the Theists, represented by Robert Potter, Steve Taylor and Mark Worthing.

North Lecture Theatre 3 in the Social Sciences building had a capacity of approximately 200, and the 70 attendees filled it comfortably. Geoff Anderson, senior lecturer from the School of Politics and Public Policy at Flinders University moderated the debate. It began with Ian Robinson, President Emeritus of the Rationalist Society of Australia, for the affirmative.

Ian argued that morality can't be objective, and is simply a subjective opinion. He also argued that we should accept the subjective opinion of the human race evolved over time. He then went on to debate the validation (or lack thereof) of events in the Bible, and criticised Christians who rationalise the contradictions in the Bible. Human morality is a work in progress, and constantly refines its moral sensibilities. The Bible has out-dated moral injunctions, which makes Christians look silly. We derive our morality from an extra-biblical sense of what is right and wrong. One needs to look at evidence. Christians derive morality from the Bible by cherry-picking the good bits, and rationalising the bad bits. He concluded that the Judaeo-Christian God has a strong record of unjustly punishing people for the sins of others (and gave multiple examples), and these are innocent people, including his own son.

First to represent the Theists was Robert Potter, academic from the Flinders University Department of International Relations. He stated that the debate was about moral autology (is there such a word?) and what makes good 'objective'. The team was defending the intention that God is a foundation for all morality. Atheism doesn't have a firm foundation of objective morality. There needs to be some objectivity with regards to morality. Morality is a biological adaptation, and is an aid to survival. Christianity takes God to be a maximally superior being. He supplies supreme command. Atheism has no metaphysical basis, and morality is left to the realm of the individual. Morality is not just a basis of the genetics of man. If genetics provides the basis for morality, then it is arbitrary. In summary: no objective morality exists with Atheism, and Theism provided the better option.

Next to take the stand was Leigh Raymond, who is studying psychology and philosophy at Melbourne University. She stated that we don't always have conscious access to our moral judgement. The position 'I'm good because of God' contradicts evolutionary evidence. From the perspective of evolution, morality comes from competition for survival. Characteristics important to the social animal are attachment, bonding, reciprocity, empathy and sensitivity to the rules of the group. This is part of our neurological wiring in order to provide survival benefits.

Leigh gave the example of the vampire bat and reciprocal donations of blood they give in order to survive. It is clear to an impartial observer that there is an underlying group survival mechanism to their altruism. We have an innate moral toolbox. Jonathan Haidt was then quoted, and his *Moral Foundations Theory*, identifying five moral values shared consistently across different cultures. These are: *Care for others*, protecting them from harm; *Fairness in justice*; *Loyalty to the group*; *Respect for tradition*; and *Purity*. Religion has its roots with implementation of these ethics. The

Bible has contradictions and vagueness. Functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) gives an enormous degree of insight into our own moral make-up. The amygdala in the brain is activated when people think about committing a moral transgression. If the amygdala is damaged, or fails to develop, then there will not be good, God or no God.

Steve Taylor then presented for the Theists. He is Director of Missiology Uniting College for Leadership and Theology. He made reference to the Creation, and stated that the people who wrote the Bible were 'incredibly close to God'. Judgement of a society is reflected in how they treat the most vulnerable. He referred to when the Plague hit Rome, the Christians stayed while everyone else fled (including the doctors). Ultimately, he argued that a script expects a performance. If a religion is violent, then one needs to find a new religion. He finished with 'How can God and goodness be separated? The answer lies with the weakest of society.'

Matthew McArthur then finalised the argument for the Atheists. He argued that not only do we not need God to be good, but not having God is less likely to make us bad. Reference was made to soldiers on the front line, with only 25 percent involved in effective fire. The rest were aiming high, not selecting a target. There is something in the human psyche that prevents us from killing each other. What is effective in war is dehumanising the enemy, as though they were dogs. Identifying them as having a different religion helps with that process. It was used in the 1960s to justify killing in Vietnam: 'They are enemies in the eyes of God'.

Other religious doctrines are against those that don't adhere. They can do whatever they want because they believe that God will forgive them. Religious charity is one of the great benefits of religion. One does this out of fear because of the promise of eternal life, either way. One is threatened with the stick of hell, and encouraged with the carrot of heaven. This is false motivation. The Red Cross and Médecines Sans Frontières are excellent examples of doing good for goodness' sake.

Being Christian will get them out of guilt for harming other people. One should look at the harm their religion does. If God exists, we can be made aware of goodness. However, God said it's good to kill babies. So if God can't change what is good and bad, then he is not the omnimax<sup>1</sup> God.

Last to present the Theists was Mike Worthing. He started off by saying that 'Christians do not believe that only Christians do good. Atheists can also do good, but can also do evil.' He argued there is a logic and coherence of thought in the Theistic position. Atheists challenge to unravel this tradition to come up with a moral foundation. Is there any evidence for an objective moral foundation than there is for the existence in God? Why would Atheists bother to answer this question? There really is no such thing as moral objectivity. He then stated that it was destructive for Atheists to argue against the existence of God.

Then it was question and summary time, which tested both teams and their ability to think of answers on their feet. The debaters also dealt with some thoughtful questions from both atheists and theists in the audience.

Finally, Geoff Anderson stated that it was not a debate that will be settled today. It was an issue of Scripture verses Philosophy. Julia Gillard, our Atheist Prime Minister, states she gets her morality from the Bible. She may argue both sides! There was no vote in the end, and after all was done, the two teams intermingled and carried on their discussions in a very civilised manner.

What was clear is that both teams had very different perspectives on moral and philosophical issues. Personally, I felt the presentations of the three Atheist speakers were very well researched and articulated, especially Leigh's. Steve Taylor's argument lost me, especially as he was clearly quite profoundly religious, and even admitted to have personal contact with God during question time. I found Mike Worthing's presentation highly contradictory, and almost against what the team was trying to achieve. That being said, it is interesting to hear the perspectives on both sides, so that one can further understand them, and use it as food for thought to come up with further secure arguments to defend one's position. I strongly recommend members of the AFA to attend any future debates, wherever they may be in Australia. If you are interested in debating, put your hand up as a possible contributor. If you plan to be a spectator, have some interesting questions up your sleeve to test the debaters. I then raced back out into the cold with my mind buzzing with the exchanges between the two groups. I thoroughly look forward to the next debate between Theists and Atheists, wherever it may be and whatever the topic may be presented.

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<sup>1</sup> A shorthand expression for a deity that is omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, and/or omnibenevolent.  
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Omnimax>

*Luke Murtagh is a member of the AFA Committee.*

The topic of this debate is “Can there be good without God?” In other words, where does our notion of good come from? Does morality come from human beings or does it come from God?

Some people claim morality must be ‘objective’. But morality is a human construct, it is not part of the objective world. All morality is subjective, and based on someone’s subjective view.

So the question boils down to: Whose subjective opinion on what is good should we accept? Should we accept the subjective opinion of God? Or should we accept the collective subjective opinion of the human race?

We are atheists but, for the sake of argument, let’s entertain the hypothetical: if God exists, is he a credible source of morality? And let us assume that it is the Judeo-Christian God we are talking about.

We all know what this God wants us to do, don’t we? It’s in the Bible. God’s word.

But it’s not as simple as that. The Bible is mired in uncertainty and controversy. Christians have been arguing about its meaning, and even killing one another over it, for two millennia.

Even if we confine ourselves to the *Gospels*, there are huge problems of reliability:

- There is virtually no non-biblical validation of the events it describes so its veracity is by no means certain.
- The stories are second- or third-hand accounts written down many years later.
- They have been subjected to editing by biased re-writers.
- Each of the four gospels has differing accounts of what occurred – this means at the very least they can not all be right and perhaps none of them are.

One of the key features of evolving human morality is that it is a work in progress. As the human race has gained more knowledge and more empathy, it has refined its moral sensibilities and made better quality moral judgements. For example, our moral understanding of slavery, of the rights of women and of homosexuals, and of the importance of social justice, have all advanced since the time of Jesus. But Christians are stuck with a two-thousand-year-old text, containing out-dated moral injunctions.

For instance, the New Testament explicitly supports the

subjugation of women. Contemporary advocacy of the rights of women amongst Christian feminists derives therefore not from the Bible but from our extra-biblical sense of what is right and wrong.

Before people confer on God the status of sole subjective arbiter of good and evil, don’t they have a moral responsibility to do due diligence?

Don’t they have a moral duty to ask themselves whether the Judeo-Christian God is the sort of deity one should pass responsibility for making moral decisions over to?

It is begging the question to say God would only chose the good. How do we know that? We can’t simply define God as good. Nothing is true simply by definition. We need to look at the evidence.

The evidence in the Bible is unfortunately not very favourable. The only way that Christians can come up with even a marginally acceptable morality out of the Bible is by cherry-picking the good bits and rationalising away the rest, such as executing gays and hating your father and mother. Surely we shouldn’t relinquish our moral compass to someone we can agree with only some of the time.

Virtually every intervention by God in human affairs described in the Bible has been bad news for somebody, from the ancient Egyptians and Amorites to the owners of the Gadarene swine and the barren fig tree. There are no win-win solutions as far as the Judeo-Christian deity is concerned.

Nor there is much justice. The Judeo-Christian God has an impressive record of unjustly punishing some people for the sins of others. According to God’s word:

- God punishes all mothers for the sins of Eve.
- God punishes all humans for the sins of Adam.
- God punishes all Egyptians for the sins of the Pharaoh.
- God punishes all Israelites because some of them had sex with the Midianites

And the list goes on ...

Such a God would have been cheering on the SS troopers in the Second World War, who punished the entire populations of French villages for the sins of a handful of resistance fighters; and cheering on the World Trade Centre hijackers, who punished a few thousand innocent New York office workers for the sins of George W. Bush.

And before anyone protests that this is all Old Testament stuff that we have left behind, don’t forget that the idea that all humans are punished for the sins of Adam is a cornerstone of Christian theology. And it gets worse. According to God’s word, the way God demonstrated to humans that he loved them – ‘for God so loved the world’ –

was to punish another innocent person for our arbitrarily assigned sins! And not just any innocent person, but his own son. Now I don't know about you, but if someone came up to me and said he loved me very much and to prove it he was going to have his only-begotten son tortured and horribly executed, I'd be inclined to make my excuses and edge quickly away.

And, maybe I'm dense, but it wouldn't occur to me to conclude that such a person had much of a grip on what constitutes moral behaviour, let alone that he should be the sole arbiter on what was good.

To sum up, if God exists,

1. his views on morality are just one set of subjective views amongst many;
2. it is difficult to know precisely just what those views are; and
3. to the extent that we do know what they are, they do not indicate an entity with a highly-developed and acceptable moral sense.

Not only is it the case that there can be good *without* God, it is extremely doubtful that there can be good *with* God.

## L R a y m o n d

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**T**he argument that we cannot be good without a god contradicts an ever-growing body of evidence in support of the evolutionary origins of humankind's best and worst behaviour. We are not the precious endpoint of loving creation, but an animal endowed with a fortuitously large but laughably inadequate frontal cortex. To attribute the fascinatingly complex nature of human moral behaviour to the mysterious workings of a god or the moderating influence of religious structure is to fall ridiculously short of the insight we are capable of as human beings.

Assuming that we share the empirically-supported view that human beings are the product of a process of replication and competition for survival, it follows that certain familiar characteristics would be of great benefit to a social animal. The following traits are not only common to all human cultures, but shared by primates, dolphins and whales:

*attachment and bonding, cooperation, sympathy and empathy, reciprocity, altruism, conflict resolution and peacemaking, deception and deception detection, caring about what others think about you, and sensitivity to the social rules of the group.*

As we all know, natural selection works without foresight or design. These behaviours are part of our neurological wiring as a result of the obvious survival benefits of being part of a group that exhibits such good behaviour.

Take for example the so-called Golden Rule or ethic of reciprocity which forms the basis of human rights, which is perhaps best known in its negative form: 'You wouldn't like it if someone did that to you, now, would you?' It is not at all surprising that a version of the Golden Rule features in some form in basically all religions, but those who would use that as an argument

for the inseparability of good and god are missing the broader point. Taking a more alien anthropologist view, we can see that this is as close as it gets to a universal maxim, and there are good reasons that it is embraced by sacred and secular systems alike.

One of the most fascinating examples of the golden rule in the animal kingdom is that of the vampire bat, which will die after 60 hours if unable to obtain enough blood for sustenance. Vampire bats have evolved a beautiful system of reciprocal altruism, in which bats most in need of food can solicit a regurgitated donation from a neighbouring bat. The benefits to the hungry bat outweigh the cost to the donor, and as their roles are often reversed, the exchange ensures a better chance of survival for the whole colony. It's difficult to imagine a more apt demonstration of the 'love thy neighbour' principle at work, so bear with me as I take the analogy a step further.

Suppose that an observant bat lover notices that what it is like to be a bat includes belief in a deity or a pantheon or even a trinity of bat gods, beyond echolocation yet omnipresent. To an outsider it's clear that, even though the bats might themselves be convinced that their behaviour was due to the laws set down in their chiropteral creed, as impartial observers we can see a clear underlying survival mechanism that explains their altruism. In other words we have no reason to suppose that, just because the behaviour of the bats is in line with their batty religious beliefs, the beliefs themselves are the root of the behaviour. This is just as true of people as it would be of the bats. We have no need of the god hypothesis.

Of course, a glance at the evening news is a telling illustration of the fact that there are other influences interacting with these moral intuitions. But given a sample size fast approaching seven billion, we are far more likely to observe good moral behaviour than bad. The presence of the Golden Rule across a variety of cultural structures is a powerful argument for the existence of a kind of innate moral toolbox which forms the basis of our moral decision-making.

The psychologist Jonathan Haidt has investigated the way morality varies between cultures, and has identified five fundamental moral values shared to a greater or lesser degree by different societies and individuals. These are:

1. Care: protecting others from harm.
2. Fairness: treating others equally.
3. Loyalty: to your group, family, nation.
4. Respect: for tradition and legitimate authority.
5. Purity: avoiding disgusting things, foods, actions.

It's interesting that a lot of disagreement between disparate religious groups, and between religious and secular groups, can be characterised in terms of which of these moral intuitions we value most highly. For example, fairness and justice frequently come into conflict with tradition and purity. Considering that these foundations clearly hark back to a time long before any of the religions currently in play in the world were even conceived, the logical conclusion is that religion has its roots in our instinctive implementation of these moral intuitions.

Recent developments in brain-imaging technology such as functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) are offering us an enormous degree of insight into our own moral make-up, as we can literally observe the brain's reactions to different ethical dilemmas. We've come to realise that our actions are frequently guided by emotions that are part of our cognitive equipment, and not analysed according to the dictates of an external moral framework.

We can gain a great deal of insight through the observation of those who don't conform to the norms of moral behaviour. A 2009 brain imaging study demonstrated that the amygdala (an area associated with complex emotional responses) is commonly activated when people even think about committing a moral transgression. Damage to this region inhibits the typical strong negative

reaction we have when confronted with images of fear, anxiety and violence. This lack of empathy is correlated with aberrant moral behaviour. You'll notice that there is no mention at all of god or religion in these studies. If the brain structures that provide the fundamental underpinnings of our moral behaviour are damaged or fail to develop, then we will not be good, god or no god. In the countless journal articles, investigations, experiments and statistical analyses regarding our moral intuitions there is no need to control for the possible existence of a divine being when crunching the numbers.

Far from casting us into some dystopian deterministic amoral nightmare, the discovery of the naturalistic origins of human moral behaviour leads to an ever more nuanced understanding of our tendencies and capabilities. In comparison with being mired in the prescriptive and stagnant edicts of religious belief, we have an opportunity to test and investigate our reasoning and our intuitions in order to further develop our understanding of our reactions to a morally complex world. The idea of an innate moral template doesn't entail the existence of a law-giving god. Moral standards are properties that we have that are contingent on the nature of how we got here. Our biases are evident in that they represent the optimal choice (from natural selection's perspective) to matters dealing with fidelity, cheating and killing. As in so many areas, religion can be viewed as a proto-science, offering a curiously self-aware animal with a penchant for a good narrative some explanations as to our origins in a world in which we appeared to be more sophisticated than the creatures around us. The very same inquisitive nature and reason that once suggested supernatural solutions has now produced a far more compelling alternative. Our pre-rational intuitions interact with societal influences and environmental context in complex and intriguing ways. We can investigate this relationship and understand it without ever misattributing it to the influence of a god.

## M M c A r t h u r

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I was less than thrilled with the topic chosen for the debate, as I feel that Epicurus and Plato answered the question in the title some time ago, but as society has yet to take their arguments on board, it's important to continue to discuss it.

I set out to follow on from Ian's argument that having God does not automatically equate with having goodness, and Leigh's case that our ethical sensibilities are a result of our evolution, to show that not having God makes us less

likely to be bad.

Dave Grossman, a psychologist with the US Army, has been researching killology: the psychology of getting people to kill. It's surprisingly hard to do. During the Second World War only 25 percent of front line soldiers were engaging in effective fire, that is, selecting a target, aiming a weapon and pulling a trigger with the ambition of killing a person. The other 75 percent weren't cowards. They didn't run, but they didn't try to kill the enemy. Some aimed wide, some didn't aim. The key was they couldn't bring themselves to take a human life, even when the other human was trying to take their own.

There is something in the human psyche that prevents us from killing each other, an important survival trait in a

communal organism. This mental block, thought to pre-date language in our development, makes us think killing is the wrong thing to do, even in extremely stressful circumstances. Religions that incorporate this deeply encoded instinct as doctrine are desperate for credibility. Writing down 'Thou shalt not kill,' and pretending it's a completely original idea is lame, but pointing to a mandate that agrees with us at a species level and claiming the rest of a holy book is therefore also credible is laughable.

A particularly useful mechanism for getting soldiers to kill an enemy is a process called dehumanizing: getting soldiers to think the enemy less than human and demoting the act of killing them to something less than murder. One dehumanising mechanism found to be especially useful in soldiers drawn from a religious community is highlighting that the enemy is of a different religion. Apostates are fair game. Psychological prompts such as this have been used throughout history, but are not confined to history. It is still used by military leaders today, and the essence of the logic is on show at the website of William Lane Craig, prominent Christian apologist, who states that god does no harm to innocent babies killed in his name because they will go to heaven. It would be interesting to see how he would incorporate that idea into an anti-abortion stance for pregnancies involving non-Christians.

Some point to the specific statements made by their religion to garner credibility for their faith, but I've yet to find a religion in which statements about peace and compassion are not coupled with loopholes through which oppression of minorities or heathens can be justified. Many contemporary theists are forced to ignore entire sections of their holy books to be good people. In Christianity, the doctrine of mercy, the idea that you can be forgiven anything, so long as you find forgiveness through Jesus, is a particularly dangerous idea because some people interpret it as a get-out-of-jail-free card. Theologians will rail against this statement, crying that such people are misinterpreting the Christian message, but I can't see the flaw in the logic. Flaw or none, some Christians are acting as though Jesus' grace gives licence to act poorly, so long as they don't die before asking for forgiveness. Misinterpreted theology or not, Christianity has allowed people to act very badly in ways a philosophy without a forgiveness clause may have prevented.

Turn the other cheek is another part of the Christian

message that can lead us to ethically poor outcomes. Turning the other cheek when someone smites you ensures selective pressure will see a community ruled by bullies as altruism, that hard-won evolutionary advantage which allows us to live in communities will disappear.

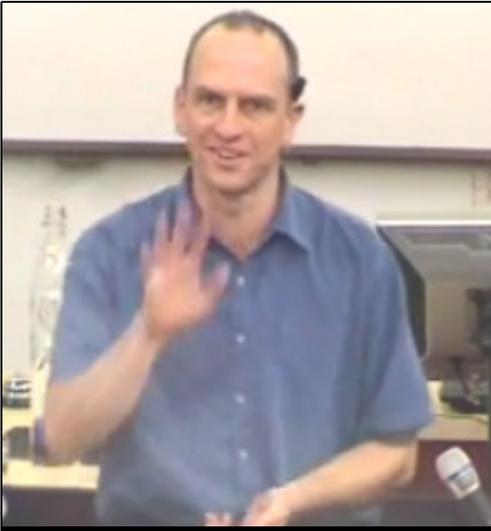
Some Christians cite the perfection of Jesus as an example to inspire goodness in others, but I find Jesus imperfect. I am not being trite when I cite the example of the fig tree Jesus cursed and caused to wither when it wouldn't give him a fig out of season. Harming a non-sentient entity for not working against its nature is an extremely petulant, spiteful act. There's more, but even a single flaw is enough to ruin pretence at perfection.

Religious charity is cited as a benefit religions provide societies, but the term is oxymoronic. Effort for reward is work. Effort in fear of punishment is slavery. As the only thing religions can offer that secular models can't is talk of eternal life, the motivation behind all religious activity is to get into heaven or to avoid hell. I don't think religious people are not charitable. I think they would perform charitable deeds regardless of their faith. I hope most of them are charitable and religious, rather than charitable *because* they are religious. Especially depressing is religious charity (*sic*) to make good problems caused by religion, such as the AIDS epidemic in Africa.

Totting up all the good things a religion has done to demonstrate its merit requires honest accounting and consideration of harm it has done as well. Citing Bach as the high point of divinely inspired humanity requires that Joseph Kony and his Lord's Resistance Army also be taken into account. Again, theologians rail and claim that such people are doing it wrong and misinterpret the Christian message, but the size of the net you use to trawl for merit in your faith is the same size net you should expect will be used when people examine the harm your faith does. Pointing to schisms as nodes beyond which faiths diverged can distance a person from actions they'd not enjoy association with, but becoming interfaith inclusive when later seeking praise would be disingenuous. Philosophers such as Kant have shown us that we can examine ethics from first principles. We don't need divinely inspired moralities to be good and the flaws in the religious models humanity has devised for itself make it easier for people using them to be bad.

**Scriptures, n.** The sacred books of our holy religion, as distinguished from the false and profane writings on which all other faiths are based.

**Ambrose Bierce (1842 - 1914),** *The Devil's Dictionary*



Matthew McArthur



Leigh Raymond



Ian Robinson

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**Can There Be Good Without God?**



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Steve Taylor

Mark Worthington



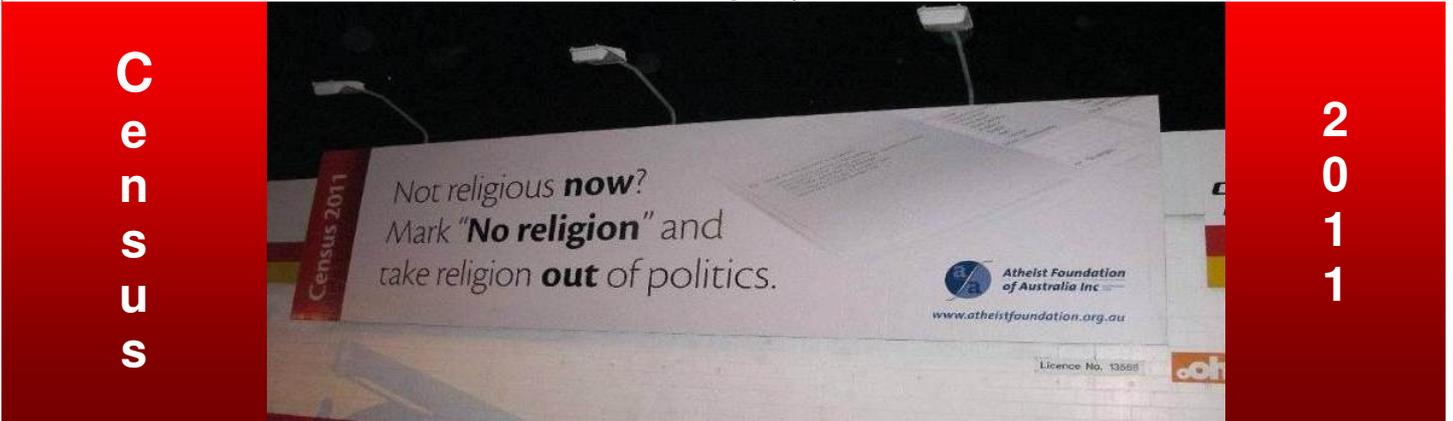
**Annandale NSW**



**Gladesville NSW**



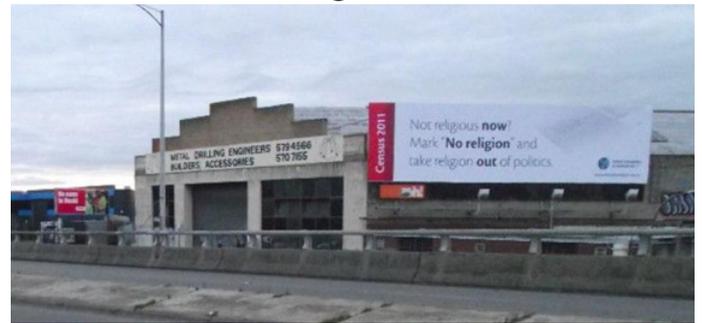
**Yeerongpilly QLD**



**Bowen Hills QLD**



**Huntingdale VIC**



**Ardeer VIC**



**West Pennant Hills NSW**



**Adelaide SA**



**North Perth WA**



# IQ2 debates: Atheists are Wrong

Having been persecuted as a dangerous minority for centuries, in recent years the champions of atheism have achieved celebrity status around the world. Atheists have been quick to point to the evils done in the name of religion and to claim that their criticism of religion is grounded in the demands of reason. Their opponents have championed faith as a source of inspiration and as an essential aspect of the human condition. However, beyond rhetorical skirmishes, in the end, just one fundamental question must be answered: does God exist?

City Recital Hall Angel Place  
2-12 Angel Place  
Sydney

6 September 2011

6:45pm to 8:30pm

Chair: **Dr Simon Longstaff**  
Executive Director  
St James Ethics Centre

## FOR

**The Most Rev Peter Jensen** is Archbishop of the Anglican Church, Diocese of Sydney and Metropolitan of the Province of New South Wales (since 2001).

**Dr Tracey Rowland** is the Dean of the John Paul II Institute, Melbourne and a Permanent Fellow in Political Philosophy and Continental Theology.

**Scott Stephens** is the Online Editor of Religion and Ethics for the ABC.

## AGAINST

**Jane Caro** is an author, lecturer, mentor, social commentator, columnist, speaker, broadcaster and award winning advertising writer.

**Dr Tamas Pataki** is honorary Senior Fellow at the University of Melbourne (School of historical and philosophical studies) and honorary Fellow of Deakin University.

**Speaker 3 TBA**

**Bookings:** [www.CityRecitalHall.com/book/id/1052](http://www.CityRecitalHall.com/book/id/1052)



## Witchcraft and Superstition in Africa

**Leo Igwe**, noted African skeptic and humanist, has paid the price of challenging religious fanaticism in Nigeria – beatings, detention and arrest. He will give the latest on irrational beliefs in Africa, including killing children for being witches.

### SPEAKING DATES

#### CANBERRA

18 August • 6 - 7:30 pm  
Optus Theatre,  
CSIRO Discovery Science Centre  
Clunies Ross Street, Acton

Dinner • 7:30 pm  
Canberra Club  
(Level 1, 45 West Row, Canberra City)

#### Bookings

[mail@CanberraSkeptics.org.au](mailto:mail@CanberraSkeptics.org.au)

•••

#### SYDNEY

20 August • 7:30 pm  
Ryde-Eastwood Leagues Club  
117 Ryedale Road, West Ryde

#### Bookings

[www.Skeptics.com.au/shop](http://www.Skeptics.com.au/shop) or  
(02) 8094 1894

#### MELBOURNE

25 August • 6 pm onwards  
La Notte Restaurant,  
140 Lygon Street, Carlton

#### Bookings

[vic@Skeptics.com.au](mailto:vic@Skeptics.com.au)  
(03) 9378 4414 or  
1800 666 996

27 August • 2 pm  
Victorian Trades Hall  
54 Victoria Street, Carlton South

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#### PERTH

27 August • 2 pm  
Trades Hall New Council Chambers

•••

#### HOBART

29 August • 6:30 pm  
Ball & Chain Restaurant  
Salamanca Place, Hobart

#### Bookings

[Paul.Turvey@gmail.com](mailto:Paul.Turvey@gmail.com)

#### ADELAIDE

30 August • 6 pm  
ABC Studio 520

#### Bookings

[LeolgweTour@internode.on.net](mailto:LeolgweTour@internode.on.net)  
(08) 8255 9508

Dinner • 7:30 pm  
Walkers Arms Hotel  
North East Road, Walkerville

#### Bookings

8344 8022 "with Leo Igwe group"

31 August • 1 pm  
Hetzel Theatre  
Institute Building  
Kintore Ave & North Tce, Adelaide

1 September • 7:30pm  
Effective Living Centre  
King William Road, Wayville

#### Bookings

[LaurieEddie@adam.com.au](mailto:LaurieEddie@adam.com.au)  
(08) 8272 5881



# New Atheist Alliance International Launched in Dublin, Ireland

**O**n 3 June 2011, Atheist Alliance International, with newly-elected President Tanya Smith, launched its new organisation. The launch coincided with the World Atheist Convention in Dublin, Ireland.

Tanya is a member of the Atheist Foundation of Australia, was on the 2010 Global Atheist Convention committee and is also a Public Relations team member.

Victor Franco and Lee Holmes, both from AFA, were also elected on to the board as Individual Member representative and the *Secular World* magazine representative, respectively.

AFA is honoured to have three of its members promoting atheism on the world stage. We offer our congratulations and look forward to AAI's continued success.

## Tanya Smith's Friday Night Launch Speech Presented at the World Atheist Convention, Dublin, Ireland

**A**theist Alliance International started in the US and it's only in the last few years that it has seriously ventured out into the rest of the world.

So when we thought about separating into two parts it raised a pertinent question, a question I've been asked a few times since I arrived in Dublin – why have an international atheist organisation?

The reasons for national organisations are clear to people – laws are country-based, countries have (to a large degree) a common language culture and issues to deal with.

But why international?

The first part of the answer is symbolic. The name Atheist Alliance International includes the word 'atheist'. It's perceived as a controversial word. It's a word that even the atheists can't agree on sometimes.

I think it should be a positive word. A word for people who have seriously thought about religion and concluded that it's just not true.

Personally, I don't mind if people choose to identify themselves as rationalists, humanists, freethinkers or anything else. Basically, we're all on the same side. And I look forward to the day when titles within the freethought community is actually one of our most pressing issue!

But I identify as an atheist: and that's largely because of the privilege that religion is afforded in our society; a privilege that says that views contrary to reason and evidence are somehow better, more influential, when they are based on old books. This is a privilege that underlies many of the laws and customs that disadvantage women, same-sex oriented people and other groups around the world, under the guise of 'respect for religion'.



**President of Atheist Alliance International,  
Tanya Smith**

An atheist identity is the one that most specifically rejects this privilege. One that stands up and says 'There's no god and that's fine, I can think for myself'. This is an identity that warrants international credibility. We can thank the speakers at this convention – and many others – for greatly enhancing atheism's standing in last decade. Atheist Alliance International can add to this position by being – and speaking out as a cooperative network of organisations and people around the world, illustrating that atheists can 'herd cats' and be effective agents of change.

The second part of the answer is practical. Organised religion is a long way ahead of organised atheism in terms of money and power. But we're gaining ground. We're gaining ground thanks to high profile atheists – including some we get to hear from this weekend – and also because of the work that's being done by individuals. Individuals who get together in groups like Atheist Ireland. Individuals who write letters, participate in the political dialogue, put their views in the media and crash polls when PZ tells us to.

Atheist Alliance International facilitates information flow and cooperation between groups and individuals around the world, including through conferences like this one and our *Secular World* magazine.

Atheist Alliance International also has a role to play in helping new organisations become established, particularly in developing countries. In the last year we've supported conferences in Gambia and Kenya – where there is no prospect of charging people 100 euro to attend – and facilitated member donations to the Kasese Humanist Primary School in Uganda. The Kasese school – its motto is 'With Science, We Can Progress' – opened in January this year. It has over 200 students and is aiming for 240. This is a quote from Mr Bwambale, the School Project Director:

*The community of Kasese is so happy for our setting up of this school and have asked us more about Humanism ... we are in tight competition with other schools that are owned by religious people and local wealthy individuals, and as this being a model school, the first of its kind on a secular foundation, I encourage Freethinkers all over the world to support Kasese Humanist Primary School so that we show to the world that indeed we can provide quality education.*

The Kasese school has received substantial support from the members of Atheist Alliance International. Our role is to increase the profile of these kinds of projects and funnel the support from members to where it is needed. With atheist branding of course!

In closing, it's great to be here to officially launch the new Atheist Alliance International. I want to congratulate Atheist Ireland for putting this convention together. I'm sure it's going to be a great weekend. And when the weekend is over I hope you will continue to support Atheist Ireland, and please have a think about supporting Atheist Alliance International too because – until we get another one – we are all on this planet together. Thank you.

## *Arrogant* **A**theists

**A**theists are arrogant because they do not believe that the most powerful being ever created a universe of over 100 billion galaxies, each with over 100 billion stars like our sun, which existed for 14 billion years, and then picked one of the 100 billion galaxies and picked one of the 100 billion stars in that galaxy, and picked one planet revolving around that star and of the million species on that planet he picked one animal member of all those species and said: 'I've really got to tell that guy to stop gathering sticks on the Sabbath.'



**Michael Nugent - President, Atheist Ireland**



# The Islamic Inquisition

By Maryam Namazie

Keynote address at the World Atheist Conference, Dublin, Ireland.

The following are excerpts from Maryam's speech. The full text can be viewed at -  
<http://maryamnamazie.blogspot.com/2011/06/islamic-inquisition.html>

In this day and age, Islam matters because of Islamism. Islam per se is fundamentally no worse than any other religion.

The tenets, dogma, and principles of all religions are equal.

I don't believe in good or bad religions; in my opinion all religion is bad for you.

Religion should come with a health warning like cigarettes: 'religion kills.'

But even so, today – as we speak – there is a distinction to be made between religions in general and Islam in particular, but for no other reasons than that it is the ideology behind a far-Right regressive political movement that has state power in many places with Sharia law being the most implemented legal code in the world.

Islam matters to us today because we are living through an Islamic inquisition and not because it is becoming more 'popular' as its proponents like to argue. They call it the fastest growing religion. I'd personally like a count of how many people are leaving it, or would like to leave if they could without being killed.

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Under an inquisition, 'Islamic feminism,' 'liberal and humanitarian Islam,' 'Islamic reformism,' 'Islamic democracy,' 'Islamic human rights,' and moderate interpretations of Islam are impossible.

A 'personal' religion is impossible under an inquisition. You can't pick and choose as you'd like.

Islamists will kill, threaten or intimidate anyone who interprets things differently, thinks freely or who transgresses their norms by living 21st century lives.

One of the characteristics of an inquisition is a total ban on freethinking and policing of thought. Censorship is rife so that one can face the death penalty for reading a book or visiting an internet site. Giordano Bruno was burnt at the stake for heresy in 1600; today there are numerous examples of people being killed for similar reasons. Some of those killed just this year by the Islamic Republic of Iran, which has 130 offences punishable by death include by the way, include: Ali Ghorabat for apostasy and Jafar Kazemi and Mohammad Ali Haj Aghaie for enmity against god.

Sharia law is designed to teach the masses the damnable nature of dissent.

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## Religion and the state

The distinction between humans and their beliefs and regressive political movements is of crucial significance here.

It is the human being who is meant to be equal not his or her beliefs. It is the human being who is worthy of the highest respect and rights not his or her beliefs or those imputed on them.

It is the human being who is sacred not beliefs or religion.

The problem is that religion sees things the other way around.

And this is the main reason why religion must be relegated to being a private matter.

More importantly than the fact that it divides, excludes, denies, restricts and so on is the compelling fact that when it comes to religion, it is not the equality, rights, freedoms, welfare of the child, man or woman that is paramount but religion itself.

This is precisely what is wrong with multiculturalism. It gives precedence to cultures and religion rather than people and their rights and lives. And it says that human beings – depending on how they are pigeon-holed – are fundamentally different, and should be treated as such. The idea of difference has always been the fundamental principle of a racist agenda not the other way around.

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Targeting a belief, religion or Islam is actually fair play and legitimate given the world that we live in.

At a minimum, we must have the complete separation of religion from the state, the law and educational system. The promotion of secularism is therefore an important vehicle to protect society from religion's intervention in people's lives, especially in the face of religion's rising access to power.

Of course nowadays, secularism is often portrayed negatively. Religious groups and many others equate secularism as the other extreme of religious fanaticism. But this is untrue.

Religion excludes whilst secularism is inclusive and ensures that a sect or group does not impose its beliefs on all. That a person's religion is a private affair.

Faith schools must be abolished. Religion in general and Islam more so because of the rise of Islamism, indoctrinates children – often violently. Religious schools by nature must teach the superiority of their belief system and the baseness of non-believers and kafirs. Unfortunately, the debate on faith schools has for too long focused on scrutiny, monitoring, and changing admission codes and employment practices rather than that they are fundamentally bad for our children. This is because they are more concerned with the inclusion of religion – the religion of the child's parents – than the inclusion, wellbeing and educational needs of the child. Schools and faith are antithetical to each other. Education is meant to give children access to science, reason and the advances of the 21st century. It is meant to level the playing field irrespective of and despite the family the child is born into. It is meant to allow children to think freely and critically – something that religion actually prohibits and punishes. Education can only truly be guaranteed by a secular educational system and by ending faith schools once and for all.

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### **The Veil**

Moreover, when it comes to the veil, much more needs to be done than banning the burqa and neqab and the veil from public spaces. The veil is a symbol like no other of what it means to be a woman under Islam – hidden from view, bound, and gagged. It is a tool for restricting and suppressing women. Of course there are some who choose to be veiled,

but you cannot say it is a matter of choice because – socially speaking – the veil is anything but. There is no 'choice' for most women. In countries under Islamic rule, it is compulsory. Even here, in Britain, according to a joint statement about the veil from 'Muslim groups, scholars and leaders', including the Muslim Council of Britain, Hizb ut Tahrir and Islamic 'Human Rights' Commission, it is stated that the veil 'is not open to debate'. The statement goes so far as to 'advise all Muslims to exercise extreme caution in this issue since denying any part of Islam may lead to disbelief.'

As I have said before, take away all the pressure and intimidation and threats and you will see how many remain veiled.

When it comes to the veiling of girls in schools, though, child veiling must not only be banned in public institutions and schools but also in private schools and everywhere.

Here the issue extends beyond the principle of secularism and goes straight to the heart of children's rights.

While adults may 'choose' veiling or a religion, children by their very nature cannot make such choices; what they do is really what their parents tell them to do.

Even if there are children who say they like or choose to be veiled (as some media have reported), child veiling must still be banned – just as a child must be protected even if she 'chooses' to stay with her abusive parents rather than in state care, even if she 'chooses' to work to support her family in violation of child labour laws or even if she 'chooses' to stop attending school.

### **De-religionisation of society**

The state is duty bound to protect children and must level the playing field for children and ensure that nothing segregates them or restricts them from accessing information,

advances in society and rights, playing, swimming and in general doing things children must do.

Whatever their beliefs, parents do not have the right to impose their beliefs, including veiling on children just because they are their own children, just as they can't deny their children medical assistance or beat and neglect them or marry them off at 9 because it's part of their beliefs or religion.

Children and under 16s must be protected from all forms of manipulation by religions and religious institutions. Cultural and religious practices or ceremonies, which are violent, inhuman, or incompatible with people's rights and equality, must be banned. Any kind of financial, material or moral support by the state to religion and religious activities and institutions must be stopped. All religious establishments must be registered as private enterprises, taxed...

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Today, also more than ever, we are in need of the de-religionisation of society, not as a private affair but against the religion industry, which is above the law, unregulated and never held accountable for its fatwas, murder and mayhem.

And we need an acknowledgement of the Islamic inquisition and real solidarity with and a strengthening of the anti-Islamic enlightenment bubbling from below that despises Islamism and Islamic morality, scorns the clergy, and rejects an ordained social hierarchy, not more of the same attempts at rescuing Islam and Islamism over the dead bodies of our beloved.

*Maryam Namazie is spokesperson of the One Law for All campaign and Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain. For more information, go to [www.maryamnamazie.com](http://www.maryamnamazie.com) or [maryamnamazie.blogspot.com](http://maryamnamazie.blogspot.com)*

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# Communicating Atheism

By Rebecca Watson (Skepchick)

speaking at the World Atheist Convention, Dublin Ireland 2011

I'm really happy to be here. I was a little unsure about what I would be speaking about because the topic of communicating atheism is such a large one and I wasn't really exactly sure what I should narrow it to, and then I saw the really interesting panel earlier today on women, women atheist activists. And I was going to ask a question at the Q&A and then I realised I didn't have a question so much as an hour-long lecture. So I'd like to give that now.

Specifically, I took issue with something that was said by the esteemed Paula Kirby, whose work I really enjoy. But she made a comment that she felt that there was no problem with sexism in the atheist community because she's never experienced any sexism in the atheist community. In the skeptical movement we refer to that as an argument from ignorance and in the feminist community we refer to it as an argument from privilege. I'm really genuinely happy that she hasn't experienced any sexism but I don't think that that's a proper basis to make a judgement on whether or not there is a problem with sexism in atheism. She also later said that she didn't think that there was some great conspiracy to keep women out of the atheist community. Well I don't think anyone thinks that, I think that's a bit of a straw person, if you will. I think that, unless you want to consider the patriarchy in general as a conspiracy, which I don't. I don't think that there's any club that's getting together, *how can we get less women involved?* no, that's not happening. But there is an issue with sexism. And I thought that because the topic of this panel is communicating atheism, I thought

that maybe I could offer my perspective as someone who communicates atheism while being a woman. Because it differs from Paula Kirby's experience and I think it's important that you know that her experience isn't my experience.

So a few weeks ago I ... I have a podcast called the *Skeptics Guide to the Universe* – no, you're right not to applaud, it's fine, that was the right decision you all made. And if you're not familiar with it, you know, it's mostly ... it's skeptical topics, science topics, but we do occasionally discuss secularism, things like that. I talked about, very briefly about, these talks I've been giving recently in the States at atheist conferences, in which I describe the religious right in the US and their war on women that they've been waging very recently. To give you just a quick idea, in the first three months of this year, state legislatures in the US passed 916, not passed, sorry, introduced 916 bills that restricted reproductive rights. Amongst those that passed were some really horrific things like 'Abstinence Only' education must be taught in one of the states, I believe it's South Carolina, unless the school petitions the government to teach something called 'Abstinence Plus', which is a way for religious conservatives to get 'Abstinence Only' education into the schools, while throwing in something about condoms at the end. Also, some very serious restrictions on abortion, and also on general access to contraception. They're allowing pharmacists, for instance, to not give contraception to women who ask them for it, and, you know, they're protecting the pharmacists' jobs, so saying that they're allowed



to take a religious exemption. Which to me is like saying a vegetarian priest can, you know, refuse to give the flesh and blood of Jesus and still keep his job. If you can't do the job, don't do the job.

So I spoke briefly about that on the podcast and I encouraged people in the audience who were concerned about separation of church and state when it comes to things like prayer in schools and Creationism. I urged them to learn more about what's happening to women and to get involved and to help fight the religious right. So then the emails started coming in. The first email was addressed to 'the female on the podcast'. My name is at the top of the show, everybody calls me by that name, it's Rebecca, it's on the website, but it was addressed to 'the female', and he was wondering why I was encouraging people to kill babies. He was an atheist. Another email I got was addressed, not to me, but to 'the men of the podcast'. It was basically: *Dear guys, won't one of you do something about that Rebecca?* This isn't the first time – I get those emails all the time. They're not addressed to me; they're addressed to the men, asking them to *shut up that girl*. And it most often happens when I talk about feminist issues, women's rights issues, things like that. I'll also note briefly that that email was terribly misspelled, grammatically incorrect, and ended

with you should all just grow up and then with great power comes great responsibility. So my response was simply: *Thanks for your email. It takes a lot of course for a semi-literate adult male to quote Spiderman and then tell us to grow up.*

So I wish I could say that those emails are rare, but they're not. I get a couple of them a month usually, more if I'm talking about women's issues. They range in sexism, from extraordinarily sexist to this is probably kinda sexist, and it's quite disheartening to get these emails from people who actually agree with me on 98 percent of everything else that's important but not on this. Then there are the emails from the people who seem to agree with me 10 percent of the time. I get fan mail. And a certain percentage of that fan mail is graphically sexual and ... you're laughing I hope out of a little bit of discomfort and if you're not uncomfortable, I'm going to make you uncomfortable, because some of these emails do describe in graphic detail what these men would like to do to me sexually. These are from the people who agree with me, and they think they're complimenting me by sending me these emails, these Tweets, YouTube messages, things like that. So these are from atheists. And they don't necessarily understand that they're being horribly misogynistic but they are. Because misogyny isn't something that's just relegated to religion. Religion can certainly bring it out and it can strengthen it, but it's a cultural problem. And even atheists, even rational people, haven't necessarily rationally looked at their own ideas of gender and equality and sex.

So that's one of the things I like to

do on Skepchick. That's one of the things that Skepchick as a website stands for is it's a place where we combine skepticism and atheism and secularism and humanism, and feminism. And through that we hope to let people know about what their privileges are and how they can help be more welcoming to women, how they can get rid of the biases they hold that they might not even realise they hold. So that's what it's like to deal with other atheists as an outspoken atheist woman. And of course there's also, I should mention, the contact I get from people who disagree with me even on the atheism. The contact I get from religious people. I'm sure you've all heard Richard [Dawkins] reading his amazing hate mail, which is hilarious, which, I should mention, I actually have as my cell phone ring. I probably should have brought it up here, but yeah, I love like walking into the grocery store and suddenly my purse goes *you suck!* I hope you get hit by a bus – by a church van! So that's the hate mail I get, obviously we all get some pretty terrible hate mail. But I'll just mention briefly that as a woman, a lot of the hate mail I get isn't just violent. I do get the death threats and, you know, standard sort of hate mail like that, but I also get a tremendous amount of threats from religious people that involve rape. A huge amount. Probably more than the death threats are the threats of rape. Whether they're threatening to rape me, or they're just saying that somebody should *cos you'll probably be better off.* They come in all of the time. And it's incredibly damaging. So I just wanted to add my voice to, you know, the earlier panel I thought was really great and I thought it was a great message to tell women that yeah, you do need to speak out, and you do need to

stand up, but we also have to acknowledge what you're going to be facing when you stand up. You're going to be facing – you may be facing, I mean, obviously not every woman has these problems, it depends on probably what media you're using – don't go on YouTube, just don't do it – but we do need to acknowledge the fact that women in our community do take a risk by standing up and speaking out. And when we acknowledge that, we can help build a better support basis for them so that when they start getting these terrible emails ... you know when I was getting them I was alone, and I would cry a lot about it, until the other guys on the podcast started speaking up and saying, you know, these emails are terrible. Did you notice how terrible these emails are? And I'm like yes! Thank you!

So I just want to encourage you all to support one another and to support the women in your lives and to know that it is a problem. And to maybe even watch your own language and your own behaviour, to try to root out any biases there might be lurking within you. So that's all guys.

You can follow Rebecca Watson at <http://skeptchick.org>

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Transcribed by  
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If all the atheists left the USA,  
it would lose 93 percent of the National Academy of Sciences  
but less than 1 percent of its prison population.

# World Evangelicals See Secularism as Biggest Threat

By Stuart Bechman

The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life<sup>1</sup> released a new survey this month of over 4,000 evangelical Christian leaders who had attended an annual evangelical Christian world Congress in South Africa in late 2010.

The survey, intended to identify and rank the biggest perceived threats to Christianity and the world at large by the group, showed that over 70 percent of attendees believed that secularism was the biggest threat; with over 90 percent of those from North America (and 92 percent from the United States) believing so.

In comparison, Islam ranked much lower, with only 47 percent of attendees ranking it as a major threat. After the influence of secularism, participants ranked too much emphasis on consumerism and material goods, and sex and violence in popular culture<sup>2</sup> as larger threats to Christianity and the world than Islam.

Why would evangelical leaders be so concerned about secularism?

Evangelical and other Christian leaders regularly phrase this threat as 'they want to wipe out Christianity'. One might think from such over-the-top characterization that secularists are on the rampage in America and elsewhere, passing laws banning religious expression, threatening local churches and churchgoers, and shoving reason and the scientific method down every religionist's throat.

But that's clearly not the case. The United States is one of the most religious countries in the world by most any standard. Over 70 percent of Americans declare themselves to be religious (admittedly, this is down from 98 percent in the 1960s, but still a dominant majority); and religious advocates not only have regular access to congressional and legislative leaders, but they themselves have had regular representation in Congress and state legislatures since the earliest days of the Republic – not to mention several of their own elected to the office of President. Billions of dollars are raised in the United States each year by religious institutions who are able to do so without any taxation, but even without any reporting to government authorities of the amounts collected and spent. Billions of dollars, too, are spent by the US military to sustain an immense chaplaincy program that too often is found proselytizing not only to US soldiers but to local communities in war zones where the US is operating.

In contrast, less than 20 percent of Americans consider themselves non-religious, and only a fraction of those belong to the organized freethought community. This entire community raises less than 5 million dollars per year at most – only a pittance compared to the monies raised by the religious community. Of the thousands of legislators at the federal and state level, only one has felt free to self-identify as non-religious – and even he is a member of a religious community. It is only in the past three years that any administration representative has ever met with anyone from the secularist community; and to-date, no member of Congress has ever introduced any legislation that served to directly benefit or even protect the nontheist community.

So on the surface, the idea of secularism being a threat to evangelical Christianity by the size of its clout is rather ludicrous. In fact, there is far more evidence of evangelical Christianity having the ability, the clout, and the desire to suppress and 'wipe out' secularism than the reverse.

Could it be, then, that the threat that evangelical Christians see is one of persuasion? That their faith simply doesn't stand up to the arguments and evidence presented by the secularists?

Prominent atheists like Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens regularly point out that the arguments used to poke holes in the world's great religions have remained as solid and unchallenged since they were first raised thousands of years ago; and that religious apologists and their clients (gods) have yet to effectively refute any of them. Instead, they simply raise a loud din of feigned offense and launch ad-hominem attacks at those who offer the arguments until observers are distracted enough to forget the original critiques.

But that can only go on so long. In this age of instant communication and the internet, the truths of religion are easier to access than ever, and more and more of the public are recognizing the frauds and choosing to withdraw their allegiance to any religious faith or leader.

Perhaps this is why the world evangelicals see secularism as their biggest threat – to their power base, to their survival, to their ability to bedazzle the masses with their stories of love and comfort.

We can only hope that they're right.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.christianpost.com/news/global-survey-evangelicals-say-secularism-not-islam-is-top-threat-51463/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.christianpost.com/topics/culture/>

*Stuart Bechman is Treasurer of Atheist Alliance International..*

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# Darkness behind the guru-bubble

By Mike Carlton

*The Age and SMH 18 June 2011*

**A**fter careful thought, I have decided, like the Prime Minister, that I have no time in my busy schedule to meet Jetsun Jamphel Ngawang Lobsang Yeshe Tenzin Gyatso, aka His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama.

This may be my loss. When Tony Abbott saw the bouncy bonze on Tuesday he announced that their meeting had been 'good and constructive'. He had gained 'an added consciousness of the importance of the spiritual dimension to life', he said, without a hint of irony.

Makes you feel all warm and runny inside, that does. Perhaps they discussed homosexuality, where their views happily coincide, one mad monk to another. His Holiness regards gay or lesbian sex as a sin, and even masturbation – or 'use of the hand', as he coyly puts it – is 'sexual misconduct'. And oral sex, too. And gay marriage. Also bad.

The starry-eyed idealists who believe the Dalai Lama to be goodness incarnate must be unaware of this puritan streak. His Holiness swans around the world on a cloud of adulation, much of it generated by an uncritical Western media.

Journalists who would not hesitate to take a stick to the Pope or the Archbishop of Canterbury for their failings report the Dalai Lama's giggly banalities with all the fawning solemnity of truth revealed. There is a curious notion in the West that Asian religions in general, and Tibetan Buddhism in particular, have reached an ethereal plane of spiritual perfection beyond the reach of the rest of us.

Yet some of his stuff is just plain barmy. Reincarnation is as silly as it gets. After the Hollywood tough guy Steven Seagal forked out a whopping donation, the Dalai Lama discovered that he had once been a 17th-century Buddhist master named Chungdrag Dorje. The actor, famed for his on-screen violence, was therefore a 'tulku', or sacred vessel. Hollywood loves guru-babble. Richard Gere, Sharon Stone and Goldie Hawn are also devotees.

Silliness is one thing. Nastiness is another. The so-called apostle of kindness has been ruthless in crushing a rival Tibetan Buddhist sect known as Dorje Shugden, expelling its monks from monasteries and ostracising or exiling its adherents.

And it is almost forgotten now, but about 20 years ago he accepted more than \$2 million in donations from the Japanese terrorist Shoko Asahara, leader of the Aum doomsday cult, who thereafter murdered 11 people and poisoned thousands more by releasing sarin nerve gas in a Tokyo subway.

So I don't think Julia Gillard missed a lot of spiritual uplift. Until corrected at a press conference, the old nutter thought that she was a he.

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**T**he hot dog vendor said 'that will be \$2.50' and the Dalai Lama handed him a five. And waited. The Dalai Lama said, 'Hey where's my change?' The hot dog vendor said, 'change must come from within.'

The Dalai Lama ate his hot dog, but it gave him bad breath and bothered his sore tooth. He then walked to the dentist to get a filling. Although old and frail, he walked often, and he walked barefoot, as evidenced by the thickness of the soles of his feet. It is for this reason he is known as the 'super-calloused fragile mystic vexed by halitosis.'

The dentist inspected the Dalai Lama's tooth, and said he could fill the cavity right then. When he offered to use Novocaine, the Dalai Lama declined, saying he wanted to 'transcend dental medication.'



# Book Review

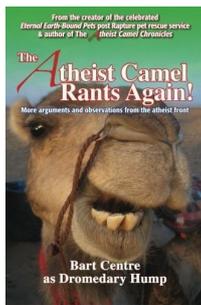
## The Atheist Camel Rants Again!

by Bart Centre

**Publisher:** CreateSpace

**ISBN** 1460933915

Available through Amazon.com



He's back, and his camelus dromedarius disposition hasn't mellowed. In this sequel to the popular *The Atheist Camel Chronicles*, Dromedary Hump (aka, Bart Centre) delivers one hundred essays on a medley of religious themes important to freethinkers and atheist activists. Each short chapter chronicles real-life observations, poignant commentary on topical issues, and flights of fictional fancy that critically explore the havoc religion-think and the theistically afflicted impose on all of us. Unique in the genre, this book touts no theory or esoterica. Every chapter supplies the reader with easily absorbed, thought-provoking insights designed to educate, stimulate activism, and prepare the freethinker to challenge even some of the most inventive religionist precepts and apologetics.

From circumcision controversy to gay marriage to exorcism, the author takes on organised religion and its adherents, seeking to reveal all of the surrounding absurdity. The collected essays are drawn from the best posts on the author's Atheist Camel blog.

"At a time when religious fundamentalism threatens world peace and our own security, agnostics and closeted atheists need to stop sitting on the fence," says Centre. "This book is ammunition against the misinformation and proselytizing of the religious."

Centre's inimitable style combines sarcasm, humour, irony, unabashed bluntness, and more than a pinch of snarkiness, making *The Atheist Camel Rants Again!* hard to put down and harder still to forget.

### "Judith Lucy's Spiritual Journey"

Wednesday 27 July - 9:30pm - ABC1.

The show follows Judith's personal path from devoutly religious child to determined young atheist to adult searching for something to believe in.

The series includes an impressive list of cameos from a bunch of Australia's best comedians.

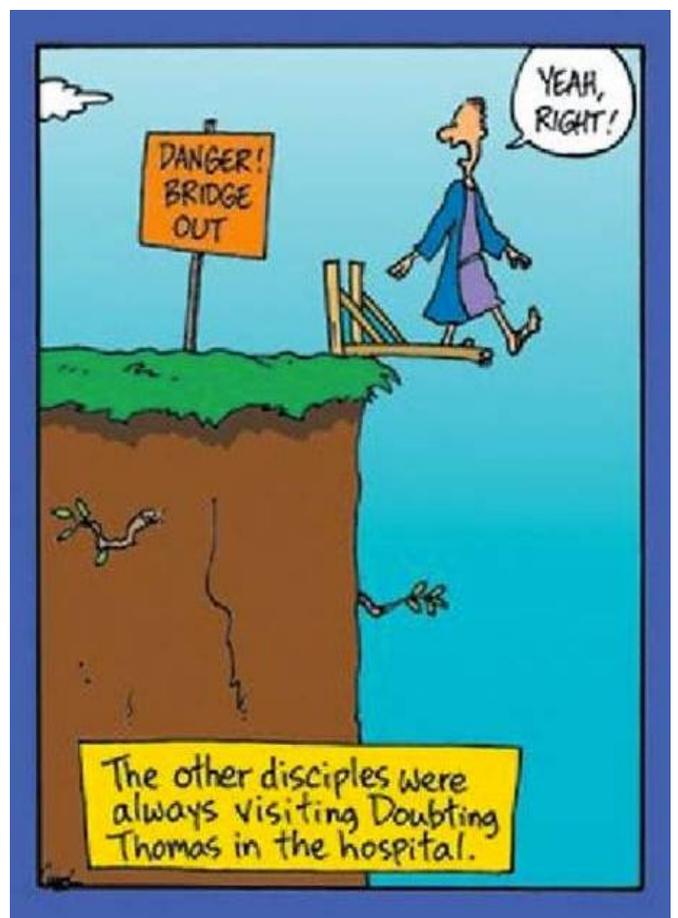
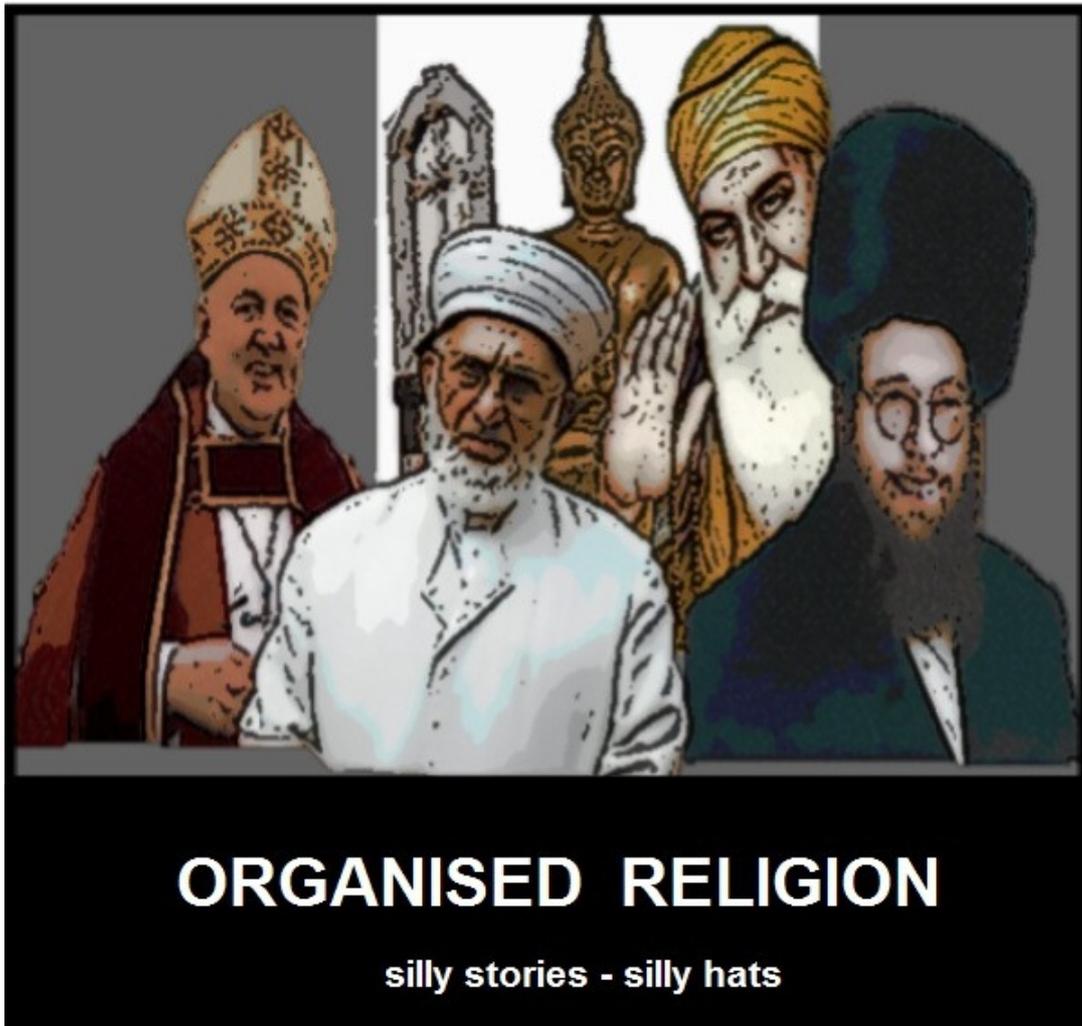
Judith's long time collaborator, Tony Martin, is on board as co-director.

Comic cameos include Greg Fleet, Denise Scott, Colin Lane and Andrea Powell.

While this possibly describes the greatest Australian comedy cast in years, Judith has said on her Facebook page that the show is not 'wall to wall comedy'. Reports so far indicate that this show documents Judith's real journey of discovery with comedy elements along the way.

From Judith's Facebook announcement: ... *I have a new show starting on the ABC called 'Judith Lucy's Spiritual Journey'. That's right, it's come to this. While I loathe the word 'spirituality' it is something that I'm genuinely interested in so I've done a six part series about it (I also really wanted a free trip to India). It's part sketch, part documentary. Essentially it's me doing what I do best: bang on about me. It's not wall to wall comedy and it's certainly not a completely serious take on religion either - I'm really hoping to disappoint everyone and just have the show slip through the cracks entirely. Anyhoo ... keep those expectations low and enjoy!*





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### Philosophy

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

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

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

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

### Aims

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

To safeguard the rights of all non-religious people.

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

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

To promote atheism.

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