

The Australian Atheist

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ATHEISM:

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



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

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From the Editor

Welcome to 2012.

We certainly have an exciting year ahead of us. Only 96 more sleeps until the GAC. Less by the time you read this! There are a few more surprises to be announced too. But you will have to be patient. I'll have more information in the next issue of *The Australian Atheist*. Many of you will read the announcements through the GAC Newsletter. Jason Ball edits the Newsletter which includes updates, news and links to articles related to the GAC or our speakers.

If you have not received the Newsletter or any other emails from the AFA it is possibly because your email address has changed or that we don't have your email address. If you would like to keep up with what is happening with the AFA and the Global Atheist Convention please send an email to **TAA@atheistfoundation.org.au** and I will update your file.

The world lost a remarkable human in December. Whether we agreed or disagreed with him, there is no denying that Christopher Hitchens was a brilliant writer with an encyclopaedic brain. There have been some wonderful tributes following Christopher's death and those from AFA president David Nicholls and AAI president Tanya Smith, are on page 12 and 13. The graphic from macleodcartoonsblogspot.com on page 13 was poignant in its simplicity. The painting on the back cover by Ilona Knudson was in her words "... the only way I know to pay my respect to a man who so beautifully challenged the invisible pink unicorns of our day every chance he could."

Hitch's death has created a roller-coaster ride of emotions. For many people it feels like their best friend has died — that one person who understood and could put into words what they were feeling.

Thank you Christopher.

An Atheist Album By Shelley Segal

To purchase a hard copy of "An Atheist Album" please go to the following link:
<http://www.shelleysegal.com/an-atheist-album/>

To purchase a digital copy of the album go to:

Itunes: <http://itunes.apple.com/au/album/an-atheist-album/id480862948>

Amazon: <http://www.amazon.com/An-Atheist-Album/dp/B0067XULQW>

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

of the

Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc

will be held on

Wednesday 21 March 2012

at 7:30pm

Eastwood Community Centre

95 Glen Osmond Road

EASTWOOD

SOUTH AUSTRALIA

All members are welcome to attend.

If you plan on attending the AGM we would appreciate if you let us know beforehand. Thank You.

Letters to the Editor

My granddaughter started Year 1 at a state school in Brisbane this year, and her parents had to fill in a form about religious education. They chose not to involve her in these classes. However, there were only three children in her class not registered to attend, so they had to remain in the room where the Bible classes were being given by a member of an Anglican church. So, in effect, they were part of the class.

After a few weeks my daughter and a friend became a little alarmed at the stories their children were hearing at the Bible classes, so they asked the Principal if their children could go to another room. However, this was not feasible because there would not be a teacher to look after them, but the Principal did suggest that the parents could take the children to the library.

So my daughter and her friend took the children to the library, and because her friend was born in France, they decided to teach the children some basic French.

The class grew from a few children to ten, and in the last few weeks mothers have been asking if their children could attend the "French classes" instead of the Bible classes! Now the school is in a dilemma and they just don't know what to do!

Cheers,
Jo Drake

Issue 30 of *The Australian Atheist* was inspiring reading and it encouraged me to put some thoughts on paper. One of the major stumbling blocks to action on climate change is religion. Let me first give some background and then I will point out the link. Some years ago I was bemused by the fact that climate change (global warming) was being discussed in isolation, i.e. without any reference to pollution or overpopulation.

On 4 May 2007 my letter to *The Age* was published as follows:

"Surely climate change is only one of the many inconvenient, potentially lethal by-products of ongoing and increasing human pollution of this planet. Others involve human necessities such as food, water and space. This planet cannot sustain its present population, let alone the projected growth, without these devastating by-products. Is the topic taboo, or just politically or economically incorrect?"

Overpopulation remains a "don't go there" subject even though it is a major contributing factor to many

of the planet's problems. Unless we willingly reign in our numbers (currently sitting at seven billion), we will not be able to sustain life of any reasonable quality in the future. At the forefront in this debate are thinkers like David Attenborough, Kelvin Thomson MP, Dick Smith and Sustainable Population Australia. In my opinion religion is a huge obstacle to population reform and I offer these reasons.

Many religions openly encourage large families. Priests and imams have a vested interest in self-preservation through "bums on seats", not to mention a "we rule" attitude. Also the "sex is only for procreation" line is still prominent with church leaders who keep denying the use of contraception. This is an obvious barrier to progress towards a sustainable population and a reason why so many people live in poverty. Whilst offering comfort and care to the poor and unfortunate, religion still insists, "it is god's will"! We could draw the conclusion that religion thrives on misfortune when we hear things like, "suffer the little children"! An equally insidious reason is that religions can deny responsibility for what happens to this planet.

Embedded in their belief systems is the promise of another life, a "heaven", where everything is perfect. So what real incentive is there to fix things up in this life, just bumble blindly along spreading a few absurd beliefs until it's time to "go to heaven"! Again we could draw the same conclusion.

So I hope you can see my logic and that you share the concern of overpopulation. My two avenues of pro-active atheism at the moment are, in order: Debunk religion (which will equalise education), and sustain population (which will minimise pollution).

Tom O'Connell



From the Inbox

Hello,

Fellow atheist here. Let me preface my question by stating that I am a big fan of Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, Carl Sagan and Richard Dawkins and follow their work intently. Especially Hitchens and Sagan.

I wonder if every atheist feels similar to the conclusion that I arrive to? My question is: When you sit down, and think about the universe and life, how do you find a “meaning/point” and not arrive at a depressing outcome?

I understand that this is one of the reasons that we are atheists, because we accept the truth, even if it is something that doesn't make us feel good. Also, I have heard a lot of arguments saying something similar to: “we should appreciate the rare opportunity to be alive and be happy that this makes us special” etc. etc. I have even tried to convince myself of these over and over again but I end up feeling like I'm lying to myself.

For the record I am not depressed and I'm actually quite happy with my life as I continue to study to try and get into med school to help other people. I'm sure I can lead a fulfilling and happy life doing what I love. But when I come to the thought it doesn't seem any less depressing, and when I tell that to my religious friends, the look on their face is even more depressing. I don't believe there is a “point” to life, and everything that we know of could be wiped out, or we could thrive for centuries on this planet, (maybe solar system if congress quits acting up), and at the end of it all, it doesn't really matter at all.

I'm not looking for an explanation as to why life matters, I've heard plenty and I agree with some. They just tend to sound wishy washy and used up. I'm looking to see if/how people have made peace with the thought that I'm mentioning and if there is an outcome where one can look at this without feeling a bit, (and I mean a minuscule amount) disappointed/depressed.

Thanks,
Kenneth

Hi Kenneth,

Thank you for this very interesting question. My name is Robert, and I am an AFA Public Relations Team member. I am also an ex-Christian. I have been an atheist for several years now, but I can still remember the *buzz* I got when I de-converted. I will give you my personal experiences first, and then make a few comments about the general situation as I see it.

I have always been a fan of science, and teach science at university. It was, in part, my curiosity which got my faith into trouble, because I found it hard to reconcile my religious beliefs with science. Anyway, I ended up at RichardDawkins.net forums where I soon made friends with fellow rationalists and even became a Global Moderator. But the most valuable thing that happened was that these new online friends helped me to understand the lack of evidence for faith, and by asking questions helped me to throw off the shackles of belief. I admit I was a bit scared and felt somewhat rudderless. But the most dominant emotion in me was one of elation — even rapture — at being freed from the chains of a non-existent god. (Well, to be honest, I cannot really absolutely claim that god does not exist as that would require perfect knowledge, and as I am not omniscient I feel it would be intellectually dishonest, not to mention false, in making such a claim).

Suddenly, the whole world made sense. I felt smarter and free. I think my reasoning skills improved. I went back into my mind and examined every idea I had ever had about the world and ethics. Of course, the world became less certain for me, but I began to realise this as a very positive thing. I was, and am, prone to depression. However, after I became an atheist, the “Black Dog” seemed to visit me less often, and not so severely. Another plus was the time saved. No more wasting time praying or worrying, and I began to realise that ethical questions, although much harder to ponder as an atheist, are more original and honest. Why do we have intelligence if one just follows some religious formula on how to interact with others? I now know, when I do an altruistic act, it is because of the pleasure at helping a fellow human being in need, and not for some fulfilment of “god's plan”. I now have my own purpose in life, which is to teach.

Of course, I have read a number of books on atheism like the ones you mentioned above. I don't see the observations made by Hitchens or Dawkins or Dennett to be false or unsatisfying: they tend to mirror my own views.

As for truth? Well, who really knows what truth or reality is? Naïve reality — the sensory/perception of natural phenomena that prevents us from harm when dodging traffic crossing a street — is one thing, but what of that we can't directly experience, like the tiny world of the quantum or the vastness of the cosmos? It is clear our senses and wit are not so certain about things so outside of our common experience, even though we have instruments like telescopes to aid our observations. I find this very exciting. Every day some

new discovery in biology or cosmology or something of that sort exercises our imagination. Here we are, little creatures evolved from the simplest of cells over billions of years, and we can actually contemplate such matters! The power of natural selection gives us this. Well, of course, we also get back aches and illnesses and so on, what a ride! How can some dreary (probably totally fictitious) story from a few thousand years ago of magic gods and angels compare with the grandeur of nature, as revealed in our sciences and interpreted poetically by our arts?

Who really cares if there is no “meaning” to it all, apart from that which we elect for ourselves, in concert with our fellow human beings? What has being a “robot of god” done for me? Nothing! No more puppet-master. The end of childhood, and the beginnings of adulthood! Carpe diem! Seize the day!

Take care and best wishes,

Rob
Public Relations Team

Heretical Happenings -

Keeping you in the know

On behalf of the Atheist Foundation of Australia’s Committee of Management, I wish all members a Happy and prosperous New Year. And what a year it is going to be.

The 2012 Global Atheist Convention (GAC) – “A Celebration of Reason” is shaping up to be the biggest event of its kind the planet has ever witnessed and one that will most likely not be equalled ever. The line-up of first-rate speakers and performers is outstanding. Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Peter Singer, Annie Laurie Gaylor, Dan Barker, A. C. Grayling, Ben Elton, Tom Ballard, Catherine Deveny and many more making a total of around 35 presenters. Several people are going to give themselves a severe kick in the hind quarters for allowing this one-off opportunity pass them by. We have warned you.

The Convention has already surpassed the audience numbers of the 2010 Global Atheist Convention – “The Rise of Atheism”. Not only will this GAC create the same surreal atmosphere of friendship and camaraderie as seen in bucket loads at the last one, it will be a fine and appropriate time to contemplate the death of Christopher Hitchens. The world has lost an alpha combatant for reason in Hitch’s death and it is more than fitting that his legacy will be remembered throughout the three days of the April convention.

By June this year, the Australian Bureau of Statistics will be releasing the figures from the August 2011 Census. There is high expectation that the 18 percent “no religion” category will gain significantly, making it a definitive case that it is the fastest growing demographic in Australia. The effectiveness of the AFA’s Census “Mark no religion” campaign will be put to the test at this time. The anecdotal and actual evidence indicates that populations in developed nations are leaving religion in droves. We shall have to wait and see if that is formalised by Census figures in Australia.

It has been a busy year at the AFA’s head office and we are all looking forward to a break after the Convention as soon as the loose ends have been properly tied. The GAC will provide a new enthusiasm for atheism to be more confident in delivering its message. Hopefully we are at the beginning of a time in the history of the world where reliance on and subservience to ancient and demonstrably wrong literature and tradition will lose their unjustified place of privilege in societal and political matters.

We must all work towards a time when church and state are completely separated, with neither interfering with nor supporting the other. There can be no greater safety for everyone, that is for the religious and the non-religious alike, than this.

Until we meet again,



Debate

The Catholic Church is a Force for Good in the World

15 November 2011



Melbourne Town Hall

**Reviewed by
William Clarke-Hannaford**

The debate at Melbourne Town Hall, “The Catholic Church is a force for good in the world”, provided an entertaining and satisfying sequel to the previous debate of the same title that featured Christopher Hitchens and Stephen Fry. The initial polling of the audience indicated it was fairly balanced with 35 percent for, 34 percent against and 31 percent undecided which meant that a large amount of the people could swing to either side. I won’t go into too much detail since the video will be up on the Intelligence Squared Australia website and I didn’t take any notes (which also means there could be some error in my recollection).

With the amount of much-needed focus in the media of the most insidious abuse by the clerical élite and subsequent cover-up by the leaders of the Catholic Church with their emphasis more on the Church’s image than the rights of the victims, this alone would lead one to think that the view that the Church is on a whole a force for good in this world would be laughable and a near impossible task to convince anyone but the most devout follower.

The side arguing for was: barrister Julian McMahon, Loreto sister Mary Ward and former Liberal senator Helen Coonan. Both McMahon and Ward emphasised the social good that church members in the community do by helping the poor etc.

I don’t think anyone would deny that the Roman Catholic Church does some good but the flaw that I see is wouldn’t most of those Catholics out feeding the poor continue such charitable acts even if they suddenly became disillusioned with the Church or, heaven forbid, with God? Surely they aren’t just doing good so that they can spend eternity in heaven; and as I learnt during the debate from David Marr that the soul is free from desire in the Catholics’ frighteningly dull heaven. The other side of the coin is that the evil that results from the Holy Catholic Church causes harm that wouldn’t exist or be greatly lessened if the world was suddenly blessed with a swift departure of the Catholic Church.

My impression of Helen Coonan was of someone that doesn’t ever reflect particularly deep on her own beliefs. She went on a bit of a rant about how democracy has failed us with the global financial crisis, and how the Catholic Church looks after the poor and hungry that democratic societies neglected to care for. Yes, I’m sure the chief concern of Ratzinger, while living in luxury in his palace, is the condition of the world’s poor. Coonan went on about how some Catholics were advocating the Tobin tax yet I don’t know if Mr Tobin even was Catholic and she admitted herself that the Roman Catholic Church has no official stance on economics (if they were true disciples of Jesus they would sell all their possessions then give all their money to the poor — but how many read the Bible or are that stupid to actually follow every word of Jesus who was probably illiterate). I am thankful at least that she is no longer a senator in the Australian Parliament.

On the side against the proposition were journalist and female rights advocate Anne Summers, former Catholic priest Peter Kennedy and journalist David Marr. All three were in my judgement much more capable than the other team and were, crucially, particularly engaging with their arguments.

Anne Summers made the obvious point that the church has a very sexist view towards women and that the

dogma on contraception is preventing women from climbing out of poverty. In particular I liked her amusing rework of saying from “if men could get pregnant then abortion would be legal” to “if bishops could get pregnant then abortion would be compulsory.”

At the end of the debate, while the votes were collected, Marr made a passionate plea for Catholic laypeople to laugh with derision whenever the priests decry homosexuality. I definitely agree with Marr that the more liberal Catholics need to speak up against the archaic views within the church. Though given the current trajectory of the church it is hard to see it adopting more progressive and humane positions. David Marr dramatically asked if they accepted the Church’s position on condoms which helped the spread of HIV/AIDS that has killed millions of people. McMahon accepted the Church’s position while Mary Ward at least agreed with the importance of using condoms in fight against HIV/AIDS.

The highlight of the debate was Peter Kennedy calling the Catholic Church a totalitarian regime since unelected clergy continue to ignore the laypeople of the church. He went through how, when he was kicked out the church (my understanding is he was too much of a humanist) and when his congregation pleaded to the bishop or archbishop, his response was that the reasoned and polite request for Father Kennedy to return would in fact only reinforce his decision. He told Kennedy that he obeys Rome, Father Kennedy must obey him and his congregation must obey him in turn. In modern society, where democracy is seen as a virtue, Kennedy sees the Church hierarchy as an evil that must be changed to allow the people to have a voice. As someone who was once was a Catholic it was very uplifting to listen to a man who once was a priest strongly criticise the church by calling it what it is. Peter Kennedy could have gone one further though. Heaven is, as Hitchens has aptly said, the celestial North Korea — with God as unelected ruler of heaven and earth, all seeing, the sole judge of what is right or sinful, no appeal or no reasoning against and from which there is no escape from even in death.

The end of the debate was a clear victory for the negative with 34 percent for, 59 percent against and 7 percent undecided. Having the Catholic Church exposed and challenged, and observing people being swayed to seeing that the Church is far from a force for good, definitely made the debate worth watching. Also the result is reassuring that constant questioning and the use of reason against authority will in the end not be in vain but will be triumphant against tyranny.



HUMANIST SOCIETY of SOUTH AUSTRALIA INC.

DONATION

It was with immense sadness that the AFA learned the South Australian Humanists were to dissolve, due to age and sickness of the present committee and the absence of volunteers to take over the vacant positions.

Many of us in South Australia were members and/or supporters of both our organisations. Over the years we have enjoyed a friendly and productive relationship, sometimes sharing events or joining together in celebrations.

We are honoured to be one of four organisations to receive a donation as a result of the winding up of the Humanist Society of South Australia, and on behalf of the AFA Committee of Management we thank them sincerely.

Although President Dorothy Bell stated in her letter ... *one man's loss being another's gain* ... it is unfortunate that we receive this generous donation because of the dissolving of a fellow freethought organisation.

We know there are many more, but we would like to make special mention of long-standing stalwarts of the SA Humanists, Dorothy Bell, Dick Clifford, Steve Patroni, Dean Dowling, Janice Roberts, Marie Crisp, Tom Goodwin, and Leonie Maddern.

The AFA will use the money to further promote the aims of rationality and reason. Dorothy’s concluding sentence seems appropriate to end this thank you.

Long live the forces of unbelief, however uphill the climb!



Submission to Consultation Paper, A Definition of Charity

The Treasury,
Langton Crescent,
Parkes ACT 2600
Email: nfpreform@treasury.gov.au

Introduction:

The Atheist Foundation of Australia considers the “advancement of religion” is no longer appropriate as a head of charity. The Foundation considers that the 17th Century historical justification of the advancement of a religion is now an anomaly in the Australian taxation system. It allows religion a tax-exempt status that can no longer be justified. The idea that religion itself has a “public benefit” cannot be reconciled to the place of religion in contemporary Australia.

Charitable Status:

The four heads of charity were confirmed in the 1891 Privy Council *Pemsel* case.

They are:

- The relief of poverty;
- The advancement of education;
- The advancement of religion;
- Other purposes beneficial to the community.

These heads of charity derive from the Preamble to the 1601 *Statute of Charitable Uses* also known as the *Statute of Elizabeth*. The 1891 *Pemsel* case reconfirmed these heads of charity.

Contemporary Society and the Advancement of Religion

In his *Losing My Religion: Unbelief in Australia* Bishop Tom Frame laments that, “Unless there is a turnaround in the fortunes of community organisations, by 2025 the Christian Church will be a marginal player in Australia life with a few surviving remnants.” He argues Christian affiliation is projected to drop below 50 per cent by 2030 and that “Australia will witness the abandonment of many local parish churches”.¹

The AFA considers that Bishop Frame's analysis is too optimistic. Hundreds of churches have already closed and been sold off, there has been a mass exodus of those attending church, particularly children, and religion generally has been on a historical slide ever since the first census. The growth in non-Christian religions has not been sufficient to compensate for these losses.

In 2006 the census found 64 per cent of Australians identifying as Christian. However, as recently as 22 November 2011 *The Age* reported² that a survey by a Christian organisation with an indicative sample of 1094 Australians found that only “40 per cent of Australians consider themselves as Christian compared with the 2006 census response of 64 per cent.”

The survey found Australians find big problems with churches:

- abuse by clergy, 91 per cent concerned;
- hypocrisy and judging others, 88 per cent concerned;
- religious wars, 83 per cent concerned;
- issues regarding the churches and money, 87 per cent concerned.

On this last concern, Perkins and Gomez calculated in 2009 that the gross cost of the advancement of religion to Australian taxpayers was around \$30B.³

Notwithstanding the public benefits of the welfare organisations which churches run, the Atheist Foundation believes it is inappropriate and inequitable for governments to use taxpayers' money to fund religion itself as a form of charity.

This is especially so considered in the light of the well-regarded evidence comparing social indicators such as murder, rape and other forms of violence, between western societies that are mainly secular, and those that are mainly religious. Gregory S Paul found mainly religious societies more dysfunctional, especially in relation to women's rights.⁴

Conclusion

Clearly, current research is finding that the notion that religion itself has a "public benefit" is no longer applicable on any scale, if ever that was the case. Furthermore, as a point of principle, religion, or any belief system, is better understood as a private matter not a public benefit.

What is particularly inequitable about the current taxpayer subsidy of religion through its charitable, tax-exempt status, is that an increasing number of taxpayers who do not identify with a religion are being asked to subsidise organisations with which they have little or no sympathy.

Laws, regulations and concepts about charitable status sourced from a culture which has changed dramatically in the last four hundred years, should be the subject of law reform, not continuation, in the face of facts that disallow the reasoning for them.

In the name of fairness and reason, the "advancement of religion" must be removed as a head of charity.

David Nicholls

President

Atheist Foundation of Australia

¹ T. Frame, *Losing My Religion: Unbelief in Australia*, UNSW Press, 2009, pp 298-99.

² B. Zwartz, "Spirituality's fine by us but there's little faith in religion", *The Age*, 22 November 2011.

³ J. Perkins & F. Gomez, "Taxes and subsidies: the cost of advancing religion", *Australian Humanist*, No. 93, Autumn 2009.

⁴ G. S. Paul "Cross-National Correlations of Quantifiable Societal Health with Popular Religiosity and Secularism in the Prosperous Democracies", <http://moses.creighton.edu/jrs/2005/2005-11.html>.

"It is justice, not charity, that is wanting in the world."

Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley

"Give no bounties: make equal laws: secure life and prosperity and you need not give alms."

Ralph Waldo Emerson

A society that has more justice is a society that needs less charity.

Ralph Nader

Sharing the love!

NSW Attorney General sends "goodwill to all" excluding Atheists, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, Zoroastrians, Pagans ...

Christmas Wishes from the Attorney General

Christmas is a time for celebration, for reflection, for the giving of gifts and for family gathering.

Its core message of peace on earth, goodwill to all shouldn't be marred by excesses, nor should it be trivialised by crass commercialism.

The Holy Family started in great humility, with the birth of Jesus in a stable in Bethlehem, where wise men following a star came to give homage and gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

The Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph, who settled in Nazareth, are an inspiration for us all, especially in times when family values are scoffed at by a largely secular world.

I hope and pray that 2012 will see an improvement in the way we treat each other and that our world will be a safer place for children to grow up in.

Greg Smith
Attorney General and Minister for Justice



Papal Christmyth message - Just say NO to glitz and intellect.

... and look beyond the Christmas "glitter" and "enlightened reason"...

"We must set aside our false certainties, our intellectual pride, which prevent us from recognising God's closeness ...

Pope Benedict XVI



Christopher Hitchens Memorial Statue Campaign

Please help get a statue of Christopher erected in London by signing the e-petition at <http://www.atheist-reference.org/>

As a hero to reason, logic, literature, and so many other things we owe him at least that. He should be remembered, and one day when the world becomes a better place people will look at that statue and know that he was at the forefront of the struggle to make it so, and that without him we would not have arrived there.

Dear Mr Cameron and Mr Clegg,

We the undersigned ask you to please commission, on our behalf, a memorial statue in a prime position within the City of London, honouring national treasure Christopher Hitchens for his contributions to the UK and the world.

Please ensure the statue is made of tough stuff, as he was, and accept suggestions and/or votes from his many fans as to which of his numerous famous quotes to have on the plaque.

Please also ensure that the statue is crafted using the famous, iconic picture of Christopher in the trench coat, as seen on the home of this petition at atheist-reference.org

Thank you.

Christopher Hitchens:

By David Nicholls

Christopher Hitchens died with friends at his side at the MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston Thursday 15 December. These words and similar headlines circled the globe in an expanding electronic wave, carrying news that the inevitable had happened. This death amongst the many thousands who died that day had special meaning for an ever-growing demographic of like-thinkers.

Strangely, the inescapable reality that Christopher Hitchens was terminally ill with stage four oesophageal cancer still deeply affected all who were aware of his plight. Death was not the direct result of cancer; instead, pneumonia, a complication of oesophageal cancer, dealt the final blow.

Thus died a person of note, removing forever from existence a gigantic intellect and one many felt greatly honoured in being alive at the same time as him. Even knowing these details, there followed shock and feelings of intense sadness, which enveloped admirers and possibly a scattering of disparagers. It is some consolation that though his physical presence is forever removed from existence, his writings and message lives on.

Christopher often pointed out to interviewers that even though his eventual death could be classified as premature, they also would go down the same path. It is a mental protection mechanism of humanity to look upon the impending or actual death of others as a them-and-us situation. A healthy mind does not wish for its own extinction. This powerful influence is a driving factor in many aspects of human life.

"Hitch", as he was affectionately known, would have had the same fears and aspirations as us all. The one and big difference is that his atheism did not allow these fantasies to overpower his thinking to the point of surrendering to the comfort of popular myths. Hitch died an atheist, having no imaginary expectations clouding his last moments.

The life of Christopher Hitchens was indeed one that should be celebrated, dare I say revered. His prolific written and verbal battle against human-made systems of a totalitarian, fascist or dictatorial nature places him amongst other enlightenment empowering characters such as Paine, Voltaire, Montesquieu, Diderot, Hume.

Everyone, and that includes many of Hitch's most fervent admirers, did not agree with everything he had to say. Indeed, many disagreed quite aggressively to the point where he fell out of favour with old friends. This brings us to the point of asking: was Christopher Hitchens always right and others misguided with that

The Epitome of Atheism

being his rightful claim to fame?

That question is of course so subjective that it cannot be answered satisfactorily but it is the crux of the title of this essay. It is the great protection afforded civilisation by atheism. It is the underpinning of a method of thought that recognises no human concept or reliance on tradition can provide absolute answers. Hitch understood this perfectly well and that was a part of his greatness. It was not so much that many of his thoughts tied up with ideas held in common or the brilliant delivery of resounding argument; rather it was his ability to use logical progression to arrive at rational conclusions.

As pointed out, other atheists use "logical progression to arrive at rational conclusions" as well, but they can be at variance to those of Christopher Hitchens. Having said that, most of the ideas held passionately by Christopher would also be agreed with by the majority of atheists. Those ideas are not accepted because "Hitch" enunciated them; they are accepted because atheists in general came to the same conclusion by following the evidence. This is unlike other systems where revealed writings or traditions are unchangeable and unchallengeable (in the short term) and are "believed" to be correct even when the evidence shows them not to be.

Revering the works and words of Christopher Hitchens is really giving acclaim to an outstanding proponent of reason and clear thinking processes. He had the remarkable ability to place shared concepts, ideas and thoughts in an order not easily achievable by others. His outstanding written and oral delivery provided a basis for his colleagues, friends and admirers to build their own repertoires into more workable condition.

We can expect detractors to exit from the woodwork over the next months. There will be half-true and untrue rumours and stories of a hateful nature, which will only go to reinforce the greatness of this one human who once trod the earth in a dignified manner. The intensity of his life and bravery to the end were examples of the finest of human qualities. If but everyone could emulate them.

The death of Christopher Hitchens has special significance for the Atheist Foundation of Australia. He was booked to appear at the 2012 Global Atheist Convention – "A Celebration of Reason" in April next year

along with the other acclaimed Four Horsemen of the Anti-Apocalypse: Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett and Sam Harris. Christopher knew, as did we, that this was a gamble with time. If pneumonia had not stepped into the scene, the Four Horsemen would have been together at a public forum for the first time.

I know I can speak for the audience and everyone

involved with this convention in saying that we are all deeply and profoundly sad that one of the four chairs on centre stage will be empty.

Vale Christopher.

This article appeared in Online Opinion - 18 December 2011
www.onlineopinion.com.au/view.asp?article=13036

Remembering a Rare Talent

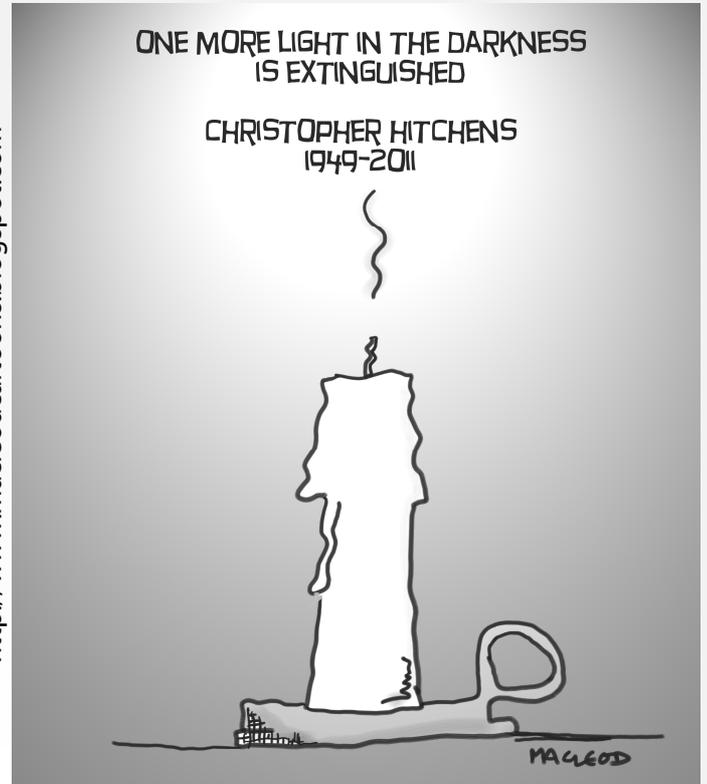
By Tanya Smith
President, Atheist Alliance International

There are very few people who could write an obituary with the wit and flair required to do justice to Christopher Hitchens' life. Christopher Hitchens was one of them.

Born in Portsmouth, England on 13 April 1949, Christopher Hitchens was one of the great public atheists. His 2007 book *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* reached number one on the New York Times Bestseller list and catapulted him to global fame. *God Is Not Great* provides a classic Hitchens devastation (a "Hitchslap") of the veracity of religious claims and the disturbingly common view that religion promotes good in the world, even if not actually true. Known colloquially as "Hitch", Hitchens was promoting his memoir *Hitch 22* when he was diagnosed with cancer of the esophagus in June 2010. He died in Houston on 15 December 2011.

The content of Hitchens' work — generally excellent, almost always controversial — is probably not what he will best be remembered for. Rather, recollections of his biting wit and eloquent destruction of the (frequently religious) opposition remain vivid.

One of the first times I saw Hitchens speak was the 2009 debate that pitted him and Stephen Fry against English MP Ann Widdecombe and Archbishop John Onaiyekan on the topic *The Catholic Church is a force for good in the world*. Hitchens and Fry (for the negative of course) won convincingly and with style. Hitchens' contribution included, directed at the Archbishop Onaiyekan, *"the teachings of his church are responsible for the death and suffering and misery of his brother and sister Africans, and he should apologise for it, he should show some shame. For condemning my friend Stephen Fry for his nature ... He's not being condemned for what he does, he's*



<http://www.macleodcartoons.blogspot.com>

being condemned for what he is. You're a child made in the image of God — oh no, you're not, you're a faggot, and you can't join our church and you can't go to heaven. This is disgraceful, it's inhuman, it's obscene, and it comes from a clutch of hysterical, sinister virgins, who've already betrayed their charge in the children of their own church." Quite.

Facing death, Hitchens became a subject of his prose. In a series of *Vanity Fair* articles he considered his mortality and the somewhat absurd situation that there were groups of people praying for him (with markedly varying degrees of goodwill). Hitchens also declared that he would not, as long as he remained himself, suddenly "find" any religion and noted that to avail himself of any group's version of salvation would necessarily require him to damn himself in the eyes of all other groups. In his last public appearance, at the Atheist Alliance of America convention in October 2011, Hitchens said that he "would not quit until he absolutely had to". Sadly, that time has come.

Being atheists, we lack a dictated ritual for mourning Hitchens' death. As Hitchens was unique in the way he resonated with those who agreed with him and infuriated those that did not, that somehow seems appropriate. Each of us may mourn him in our own way, grateful for his eloquent contributions and in admiration of his rare talent.

Let us entertain you!



Stella Young

is a Comedian and Disability Advocate and was a two-time state finalist in the Melbourne International Comedy Festival's Raw Comedy competition.

Friday Night Comedy Stella Young and Ben Elton

Ben Elton

is among other things, a hugely successful and influential comedy writer whose work includes some of the funniest and most successful comedy of our time.



Shelley Segal

is a singer-songwriter from Australia who has recently recorded an original album in London.



Saturday Night Gala Dinner Shelley Segal and Tom Ballard



Tom Ballard

is a Comedian/Broadcaster and a regular at many comedy rooms across Australia.

God of the GAC

mrdeity

The Mr Deity show offers a humorous (if slightly irreverent) look at the day-to-day operations of the universe and the "Big Man" in charge.

It's a behind-the-scenes look at how Mr Deity (the god of this universe) and his long-suffering assistant, Larry, grapple with the complications of their new Creation.

"What kind of Evil will be allowed?"

"How do you go about finding a "Saviour"?" and "Why won't these darned lights work?" are just some of the thought-provoking questions raised by this three-to-five minute series of shorts.

The show is now in its third season and will feature such guest stars as Michael Shermer, PZ Myers, Kevin Nealon, and Penn Jillette (pending clearance from Sony).

To view episodes of the show and find out more about Mr Deity go to his website.
<http://mrdeity.com>

**Mr Deity will be performing
exclusively at the
Saturday Night Gala Dinner.**

Tickets sold separately.



Student Grants Initiative

For those who harbour a niggling suspicion that atheism is predominantly the domain of white-haired academics, here is a selection of the writings of young students whose passionate and intelligent words have earned them a chance to attend the 2012 Global Atheist Convention.

Judging by the exceedingly high quality of all the entries we received, the future is in good hands, and the celebration of reason will continue long after the excitement of the Convention.

Congratulations to the winners. We look forward to seeing you in April 2012.

Global Atheist Convention Committee

It would be stellar to gain access to the GAC through a generous grant. As a student in the US, the very idea of attending seemed completely out of reach. Melbourne seems like worlds away! I see the GAC as a way of making my world a little smaller.

I come from a family of compassionate and tolerant Lutherans. I've been around religion since birth — I was baptized in the church my parents were married in, and my grandfather remains active in that church to this day. My parents only ever made me attend church on Christmas and Easter, and I have very early memories of stumbling through hymns and refusing communion. I went to a secular private girls' high school, where I was taught to question absolutely everything. I came out as an atheist when I was 15 to very little fanfare. My parents were understanding, but confused. My mum and I have since had many conversations about why she remains agnostic, and why I stubbornly insist upon refusing the idea of a "higher power".

I was alone in my lack of faith for a long time. The overwhelming majority of my friends hold on to their spirituality, whether it's Judaism, Quakerism, or (rarely) Christianity. I discovered the works of Christopher Hitchens, Jennifer Michael Hecht, and Richard Dawkins. I found a niche in these amazing books. I've found and latched on to the skeptic community, because it seems to connect all of my favourite things — intellect, doubt, and science fiction. The GAC can be my first adventure in real-life atheism, with a vast community of incredible people who share my non-beliefs.

I love the idea of forming relationships with outspoken, intelligent, educated, interesting, and all-round fantastic atheists from around the world. I've learned so much from the godless heathens in my life, and I can't wait to spend a weekend bonding with more.

Jennifer — Philadelphia, USA

My name is Miranda, and I am currently a Year 11 student at John Monash Science School. Despite attending Christian schools for most of my schooling, I have been an atheist for many years.

I wish to attend the 2012 Global Atheist Convention for many reasons.

Books such as *The God Delusion* and *Letter to a Christian Nation* were, and still are enormously influential to me as an atheist teenager, and Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris have always been authors who inspired me to learn more about atheism. The opportunity to see some of these leaders in the atheist community present a talk is truly amazing.

Catherine Deveny has been a role model of mine for a long time, for various reasons — although I haven't always agreed with her opinions, her work with "Dying with Dignity", support of people with disabilities and her initiative of "No Chicks No Excuses" is nothing short of inspirational.

I have spent many hours in compulsory religious education classes, but the only religious education provided was that of Christianity.

Although I now currently attend a public school, there is a Christian group — and I intend to create a secular student society. The internet is, of course, an invaluable resource, but the prospect of meeting with like-minded people at a three-day conference is an experience that would provide me with enormous amounts of information, confidence, and guidance in the right direction to promoting atheism and freethought as a viable alternative to religion.

The 2012 Global Atheist Convention is an exciting event which I hope to attend, which is why I hope to receive a ticket to next year's convention.

Miranda — Melbourne, Australia

Having come from a relatively conservative town in the southernmost part of New Zealand, I've seen my fair share of illegitimate, religion based logic. Out-dated traditions have kept many high schools in Dunedin in the Stone Age in terms of accepting people for whom they are and allowing, tolerating and encouraging diversity. I consider myself lucky in that I managed to go to the most open-minded high schools in Dunedin. Here at Logan Park high school we're the only school in Dunedin that has allowed same-sex couples to attend end of school formals/balls together. The fact that every other school in Dunedin disallows this is outrageous. Some schools allegedly will allow a same-sex couple to attend the end of year formal if they acknowledge their sexuality in a school assembly. To me this is clearly a human rights violation, which brings me to my next point about why I consider myself an Atheist and why I would love to attend the 2012 Global Atheist Convention in Melbourne.

Why: Why is something that I believe we need to ask at every stage of our lives and every decision that we make. While I consider asking why to be a core pillar of what makes our society work, various religions would rather that we didn't question why and that we left certain or most topics out of the spotlight of conscious debate. As an atheist I feel that we should constantly question and challenge traditions and beliefs. This is in no way limited to a belief in gods or tradition created solely by religion. I believe that we should be in constant re-evaluation of our moral and ethical code. If we question the beliefs of the past we can improve our quality of life and create a better world for everybody to live in. If we take some entities view on what they consider 'wrong' to heart then we're limiting ourselves in a very serious way. We have only a short time on this earth and it's important that we make the most of it and enjoy every part of it that we can. Thinking in this way allows us to discontinue archaic traditions like the one I highlighted above.

I pity the huge numbers of people that waste their lives away in the hope of something better, in some mythical afterlife, when really, the only thing that can make them happy or create change in their lives, is themselves. I would like to attend the global atheist convention because I want to ask why. I want my mind to be changed and I want to re-evaluate more of the decisions that I've already made. I want to hear alternative reasoning regarding everything in life. The Global Atheist Convention is the best place to do this because of the free and open thinking that atheism creates. By doing this I believe I will be able to enjoy a fuller and more interesting life.

Louis — Dunedin, New Zealand

My name is Chloe and I am in my final year of school in New Zealand. These past two years, atheism has become a passionate interest of mine and to procrastinate from studying I have often read more about atheism and participated in forums and Facebook pages discussing religion (or lack thereof). I bombard my Religious Education teacher with questions every Monday, and I'll (almost) miss going to a religious school next year because at university there won't be any obligatory prayers or hymns or indoctrinated fairy-tales that I can question!

My boyfriend (who has already bought tickets to the convention) and I are in the process of writing an FAQ about atheism to put on our Facebook pages, as many of our friends are religious and don't understand our position, or our view on the undeserved respect of religion, etc. Obviously we are making use of the wonderful knowledge and insight of atheists such as Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, Dan Barker, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Michael Shermer and Carl Sagan, the first five of whom will be at the convention!

When I heard about this convention, it seemed to me like a more worthwhile and exciting thing to go to than a concert of my favourite band! It is one thing to read *God is Not Great*, or watch Dawkins eloquently argue on YouTube, but to see these inspirational people in person and hear them talk would be the most fantastic opportunity I could hope for as an 18-year-old ready to take on the religious world.

I would especially look forward to hearing from Ayaan Hirsi Ali and hear first-hand her experiences with Islam and of course Richard Dawkins is an inspiration to me: he has helped me to be more outspoken about what I believe in, and to challenge the status quo.

I would love to go to Melbourne in April, and to receive a free ticket would be the icing on the cake (for my parents as well as me!). I plan to get a summer job in the holidays to pay for airfares and accommodation, but to knock off the ticket price would be wonderful.

However, even if I do have to buy my own ticket, I think it is just fantastic that young people are given this heightened chance to go, because I am sure there are a lot of secondary and tertiary students out there who are just as passionate about atheism as I am, but who don't have the money to afford attendance.

Thank you once again for this opportunity.

Chloe — Wellington, New Zealand

Faith in Equality a Must

By Leslie Cannold

That Poor Little Israeli Girl & the Cost to Secular Democracies of Religious Extremism

<http://cannold.com/articles/article/that-poor-little-israeli-girl-the-cost-to-secular-democracies-of-religious-extremism/>

Last week in Israel, a news story shocked the nation. It concerned Naama Margolis, an Orthodox Jewish girl, who was shown crying and quaking at the prospect of taking the 800-metre walk from her home to school. The reason for her distress? The harassment and intimidation she has been subjected to by a roving band of ultra-Orthodox men who felt that her long-sleeved shirt and below-knee-length skirt were insufficiently "modest".

The men called Naama a slut. They spat on her and made her fear for her safety. Naama Margolis is eight years old.

The story has gone global. But so far few of the male "experts" who have been asked to comment appear to have a clue what is truly at stake, not just for women or Israel, but for all pluralist secular democracies.

What Naama's story reveals is the unavoidable clash between the sexist edicts of religious extremists and the state's guarantee of full human rights to all its female citizens.

Behind this clash is a far older and more fundamental one. Namely, who will decide how women will live — the church or the state?

Whatever god or gods they believe in, adherents of orthodox religious sects share the view that they — or their undemocratically appointed male leaders — have exclusive access to the wishes of the one true God.

This absolutist and arrogant view makes them wholly intolerant of fellow citizens of no faith, other faiths and even — as was the case with Naama — those of their own faith whose beliefs or practices differ from their own.

To ultra-orthodox adherents of every religious tradition — Christian, Hindu, Muslim, Jewish — the rest of us are not fellow humans whose beliefs are entitled to the same respect and licence they demand for their own. At best, we are ignorant dolts worthy of pity. At worst, we are sinners deserving damnation or death.

Muslim author Salman Rushdie, well-known

atheist Christopher Hitchens and former US president Jimmy Carter have been among those who have noted the persistent relationship between religious extremism and the often violent oppression of women. Of the Islamic republic of Pakistan, Hitchens wrote: "Here is a society where rape is not a crime. It is a punishment. Women can be sentenced to be raped ... if even a rumour of their immodesty brings shame on their menfolk."

Carter, who left the Southern Baptist Church several years ago over its treatment of women, said the "view that the Almighty considers women to be inferior to men is

not restricted to one religion or tradition ... The truth is that male religious leaders have had — and still have — an option to interpret holy teachings either to exalt or

subjugate women ..." He added: "They have, for their own selfish ends overwhelmingly chosen the latter.

It would be nice to see the men who run the world's religions do an about-face on the gender issue. But forgive me if I don't hold my breath. More disappointing is the refusal of leading liberal men — opinion makers, legislators and adjudicators — to prosecute gender justice with anywhere near the enthusiasm they dedicate to attacking racial inequality.

In Israel, it would be unthinkable for black Jews (known as "Falasha") to be forced to the back of public buses to appease the sincerely held views of ultra-Orthodox men that this is where they belong. Yet, this is precisely what is happening to women. In fact, Israeli legislators have had to pass a special law to overrule Israel's standing requirements for gender equality to ensure the demands of ultra-Orthodox men for segregated buses could be accommodated.

The Americans are no different. In 1983, a US court vindicated the tax office's refusal to give exempt status to Bob Jones University because the Christian college's admission policy was — on what the college deemed the advice of God — racially discriminatory. In contrast, American courts continue to stand by while scripture is





◀ Sign in Mea Shearim, Jerusalem, Israel.

Ultra-Orthodox Jewish man



cited as justification for the church's refusal to hire women for senior pastoral roles or pay them the same rates as men.

Australian lawmakers are just as supine, something that might surprise those who remember the claim by then treasurer Peter Costello that gender equality was what distinguished Australia from societies governed by sharia law. But Australia's Sex Discrimination Act offers extensive exemptions to religious bodies that wish to discriminate against women for no other reason than that they are women — the very definition of unjust bias.

Whether it is in the training, educating and appointing of senior ministers or "any other act or practice," male church leaders can do as they please when it comes to women, if that's what they claim God demands. Sexism is unjust and unfair. It is as debilitating to the life chances and self-esteem of women — and to the societies that sacrifice the talents of its citizens on the altar of bigotry — as racism.

Secular authorities have been tussling with

religious rulers over who makes the rules for a long, long time. To prevail, democratically elected rulers must understand and enforce the limits of a tolerant society. Indeed, in my view, Australia needs a far more militant democracy — one linked to core values such as secularity and equality and buttressed by pre-emptive constitutional protections against such foundational values, or democracy itself, risks being overridden or given away.

These values should apply to all democracies, Israel included. Naama, like all females, whether they be little girls or women, deserves to live in a society that defends her freedom and her opportunities, and insists she be judged on the content of her character.

To achieve this she is going to need political leaders who don't just talk about gender equality to score political points, but in the face of religious bigotry and intimidation, have the balls to defend it.

Published in *The Age*, Opinion, 2 January 2012

Dr Leslie Cannold is an award-winning author and columnist, www.nationaltimes.com.au/opinion/by/leslie-cannold as well as a qualified ethicist and researcher.

She has been noted as one of Australia's top 20 public intellectuals.

www.theage.com.au/news/Education-News/Brain-power/2005/04/18/1113676693627.html

In 2011 she was honoured as Australian Humanist of the Year.

www.ihcu.org/dr-leslie-cannold-australian-humanist-year-2011

Her latest book is an historical novel, *The Book of Rachael*,

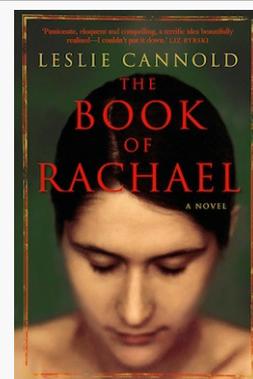
<http://cannold.com/articles/article/the-book-of-rachael/> published by Text.

Leslie will be appearing at the 2012 Global Atheist Convention.

The Book of Rachael and 2012 Global Atheist Convention: *Feathering the Same Nest*

<http://www.readings.com.au/news/the-book-of-rachael-and-2012-global-atheist-convention-feathering-the-same-nest>

 <http://blog.cannold.com>  <http://twitter.com/LeslieCannold>  www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=592994207



Kasese Humanist Primary School



" With Science, We Can Progress "

The Kasese Humanist Primary School in Uganda was established in late 2010 to provide a quality, science-based education for children in the local area. Uganda is a heavily religious country and the Kasese School is in competition with schools run by religious groups and local wealthy individuals.

Atheist Alliance International (AAI) is proud to have assisted the establishment of the school by arranging and partially funding a group of volunteer teaching assistants to work at the school in 2010. Since its establishment Kasese School has grown to around 250 students and added a Primary 7 class to its original Primary 1 - 6 program.

AAI has continued to support Kasese School.

In 2011 AAI conducted fundraising for the school's renovation project, including the addition of classrooms and AAI facilitates an ongoing sponsorship program under which donors pay a year's tuition fees for specific students.

In October AAI commenced fundraising for the Kasese School's renovation project. In December AAI sent US\$900 to the school — a combination of donations from AAI supporters and from AAI itself.

The funds purchased construction materials and padlocks and paid labourers to fit iron sheets to the classroom walls and mesh in the windows.

Kasese school is seeking to complete its renovations before school re-opens on 15 January 2012. This includes using donated funds to cover ply wood for room partitions, floor levelling, painting and the addition of chalkboards, desks and teacher tables for the new classrooms If you would like to donate to the Kasese Humanist Primary School you can do so through AAI.

<http://www.atheistalliance.org/support-aai/donate>

Sponsor a child at Kasese Humanist Primary School

Education is the key that unlocks all doors to success in life. Many Ugandan children are on the streets, roaming, lacking education. They face the problem of not being in school because some have lost their parents, and some have parents who can't afford to pay school fees. Kasese United Humanist Association initiated the Child Sponsorship Program to ensure vulnerable disadvantaged children are enrolled in its school, the Kasese Humanist Primary School.

Sponsor a child for -

US\$40 per term

or

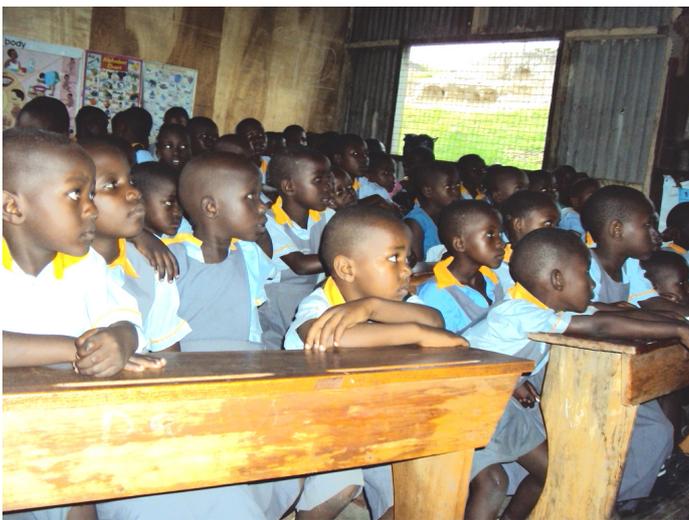
US\$120 per year

Find a student to sponsor. <http://www.atheistalliance.org/support-aai/donate>

Kasese Humanist Primary School



Kasese Humanist Primary School — the buildings are hired from the defunct Uganda Railways Corporation.



The Students.



Ham on a Roll // Or Just a Lot of Old Porkies?

By Bob Irwin

Be prepared!

The author recently visited the Creation Museum in Petersburg, northern Kentucky, just over the border from Cincinnati, Ohio. The area is a bastion of conservative Christianity.

The museum was established by Answers in Genesis (AiG), an organisation led by former Australian Ken Ham, the founder and president of AiG. His multi-million dollar museum, an “outreach of AiG”, has attracted over four million visitors since its opening in 2007. As well as receipts for entry (\$25 per adult), the museum’s bookshop and web-based outlets have a large turnover. Through peddling the preposterous to believers, the museum’s owners must be delighted with the returns — and simply for promoting made-up old-world tales.

Lots of smiling, happy-looking museum staff greet visitors entering the museum and offer help to get their “creation experience” started. It was a friendly, welcoming environment. The only threat was the prospect of drowning in pleasantness.

The Creation Museum’s motto is “Prepare to believe”. If this was the preparation, well, I was being “prepared”.

Gathering my thoughts, I read from the “Today Events” pamphlet and chose two. One before lunch and one after (see below). Within minutes of entering, I cancelled my afternoon engagements to do a full eight hours at the museum instead of the planned half-day.) The remainder of my time was spent at the exhibitions and retail outlet.

A matter of morals

Central to the *modus operandi* and organisational culture of the Creation Museum seems to be a concern over morality, in particular sexual morality. The museum’s propaganda and presenters claim that the declining morality they say is occurring in the USA and across the world is caused by people abandoning the Bible. They promote the view that when people believe in God’s creation — as written, word-for-word in Genesis — and read the Bible, their morality will be restored and maintained.

They laud the Bible as *the* authoritative text — because they must. In placing the Bible on a pedestal of moral authority they have to treat it as something special: the actual “word of God”, they claim, never to be doubted or questioned.

What to believe

This is not a small institution with a few displays

meekly trying to sell the Genesis creation story. It is a massive building and outdoor complex with numerous exhibitions and other features, including a small petting zoo. And its tentacles spread wide: into merchandise, books, magazines, videos, lectures, and broadcasting, just to name some areas of influence.

Central to the museum’s belief system is the following, quoting directly from the museum’s promotional material: God’s creation unfolded *exactly* like this, just over 6,000 years ago. Day 1: Earth; day and night; light. Day 2: Firmament (heavens/space); Waters above and below. Day 3: dry land and seas; plants. Day 4: Lights to divide day and night. Day 5: living creatures of the sea; living creatures of the air. Day 6: living creatures of the land; man and woman. (Phew! It’s no wonder He needed to wipe his brow and rest on the seventh day.)

The above will come as no surprise regarding the Genesis story of God’s creation. What might surprise is the extent this museum goes to in support of a literal reading of Genesis. The museum is an extravaganza to the telling of error-ridden accounts about the history of our world and its inhabitants, our solar system and our universe. Without a scintilla of proof or evidence, the museum’s exhibitions, speaking events, merchandise and other material make *definite* claims about evolution, biology, geology, genetics, fossil records, and general history that are nonsensical by modern scientific and other evidence-based means of explaining and recording reality.

If the museum’s owners would only say their exhibitions and material are just allegory, or legend, or merely nice stories to help people in their religions, then that might be acceptable; but to state, categorically, that everything they say and display is fact and actual truth, is profoundly absurd. Indeed, might it be fraudulent? For in making claims without any real foundation, they are raking in millions of dollars.

Get ‘em while they’re young!

From both geological and human perspectives, there is a strong attention to youth evident in the museum’s displays, presentations, material and merchandise.

The museum defends the young-earth viewpoint: it’s fundamental to the Bible’s morality and to the Bible’s authority. They believe there has not been enough time for the changes that evolutionists say have happened. But that’s because AiG chooses the wrong time span of 6,000 or so years. They’ve locked themselves out of accepting biological evolution over billions of years

because of their need for total belief in and acceptance of Bible stories, such as the Genesis creation, Adam and Eve, God's flood and Noah, and so on.

The museum is also strongly oriented to children. It has been established to deliver a creation experience which appeals to youngsters: the future believers, supporters and patrons. One can observe the attention and delight of youngsters. Excursion groups of school-age children ask questions of their teachers and museum staff, they walk excitedly through exhibitions, attend special speaking events with enthusiasm, take copious notes, talk about which exhibition is their favourite, and how much fun they are having. There are moving dinosaurs, and people



building Noah's ark, while others "speak" to you about the Bible stories that AiG holds dear.

As well, there's the large Noah's café where visitors can have a soft drink, meal and ice cream to build up strength for their afternoon in the museum.

Working backwards

If anyone was ever developing an argument to match a position, this would have to be it with this museum's visual representations of biblical history. Working backwards, it's the creationists' argument, in physical form, to promote their views.

Ken Ham says that walking through his "creationism history museum" will promote creationist theory while countering evolutionary natural history museums that "turn countless minds against God, Jesus and biblical scripture." You know, Mr Ham is correct. Natural history museums *do* turn people away from Christian creationism. But that's *not* their aim. Natural history museums are merely presenting the best-known facts at the time — which are obviously not in agreement with the fantastic claims of the creationists.

But there's no need to be concerned about such trivialities as dates and times, because as Ham states, "it's all in the Bible . . . the supreme authority in all matters of

faith and practice in every area it touches on". And if it's in the Bible, Ken Ham could have a display for it that (in working backwards) "proves" stories from the Bible.

(The Answers in Genesis website says "Ken Ham is one of the most in-demand Christian speakers in North America.")

There's more!

Not to be held back by a mere museum to show off God's creation, Ken Ham and his organisation are building the "Ark Encounter": a full-scale replica of the fabled Noah's Ark. This venture into fantasy is taking place in northern Kentucky around 50 kilometres south of the museum, and is expected to open in the first half of 2014, as financial support is provided. For those wishing to assist, one can sponsor a peg (from \$10 to \$100 donation), a plank (from \$100 to \$1,000) or a full beam (from \$500 to \$5,000). The Ark Adventure should be the perfect combination of fun and faith: as well as the ark, it will have a Tower of Babel, a walled city, an amphitheatre, large water features and many other fun biblical attractions for kids and families to enjoy while deepening their faith. Who knows, they may even ship in a whale for a Jonah exhibition.

Four million dollars in donations have been received (at November 2011) towards the \$25 million or so required.

Conclusions

Like Christianity itself through the centuries, the museum appears to be a male-dominated business: Men are the bosses and speakers. Women are the assistants. Women sell tickets and merchandise, offer directions, and prepare food and drinks.

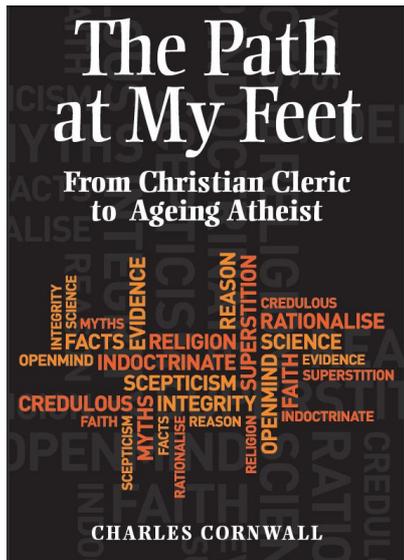
The museum's bookshop and merchandise outlet is a hive of activity with visitors buying up books, CDs, DVDs, clothes and various trinkets as references and mementos of their visit. These are intended to reinforce believers' convictions of the Genesis creation tale.

The museum seems very business-like. It might be easy to think of its head, Ken Ham, as a religious demagogue, because in presenting absurd notions about the history of planet Earth, the museum appears to be a massive money-maker, with close to a thousand visitors each day paying their entrance fees to the museum and to special events and talks, as well as buying up big at the bookshop and food outlets. There is also a donation box on the premises, to "help rebuild our biblical foundations".

The museum's displays, material and speakers seemed at least as much anti-evolution as pro-creation.

It's such a pity that the massive amount of time and money injected into the building and running of the museum (and now the Ark Encounter) is not spent helping people in need in a tangible way.

New Book



The Path at My Feet From Christian Cleric to Ageing Atheist

By Charles Cornwall

Published Nov 2011
Hyde Park Press.
Price \$20.00 + \$4.00 p&h.
ISBN: 9780646570150

Available through the Atheist Foundation of Australia

After being subjected to unmerciful religious indoctrination in a strict Baptist home, the author studied for the ministry only to resign seven years after ordination. Ironically, the studies meant to prepare him for a life of service to the Church actually opened his eyes to the fact that what he had always accepted by faith did not accord with reason and evidence. Faced with the choice of treading the path of Faith or of Reason, he chose Reason's path, eventually to become an active atheist. In *The Path at My Feet* Cornwall tells the story of this transition and presents an atheist's viewpoint on such subjects as Death, Morality, Natural Disasters, Childhood Indoctrination and many others.

"This book is an intriguing, thought provoking and extremely well written account of the journey that Charles has taken as a result of never being satisfied with easy answers . . . [it is] the product of passion in helping others see what they have been told all their lives might just well be wrong. The book is so well written and so easy to understand that I would encourage anyone, atheist, agnostic or believer, to read it."

- David Nicholls, President, Atheist Foundation of Australia

Charles Cornwall is a member of the Atheist Foundation of Australia. He served on the Committee of Management and Public Relations Team for a number of years until health issues forced him to take life a little more easily. So he wrote a book!

I have always enjoyed reading Charles' articles and looked forward to when his next instalment for *The Australian Atheist* was due.

Charles' responses to emails as a member of the Public Relations Team were a pleasure to read with many recipients appreciative of the effort he obviously took with his replies.

Lee Holmes, Editor - *The Australian Atheist*

The Path at My Feet is part-funded by the Atheist Foundation of Australia.

To purchase please make payment of \$24.00 to Atheist Foundation of Australia by either -

Cheque/Money Order to – Private Mail Bag 6 | Maitland SA 5573

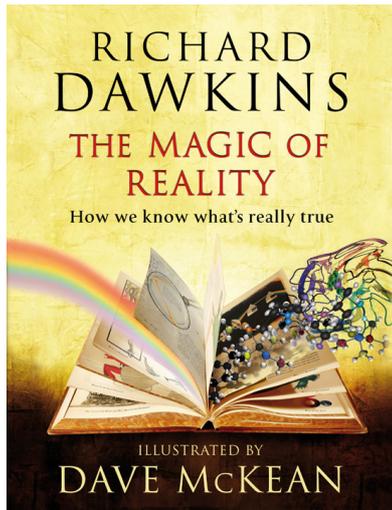
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Book Review



The Magic of Reality How We Know What's Really True

By Richard Dawkins

Publisher: Random House

Format: Hardback

RRP: \$39.95

ISBN: 9780593066126

Review by Ben Akerley

This dazzling, oversize, coffee-table-worthy, unputdownable gem differs dramatically from the previous ten blockbuster offerings from the world's preeminent expositor of science in three important respects:

(1) The layout consists of roughly half text and half exquisite, vividly colourful, imaginative illustrations from award-winning graphic artist Dave McKean. These visually stunning and captivating drawings immeasurably enhance the message of the printed word.

(2) Whereas all his previous output primarily captured the imagination and stimulated the intellect of sophisticated adult readers, this classic targets a family audience and could easily serve as an enthralling general science primer suitable for literate children as well as a refresher course survey for those of us grownups who unfortunately never had exposure to truly superior science education but rather had to settle for basic and mostly inferior instruction.

(3) All twelve chapters follow a simple question and answer format covering such diverse and intriguing topics as the first humans, the life cycle of stars, earthquakes, origins of the universe and the making of a rainbow.

In most cases, the first part chronicles the universal myths and fables which the ancients concocted in an attempt to comprehend the natural world surrounding them followed by the modern, scientific explanation as this master storyteller makes the reality-based answers as thrilling as Homer, as profound as Job and every bit as entertaining as Kipling.

The former Oxford professor patiently elucidates how the fables and myths from the Judeo-Christian tradition as well as from pagan sources endure throughout the ages as great stories whereas science details wonderful sets of experimentally testable

theories about things we don't know and may never fully understand so that it becomes our task to learn how to differentiate between the two divergent approaches.

The author underscores the striking similarity between animal evolution and language evolution and explains why there are so many different animals and so many different spoken tongues as a result of how language drifts the same way that species drift.

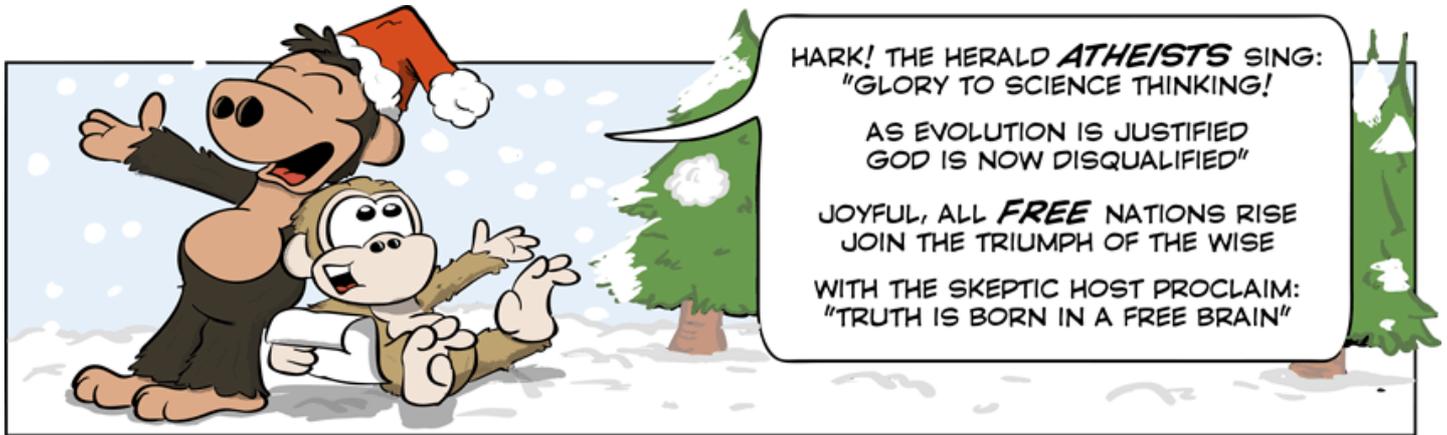
In a particularly refreshing, self-deprecating admission, this peerless and indefatigable investigator confesses: "I'm not going to talk about it [quarks] in this book. That's not because I think you wouldn't understand it. It's because I don't understand it." He employs the same unvarnished candour with respect to how a rainbow tells us that time and space began with a big bang "because not being a cosmologist, I don't understand it myself." All of this, he emphasizes, helps us to accept the boundaries of science and how important it is for scientists to recognize their own limitations. However, at the same time, what is unknown is not necessarily unknowable.

As an outstanding example of why this scholar uses "magic" in his title, in Chapter 2 ("Who was the first person?"), he finishes his explanation with these sublime words of wisdom which beautifully capture the essence of this entire ambitious undertaking: "What is a fact beyond all doubt is that we share an ancestor with every other species of animal and plant on the planet. All are our cousins. Every last one of them. Isn't that a far more wonderful thought than any myth? And the most wonderful thing of all is that we know for certain that it is literally true." His final sentence reads: "The truth is more magical — in the best and most exciting sense of the word — than any myth or made-up mystery or miracle. Science has its own magic — the magic of **reality**."



Many people would rather die than think; in fact, most do.

- Bertrand Russell



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Gods are fragile things; they may be killed by a whiff of science or a dose of common sense.

- Chapman Cohen



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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.

Well lived, Christopher.

13 April 1949 - 15 December 2011



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Ilona Knudson,
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**The finest orator of our time, fellow horseman,
valiant fighter against all tyrants including God.
Richard Dawkins**

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.

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