

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

Busy? Us? Let me count the ways. Honestly, I can't even do that because we are too busy! As I am sure you are aware (if not where have you been?) there is now only one month until the 2012 Global Atheist Convention.

The planning of an event of this size and with the calibre of speakers is, to put it mildly, a bloody nightmare. Organising people from the other side of the planet to come together on one weekend is a mammoth undertaking and the GAC Committee can be mighty pleased with what in anyone's opinion is a brilliant line-up of speakers.

The next issue of The Australia Atheist will be a special edition on the Convention. It is due out in the middle of May but that will only allow me two weeks to prepare. That isn't long enough! I hope to have it to your computers and letter boxes by early June. Trust me, it will be worth the wait.

**GALA DINNER &
GOLD PASSES
SOLD OUT**

Sunday-Only Balcony Passes Now Available

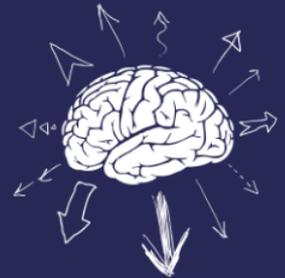
Due to unprecedented demand, the organisers of the 2012 Global Atheist Convention have released single day balcony tickets for Sunday only.

"It is our goal to make Atheism and the Convention as accessible to the public as possible," David Nicholls, President of the Atheist Foundation, said. "We understand that many young people, especially students, cannot afford a three-day pass.

"These people are the future of atheism and attending the Convention will cement in them the ideas of rationalism and the values of the enlightenment for the future benefit of humanity."

**2012
STUDENT
LEADERSHIP
CONFERENCE**

Freethought University Alliance presents,



**DEBBIE GODDARD (USA)
CHRIS STEDMAN (USA)
LYZ LIDDELL (USA) via video link**
+ surprise guests

Friday 13th April
12-4pm Melbourne Convention Exhibition Centre

\$20 early bird / \$35 standard - Ticket includes Lunch

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From the Inbox

To whom it may concern,

I am currently researching secular opinions of Euthanasia for a year 12 Religion assignment I am currently doing. I am just enquiring about your perspectives on Euthanasia, and was wondering if I could use your opinion within my assignment.

I can assure you that you will be properly referenced and your opinion will not be put out of context. If you do not want to explain, a mere "agree" or "disagree" will suffice.

Thank you very much!

Kind regards,

Rene

Hi Rene,

Thank you for your query about the very important issue of Voluntary Euthanasia (VE). It is important to always include the word "voluntary," or we are in fact talking about murder, no matter how merciful it may appear, rather than the act of assisting a person to die at their request.

The only thing that unites atheists, Rene, is the acceptance that there is no credible evidence for the existence of "God". Therefore, atheists will have a range of views about voluntary euthanasia and end of life choices, as do Christians, many of whom support VE.

However, the official position of the Atheist Foundation of Australia (AFA) is one of support for VE, both in terms of legislation; and in terms of a belief in the fundamental right of adults of sound mind to make decisions affecting their own body, free of legal and medical interference. This includes the right to decide when they want to die and the manner in which they die. Currently, the most common way for elderly people in Australia to kill themselves is by hanging, a grim and horrible death, but rope is cheap and available. We believe this is a totally unacceptable situation.

Repeated research indicates that over eighty percent of the Australian population supports VE, which is legal in Belgium, Luxemburg, Switzerland, The Netherlands and in the states of Oregon, Washington and Montana in the United States of America. However, extreme opposition from right-wing religious groups has resulted in assisted suicide being illegal in Australia, with prison sentences of up to twelve years; and life sentences in two states. In 2006, the *Suicide Related Materials Act* made it a crime in Australia for adults to talk openly about end of life issues using the telephone, email, fax or internet. This is a law without parallel anywhere else in the world, and one to which we are strongly opposed.

Approaches to suicide and death changed with Christianity. In ancient Greek and Roman times, suicide was considered a right of a responsible person, and the word euthanasia comes from the Greek meaning "dignified death". With Christianity came the belief that only "God" has the power to give and take life. Atheists fundamentally disagree with this position.

Also, the medicalisation of death, and the prolonging of the dying process with sophisticated technologies, is not always in the patient's best interests, but currently this decision is made by the doctor. There is also increasing evidence to support that where a person knows they have access to a peaceful death at a time of their choosing, they are able to lead a life with quality for longer. This is particularly true of people with degenerative diseases such as Motor Neurone Disease. Currently, many people with this condition feel compelled to take their lives earlier than they wish to, whilst they still have capacity, for if they wait until they need help to end their lives their loved ones face the real possibility of a lengthy imprisonment.

The AFA is passionately committed to a secular society, where personal choices should be free of religious or other ideological control.

Currently, the belief of some religious groups is being imposed on everyone. Atheists would never presume to tell Christians or others how they should die, and would passionately defend their right to the death they desire (prolonged suffering, with last rights, etc.)

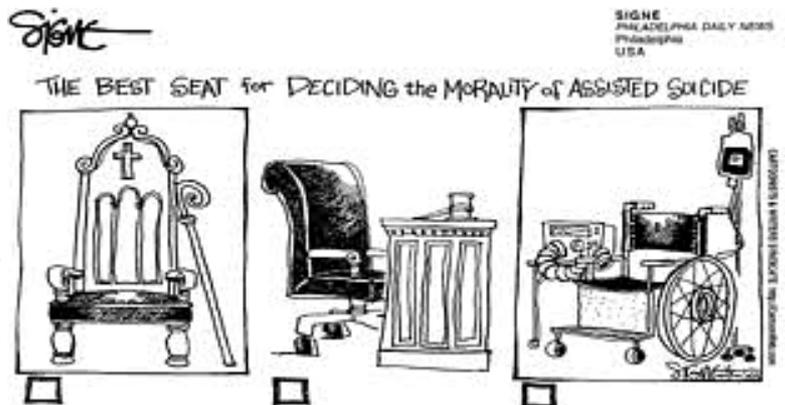
Currently, those opposed to VE get the death they want. Those in favour of it do not. A particular moral concept of sin should not be the basis of legislation in a secular society. That is unreasonable, undemocratic and indefensible in our view. We can all have a say in how we live. We believe everyone is entitled to have a say in how they die.

Hope this is of some help with your assignment.

Janine

Committee Member

Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc



Interview



Beat Magazine's Nick Taras talks with David Nicholls about the upcoming Global Atheist Convention.

"There's a need in civilisation that we have to try a new paradigm because the paradigm that has got us to this stage is also threatening to destroy us," observes David Nicholls, President of the Atheist Foundation of Australia and one of the key organisers, of the upcoming Global Atheist Convention to be hosted by Melbourne in April. From producing the first Global Atheist Convention in 2010 to representing the atheist viewpoint at a Federal Senate hearing on funding for religion, as well as campaigning the "Mark No religion" movement on the Census question of religion, Nicholls is a prominent atheist figure in Australia.

David Nicholls: "I was brought up in a very Irish-Catholic religious atmosphere where priests and nuns and brothers taught me as a child and my relatives, friends, acquaintances were all from the Catholic persuasion, and I was very hooked into it when I was young and not knowing how to think correctly. But as soon as I reached a little bit of maturity of sort, I began questioning some of the things I had been taught. It was a slow process escaping the intense Catholic indoctrination in those days but eventually I overcame and I've been an atheist now for maybe 45 years and I'm very happy about that fact."

BM: The atheist movement is growing at a remarkable rate especially since the 9/11 attacks in America. Famous atheists and highly-respected intellectuals such as evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, journalist Christopher Hitchens, philosopher Daniel Dennett and neuroscientist Sam Harris [all four were to appear onstage at this together for the first time at this year's convention before Hitchens' passing earlier this year] have released best-selling books as millions worldwide question whether religion is perhaps more poisonous to society than positive. With more and more atheists coming out of the closet worldwide, even in the extremely religious United States where secularism is now the fastest growing 'religious' demographic — having doubled in the past couple of decades — the concept of a staging an atheist convention made sense. Whilst being one of the first of its kind, the 2010 Global Atheist Convention, also held in Melbourne, was a remarkable success.

David Nicholls: "The first convention was an idea put across by Atheism Alliance International which is a very good international group. They said, 'Listen would you like to run a convention?' and we ummed and ahed about it because this was quite new to the world — even then — there had been smaller conventions all around the place so we eventually agreed to that. And

that spanned out quite rapidly to us thinking we might get 200 people, because nobody knew, this was new ground, to eventually getting over 2,500 people to that convention. And everybody enjoyed that immensely. It was just such an incredible time that after that convention the pressure came onto us: 'Listen, when are you putting another one on?' and we were getting it from all sides that people wanted to put another convention on ... we thought, 'Hey, listen, with a little bit of support from the government, we could probably put on a convention that will equal or better the last convention' and that's when it took off and we've been working flat out ever since to make that come true and it is going to come true. This is going to be an absolutely incredible convention."

BM: With a tagline of "a celebration of reason", the convention aims to achieve more than just a forum to attack religion and the existence of God.

David Nicholls: "The convention has many things it's trying to achieve. One, it's going to be a focal point for all those people who really want to be in their own space where everybody around them is a freethinker. This doesn't happen very often in society and that's why this is so unique to be sitting in a room where you can just about guarantee that 95 percent, probably more, of the people there are freethinkers who might have different ideas on certain things but you know you're in a room of people that have a rough idea where *you* are coming from.

"If you ask the whole world, 'Are you an atheist?' you'd probably get people saying, 'Gee, no, maybe I am ...' There's a whole lot of confusion about being atheist, and there's connotations connected with the word that have negative resonance with some people. Those people are actually atheists if they are freethinkers; they don't have a religion, they're actually atheists, and so what has happened, this is sort of a phenomenon throughout the planet, is that atheism and organisations

that base their mantra around atheism — which is just a lack of acceptance that there is a god — have become the spearhead of freethinking throughout the world and it's a phenomenon that is accelerating at an incredible rate and it's a wonderful thing for the planet. It's an absolutely new paradigm that we're going through, and the Atheist Foundation and most atheists are very happy and proud to be part of that whole rise of freethinking."

BM: The upcoming convention features one of the most comprehensive lists of famous atheist speakers ever assembled. With Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris and other speakers, such as PZ Myers, Lawrence Krauss, Eugenie Scott, Peter Singer and many more appearing at the convention, it is unlikely that such a line-up will be held on this scale again.

David Nicholls: "I'm excited about them all. There are people like Annie Laurie Gaylor who has done wonderful things in America with the freethought organisations and I'm dying to hear her speak. Lawrence Krauss has just brought a book out about a universe from nothing — this is going to be very impactful on the psyche of humanity. I'm not a person who likes going to conventions, trust me on that, but this is one event that I wouldn't miss if I'm still breathing.

David Nicholls: "Picking speakers is a very difficult thing. It's far more difficult than looking from the outside. You start off with a list of people that you'd like

to have at a convention because they have some attraction or rather to the public and have an educational base behind them, but then you have to work out if *our* event is going to conflict with something they are doing at the present time. Getting a list together is an incredibly difficult thing and we are very, very happy that we have the list of speakers at this event that is portrayed on our website — also there are more to come by the way — and we just couldn't be happier about it. This is going to be an absolute unique occasion with the class of speakers we have — it will never be repeated anywhere on the planet. Getting all those people together has been a task that has almost sent the Global Atheist Convention committee insane, if we weren't insane before even trying to put this on, but we are so pleased that we have ended up with the list of speakers and I would advise anybody who is contemplating coming to the convention, if they are being a little bit, 'Should I go? Should I not go?' sit down, have a think, look at that list of speakers because it is not going to happen again."

Nick Taras writes for several publications across Australia, mostly on the topics of music, film and the arts. He is currently completing his studies in English and Psychology and is a strong supporter of secularism and reason.

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All Things Bright and Beautiful

All things bright and beautiful,
All creatures great and small,
Evolved throughout Earth's history,
And Darwin proved it all.

In natural selection
A gene mutates by chance,
More suited to surroundings,
A unique happenstance.

All things bright and beautiful,
All creatures great and small,
Are due to evolution,
No god made them at all.

Words by V. Clarke and M. Fyfe 2012

Easter Explained

What the Sacrificial Death of the Son Tells Us about the Father

By Peter W. Sperlich

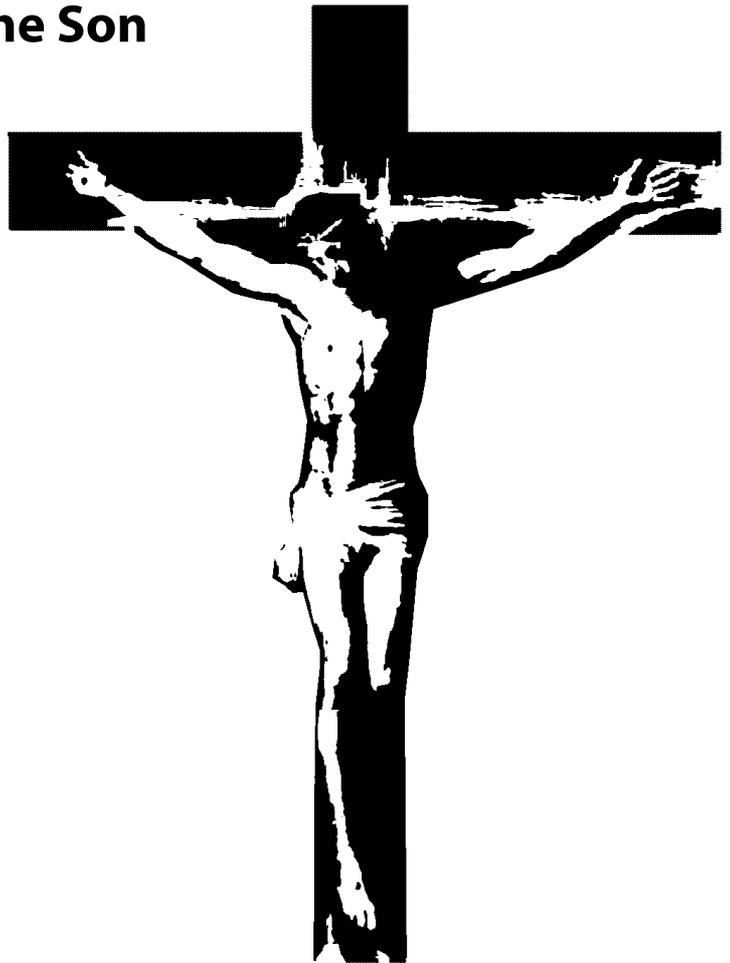
Even a minimal acquaintance with religious assertions and theological *dicta* makes one tiresomely familiar with claims affirming the truth and logic of a given faith. The faith in question may be specific (Catholic) or general (Christianity), but the assertion is always that the faith is true and logical. The truth of a faith cannot be tested directly; one simply believes it or not. The logic of the creed, however, is subject to scrutiny. Assuming the common and ordinary meaning of that term, it is certainly possible to show whether or not different elements of the creed cohere logically. If the faith does not survive the test of logic, it is not likely that it is true by the most common meaning of this term because a true statement cannot be self-contradictory.

Various aspects of the foundational dogma of Christianity (the Easter story) do not form a logically coherent construct. God is said to have sacrificed his son in order to save the world. The key question is what the sacrifice of the son reveals about the father. To set the stage for this investigation, a number of issues require prior attention: the veracity of Christian monotheism, the origins of evil, and the problem of divine cruelty.

Monotheism

Monotheism is a Hebrew invention — unless it was Egyptian, originating with the Pharaoh Akhenaten and his single god, Aten. We do know that the ancient Hebrews were not consistently monotheists but worshipped a variety of gods. And polytheism did not only exist prior to Moses's reception of the Ten Commandments but continued long thereafter, much to the despair of such prophets as Elijah, Isaiah, Hosea, and Amos. Even the commandment that "you shall have no other gods before me" buttresses polytheism. It does not say that there are no other gods but only that, among the Hebrews — God's people — these gods should not rank above Yahweh. Joshua assumed the existence of other gods when he spoke to the assembled tribes at Shechem (Joshua: 24:1 5). And Psalm 82 begins by declaring that "God takes his place in the court of heaven to pronounce judgment among the gods."

Today, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam proclaim a single god, the supreme ruler of the universe. This god is



said to be the sole creator of the universe and all of its laws. There is no doubt about the monotheism of contemporary Judaism and Islam. Christianity presents a more complicated picture because of the dogma of the Trinity. It is part of the doctrine, at least since Nicea, that three is one, but to non-Christians, and even some Christians, this appears to be no more than a glib pretense. The Qur'an is highly skeptical of the concept and asks repeatedly why God would need a son. The post-Babylonian Jews also could not imagine that God had a son. And the dispute among Christians about the nature of the Trinity has a long history (one remembers Tertullian, as well as the dispute between Athanasius and Arius) and is by no means over.

Catholicism presents an even more vexing problem. It is difficult to deny that Mary has quasi-goddess status in the Catholic Church. She is the "Mother of God" and, like Jesus, is free from the stain of original sin. Mary is vastly more venerated than the father or the son, not to mention the Holy Ghost. Add to this the church's innumerable saints (each with specialized powers and responsibilities), and the sacred assembly resembles nothing so much as the polytheistic array of Hinduism.

In the beginning of this discussion, however, it will be assumed that all Christian creeds are truly monotheistic. Only in the last section will doubts have to be considered.

The First Problem: Monotheism and Evil

The problem of the origin of evil is a burden shared by monotheistic religions. Polytheism avoids the issue by having a divine division of labor. Some gods are responsible for the “good” things, and other gods are responsible for the “bad” things that happen. The monotheistic God, of course, is uniformly presented as omnibenevolent and omnipotent, as well as omniscient and omnipresent. However, when the only acknowledged force in the universe is characterized as that of a benevolent omnipotence, it becomes difficult to explain the existence of evil. The “solution” is commonly found in the invention of Satan. Yet, given monotheistic omnipotence, Satan must also be a creation of God (the highest of the angels) and under the control of God. He has power and dominion only as far as Yahweh permits.

If Satan were to be understood as a self-sufficient and autonomous force arising independently of God’s creation, he would need to be granted the status of a (another) god — which would return matters to polytheism. This is the chief dilemma for all monotheisms, and even after thousands of years of trying to resolve the predicament, monotheistic apologists have not yet found a solution. Not, to be sure, because they were not clever enough but because the dilemma cannot be resolved — or rather because it *can* be resolved by denying God’s benevolence (about which more later), which is neither a feasible nor a welcome denial.

The problem of evil has been an eternal affliction of monotheism. It has been endlessly debated and argued. There is little new that can be added to this discourse; it can only be noted. Christianity, however, has another problem that, similar to the problem of evil, cannot be resolved — at least not (as with evil) without dissolving the very monotheistic foundations of the faith. This problem is grounded in the Easter narrative: “God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that everyone who has faith in him may not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). The phrase “only begotten” serves to indicate the magnitude of God’s love: he sacrificed not only a beloved son but the only one. At the human level, it can be seen that a father who gives his only son makes a greater sacrifice than a father who has several other sons — except that the analogy does not fit. A god who managed to get himself one son surely can get himself any number of other ones.

God, it should be noticed, did not seek to save “the world” by sacrificing his son but only that part of the world that believed in the son — a mere fragment of the world, then as now. Associated with the problem of the

sacrificial death is the problem of divine cruelty. Cruelty will be considered first.

The Second Problem: Easter and Cruelty

Easter, the sacrificial death of the son of God, is a problem specific to Christianity. The key question is whether God was somehow compelled to sacrifice his son or whether he did so freely, by his own volition. It may seem strange to imagine that God would want to kill his son without necessity as an act of willfulness. But given Yahweh’s record of vengeful punishment and excessive cruelty, often beyond any discernible necessity and justification, such a killing would not seem to be outside his repertoire. (Surely divinely ordained killing of a son by the father is not that unusual; just ask Abraham and Isaac [Genesis 22]).

The Old Testament provides much evidence in this respect. There is the destruction of innocents *in toto*, such as the total destruction of the various tribes inhabiting the “promised land”, including the people of Sihon and the Amorites. Men, women, and children

were slaughtered without exception — sometimes even the cattle were killed (Deuteronomy 3:33–36; Joshua 11:7–9). There is the torture of innocents by association because they were part of a group that contained (at least one) guilty person. Surely, not all of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah were equally guilty. A large number of them must have

been entirely blameless (at least the women and children) of whatever transgression it was of which the men of Sodom were guilty (Genesis 19). The obviously innocent people of Egypt had to endure the cruel torments of the ten plagues because of the stubbornness of the pharaoh, who would not let the Hebrews go — but it was God who first had made him stubborn (Exodus 10:20). And then there is the torment inflicted on specific, innocent individuals: consider the fate of the truly blameless Canaan, who was cursed and condemned to be a slave (with God’s approval) because his father, Ham, had seen his grandfather, Noah, naked (Genesis 9:20–27). While the punishment does not seem to fit the “crime”, it is, most astonishingly, not even applied to the actual offender. Finally, if there ever was an innocent man made to suffer the most grievous torments simply because it pleased God (on suggestion of Satan), it was Job (Book of Job).

The actuality of willful divine cruelty, however much it may disturb us, cannot be dismissed. In consequence, the doctrine of divine benevolence is very much thrown into doubt. But rejecting the doctrine of

Is God Above Human Judgment?

It is possible to take the position (and many do) that what God does is justified by definition. This rules out any possible criticism of divine actions by mere human beings. But if human beings are entitled to comment on divine conduct at all (and nearly all believe this to be legitimate), then such commentary cannot be limited to praising kindhearted and beneficial deeds but must also include commentary on cruel and hurtful acts.

divine benevolence is not the only possible solution to the predicament of Easter cruelty. The other alternative is to dismiss supremacist monotheism.

The Third Problem: Easter and Supremacy

The Scriptures provide evidence for God's unhappiness at the death of the "beloved Son" (Matthew 17:5; Mark 1:11). It can well be said that God grieved. At the crucifixion, God gave evidence of his distress in a number of ways. Most famously, a three-hour darkness fell over the land (Matthew 27:45), the curtain of the temple was torn, the earth shook, rocks split, and graves opened (Matthew 27:50–51). The Roman soldiers (and the Christians to come) took these signs to mean that they had indeed crucified the son of God and that God was unhappy about it (Matthew 27:54).

So we are confronted with a god who begot a son whom he knew would be killed and that he would be grieved. Then why did he allow the killing to take place? The first answer is because he wanted to save the world.

But this is not sufficient. The sole and omnipotent ruler of the universe could have found other means for mankind's salvation — for example, simply saying "I forgive your sins". What needed to be forgiven, apparently, were not individual sins but (at least, following the teachings of Saint Augustine) the original sin inherited from Adam by all his descendants — something all the easier, it would seem, to forgive. That he did not make use of such much more benign alternatives suggest the presence and intervention of an external entity.

At this point we must ask the question: What power compelled God to save the world by sacrificing his son? To ask this is to ask about authorities above and beyond Yahweh. The answer to this question will tell us much about the nature of Yahweh. What, then, does the sacrifice of the son reveal about the status of the father? In other words, if the sacrificial death of Christ was not simply a volitional act on the part of God but the necessary and required payment for the salvation of mankind to be made by a grieving father, then the question becomes: *who* decided that men could be saved only by the sacrifice of God's son? A truly omnipotent God who wanted to forgive sins and spare men eternal damnation surely had alternative means by which to accomplish this. If Yahweh himself made the rule regarding what had to be done to save mankind, any rule could have been adopted, including, as noted, a simple declaration of forgiveness.

The origins of the sacrificial ordinance must be found outside of and apart from Yahweh. There had to be a yet greater power that could compel this price. This line of thought, however, has two infelicitous consequences for Christian monotheism and for the standing of Yahweh. First, it would follow that there is another force (another God) in the universe. *No more monotheism*. Second, it would follow that Yahweh is not the most powerful being in the universe. There is someone/something else that can force Yahweh to do things that are not of his own will. No more omnipotence.

Conclusion

The reader will have noticed that this essay has not sought to challenge any particular religious doctrines. It has simply extrapolated from the scriptural record and noted the resulting dissonances. The extrapolations show that the conventional Easter story of the loving God and of the sacrificial death of his son is incompatible with other tenets of the Christian faith,

namely, Yahwist monotheism and omnipotence. Depending on which theologians are willing to give up — monotheism or goodness — Yahweh's benevolence can also be thrown into doubt. Christian apologists will, of course, find excuses. But these Easter apologies will be as unsuccessful as the attempts to reconcile a benevolent God and the existence of evil. The Easter story does not logically cohere with various other

Theology and Contradiction

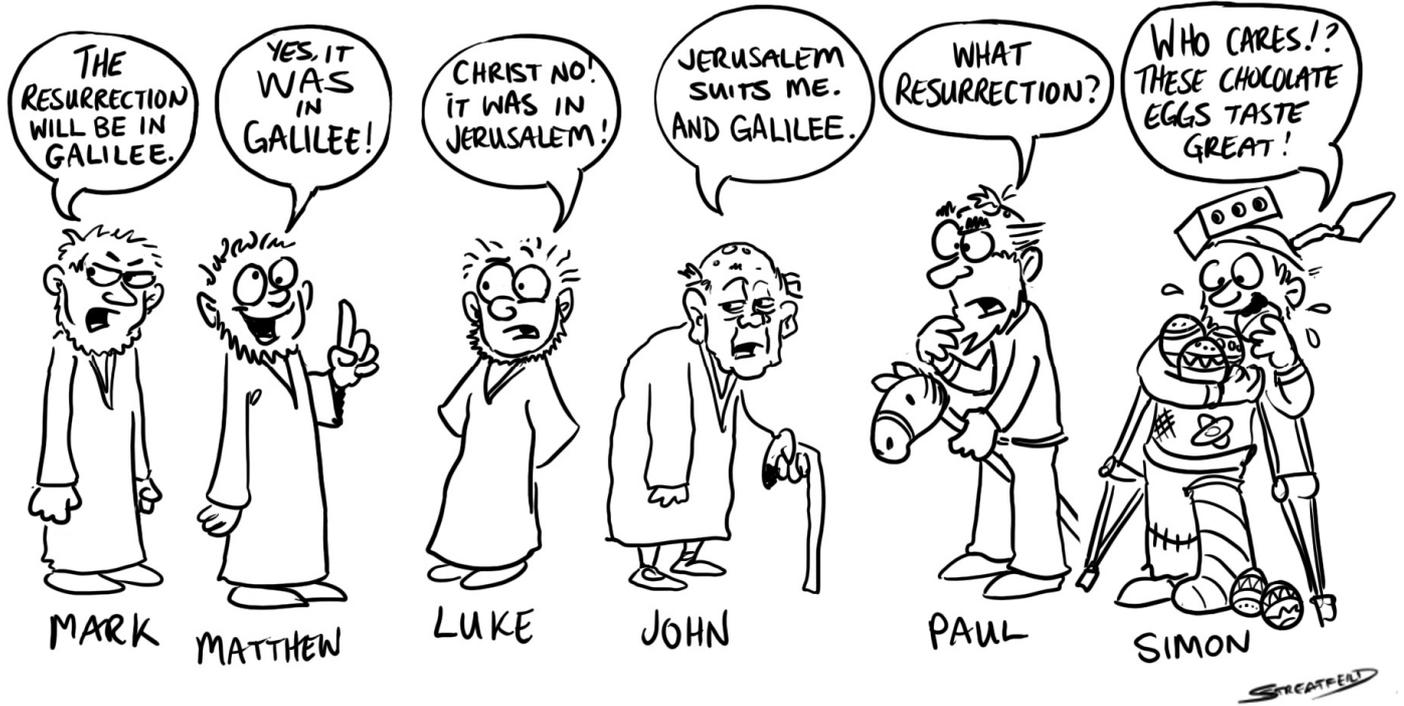
Religious devotees are famously able to hold simultaneously as true the most obviously contradictory positions. If the contradiction is at all acknowledged, it is reinterpreted as a "test" from God to identify his true disciples. Of course, there also is the Tertullian "solution": *credo quia absurdum* (however, to be fair to Tertullian, possibly a misquotation). If the notion of a test proves to be too outrageous, there is the ultimate pretense that mere human beings simply cannot understand God. This may well be, but it raises the question of the usefulness and legitimacy of theology.

tenets of the Christian faith — which calls into doubt its truth and the validity of that faith. Religion, it must be admitted, does not belong to the domain of rational thought but to the realm of myth, fiction, fantasy, and wishful thinking. Religious doctrines, as such, are not facts and cannot be verified or disproven as such. They can, however, be very much doubted when they do not form a logically coherent whole. Religious discourse is by its nature mystical and metaphysical. Clerics are forever talking about the truth and the logic of their faiths. They cannot be prevented from doing this, but at least their claims should be met with the laughter they deserve. Religion may have a function and a place in society, but it is not to foster truth and logic.

Peter W. Sperlich is emeritus professor of political science at the University of California at Berkeley.

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The Resurrection



No Authority

Correspondents of religious persuasion periodically pronounce on moral and social issues and usually at least allude to God and "His word", the Bible, as their authority.

Currently, a hot topic is the status of same-sex marriage, a state of human relationship allegedly condemned by divine decree.

However, the very concept of an almighty, ubiquitous and infallible being is indubitably in supernatural realms. Yet there is no rational, scientific evidence whatsoever to validate belief in anything supernatural — either God or fairies.

Personal emotions (which manifestly originate in the mind) and unsubstantiated opinions are not proof. Nor is the trite rejoinder, "for those who believe, no proof is necessary; for those who don't, no proof is possible". Belief by faith alone is, by definition, reliance on the unproven.

The Bible, then, cannot justifiably be regarded as of divine and unique authority. By any honest and informed study, in fact, the Bible is seen to be morally unoriginal and unremarkable and critically deficient in substantiating popular claims made in and for it; claims illuminatingly critiqued in, for just one reference, McKinsey's *Encyclopedia of Biblical Errancy*.

If I claimed there were fairies at the bottom of my garden I would accept the responsibility for proving it. We should expect no less an undertaking by those who claim their belief in things supernatural entitles them to influence, let alone regulate, the society we all live in.

**John Dillon
Blackheath**

Blue Mountains Gazette

1 February 2012

Atheist Alliance International strongly condemns violence in Afghanistan after Qur'an burning

Atheist Alliance International strongly condemns the violent protests in Afghanistan, which erupted after copies of the Qur'an were burnt in error at a US base. It has been reported that more than 30 people have died, including protesters and US troops.

Tanya Smith, President of Atheist Alliance International, said, We oppose the burning of the Qur'an. Burning books — regardless of their content — is an affront to freedom of expression, and a particularly insensitive action in this case.

"The mistake was quickly acknowledged and apologised for, as it should have been. However, the response to the burning of the Qur'an has been far worse than then burning itself — real people have died and Afghanistan has been destabilised further.

"Those who protest violently and commit murder deserve far stronger condemnation than those who accidentally burn a book, no matter how sacred some people consider that book to be."



The Unknown Knowns of Islam

By John L. Perkins

Former U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld was unfairly ridiculed for his division of knowledge into knowns and unknowns. He said that there were things that we know we know, things that we know we don't know, and things that we don't know we don't know. Convoluted language perhaps, but perfectly logical, as far as it goes. What's the matter then?

The real inadequacy of it is that it overlooks the fourth possibility: The things that we don't know we know. That is, there are things that are well known, or known to us if we make a modicum of effort, but which we deliberately overlook or turn a blind eye to: Unknown knowns.

In Donald Rumsfeld's case, the unknown knowns were that Saddam Hussein had nothing to do with September 11 and that the U.N. weapons inspectors had searched high and low and eliminated the possibility that there were any weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. This was known, but he didn't want to know it.

The phenomenon of unknown knowns is widespread and in fact plagues the human condition. Even the existence of unknown knowns is apparently itself an unknown known. The biggest unknown knowns are in religion.

The problem is one of willful blindness, or cognitive dissonance, to do with things that we don't want to know, because they conflict with our emotional or ideological preferences in some way. What makes it a problem is that the things we don't want to know are often highly relevant. If we took the trouble to know them, we would save a lot of time and money, and avoid a lot of needless hardship and suffering.

Mark Twain identified the phenomenon a century ago when he said "Faith is believin' what we know ain't so." That is, faith is knowing that something is not true, but believing it anyway. Faith makes the known into an unknown. Knowledge has increased enormously since Mark Twain's time. We know now that religions are contradicted, not only by each other but by numerous facts of history, science and archaeology. Yet the knowns remain unknown.

We know, for example, that the Prophet Abraham, the legend of whom forms the basis of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, was not a historical figure, i.e. he never existed (See *The Bible Unearthed*, by Finkelstein, et. al.). The Abrahamic religions are all based on myth. One might expect that this would be a finding of some interest to those who devote their lives to belief in these religions. Yet it steadfastly remains an unknown known.

The phenomenon of propagating unknown knowns is not just one that individuals indulge in. Whole societies practise the art. With our advances in knowledge, unknown unknowns become known unknowns, and known unknowns become known knowns. Yet for whole societies, certain unknown knowns remain, and nowhere is this more so than in relation to religion. And the cost of the unknown known is higher for Islam than for any other religion.

It used to be well known that Islam was bad for modernisation, development and democracy. That is why Ataturk, the victor at Gallipoli, founded modern Turkey as a secular state. Turkey's constitution forbids the imposition of Islam. This does not prevent the government from promoting its version of Islam in schools, but it does protect Turkish society from religious strife and Islamist abuses. Despite some backsliding, Turkey is still reaping the benefits.

The United States' Constitution protects citizens from religious indoctrination in schools. By contrast, many Muslim countries now mandate Islam in their constitutions. Education means indoctrination. This is true of post-invasion Afghanistan and Iraq. The value of constitutional secularism was known but has become unknown. The "separation of mosque and state" is not considered. Yet this concept is not just the basis of secular democracy, but of democracy itself.

Only secularism provides a guarantee of religious freedom, which Islamic constitutions effectively forbid. Without the "freedom of thought, conscience and religion" as defined in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*,

there cannot be true freedom. Yet the known has become unknown.

The Arab Spring is taking place in countries that are constitutionally "Islamic states". The constitution of Egypt says "Principles of Islamic law (Sharia) are the principal source of legislation." Libya and Tunisia are following suit. Sharia law, which is the rules laid down in the Qur'an, cannot be overturned by an elected parliament. Thus democracy is limited and ineffective. The Arab Spring is likely to become an Islamic Winter.

Worse than that, perhaps, the whole legal system is subservient to religious leaders with the responsibility for interpreting the basic law. Qur'anic law can be, and is, used to justify any number of abuses, from the oppression of women, to jihad, to the killing of apostates.

Two decades ago, hijabs were rare in the Muslim world. Now they are ubiquitous. Greater prosperity, education and increased literacy have led to more indoctrination and greater emphasis on the Qur'anic literalism. Exposure to slanted media intensifies belief.

Islam can only change if Muslims are able to reject the inerrancy of the Qur'an as Christians have generally done with the Bible. This is very hard for Muslims because the Qur'an demands complete acceptance, obedience and submission. If they reject any part, they can be denounced as infidels and traitors. So the knowns remain unknown due to intimidation and persecution.

The highest cost of unknown knowns relates to Islam and terrorism. Those who do not appreciate the extent to which the religious ideology of Islam is connected to insurgency and terrorism need to know more about the Qur'an and Islamic history.

The prophet Mohammed was the leader of a military insurrection. Islam was first established in the Arabian peninsular, and beyond, by means of military conquest. The Qur'an contains many of Mohammed's war proclamations. This is what motivates Islamic insurrections and terrorism today.

Those in doubt about this might like to consult *Inspire* magazine, produced by Al-Qaida of the Arabian Peninsula. It is explained why, since Muslim countries have been attacked and invaded, it is the duty of all Muslims to fight the infidels. Inspiration is provided to commit the most egregious acts, all based on quotes from the Qur'an.

What is our counter-insurgency strategy? It has now finally been recognised that military conquest is not a sustainable counter-insurgency strategy in Iraq and Afghanistan. Building civil infrastructure is now considered a good strategy. But this is doomed to fail unless we are prepared to engage with the ideology. Failure to engage in the war of ideas is capitulation to Islam.

In the first edition of *Inspire* it was stated that: "Islam is not a man-made religion; it is not a religion that has been tampered with as the rabbis and priests did with the other two Abrahamic faiths." There is plenty of room for debate here. There is an opportunity to undermine the ideology of Islam based on evidence and reason. All sides would benefit from the debate.

Instead, the United States has engaged in debate with the magazine's editor in the form of a missile launched from an unmanned aircraft. Anwar al-Awlaki (a U.S. citizen) and his colleagues were killed on 30 September, 2011. Ex-judicial actions such as this are counter-productive. They do not provide an antidote to Islamic beliefs. They confirm them.

As societies, we cannot forever maintain the pretence that all religious beliefs are true, even when we know they are not. We need to address the issue of unknown knowns. We need to deploy reason and evidence as counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism weapons. We need to inspire a more rational world.

We know that universal ethical principles such as compassion, honesty, freedom and justice provide a basis for morality that is better than any religion. If we are honest, we will accept what reason and evidence have put beyond doubt. What is known, ought to be believed.

John L. Perkins is on the Public Relations team for the Atheist Foundation of Australia and is the founding President of the Secular Party of Australia. Dr Perkins works at the National Institute of Economic and Industry Research in Melbourne. He has 30 years experience in econometric model building and in forecasting software development. He is involved with developing a multi-country model for forecasting and policy analysis with respect to global trade, fossil fuels, climate change and population.

Originally published in *Secular World Magazine*, January 2012



The Inaugural Christopher Hitchens Memorial Lecture



Presented by Geoffrey Robertson

Geoffrey Robertson Q.C. is head of Doughty Street Chambers — the United Kingdom’s largest human rights practice — is a Master of the Middle Temple, and serves as a “distinguished jurist member” of the United Nations Justice Council.

He was the first President of the UN War Crimes Court in Sierra Leone, and has delivered ground-breaking judgements on the illegality of recruiting child soldiers and the invalidity of amnesties for crimes against humanity.

He has argued many landmark civil liberties cases and has acted against General Pinochet and Hastings Banda and for Salman Rushdie, Mike Tyson and Julian Assange.

His recent book *The Case of The Pope* has been translated into many languages. He is the author of *The Justice Game* (a memoir), *The Tyrannicide Brief* and *Crimes Against Humanity*.

In 2011 he received The New York Bar Award for Distinction in International Law and Affairs.

Friday Night Comedy

Start your
Celebration of Reason
weekend with a
Celebration of Comedy
on Friday 13 April.



Mikey Robins



Ben Elton



Stella Young



Jim Jefferies

TICKETS

Special Delivery



The much awaited tickets to the GAC were hand delivered to this lucky person.

Religion and Politics

Panel Discussion



Dick Gross

Colleen Hartland

Marion Maddox

Fiona Patten



Derek Guille

While the godless may vary in the degree to which they view religion as a pernicious force in the lives of individuals, the hackles of unbelievers are almost unanimously raised when the issue of the influence of religious beliefs on political decision-making comes up. The fascinating, complex, and often frustrating interaction of sacred and secular factions in the political arena is a subject that demands discussion, and the Global Atheist Convention is proud to present a unique opportunity to watch a panel of intelligent and well-informed speakers contribute their two cents worth to the public debate.

Addressing the subject of the intersection of politics and religion, our distinguished panellists will include Fiona Patten, leader of the Australian Sex Party; Marion Maddox, author, academic and political commentator; Dick Gross, journalist, author and atheist blogger for the *National Times*; and Colleen Hartland, Victorian Greens MLC.

Moderated by ABC Radio veteran Derek Guille, it is sure to be a thought-provoking experience, a highlight of the convention programme, and yet another very good reason to be at the 2012 Global Atheist Convention in April.

The *Religion and Politics* discussion will take place on Saturday afternoon, 14 April 2012.





2012 Global Atheist Convention Program



FRIDAY NIGHT	
<i>Commence registration</i>	5.00pm
<i>Commence drinks & canapés</i>	6.15pm
Official GAC opening with address by David Nicholls, President of the AFA	7.30pm
Meet the MCs Kylie Sturgess & Lawrence Leung	7.45pm
Mikey Robins, MC for the night	7.55pm
Ben Elton	8.05pm
Stella Young	8.40pm
Jim Jefferies	9.00pm
Sign off – Mikey Robins / Kylie Sturgess	9.30pm
Close	9.35pm

SATURDAY	
Intro – MCs	8.30am
Peter Singer	8.40am
Leslie Cannold	9.15am
Dan Barker	9.50am
Break	10.25am
Religion and Politics – Panel Discussion. Fiona Patten, Colleen Hartland, Dick Gross, Marion Maddox – with Moderator Derek Guille	10.55am
Daniel Dennett	11.55am
Lunch	12.40pm
A.C. Grayling	1.40pm
Lawrence Krauss	2.20pm
Break	3.00pm
Geoffrey Robertson	3.30pm
Ayaan Hirsi Ali	4.10pm
Richard Dawkins	4.55pm
Conclusion	5.45pm



2012 Global Atheist Convention Program



SUNDAY	
Eugenie Scott	8.45am
Tanya Smith	9.20am
Annie Laurie Gaylor	9.35am
Sam Harris	10.10am
Break	11.00am
Parrot premiere + Q&A (Emma McKenna & Craig Foster)	11.30am
Jason Ball	12.05pm
PZ Myers	12.20pm
Lunch	1.00pm
Tribute to Christopher Hitchens	2.00pm
Three Horsemen Panel with Ayaan Hirsi Ali	2.50pm
Close of GAC – MCs	3.50pm
Conclusion	4.00pm



SATURDAY NIGHT GALA DINNER	
Doors open	7.00pm
Welcome – Simon Taylor	7.15pm
Mr Deity	7.55pm
Shelley Segal	8.20pm
Tom Ballard	9.05pm
Catherine Deveny	9.30pm
Close	11.00pm

Posters and Postcards

As part of the Global Atheist Convention we have produced a variety of posters and postcards. They are displayed in cafes, on walls, buildings and fences.

We are also having signs on buses in Melbourne. They will be

IF GOD EXISTS, I HOPE HE HAS A GOOD EXCUSE. - Woody Allen.



One Flew Into the Cuckoo's Nest

By Barry Duke

I have only had one encounter with the late philosopher Prof Antony Flew — and it jolted me out of the near-comatose state I was in at a very boring *National Secular Society* AGM in the mid-1970s.

Flew, then a member of the NSS a good while before he completely mislaid his marbles and found God, loudly called out my name and demanded that I publicly declare whether or not I was a member of the Communist Party. Puzzled, and now wide-awake, I demanded to know what prompted the question.

Flew snorted that he took the gravest exception to a several articles I had written in the *Freethinker*, attacking South Africa's Christian national's apartheid regime, and calling for its overthrow. These, he said, could only have been penned by "a seditious communist", and expressed his full support for the South African government. I politely

replied that he was making "a complete horse's arse of himself", whereupon he threw a bunch of papers he was holding into the air, and flounced out of the meeting room.

My recollection of that meeting was prompted by the sight yesterday of Flew's photograph, dredged up from Noah's Arkives, on the front page of the newly-launched *Regal Standard*.

The Regal Standard has been produced as an antidote to the Global Atheist Convention, to be held in Melbourne in April.

According to this report, the ridiculous rag is the "brainchild" of semi-retired, semi-intelligent pastor Dennis Prince, co-founder of Kingston City Church in Clarinda, who "felt God" tapping him on the shoulder to tell him that the convention was happening on his watch, and he had to do something about it. So he spent \$A5000 and some 300 hours producing the paper featuring a dead crypto-fascist twit on the front page, and needs to sell 45,000 at an average of 20¢ each to recover his costs. He said:

It surprised me when I got all the articles together how compelling was the case for God and his greatness. I was delighted and humbled by that. But I know that atheists will raise hard questions — some are insurmountable.

No. Really?

The lunatic added:

People know intuitively that God is there, we see it in the morals of creations. The paper should not try to defend God but honour him and reveal something of his work.

While I'm disturbed about the convention, I see a positive spin-off. Public interest will be stimulated, and we get to give the answers. Otherwise the gullible will be led down the garden path.

Convention organiser David Nicholls, President of the Atheist Foundation of Australia sees the paper as:

A sign of desperation by the creationist camp. I'm certain the people on the creation side think we are the work of the devil.

The 2012 convention has an even stronger line-up of speakers than the first in 2010, including Richard Dawkins and Ayaan Hirsi Ali, philosophers Daniel Dennett and Sam Harris and cosmologist Lawrence Krauss.

Meanwhile, Creation Ministries grizzled that:

There is little doubt that the media will give full-on coverage as they did last time, with features and interviews sympathetic to the atheists and antagonistic toward God ... It's unlikely the media will give Christians opportunity to balance atheistic misinformation about science and the Christian faith. At the last convention in 2010 the ABC and Melbourne Age effectively acted as a mouthpiece for the godless program.

But CMI says every cloud has a silver lining:

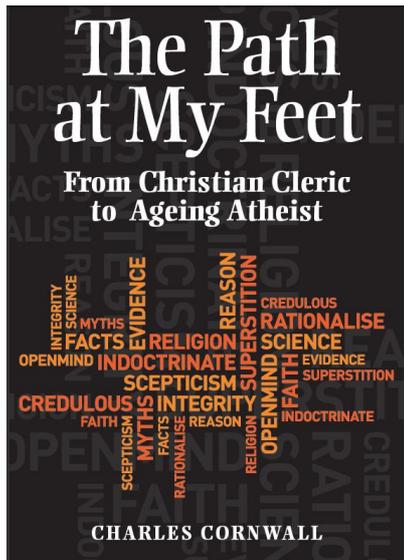
The next few months provide an amazing opportunity for Christians in Australia to make a bigger impact for Christ than usual. The Regal Standard is one effective tool that can be used as a conversation starter with friends, to answer questions that people ask, and to distribute through communities, universities and workplaces.

Yeah, right!

Barry Duke is the Editor of *The Freethinker* — <http://freethinker.co.uk>



Book Review



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

Reviewed by E. Black

This is a story of bravery. Not the done-in-moments bravery of the bloke who hurls back the grenade, or the fellow who dashes into the burning building to save the kitten; some deeds of bravery are done quietly over a long period.

Charles Cornwall is such a man. Faced with a life of hypocrisy on a salary, or leaving a pastoral position when belief ran out, he took the more difficult road.

Reading Charles' book, you won't hear him describe himself in such glowing terms. Indeed, he describes his first step (from active pastor to "unattached list") as "a cowardly act on my part". Still, as a clergyman with no savings and the concern of looking after a wife and children, his act was courageous. There are many who stay for the pay and conditions, long after belief has died. We meet one of these dog-collared unbelievers at a funeral toward the end of the first part of the book. He "simply proclaimed the Bible message and left it up to his hearers to interpret it in whatever way they were inclined!"

The people in the book are all dealt with kindly. Mr Cornwall even finds a means of understanding his father, who may not have been the easiest family member in the world.

Charles' unassuming account of his life, and his rising above the impediments religion brought to his youth, is quite kind to third persons, in a way many first-person accounts aren't.

Indeed, having taken us from his early life, through churches and guilt, eventually finding he was not alone in atheism and joining the Atheist Foundation of Australia, Charles considerately offers the reader a selection of articles written with the dual benefits of familiarity with belief and its theological or philosophical framework and the doubt that springs from applied reason.

The autobiographical part of the book reminds me somewhat of A.B. Facey's *A Fortunate Life*: Charles-as-narrator just gets on with it, does no hurt, and casts no blame. That's not a bad example, and I may re-read the story now and then.

The articles are an excellent source of reason, as an antidote to blind belief. They are written in the same non-aggressive style as the early part of the book, and Charles provides many calm answers to the canards of misguided faith.

I don't award stars out of ten, but I demand to keep my review copy. It will be in the shelf I can reach easily, just by my desk.

Clergy who have outgrown faith don't need to feel alone. The Clergy Project (www.clergyproject.org) was formed in early 2011, and provides community, in a framework of anonymity and trust, for those who may be seeking to make the difficult exit.

To purchase please make payment of \$24.00 to:

Atheist Foundation of Australia

Cheque/Money Order to –

Private Mail Bag 6

Maitland SA 5573

or

Direct Deposit –

Commonwealth Bank

BSB: 065503

Acc. No. 10120389

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Please enter your NAME into the reference section when making a Direct Deposit.

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info@atheistfoundation.org.au

The Faithful Must Learn to Respect those who Question their Beliefs

By Lawrence M. Krauss

Tensions between religion and science will persist unless believers recognise that skepticism is a hallmark of science.

Issues of personal faith can be a source of respectful debate and discussion. Since faith is often not based on evidence, however, it is hard to imagine how various deep philosophical or religious disagreements can be objectively laid to rest. As a result, skeptics like myself struggle to understand or anticipate the vehement anger that can be generated by the mere suggestion that perhaps there may be no God, or even that such a suggestion is not meant to offend.

Last week, police in Rhode Island had to be called to suppress an angry crowd at a school board meeting, and a 16-year-old atheist had to take time off school after being threatened and targeted by an online hate campaign. She was even described on the radio by a state representative as an “evil little thing”. All the girl had done was to press for the removal of a banner bearing a prayer that asked “Our Heavenly Father” to grant pupils the desire “to be kind and helpful to our classmates and teachers” and “to be good sports”.

Equally disturbing was a paper just published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, based on a study of American adults and Canadian college students, that suggested atheists are among the

most distrusted groups in society — on a par with rapists. An earlier Gallup poll ranked atheists as the least popular hypothetical minority presidential candidates, and the group that people would most disapprove of their child marrying.

The researchers of the new paper concluded: “Outward displays of belief in God may be viewed as a proxy for trustworthiness ... believers may consider atheist's absence of belief as a public threat to cooperation and honesty.” This probably explains recent electoral successes of openly devout presidential candidates who previously demonstrated dubious ethics, while also explaining the absence of any serious candidates without known religious affiliation.

It is fascinating that lack of belief, or even mere skepticism, is met among the faithful with less respect and more distrust even than a fervent belief in a rival God. This, more than anything, leads to an inevitable and deep tension between science and religion. When such distrust enters the realm of public policy, everyone suffers.

As a scientist, one is trained to be skeptical, which is perhaps why many scientists find it difficult to accept blindly the existence of a deity. What is unfortunate is that this skepticism is taken by many among the faithful to be an attack not only on their beliefs, but also on their values, and therefore leads to the conclusion that science itself is suspect.

One can see this in many domains appropriate to public policy from the local scale (school boards and the teaching of evolution) to the global scale (climate change and what international codes of behaviour may need to be changed to address it). But what may be surprising is that even on rather esoteric questions, the suspicion that science is akin to atheism, and that therefore science cannot be trusted, easily surfaces.

Over the past 25 years there have been remarkable revolutions in our understanding of the universe on

its largest scales — revolutions that have transformed our picture of the cosmos and its possible future, and which may shed new light on its origins.

What is truly remarkable is that observations and the theoretical advances associated with them, from particle physics to astronomy, have produced such progress that we are now being driven to address questions that science has previously shied away from. In particular we can imagine increasingly plausible natural mechanisms by which our universe came into existence from non-existence.

As a result, the longstanding theological and philosophical question, “Why is there something rather than nothing?”, like many earlier such questions, is increasingly becoming a scientific question, because our notions of “something” and “nothing” have completely changed as a result of our new knowledge.

As science continues to encroach on this issue of profound human interest, it would be most unfortunate if the inherent skepticism associated with scientific progress were to drive a further wedge between science and society.

As a cosmologist, I am keenly aware of the limitations inherent in our study of the universe and its origins — limitations arising from the accidents of our birth and location in a universe whose limits may forever be beyond the reach of our experiments.

As a result, science need not be the direct enemy of faith. However, a deep tension will persist until the faithful recognise that a willingness to question even one's most fervently held beliefs — the hallmark of science — is a trait that should be respected, not reviled.

This article was first published on www.guardian.co.uk

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Keith Lowell Jensen: The Atheist Comedian

Interview by Richard Silverwood

Keith is not only the heterosexual host of the *Gay and Lesbian Comedy Show* and the non-disabled founder of *The Comedians with Disabilities Act* but he is also the only atheist stand up comic in the multi-faith *The Coexist? Comedy Tour*. In a profession where having a niche can make the difference between worldwide superstardom and complete obscurity, he has skilfully crafted a role for himself as the token non-minority. But he is more than just a gimmick. His strength lies in his ability to be hilariously funny whilst at the same time causing people to question their faith in non-existent gods. I caught up with him to see how comedy can be used to gently nudge the brainwashed masses in the direction of the truth.

Richard: What inspired you to incorporate jokes about atheism into your act?

Keith: I think more comics are atheist than not. Atheism became a central theme after I started producing and performing with *The Coexist? Comedy Tour*. It's an important part of the act because it's the truth and it's being honest about who I am. I also think about how isolating it was when I became an atheist as a teenager. I think atheists need to be out, loud and proud so that people are more willing to question religion and to see that doing so is a healthy, normal thing. My favourite fan letters are from teenagers who say my comedy is helping them deal with being the only atheist in their family, school or town.

Richard: Do you think that there is an unhealthy amount of stigma attached to being an atheist in America?

Keith: Yes, definitely. Where I live in Sacramento, things are fairly liberal and progressive, as they tend to be in cities, but I still face stupid comments and prejudice regularly. I talk to people who live in more rural areas and in more conservative states and they face bullying and harassment constantly. When I tour, there is the risk that I will meet a Christian who will not be happy to be made fun of. I have a joke where I tell the audience, "I get away with making fun of Christians because I promise them that I'll make fun of the other religions afterwards. Turns out Christians will put up with no end of shit so long as they're promised a reward at the end of it." This challenges them to be cool and act like adults by pointing out that I am indeed making fun of everyone and by letting them know that I've done the same in front of other Christians and that they handled it.

Richard: The *Coexist? Tour* is a tour in which an atheist, a Muslim, a Hindu, a Jew, a Buddhist and a Christian team up to deliver religious-based comedy. What was the experience like and did being surrounded by members of so many different religious groups cause you to hold back any material?

Keith: I actually had to hold back less. The great

thing about that show is that it's obvious from the fact that we're all there together that we're friendly towards each other and that we're not haters. We walk out on stage, say hello, clown around with each other a bit and then take turns at savaging each other. But very rarely is anyone offended. We just did a show at Cal Poly in San Luis Obispo and we have a documentary getting ready to hit the festival circuit.

Richard: Has there been anybody who has been particularly outraged by your shows?

Keith: There is very little outrage. I've been told I have an "every man" kind of delivery and while I think that's very odd, having always identified with punk and queer culture, I think it's a very good thing. I let the audience get to know me. We joke about kids and things we might have in common then when the atheist stuff comes in, it's harder to demonise me or to get crazy because we've all just had a laugh together. I also try to follow what I call the "Dick Gregory rule", after the civil rights activist and comedian, which is to make fun of yourself first. Mind you, the audience are folks who chose to come to a comedy show with a two drink minimum so I don't think there's a lot of fundies [fundamentalists] in the crowd. *They* drink at home in shame with the curtains drawn tight.

On the internet it's another story. My atheist videos get me all kinds of flack, including threats of violence. I don't worry about it too much and usually keep my cool and maintain the moral and intellectual high ground. When I do lose my temper, I like to at least make sure it's funny. A lot of my material comes from fighting with Creationists online.

Richard: Were you scared about the death threats? I read about one where you were told that you would go the same way as murdered atheist activist Madalyn Murray O'Hair.

Keith: I think that threats are very easily issued by cowards online. I know geeks and they are dangerous people to mess with. Within twenty-four hours, one of

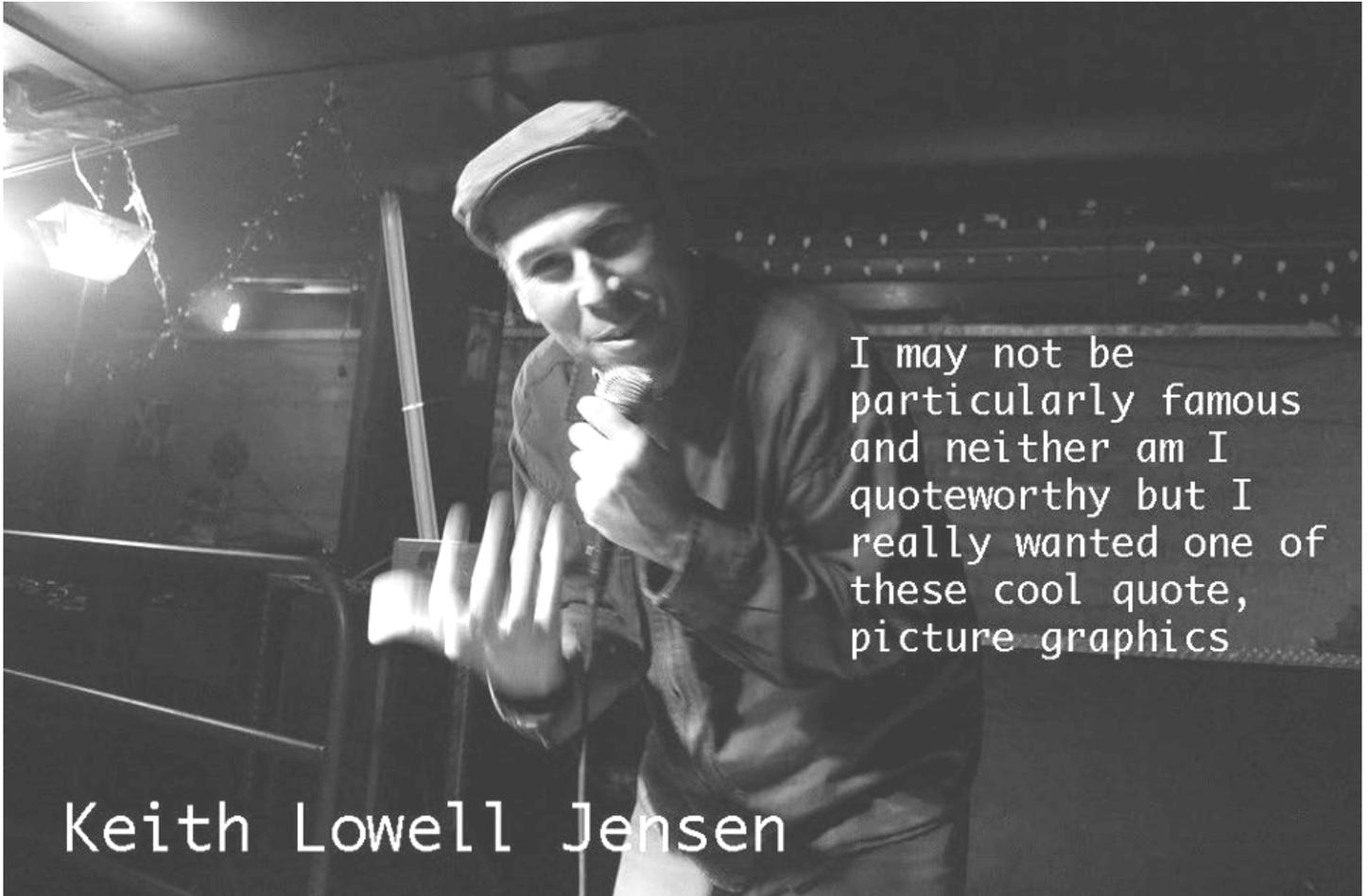
my geek friends had the name, phone number and address of the guy making the threats. When I called his house and suggested that he stop making threats and mow his lawn, he disappeared from my life pretty quickly. I do think there is some danger but the more of us there are, the safer we are. We dilute their anger when they have to spread it out. I am cautious though and I watch my back.

Richard: I know that Muslims have complained about some of your jokes. Are you worried about getting a fatwa issued against you?

terrorists but when it comes to dangerous extremists to fear, I prefer to buy locally. USA! USA! USA!

Richard: In Australia there has been a lot of negative focus on Muslims in recent years. What's your take on this?

Keith: I see that you have more insular groups of Muslims and more conflict and tension. I try to sympathise but I get very frustrated at all Muslims being grouped together. They're all Muslim and therefore I disagree with all of them but many are peaceful, mellow people, regardless of what their books may say. History



Keith: I think that they have bigger fish to fry. The day someone issues a fatwa against me is the day I know I've made it.

Richard: You have also had flack from members of Christian extremist groups. Do you think people underestimate Christian fundamentalists, choosing to focus on Islamic terrorists instead?

Keith: Absolutely. Most Christians are secure in the fact that they're still the dominant culture in The West but as that changes, and I believe it will, I'm afraid they'll get more violent. Abortion doctors are already being killed and judges are being targeted. We need to keep an eye on these folks. I joke about being afraid to fly domestically because I don't like to think of having to make an emergency landing in the Jesus Land that is the middle of the US. Other folks worry more about Muslim

shows that no matter how insular they try to be, most of their children will just be English, Irish or Australian or whatever.

My friend Hassan Minhaj, a very funny Muslim comedian, was raised here by Indian Muslim parents. He is the all-American boy, way more so than I am. People accept that there are peaceful Christians even though they carry around a Bible full of violence but yet we don't do the same with Muslims. It's hard not to think that there is some racism or xenophobia at play.

I started being more outspoken about this when France outlawed the burqa and played it off as feminism. On stage I complain about the burqa and I make fun of it but I also rail against trading our civil liberties in out of fear. I guess I love civil liberties more than I hate religion. It doesn't mean that I don't hate religion; I just have a raging boner for civil liberties. And on a more superficial

Equivalent Opposites Between Science & Christianity

Equivalent Opposites Between Science & Christianity

By Bob Irwin

Science

Christianity

◆ An open system, with work-in-progress	◆ A closed system, set-in-stone
◆ Flexible and sceptical	◆ Dogmatic and superstitious
◆ Sheds light on facts	◆ Light on facts
◆ Works with uncertainty, seeking solutions	◆ Certain about its claims, and not looking further
◆ Based in the natural world	◆ Based in the supernatural world
◆ Seeks answers when in doubt	◆ Never in doubt because it has all the answers
◆ Receives praise for new discoveries	◆ Prays for everything
◆ Believes in creativity	◆ Believes in creationism
◆ Rewards for experimentation and analysis	◆ Rewards for believers; punishment for others
◆ Describes the world around us	◆ Describes the world around it
◆ Encourages evidence-based decision making	◆ Encourages fantasy-based decision making
◆ Transparent, though not always understood	◆ Definite, though not understood
◆ Seeks new information about nebulae	◆ Is content with the nebulous
◆ Arrives at spectacular findings	◆ Arrives at speculative fantasies
◆ Tries to know about new things	◆ Says no if something new opposes its dogma
◆ Wealth of evidence to support its conclusions	◆ Wealth, without evidence to justify it
◆ Explains complexities as they actually are, using the best and simplest information available	◆ Reduces complexities to black or white within the framework of its own limitations
◆ Understands what is being intellectualised	◆ Tries to intellectualise its 'understandings'
◆ Thousands of scientific books and documents which report on clever thinking, and significant discoveries	◆ One olden-day book, studied to death, and no real change of outlook
◆ More concerned with progress and the effective application of results	◆ More concerned with process and the efficient conduct of internally-developed rules and rituals
◆ Reality is a symbol or representation of science	◆ Turns ancient symbology into 'reality'
◆ Deals in possibilities	◆ Deals in impossibilities
◆ Science is about dynamism	◆ Christianity is about dying

GACing Up!



More ticket madness!



ATHEIST FOUNDATION OF AUSTRALIA INC

MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

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

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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.

Pale Blue Dot

Consider again that dot.
That's here. That's home. That's us.

On it everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives. The aggregate of our joy and suffering, thousands of confident religions, ideologies, and economic doctrines, every hunter and forager, every hero and coward, every creator and destroyer of civilization, every king and peasant, every young couple in love, every mother and father, hopeful child, inventor and explorer, every teacher of morals, every corrupt politician, every "supreme leader", every "superstar", every saint and sinner in the history of our species lived there — on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam.

The Earth is a very small stage in a vast cosmic arena. Think of the endless cruelties visited by the inhabitants of one corner of this pixel on the scarcely distinguishable inhabitants of some other corner, how frequent their misunderstandings, how eager they are to kill one another, how fervent their hatreds.

Think of the rivers of blood spilled by all those generals and emperors so that, in glory and triumph, they could become the momentary masters of a fraction of a dot. Our posturings, our imagined self-importance, the delusion that we have some privileged position in the Universe, are challenged by this point of pale light. Our planet is a lonely speck in the great enveloping cosmic dark.

In our obscurity, in all this vastness, there is no hint that help will come from elsewhere to save us from ourselves.

Like it or not, for the moment the Earth is where we make our stand. It has been said that astronomy is a humbling and character-building experience. There is perhaps no better demonstration of the folly of human conceits than this distant image of our tiny world. To me it underscores our responsibility to deal more kindly with one another, and to preserve and cherish the only home we've ever known, the pale blue dot.

Carl Sagan
1934 - 1996

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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