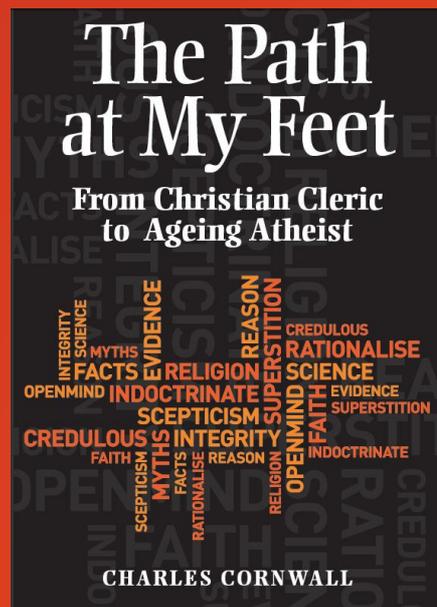
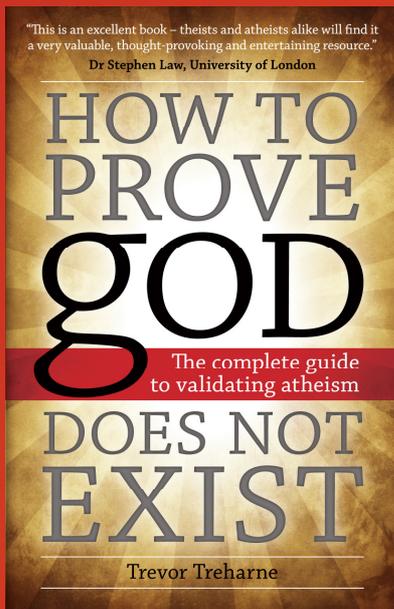
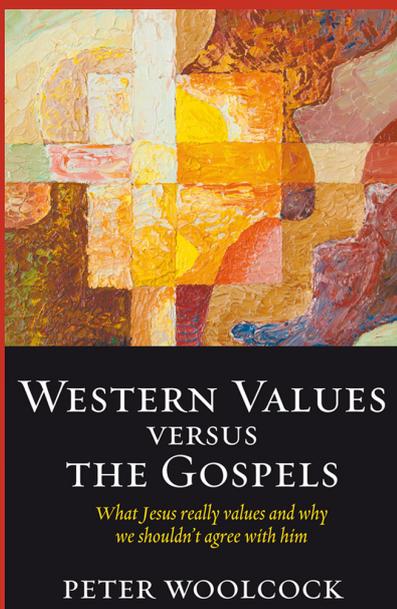


ISSN 1035-1477

# The Australian Atheist

Issue Number 35

Sept – Oct 2012



## A Veritable Smorgasbord Of Words!

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**Book Reviewer:**

Eustace Black

**AFA is a Member of**



**Anthony G Pickham** BCom FCA MTax FTIA  
Partner

276 Keira Street, Wollongong NSW 2500  
PO Box 1649, Wollongong NSW 2500

P: 02 4226 1000 | F: 02 4228 0907 | E: [agp@ajbca.com.au](mailto:agp@ajbca.com.au)

[www.ajbca.com.au](http://www.ajbca.com.au)



Printing by  
**copyking**  
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[info@copyking.com.au](mailto:info@copyking.com.au)  
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# From the Editor

I look forward to the day when politicians stop giving deference to religious leaders who spout vile messages full of hate and lies. The likes of Jim Wallace, Managing Director of the Australian Christian Lobby (ACL), and Peter Jensen, ye olde Anglican Archbishop of Sydney, are all too often given kudos by our political leaders fearing a backlash from voters. It was, therefore, rather pleasing that Julia Gillard cancelled her invitation to speak at the ACL's convention later this year. Her decision to do so was related to the outrageous ranting of Wallace stating that being gay is more of a health risk than smoking.

Then on Monday night's Q&A (ABC TV 10 September 2012) Peter Jensen told the audience he was generally supportive of ACL and stated: "As far as I can see ... the lifespan of practising gays is significantly shorter than the ordinary so-called heterosexual man."

One guest on the program, Liberal Senator Concetta Fierravanti-Wells, when asked whether she believed in God reverted to the "you're always picking on us" mantra. It is worth quoting.

"Thank you. Well, I do believe in God and I'm very proud to believe in God and, indeed, I know that there are millions of people around Australia who share my belief and perhaps, you know, believing in God and in Christianity and the values and beliefs that come with it for those, as I call, the chattering classes, may not be very fashionable but can I say that I believe that there is a silent majority in this country that believes in the traditions that go with Christianity, that go with the tradition of marriage that is opposed to same-sex marriage and they are the silent majority in this country and it really irks me the way that, you know, people come along and just always rubbish God and Christianity. You know, do we hear you ruzzishing, you know, Allah or Buddha or anybody like that? You know, give the Christians a break because there's millions of them in this country."

Silent?

While I'm on the subject of gays and homophobia I would like to tell you all about our media spokesperson, the wonderful Jason Ball. Not only is he an atheist and gay — he also plays footy. But don't hold the football playing against him! Jason has made a public statement outing himself to the footy world (he is already out in the real world) and asking the AFL to take a stand against homophobia in football. It is a very courageous stand he is taking and we wish him the very best with his campaign. You can sign his petition: "I've experienced homophobia in Aussie Rules Football first hand — now it's time to end it" at the following link.

[www.change.org/petitions/i-ve-experienced-homophobia-in-aussie-rules-football-first-hand-now-it-s-time-to-end-it](http://www.change.org/petitions/i-ve-experienced-homophobia-in-aussie-rules-football-first-hand-now-it-s-time-to-end-it)

The books displayed on the front cover of the magazine are all written by AFA members and each has been reviewed by our very own committee member, Eustace Black. I have now designated him as the official Book Reviewer for the AFA. Thank you, Mr Black.

I would encourage everyone to support our members whose book reviews appear in *The Australian Atheist*. The AFA is not involved with nor will it receive any money from the sale of Peter Woolcock or Trevor Treharne's books. We will make a very small profit on the sale of Charles Cornwall's book.

Happy Reading.

"Babies are born with the instinct to speak, the way spiders are born with the instinct to spin webs. You don't need to train babies to speak; they just do. But reading is different."

**Steven Pinker**

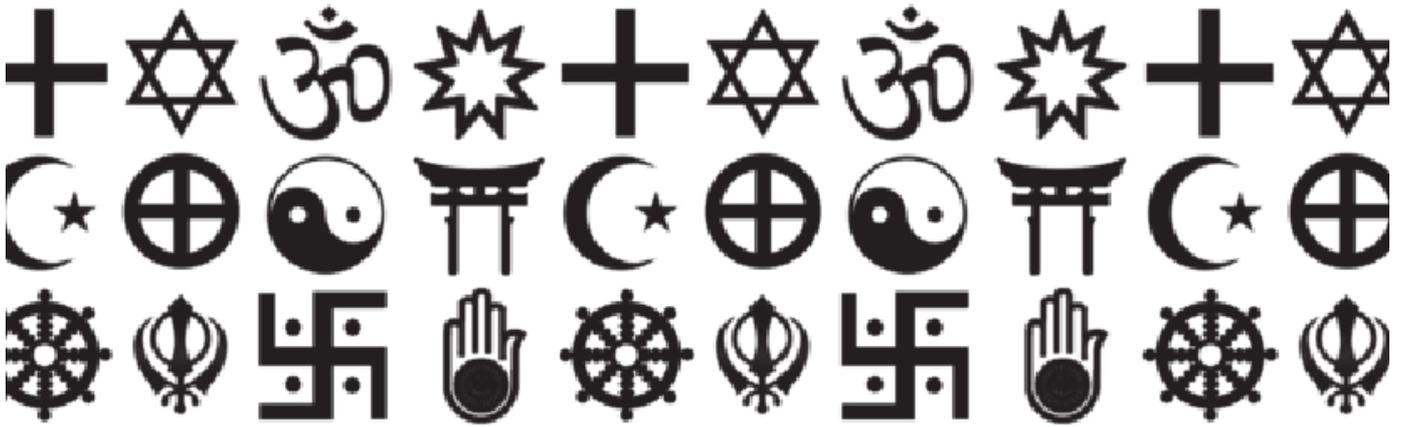
"To read is to fly: it is to soar to a point of vantage which gives a view over wide terrains of history, human variety, ideas, shared experience and the fruits of many inquiries."

**A. C. Grayling**

"To learn to read is to light a fire; every syllable that is spelled out is a spark."

**Victor Hugo**





# RELIGION IN THE 21ST CENTURY

## New Farm Neighbourhood Centre's POLITICS IN THE PUB

Wendy Francis – Australian Christian Lobby  
Dave Andrews – Christian Anarchist community worker  
Riffat Gurdezi – Young Muslim Advocate  
Rev Gerard Hall – Academic and ordained Catholic minister  
Danny Jarman - Atheist Foundation of Australia

6pm Thursday 20<sup>th</sup> September  
Turbine Platform, Brisbane Powerhouse

Join the discussion at this free community forum.



All are welcome.



# From the Inbox

Hello,

I have been raised as a Catholic but I do not follow the beliefs. I attend a Christian school and I am forced to attend mass when I do not want to. There are about 15 other atheists in my grade including me. I am contacting you because I believe that I should not be forced to attend mass but to do this I must leave the school but I do not wish to leave the school because it has a successful education history and also because of my friendship structures. So the email is to ask if anything can be done to stop us being forced to attend mass when we do not wish to. Also I think that the Catholic church should be brought to justice over events that they have carried out over history such as the Crusades. Also I would much appreciate it if you could tell me how to deal with discrimination.

Thank you  
Liam

PS. I think a revolution is at hand.

Good morning Liam!

I can identify with your desire for open rebellion, but I think, for your own sake, that I should caution you against any open show of defiance.

Your entire future lies ahead of you. You will probably want to pursue further study, build a career, and live a fulfilled life.

I can offer something I took time to learn, and it has cost me a number of advantages and opportunities to find out. It is this: "the squeaky wheel doesn't always get the grease: sometimes it gets removed and trashed."

You are currently in a position where a show of defiance is powerless — potentially you, versus the entire administration of a Catholic school. Could your life be made hell? Could your card be marked? Could references and reports be a little less positive?

On the other hand, is there any real likelihood of a positive result if you openly defy standing orders regarding Mass?

While you may see it as an issue of standing up for principles, the administration and teachers will almost certainly see a nuisance, or a rebel to be broken. Neither view will result in anything good for you.

I'm not saying to betray yourself. I'm saying to take advantage of what the school can give you, in terms of learning, connections and preparation for the future. You're obviously bright, as you're reasoning this problem through and seeking input from others.

Your best "revenge" would be to do as well as you can at becoming educated, to excel at whatever career you eventually take on, and to become a person whose opinion is asked for, and listened to.

Then, you can help us encourage others to think rationally for themselves.

I wish you all the best in rising to that challenge. (And I'd like to remind you that Mass is a good time to think about other things: they might have your body there, but your mind is your own.)

Best regards,  
E Black  
Public Relations Team  
Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc

Hi  
Thank you for the advice it will almost certainly help me in my studies and my school life and now I know what to do during mass.

Yours Sincerely  
Liam

# H<sub>i</sub>

My name is Emily and I am doing a school assignment on evil and suffering. We are required to ask some questions to find out the views that people believe in the community about evil and suffering.

Below are some questions. Feel free to answer any of them it doesn't have to be all.

Hello Emily,

I am David, a correspondent for the Atheist Foundation of Australia. Thank you for your questions. I have made at least a comment against each question below and answered others more extensively. There appear to be cases where we have different understandings of terms or the assumptions behind them. If you would like any of my comments explained at greater length, please write back with additional queries.

All the best with your assignment.

David V

Public Relations Team

Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc

### ***What forms of suffering in the world offend you most?***

Offend me? Should I be offended by suffering or should I empathise, understand both causes and pain, and seek to alleviate suffering immediately and in the longer term? I may well feel offended by the actions of people who cause suffering, but that is a different matter, not to be confused with the nature of any suffering itself.

### ***How do you explain to yourself why suffering happens?***

#### ***Do you think it is necessary to have an understanding of why suffering happens? If so, why?***

#### ***Why not?***

Answering the above two together, I do think it is important to understand why suffering happens. It is important to divest ourselves of the notion that in some fashion we are not animals in a natural world. Causes of suffering for ourselves arise in the same way as they do for other animals. Additionally, thanks to our greater ability to think, we are able to refine our moral standards to identify or classify forms of suffering that would not be recognised by other animals. It is vital to understand that there is no unique human condition, a super-nature or soul, that relates to suffering. There are only natural events and our treatment of others within the social or moral rules we form.

### ***How do you think the media portrays suffering in the world? Is it helpful for understanding?***

This is a very broad question, given the huge variety of media sources. If you refer to popular television and newspaper reporting, I could argue that issues of scale, likelihood, relevance and long-term remediation are not commonly addressed by such media, with their interest more often being pandering to local interest, "tugging heartstrings", or allowing a safely vicarious sensation of fright.

When a commercial TV channel leads its evening news with "In breaking news, the Sydney monorail has stopped and passengers have been trapped for an hour" (cut to camera shot of a stationary monorail car), you can imagine that there may be greater issues of suffering worthy of report. However, this is a problem with all news. We are interested in local events and news slots need to be filled by chasing ambulances. The question to consider is whether there are also reporting and analysis in greater depth, or what other sources there are for research?

### ***Is faith important to your understanding of why suffering happens? If so, why? Why not?***

No. Faith brings no knowledge and nothing to contribute. Most faiths encourage ideas of unworthiness and deserved suffering for individuals, and call these worthiness. They encourage mere charity over understanding. They encourage false remedies and a culture of blaming the victim.

### ***Do you think human suffering can be lessened? If so, by what means?***

If you look back over thousands of years, or more intensively over the last few centuries, what has lessened human suffering? Your answers will be found in medicine, sanitation, education, greater economic equality and opportunity, democracy and rule of law. By advancing these things, what we understand about the world and what opportunities we give people for equal and humane treatment, we can further reduce



suffering, especially that which we cause to one another. You might observe that nowhere in there was faith a useful factor, only social, scientific and economic change.

***What do you think are the origins of evil? Where does it come from?***

***Can evil be controlled? If so, by what / whom?***

In answer to the above two, you would need to define your understanding of evil for me to address your questions properly. A democratic and secular state with rule of law and encouragement of scientific and social advance has demonstrably been the most efficient way of reducing suffering over history. Nothing else has approached these methods.

***Do we live in a world that cares about suffering? What makes you think either way?***

Yes we do live in such a world. Humans are a highly social species where co-operation has proven itself as an effective path to a longer life. The "golden rule" of ethics is instinctive in people of every society, traceable back to our earliest histories all over the world, leaning us toward not harming but assisting others in expectation that we ourselves might then not be harmed, might be assisted. There is no magic to this; it is a natural evolutionary outcome and can be seen to various extents in other animals. We did not invent the golden rule; it emerged with our evolution into larger social co-operative groups.

***Where do you find strength to face the difficulties of life? How is this helpful to you?***

Well, I like to live. It is rather natural. Going more deeply into exactly what one does would be difficult in a brief letter, trying to ensure a balance of factors and coverage of them. Better I think to refer to the underlying fact that, on balance, living offers more fun than being dead, so I am inclined to keep doing it while I can. More seriously, if you were to read the difficult stories of people who survived natural or wartime disasters or oppression, the will to live expressed is quite remarkable, and unrelated to faiths except as a matter of desperation, and then to whatever faith happened to be that person's upbringing. Our will to live is both strong and innate.

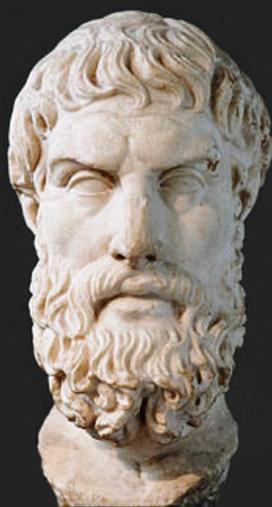
***What is your opinion of the way organised religion deals with suffering? Why do you feel this way?***

I think organised religion deals with suffering in two ways: creating and palliating. Organised religion is a ready source of mental and physical abuse, encourages unrealistic ideas of what is suffering and what might be done about it, encourages infliction of suffering on others through "righteous" war, then holds out palliative care and claims virtue from it. Nowhere does organised (or disorganised) religion contribute meaningfully to the factors that actually alleviate suffering in the longer term. I discussed these above where you asked how human suffering might be lessened.

Hi David,

Thank you for the answers to the questions. They have been really helpful and I appreciate the time that you have taken to answer them.

Emily



**Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able?**

**Then he is not omnipotent.**

**Is he able, but not willing?**

**Then he is malevolent.**

**Is he both able and willing?**

**Then whence cometh evil?**

**Is he neither able nor willing?**

**Then why call him God?**

***Epicurus 341 BC — 270 BCE***



Hello there,

My name is Brynne, I am going to be 15 years old and I am a Christian. I am not brain washed or forced to be but just like you have the choice to be an atheist, I have the freedom to be a Christian. A lot of your messages on the home page from members are about God and how He sacrificed His son but in reality, Christianity isn't the only religion. There are hundreds of other religions that are barely mentioned in these messages. Is Christianity the only one that they can talk about? And talk about the same so called "Faults" in Scripture when really they have never even picked up a Bible or asked someone for answers? I have struggled with my Christian relationship but I got the courage to ask questions and guess what? I got more than enough answers. Why are people atheists? Do they, in reality, when they truly and deeply think about it ... think they are right? This is research, not a judging or "pointing fingers" email. Just research. Don't take it personally. Most Christians don't take it personally when atheists post statuses on Facebook directing at the blindness of Christians or make Christians the subject of ridicule and not members of other religions, just Christians. But, maybe to you it would seem that way, that Christians are blind, but really most would assume that atheists are the blind ones for missing all of the evidence that God is real.

Please reply with thoughts, thank you for your time.

Dear Brynne,

Thank you contacting the Atheist Foundation of Australia. My name is Jac, and I have been asked to reply to your letter. Atheists come in many "shapes and sizes", that is, we don't all think the same. But I shall endeavor to answer your questions and assertions in a manner that I think best represents the atheist's point of view.

I agree that you have not been *brainwashed* into your religion. On the other hand, there is no doubt, none at all, that you have been *indoctrinated* into your religion. There is a difference, which I will explain below, and I'll leave it to you to research the precise meaning of *brainwashing*. (If you have access to Wikipedia, that might be a good starting point. Look up *indoctrination* too). But indoctrination, well, that's different. Indoctrination is the slow process of embedding (in young minds, particularly) certain ideas as absolute, indisputable truths. It is effective because

- a) children love and respect their parents and elders, and will therefore blindly follow their example (think of it as *imprinting*), and
- b) young minds have not yet developed the skills to critically examine and question what they are told.

So Brynne, if you have (say) from birth been surrounded by loving and caring adults, who seem to act and talk as if there was an invisible being living in the sky, it is (almost) inevitable that you should come to believe it as a normal part of life. If you're then taken along to a church on a regular basis, and you attend a school where the same message is pumped out over and over *ad nauseam*, you'll reach a point where you simply cannot see the world any other way. Once this embedding (indoctrination) has been successful, it becomes, for many adults, an intellectual stumbling block. They then pass the same (mistaken) ideas on to their children. And around it goes once again.

Many atheists are (generally speaking) people who have not been exposed to any particular doctrine, but who been left to explore the world for themselves and to make decisions about beliefs on the basis of demonstrable facts. Other atheists start out in life with religious indoctrination but abandon it as they gradually recognise the falsehood and absurdity of the myriad of religious claims.

An atheist then, is a person who does not accept, and who has not been *taught* to accept — on somebody else's say so — claims about supernatural beings (gods). Atheists simply say that, given the complete and total lack of *credible* evidence, gods simply do not exist. Claims about talking snakes, virgin births, feeding thousands with a few loaves and fishes, miracle cures, people rising up after death, etc. all belong to the same rag-bag of superstitions as does a broken mirror causing seven years of bad luck!

Now for the rest of your letter! True, Christianity isn't the only religion. It is, in fact, as you say, one of many hundreds of religions that have existed over time. And the Christian god is similarly but one of many hundreds of other fanciful gods. But the reason that Christianity gets mentioned more often on the AFA website is because it is more pervasive in our society than any other religion.

As for your claim: "... and talk about the same so called "Faults" in scripture when really they have never even picked up a Bible or asked someone for answers?" Well Brynne, you're simply making a random assertion that has no basis in fact. How can you possibly know that atheists have never picked up a bible? It may surprise you to know that some members of the AFA are surprisingly erudite biblical scholars, who



could easily teach Christians a thing or two about their sacred texts. It is important, Brynne, to avoid making grand, sweeping statements about things you could not possibly know.

I note that you say that you've struggled with your religion. I think that is probably a good thing. It possibly means that you're beginning to think for yourself. You say you had the courage to ask questions and got more than enough answers. This is what atheists do, too. What makes atheists different perhaps, is that we possibly ask *more* questions, and are not easily satisfied with any one particular answer. Don't just look for answers in one place. Search out other opinions, other ideas.

Why are people atheists? Well, probably because atheism is entirely natural. It's the default position in life. You were born an atheist also, Brynne. It's just that you've been conditioned to accept as truth something for which there is no evidence. Worse than that, when it comes to religion, you've been taught to ignore matters for which evidence is overwhelming the opposite.

There's no need to worry about offending atheists, though. Atheists are on a firm footing and as such are immune from ridicule by religious people. You can't blaspheme against an atheist!

And finally Brynne, in suggesting that "*... atheist are the blind ones for missing all the evidence that god is real ...*," I sincerely invite you to furnish me (and all the atheists in the AFA) with some of that evidence. I'm 64 years old, and I've been searching for it for a long time, but I have to tell you, Brynne, so far, not a blip of evidence has ever turned up on my radar!

Best wishes. Please feel free to write again.

Jac

Public Relations Team

Atheist Foundation of Australia

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# Letters in the Papers

Responses to Victoria's Planning Minister, Matthew Guy after announcing a "place of worship" will be built at Docklands instead of a public school.

*The Age* Letters to the Editor, 8 and 10 September, 2012

Forget learning to read and write, instead learn about my fictitious, invisible friend God ("Place of worship gets preference to school at Docklands", *The Age*, 7 September).

Planning Minister Matthew Guy should be sacked for putting religion ahead of education at Docklands.

Mr Guy was not elected for his religious beliefs. He is supposed to be concerned with providing public services, not furthering religious beliefs.

**Teresa Puszka**

What a travesty. A growing community needs schools, libraries and universities, not places that ultimately produce narrow social views and division in society.

Mr Guy's proposal is a waste of taxpayer resources and a scheme not supported by even a majority of Victorians.

Concentrated effort needs to be put into increasing the population's critical thinking skills. A state school would be much better in providing for the community's growth.

**David Nicholls, Atheist Foundation of Australia**

A "place of worship" won't bring people together. It will divide them. Docklands deserves a school — that would bring together people of different beliefs and cultures.

**Terry Kelly**

Matthew Guy has given a "church" priority over a school. It must be more important to get to Heaven than to get an education.

**Colin Jones**

David Nicholls objects to building a place of worship in Docklands (Letters, 8 September).

Churches strengthen communities and develop love and spirituality in contrast to the endemic gross materialism secularism can bring, leaving lives empty and destroying our planet.

**Marguerite Marshall**



# The Devil's Disease

By Holly Warland

**W**hy do people turn to religion if not to help them with their troubles? There'd be no need for an invisible friend in the sky if your life was perfect and you never needed guidance or reassurance. Most people believe the logical thing to do when presented with a tumultuous life-changing event is to turn to God. I feel like I bucked the trend in a major way.

When I was twelve, I was diagnosed with Limb Girdle Muscular Dystrophy. The prognosis for this affliction involves the gradual weakening of all muscles below the neck, rendering the sufferer unable to engage in everyday activities such as walking, lifting things, and driving. At 21, I'm in a wheelchair with limited use and strength of my arms and legs, but only time can tell how much worse it will get. When I was young, I'd noticed I was very clumsy and not as strong as the other kids, but simply thought I just wasn't destined to be a sports star. The symptoms involved falling over a lot, running strangely, and having slower reflexes. It will come as no surprise that I was teased and bullied a lot due to these "differences".

I was raised in a Christian household. I was taught to believe in God, I attended youth group at church, and I genuinely believed in prayer. As you can imagine, when I was diagnosed I was shocked and upset to say the least. The only way I knew how to cope was to pray and ask God for help. I vividly remember lying in bed and asking God why he made me like this. Had I done something wrong? Was he punishing me? As I look back, my heart breaks for my 12-year-old self. This poor girl thought her muscular dystrophy was her fault and God had given it to her. She couldn't understand how he could give such a terrible disability to someone he loved. I want to give her a hug, wipe the tears from her eyes and assure her that things will be all right and that it's not her fault.

After the initial shock, and days of praying to God asking him why, I started to get frustrated with the significant lack of answers. You could say I have the egocentrism of my 12-year-old self to thank for my lack of beliefs today. Something changed in me. I grew up immensely in a short time. I suddenly had to face the reality that my life isn't going to be a fairy tale and that I'm going to have to rely on others to help, and that God simply didn't make the cut.

After a few years, I had abandoned all ties with God and the comfort I previously felt whilst talking to him, but this didn't stop people from trying to reassure me that he was still there. I had a friend tell me that my Muscular Dystrophy was the "Devil's disease" (which I think is a great name for a heavy metal band), and I often encounter complete strangers who stop me in the street to tell me they're going to pray for me. However, the reassurances I receive most often are "everything happens for a reason" and "God doesn't give challenges to those he knows can't handle it." I have major problems with these almost insulting remarks. What possible reason is there for an innocent child to be born with a genetic disease so severe that it will render her incapable of doing most enjoyable things in life? Why does God give out these "challenges" in the first place? If he was the all-loving God that preachers claim he is, what possible reason would he have to create these afflictions in the first place? I may sound bitter and twisted but there is no reason behind any heartbreak in this world. Once I realised this, and started to think about things from a scientific and logical point of view, I found a freedom and peace that I'd never experienced before.

No longer do I question "why me"? I accept that my disability is the result of random chance, the genetic lottery. From there I can extrapolate to the rest of the world. I can appreciate everything for what it is. Science has explained life to me, and has comforted me much more than a deity whom I can't see, hear or feel. I can sense the sun on my skin, I can hear my little sister giggling and I can see the universe when I look up and feel a part of something much bigger and more beautiful than I am.

I discovered that turning to a God doesn't solve any of your problems, it just projects them onto an invisible being: you don't take responsibility for your life. God doesn't make me get out of bed in the morning. He didn't put me through university. He doesn't set goals for me. I have to do it. I have to grit my teeth and ask for real help from real people who love me.

So that's my story in a nutshell. I highly doubt you'll be seeing it on your current affairs television show as they tend not to like defiant, questioning, atheist cripple stories. They're not very inspiring for the viewers.

You can read more of Holly's work and watch her YouTube videos at [www.fearblandness.com](http://www.fearblandness.com)



# Beyond Atheism?

By Cliff Willard

I became an atheist at 21 years of age after comparing various religious beliefs and concluding that they were *all* wrong. Maybe the fact that I am now 73, and therefore closer to the grave, has pushed me into investigating religion and particularly atheism more fully.

My immediate concern is with organised religion, especially Islam, which, in my opinion, is seeking to dominate the world, along with fundamentalist Christians. (Both religions have high birth rates.) Perhaps this is why I joined the Atheist Foundation: organised religion should be balanced by organised atheism. I've read the books of "The Four Horsemen", Victor J. Stenger, George H. Smith and Ayaan Hirsi Ali (among many others including Charles Cornwell's great little story *The Path at My Feet*). I enjoy the commentaries of Pat Condell, Martin J. Willett and others.

I'm all in favour of "strong" atheism as opposed to "weak" atheism, which appears to me to be little different from being a non-believer. Fine, it's great to be a non-believer, but this is not a philosophy as such and does not require to be backed up by rational argument the way atheism does.

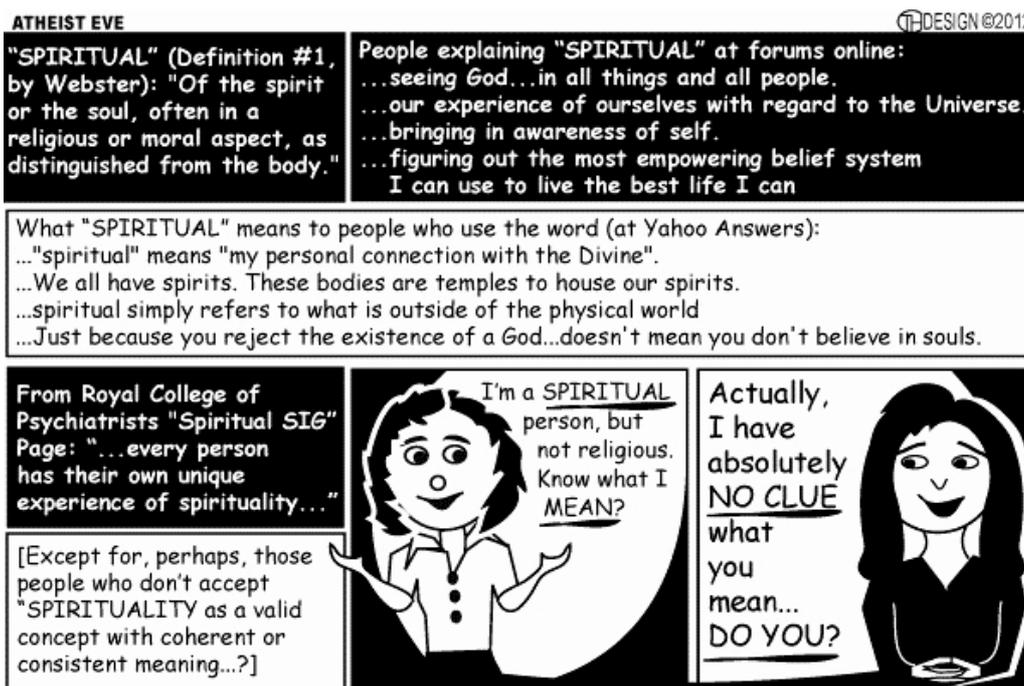
However, a non-belief in gods did not leave me satisfied as a person. Isn't there a moral code out there somewhere, applicable to atheists and not based on religion? In my old age I discovered Peter Singer.

Peter Singer answered, for me, a lifetime of questions and gave me a guide to ethical behaviour.

After reading *Animal Liberation* I became a vegetarian. But Peter's ethics involve a lot more than just the humane treatment of animals. His decisive reasoning shook many beliefs that I had unconsciously held from being brought up in a "Christian" society. I suspect many atheists still hold those beliefs.

As atheists, we believe that there is no afterlife (unless some of us are Buddhists); we only get "one bite at the cherry" (and we should be pleased for having lived at all). It would seem to me that all life (particularly human life) has some worth. Capital punishment (state-sponsored murder) has no place in atheist beliefs; life is precious to all those who want to live. In my eyes, nations such as the USA, China, Iran, Saudi Arabia and many others who practice capital punishment for whatever "crimes", cannot call themselves "civilised" in any sense of the word.

There are many questions such as these that we, as fellow atheists, should explore, even perhaps our attitude towards pollution. In other words, "Does atheism involve philosophy?" I think so, but I'm sure others don't. I look forward to your ideas and comments.



# Zealots in school ... Jesus loves me, this I know, cos he gave me a Freddo

By Chris Fotinopoulos

**A**s debate over religious education and chaplaincy programs in state schools attract public attention, religious representatives masquerading as youth workers are enjoying unsupervised access to students in certain Melbourne state schools without the knowledge of many parents and teaching staff.

Most of us are accustomed to proselytisers lurking in public spaces or appearing unannounced on our doorstep in the hope of snagging dispirited souls. And we put up with them only because we can walk away or slam the door shut. Our tolerance, however, ought to end at the public school gate, particularly when church groups use sweets and saccharine smiles to lure 13-year-olds into classrooms that are out of earshot of teaching staff, as has been the case for several years at the state school I teach at.

Keen to obtain a clearer understanding of this church-based program, I decided to plant myself in an adjacent classroom and eavesdrop on their so-called "student focussed lunchtime activity".

As with most sermons, this lunchtime sessions begins with the church leader posing life's big questions.

"Who likes chocolate?"

"Me."

The kids are encouraged to yell at the top of their lungs, with the child who manages the loudest screech receiving a chocolate reward. Watching the group leader in action reminded me of dog trainers in charge of frisky pups on their first day of training school. But in this case, it is religious interlopers posing as youth workers who command the attention of children.

As the ecstatic laughter and screams reach a crescendo, the group leader asks:

"Who are we?"

"You're Baptist!"

"Here's a Freddo for you."

"Where are we from?"

"The Baptist Church from down the road!"

"A Cherry Ripe for you."

"Who do we represent?"

"Jesus!"

"Mars Bar."

"Who can remember the golden rule from last week?"

"Treat others as you want to be treated."

"That certainly deserves a Freddo!"

The golden rule or ethic of reciprocity prescribes behavioural consistency, which essentially requires our actions to be in harmony with our desires. We often ask youngsters "how would you like it if it was done to you?" as a way of prompting them to see things from the point of view of others. It is essentially a lesson in empathy and solidarity. So allow me to pose a similar question to our religious interlopers.

How would you like it if your child were enticed with chocolates to embrace a belief system that you did not subscribe to?

I was informed by a school administrator that parents are provided with a notice at the beginning of the school year offering them the choice to opt their child out of the "youth program". But even if this is the case, at no stage did I see the group leader ask for a permission slip or a consent form. I even asked a



couple of my year 8 boys, who had never attended these sessions, to see if they could participate without a signed parental consent form. Unsurprisingly, they were not only welcomed with high-fives and exaggerated smiles, the organisers made out as if they knew them, greeting them with "hi, long time no see" and "do you like chocolate?"

What's more, I am required to seek parental consent for screening films or presenting literature and ideas that may be considered insensitive to certain religious groups and traditions, yet God's representatives see no need to adhere to this arrangement.

As the chocolates continued to flow throughout lunchtime, the organisers invited a young woman to relate her personal story. Her story is essentially as follows:

"I used to party a lot, drink alcohol and stay out late. One morning I woke up to Jesus. He asked me what I was doing with my life. He told to me not to go to university, and to become involved in the program. I am now free of my past through Jesus. I now turn to Jesus with my problems and he guides me."

So, the implication here is that choices made without Jesus' help are not wise choices. Urging students to act in accordance with Divine orders contradicts the notion of a successful learner, which, according to The Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians, is to "think deeply and logically, obtaining and evaluating evidence in a disciplined way."

The group's audacious foray into my school had me wondering if similar programs operate in states school throughout Victoria and indeed the nation. I contacted the Australian Baptist Ministries asking for information on this matter. Given the clandestine nature of the program in my school, I was unsurprised by the Church's mute response to this request.

I did, however, visit the various official Baptist websites, particularly the youth-orientated ones, to obtain a clearer understanding of the Church's youth agenda. Based on the Baptist Youth Ministries website [www.byouth.org/mission/mission-committee.php](http://www.byouth.org/mission/mission-committee.php) (BYM, which is a network of leaders and youth communities from NSW and ACT) "... the primary role of Baptist Youth is to help children and young adults develop a global vision and know God's heart for the nations and to give them an opportunity to play their part in bringing the good news of Jesus to the ends of the earth."

Given the evangelical tone of this mission statement, along with my observations at my school, I would not be surprised if schools throughout Australia had been targeted for this purpose. Parents who are opposed to such clandestine faith-based initiatives in state schools should contact their local state school and ask if similar initiatives operate under the guise of "youth support". I don't think they'd be too pleased to discover that religious groups are luring their children into classrooms with sweets and confectionery for proselytising purposes.

This article first appeared on *Crikey*

[www.crikey.com.au/2012/08/13/zealots-in-school-jesus-loves-me-this-i-know-cos-he-gave-me-a-freddo/](http://www.crikey.com.au/2012/08/13/zealots-in-school-jesus-loves-me-this-i-know-cos-he-gave-me-a-freddo/)

Chris Fotinopoulos is a state schoolteacher and a Melbourne-based writer.

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**When you  
tell kids  
they have  
to stay  
in the  
closet ...**



**... they  
run  
out of  
things  
to play  
with.**





a celebration of reason



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The AFA is a member of



Tasmanian bus advertisement 2010

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

## LATEST NEWS: New AFA website launched

Welcome to the new Atheist Foundation of Australia website.

In updating the website, we have aimed at focusing on making it a resource that members and the public can use more regularly, with updated information and as a basis for exploration of atheism in Australia.

It has been designed to be mobile device friendly, adapting automatically to the screen width of smart phones and tablets, in both portrait and landscape modes.

We hope you enjoy the new format.

### Forum Latest

- Exclusive Brethren GP banned for prescribing gay 'cure' Blue Lightning
- Breastmilk? prudie
- Philosophers wanted Gadfly
- Worldview and suicide rates? Unicorn
- Hello :) placebo
- Apologies... Threat
- G'day Mark G
- Haunting threats to get Chinese elderly to hand over money owheelj
- 08 - Star Wars Mafia Day 3/Endgame Bolero
- Western scrub-jay funerals: cacophonous aggregations in response to dead conspecifics Voltairine

### On Twitter



Atheist Foundation  
**AtheistAus**

AtheistAus "Arrival of #RU486 in Australia a great leap forward for women" by @LaTobe's Angela Taft [bit.ly/TBNI05](http://bit.ly/TBNI05) via @conversationedu  
5 days ago · reply · retweet · favorite

AtheistAus "ACT in knots on gay marriage as Tassie puts a ring on it" [bit.ly/PvpHS1](http://bit.ly/PvpHS1) via @canberratimes  
5 days ago · reply · retweet · favorite

AtheistAus "Salvos plan to patrol trains and stations" [bit.ly/PtXBX7](http://bit.ly/PtXBX7) via @theage  
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LaraGiddings Looking forward to the debate on Same Sex Marriage - the time has come to remove this last bastion of discrimination

Join the conversation

### On Facebook



**Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc** on Facebook

Like You like this.



Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc shared a link.

**School chaplaincy provider facing financial pressure**

[www.theage.com.au](http://www.theage.com.au)

THE organisation responsible for providing chaplains to Victorian state schools, using millions of dollars of federal government money, is under financial pressure, recording a loss for the third successive year.

Monday at 08:52



# tribute to Pussy Riot



www.nakedpastor.com/2012/08/19/tribute-to-pussy-riot/

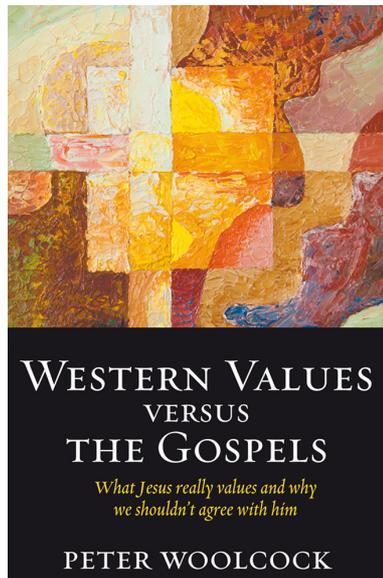
nakedpastor.com

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# Book Reviews

By Eustace Black



## Western Values versus The Gospels

By Peter Woolcock

ISBN-10: 1908675004

ISBN-13: 978-1908675002

Publisher: Dangerous Little Books, Great Yarmouth, UK  
March, 2012

Price AU approx. \$30.00

The Bible has a lot in common with the *Dungeons & Dragons* rulebook: literal application of either one to real life can have unfortunate results.\* Still, most people of Christian faith today would almost certainly say they are living their lives by the biblical directions of Jesus Christ, or at least trying to. And the idea that Western civilisation is "founded on Judaeo-Christian principles" gets thrown into the mix almost every time somebody wants to stop another group gaining a privilege they themselves possess. Yes, Jim Wallace, I am looking at you.

Peter Woolcock, through a detailed and critical examination of biblical writings, takes them at their word. The "word" in question is the biblical record of what Jesus Christ is supposed to have said.

What emerges from Woolcock's painstaking examination of the red letters in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John is a very different picture of Jesus, and a re-examination of what values can be drawn from the quoted texts.

There's lots of meaty content here for the thinker, the refuter of Christianity, and even the curious believer. The book is probably no danger to the faith of a committed Christian, and I would commend it to believers also as a sourcebook for examining the true mission of their faith

Woolcock's argument is exhaustively supported by reading deeply into the Beatitudes, Sermon on the Mount, parables, sayings, and accounts of miracles, looking for the things that really mattered to Jesus. The underlying theme that emerges is, put simply: "... the Western value of regarding autonomous rational adults as being of equal intrinsic worth." (p.131)

So, the "Western value is that we're all equal and free, if we are able to manage our own affairs."

Jesus, however, has different priorities. Woolcock finds: "A person has value as an actual or potential worshipper of God but is worthy of punishment or destruction once they have closed off the option of being a worshipper." (p.134)

And even those who do matter to Jesus matter because of their value as pawns or productive units (missionaries etc.) rather than because "Jesus Loves Me": "... for Jesus, nothing is more important than his mission. From a Western point of view, there is something more important, namely, respecting people as autonomous rational agents of equal intrinsic worth. If there is a conflict between what this demands and the demands of Christ's mission, then the West chooses the former, not the latter." (p. 158)

The book is written with a scholarly tone, and will invite slow study and a few revisits. There's a lot there to take in, and the detail that Woolcock goes into is deep: there are a number of spin-offs that could easily



become articles on their own, like the church-state divide:

"Jesus is not plausibly interpreted here as holding one of the core values of the modern West, that is, the separation of church and state. In his view there will be a unity between the political realm and the religious realm when the kingdom of God is in place and this will be a good thing. A separation of church and state is only necessary, on this model, when the state is not an agent of the church. When that is the case, then it is in the interests of the church that the state not interfere with the activities of the church; for example, it is best from the church's point of view that the state not prevent it from spreading the gospel, which is the church's prime mission. There is no commitment here to the state also staying out of the affairs of other religious groups. In fact, it would seem a plausible consequence of this attitude to think that the church's mission is best served if the state suppresses the freedom of other religions to compete with the gospel." (p. 105).

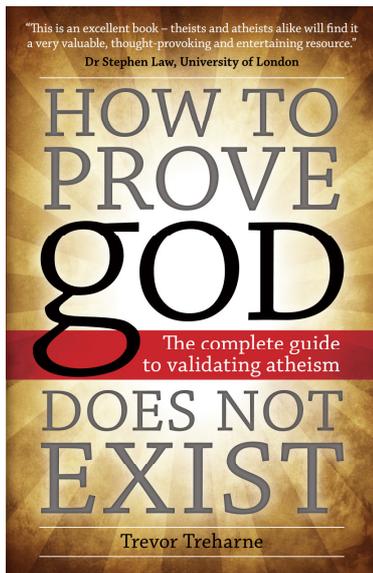
There's a section on the values of William Lane Craig, examining his approval of the Canaanite genocide, which, in my opinion, is almost worth the price of the book in itself.

I would recommend this book to believer and rationalist alike, as a cure to the recasting of Jesus as a Western right-winger, founder of nations, or caring, sharing type of guy. The "shepherd" imagery gains a whole new perspective if you think of yourself in the role of "livestock", and consider what can happen to well-tended sheep.

\* The "Boots Of Escaping" video can be seen here:

<http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-5463194370273222085>

Peter Woolcock is a visiting research fellow at Flinders University, South Australia and was formerly Dean of the Faculty of Education and Family Studies and Associate Professor at the University of South Australia. and has been a long-time member of the Atheist Foundation.



# How To Prove god Does Not Exist

The complete guide to validating atheism

By Trevor Treharne

ISBN: 978-1-61233-118-8

Publisher: Universal Publishers

September, 2012

Price AU approx. \$30.00

All the usual misguided missiles of the god-deluded are covered, such as "Isn't atheism a religion too?", "What about Hitler, Pol Pot and Stalin? Weren't they all atheists?", "How can you criticize religion's perceived far-fetched notions, when the Big Bang suggests nothing smashing into nothing and formed the world?" and many, many others. The Big Bang question alone fetches over 1,000 well-chosen words of answer, structured and full of information accessible by even the non-scientist.

Broad headings for the answers and refutations are:

- The Atheist Stance
- Morality



- Science
- Religious Validations
- Arguments For Atheism

The material in the Q&A section (over 300 pages in my very advanced e-book copy) has a structure that can be read as a methodical argument for rationality, or be used as a topical reference, based on field and question.

Featured material, in interview form, from Victor Stenger, Michael Shermer, Peter Singer, Michel Onfray, James Randi, Richard Swinburne and others addresses the professional specialties and experience of each interviewee, bringing answers that are personal, pertinent, and somewhat livelier than usual reference book material.

The believers' side is not unrepresented, with Peter Hitchens, Michael Behe and William Dembski interviewed.

Here is a sample question/answer from Stenger's interview:

**Author:** Much is made of Christian apologist William Lane Craig today, yet your debate in Hawaii seemed to set him straight on several of his arguments, in particular his first cause argument. What do you make of his challenge?

**Stenger:** I've debated William Lane Craig a couple of times. I've written about a few of his views, he has reviewed one of my books and I have also spoken to him personally a number of times, so we have had a fair amount of interaction. He is basically a very evangelically-minded Christian apologist. He uses a lot of cosmological arguments, but they don't hold water. He is not quite honest about those arguments and he uses arguments that he should know already are illegitimate and ruled out. So I don't think much of his arguments.

While the example above reveals some of the personal nature of the struggle for rationality, there are answers that draw forth the expertise of the subject, such as this answer from Dr Hector Avalos, author and professor of Religious Studies at Iowa State University:

**Author:** Accusations are often made that atheists have not studied theology sufficiently, but surely it is possible to be an honest atheist without an in-depth understanding of theology?

**Avalos:** Yes. The lack of evidence for the existence of God is sufficient to justify atheism. So just like the lack of evidence is sufficient to justify my lack of belief in Zeus or in invisible Martians, then the lack of evidence is sufficient to justify my unbelief in all gods/supernatural beings. Knowledge of theology is useful only to know the arguments used for the existence of God by Christians, but it is not necessary to justify atheism anymore than a deep knowledge of Zeusology is necessary to deny the existence of Zeus.

So, to round up:

- Some very detailed answers to those questions that spring up again and again.
- Some interviews that reveal much more than surface detail about their subjects, and their views on atheism and belief.

It sounds simple, and it is: many indispensable, everyday tools are. This one stays in my Desktop Shortcuts for daily access.

Trevor Treharne is a career journalist, researcher and magazine editor. Educated with a Bachelor of Arts in Information and Media Studies in England, Treharne now resides in Sydney, Australia.



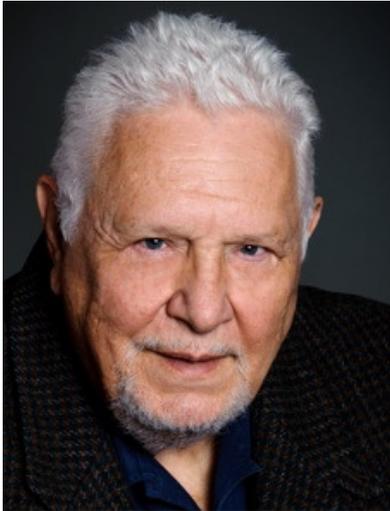
Eustace Black is a writer. He has done many of the jobs that are supposed to look good on a dust-cover, including bar manager, trawler deckhand, produce seller, systems administrator and he was formerly a student minister of religion. He is a member of the AFA Committee and Public Relations Team.

# Interview

## Questions on Science and Religion

The following is an interview with Victor Stenger.

It will appear in the book *How to Prove God Does Not Exist* by Trevor Treharne.



**What is the fundamental conflict between science and religion? Is it one that will never be resolved?**

The two have opposing views on what constitutes reality. Science finds no need to include any substance beside matter in order to describe our observations of the world. Religion holds that there is a world beyond matter. Religion claims it has a way of obtaining knowledge that is separate from the scientific method of observation and experiment. The religious believe that we have an inner faculty of some sort that enables us to learn about the world, the universe, and reality without such observation. It is hard to see the two ever resolving this conflict.

**One of your more recent books, *The Fallacy of Fine-Tuning*, is certainly a timely one based on how common that argument is currently proving. What is your summary on what is wrong with**

**the fine-tuning arguments?**

As I have said before, the universe is not fine-tuned for us — we are fine-tuned to the universe. I claim that the statements made about fine-tuning are not accurate. When theists talk about something being fine-tuned to one part in ten or a hundred orders of magnitude, they are simply incorrect. If you look more closely at the physics and cosmology, you will see that there is plenty of room to vary their various parameters and still maintain some kind of life. Our form of life is certainly sensitive to the parameters and if the parameters of the universe were different, our form of life wouldn't exist; I agree with that. But our form of life is not the only form of life one can imagine.

**Two rather traditional arguments still persevere amongst theists today, firstly that "something" could not come from "nothing"...**

When tackling this question in the past, I was often forced into a philosophical discussion on defining what one means by nothing. Once you define it, give it some property, then it becomes "something". So, I don't really know how you define "nothing", when you start talking philosophically. The way I handle that question now, which is consistent with all existing knowledge of cosmology and physics, is that the universe is eternal. It didn't come from nothing, or something for that matter, because it always existed and it always will. Our universe began with the big bang. I don't dispute that, but it could have come from an earlier universe and there are proposals available in literature — written by reputable scientists, published in reputable journals, and fully worked out mathematically — that provide scenarios for how our universe could have come from an earlier universe. They don't prove it really happened that way. However, they serve to refute any claim that our universe had to be supernaturally created *ex nihilo*.

**... And secondly, how can "order" come from "disorder"?**

That's an easy one since you don't have to rely on complex biological arguments. You can go back to simple physics and look at something like water. Water appears in three phases: gas, liquid, and solid. If you are out in space or in a polar region, then the natural state of water is solid — ice. But that occurs only after water vapor, which is a gas, is condensed into liquid water, which is then frozen into ice. That original vapor has little structure and is about as simple as it could be. Then when it becomes a liquid, it develops some structure but can still flow and change shape. Finally, when it becomes solid ice it has considerable structure — crystal layers and so forth. So, there is this tendency in nature, in physics, for physical



substances to go from simplicity to complexity. That is actually the natural trend of physical processes.

***Much is made of Christian apologist William Lane Craig today, yet your debate in Hawaii seemed to set him straight on several of his arguments, in particular his first cause argument. What do you make of his challenge?***

I've debated William Lane Craig a couple of times. I've written about his views, he has reviewed one of my books, and I have also spoken to him personally a number of times. So we have had a fair amount of interaction. He is basically a very evangelically-minded Christian theologian and philosopher. He uses a lot of cosmological arguments, but they don't hold water. They are already ruled out by existing science.

***"Science flies you to the moon. Religion flies you into buildings" — what reaction has that view garnered since you suggested it? What made you think of it?***

I sent it into Richard Dawkins when he was trying to come up with bus slogans. He was delighted with it and said it was the best one he had received. Other people have picked up on it since, so it has worked out pretty well. It is one of those sound bites that people have made use of.

***What do you define as what is new about the New Atheism?***

When my book *The New Atheism: Taking a Stand for Science and Reason* came out in 2009, I took a lot of flak from old-time atheists who resented that all the work they had done promoting atheism, secularism, and humanism was not fully recognized. But there was a difference. When, starting in 2006, a whole series of bestsellers appeared by Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Christopher Hitchens, and myself, these all got a lot of attention. In *The New Atheism*, I was focusing on those works and asking what it was about these bestsellers that were different from the old atheism, which I did acknowledge.

The difference was that we are far more uncompromising towards religion. The term "accommodationists" is used for the people who were saying that they wanted to promote atheism, humanism, and science — but at the same time we should respect the opinions of believers and, in particular, we shouldn't get into fights with them since we need their support for, say, the teaching of evolution in public schools. Moderate Christians tell us that they believe in evolution. But surveys show they really don't, since they claim evolution is God-guided, which isn't Darwinian evolution. In Darwinian evolution, humanity is an accident and that is unacceptable to Christians. They sure as heck don't want that taught in school.

Scientists are very reluctant to criticise religion. They are afraid of a backlash that might affect scientific funding, which for a research scientist is critical. The new atheists understand that it makes sense to have as many friends as possible, but ultimately it came down to the fact that religious belief is based on magical thinking and ideas that cannot be supported empirically. This serves to retard the progress of science. There is a lot of anti-science built into the religious enterprise and we felt we had to take a strong stance and argue that when someone says something contrary to our best existing knowledge, whether religious or not, then we should not hesitate to respond to it. Not that we have to call them fools or idiots, but we have to present intellectual arguments that explain the flaws in their reasoning. We needed to come out and say something and not pussyfoot around it.

The anti-science that is so prevalent among conservatives in America today, and is occasionally found among liberals as well, is driving the world toward economic and environmental disaster.

Victor J. Stenger is a retired elementary particle physicist and author of eleven books, including the 2007 *New York Times* bestseller *God: The Failed Hypothesis. How Science Shows That God Does Not Exist*. His latest book is *God and the Folly of Faith: The Fundamental Incompatibility of Science and Religion*.

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[www.huffingtonpost.com/victor-stenger/questions-on-science-and-\\_b\\_1585151.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/victor-stenger/questions-on-science-and-_b_1585151.html)

**A**ny strategy that attempts to reinforce faith by undermining science is also doomed to failure. Showing that some scientific theory is wrong will not prove that the religious alternative is correct by default. When the sun was shown not to be the center of the universe, as Copernicus had proposed, the Earth was not moved back to that singular position in the cosmos. If Darwinian evolution is proved wrong, biologists will not develop a new theory based on the hypothesis that each species was created separately by God 6,000 years ago.

**Victor Stenger - *Has Science Found God?***



# Media Releases

## Pandering to Stupidity

14 August 2012

Prime Minister Julia Gillard is to be the keynote speaker at the National Conference of the Australian Christian Lobby (ACL), representing all Australians, including the Australian Labor Party.

The ACL is an organisation consisting of ultra-conservative Christians, whose views are unlikely to be accepted by a majority of the population, whether religious or non-religious. Mainstream Christian faiths have distanced themselves from this organisation, claiming they are not representative of their churches.

The Atheist Foundation of Australia had previously asked the Labor Party under Kevin Rudd, as well as Julia Gillard, to open the Global Atheist Conventions in Melbourne in 2010 and 2012. But the offers were declined in both instances. This was despite the fact that Atheists represent between 30% and 50% of the population.

It is deplorable that the Labor Party should be pandering to any religion at all, especially to such an anachronistic and fundamentalist branch of Christianity, one that has no relevance in a modern and enlightened society.

Julia Gillard has failed as a politician and an atheist, and her kowtowing to a religious minority, whose aim it is to create a Christian theocracy, is a downright disgrace.

The Atheist Foundation of Australia condemns this short-sightedness and hypocrisy.



**The vision of the Australian Christian Lobby is to see Christian principles and ethics accepted and influencing the way we are governed, do business and relate to each other as a community. The ACL aims to foster a more compassionate, just and moral society by seeking to have the positive public contributions of the Christian faith reflected in the political life of the nation.**



Source: [www.acl.org.au](http://www.acl.org.au)

## Thank you Julia

6 September 2012

Prime Minister Gillard's announcement that she would speak to the Australian Christian Lobby convention spread like wildfire through social media channels eliciting comments of shock and horror.

Today, the Atheist Foundation of Australia applauds and congratulates the Prime Minister's decision to decline this engagement with her statement that, "To compare the health effects of smoking cigarettes with the many struggles gay and lesbian Australians endure in contemporary society is heartless and wrong."

David Nicholls, president of the Atheist Foundation of Australia, said, "The leader of our nation should not be supporting the American-style bigotry that emanates ad nauseam from Jim Wallace's words, but, instead, should be condemning them. The 'smoking' incident is but the tip of the iceberg regarding copious amounts of inanity and bigotry emanating from the ACL."

Nicholls went on to say, "If it is good enough for the Christian Barack Obama to endorse same-sex marriage in the religiously-bamboozled country of the USA, then Ms Gillard, leading a more progressive and secular society, must now follow suit if she wishes to regain credibility. Fixing mistakes is far preferable than letting them unnecessarily fester."

The Atheist Foundation of Australia feels guardedly confident that this small but important step by Ms Gillard will result in greater recognition of the harm created by Church and State not being totally separated.



# Apes Like Us: Towards an Evolutionary Humanism

By Volker Sommer Professor of Evolutionary Anthropology at UCL

Our everyday language separates “human” and “animal”. This popular definition is perhaps rooted in a desire for self-discovery. For the question “Who am I?” is easier to answer if I can designate “the other”.

Sigmund Freud had another take on this. He theorised that the admission that humans derive from the animal kingdom would hurt our pride and self-esteem. Indeed, if the orang-utan could think, if the gorilla commanded a free-will and the bonobo possessed consciousness, would this not drag our superior minds from metaphysical heights down to rather earthly abodes? And chimpanzees permeated by a soul? Suddenly, the pinnacle of creation would fall flat ...

## Descartes’ Dualism of Body and Soul

In Western intellectual history, the animal/human polarity is tightly connected with the philosopher Rene Descartes. His 17th-century ideas signal the beginnings of modernity. The critical and thinking self became the hinge for Descartes’ dualism of body and soul. Within this philosophy, there is a strict distinction between entities of thought (*res cogitans*) and matter (*res extensa*). The mind — more or less identical with the soul — belongs to the former category. It is non-material, does not occupy space and therefore does not follow the laws of nature. Only humans possess a true mind or soul, whereas animals do not.

This led Descartes to say that animals did not feel real pain. He thus advocated the practice of the dissection of live animals to better understand human health and disease. Descartes maintained that

animal testing for the benefit of humans made sense, given how dissimilar they were with respect to the soul. But he argued that all living beings were subject to the laws of nature when it came to their bodies, as they all consisted of matter. Descartes was inspired by clocks, at the time the peak of mechanical craftsmanship, and therefore suggested that bodies, whether those of animals or humans, resembled machines and functioned like clockwork.

Descartes was one of the first thinkers who looked at biological processes as if they were mechanical. He thus postulated unbroken sequences of cause and effect — similar to the interactions amongst the precisely tuned parts of a watch. This approach is at the core of scientific progress and its practical achievements in technology, physiology and medicine. Nevertheless, Descartes’ animal/human dualism with respect to the mind and soul fuelled the very philosophy that claims a special position for humans because of purportedly unique characteristics such as technology, culture, language and social behaviour. The quest for “the unique” with its dividing perspective of all-or-nothing would thus intensify, despite the rise of evolutionary theory with its unifying perspective of a more-or-less.

However, detailed research over the last half century and studies of apes in particular have raised more and more doubts that certain traits are the human privilege we once thought they were — be it tool manufacturing, empathy or planning for the future. This revised state of knowledge, while not undisputed, is not only important in a scientific sense, but has also

implications for “big questions” in ethical and existential perspectives. Under the heading of evolutionary humanism, such debates are gaining momentum.



## Legal Status of the Great Apes

Discussion is needed, for example, concerning the legal status of great apes. Initiated by philosophers Peter Singer and Paola Cavalieri, the *Great Ape Project* demands that some privileges that currently apply only to humans should be extended. This includes a right to life, liberty and the prohibition of torture for great apes. Supported since 1993 by dozens of renowned primatologists, the initiative aims for an expansion of the “community of equals”. Defenders of the project would also like to see that great apes are recognised as “persons”, given that their complex mental landscape includes consciousness, emotions and sophisticated cognitive abilities, such as forward planning and empathy.

These demands are basic and they remain measured — because nobody requests a right to education for bonobos, voting rights for gorillas, data protection rules for chimpanzees or a minimum age for sexual consent amongst orang-utans. Supported by eminent primatologists, the Great Ape Project simply wants to expand the “community of equals” in certain aspects. For example, it should be unlawful to inflict pain on great apes for the alleged benefit of others — as is



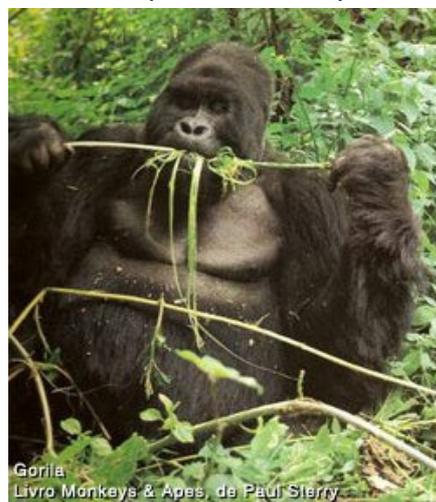
done in biomedical experiments. Moreover, their freedom should not be arbitrarily deprived — although it is recognised that, for their own good, apes born in captivity might need to be kept in a zoo or in a sanctuary where they were brought to as orphans after hunters had killed their mothers.

Demanding basic equality for great apes is a contemporary continuation of former debates — for example, if women should have a right to vote, whether dark-skinned Africans or Australian aborigines are human, or whether gay people can marry. Ethical sentiments amongst humans were first restricted to one's own relatives, then extended to clans, later to members of larger societies, and eventually to all people — with the UN Declaration of Human Rights. More and more primatologists and philosophers are convinced that the historic moment has arrived to again be more inclusive. This time, we would have to remove the barrier of "speciesism" that justifies inequality amongst living beings solely based on assignment to a particular species. Of course, the arbitrary line between humans and great apes on the one hand and the rest of the animal species on the other could likewise be questioned at any time in the future; interestingly, such a lobby is currently forming for whales and dolphins. Thus, the Great Ape Project understands itself as a door-opener for a wider discussion of animal rights.

Practical limitations do not contradict the principle. Interests of humans unable to speak up for themselves — such as infants or those afflicted by conditions such as Alzheimer's — are represented by guardians. Guardians can therefore also safeguard the legal rights of great apes. Legislation to this end has already been drafted in New Zealand and Spain.

What we now know about apes also certainly provides new arguments against the mind-body dualism of Descartes. To be sure,

contemporary philosophy engages with his positions at best for historical reasons. But Cartesian dualism still plays a prominent role in popular conceptions. Roman Catholics, for example, trust in the existence of an immaterial and immortal soul. Some animal researchers are likewise sympathetic to such lines of thought, but they would want to shift the boundary between "soulful humans" and "inanimate animals" and thus ascribe souls also to animals. The prominent ape researcher Jane Goodall publicly confesses such beliefs, which include a life after death — and her conviction that chimpanzees, too, can expect immortality.



Gorilla  
Livro *Monkeys & Apes*, de Paul Slerry

### A New Monism?

However, those sceptical about the conventional human/animal dualism can also be more radical, and question the distinction between mind and matter on principle. The result would be a new monism — a world-view that renounces non-material interpretations altogether, and maintains that psychological phenomena can be fully explained by physical-chemical processes in the brain. It is not without irony that this is a late consequence of the Cartesian programme of the mechanisation of nature.

This train of thought is now catching up with the very dimension that was originally explicitly excluded: the soul. For disciplines such as palaeontology,

medicine, genetics and neurobiology have not only dissected animals into finer and finer parts and corresponding chains of cause and effect, but also we humans. Thus, we suddenly find ourselves to be machines — an apparatus that commands a gifted brain which itself created the soul. But if everything can indeed be attributed to materialistic processes, then we are finally reunited with all other animals.

Whether one wants to defend this monism or not, it eliminates a paradox of classic dualistic thinking: how could it happen that an archaic mother who lacked a soul gave birth to a child with a soul? A monist does not have to ponder such a miracle but can enjoy secular wonders — the wonders of nature, and how they instill a feeling of being close to other living things. With this, Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic interpretation of the stubborn persistence of the mental animal/human divide would likewise be passé. Because those who take evolutionary theory seriously would not find it insulting but empowering and enriching to understand themselves to be an animal — a mammal in general and an ape in particular.

Volker Sommer conducts field studies of primates in Asia and Africa and advises the International Union for Conservation of Nature as an expert on apes. He is on the scientific board of the Giordano-Bruno-Foundation, a think-tank that promotes evolutionary humanism. This contribution is based on: Hof, Jutta (photography) & Volker Sommer (text), 2010: *Apes Like Us; Portraits of a Kinship*. (Bilingual edition German/English) Mannheim: EditionPanorama.

Transcript of a lecture given on 20 May 2012, at the South Place Ethical Society, London, UK.

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# News

## Parrot wins Awards



The short film *Parrot*, which premiered at the 2012 Global Atheist Convention, and was proudly supported and partially financed by the Atheist Foundation, has been making waves around the world.

It has won the Best Director and Best Screenplay awards at the Blue Whiskey Independent Film Festival in Chicago.

It also received the Short Film Award at the San Francisco Atheist Film Festival.

Congratulations Emma McKenna and Craig Foster.

<http://www.parrotshortfilm.com>

## Vale Gore Vidal



*The last of a generation of great American writers, Gore Vidal, died on 31 July, 2012, at the age of 86. To his friends and family, he was always kind, loyal, and generous. He spent his life learning and, as an educator, wanted to share this knowledge with the rest of the world. Always the realist, he bravely told the truth as he saw it, even when these words were not always welcome. We already miss him, not just for himself, but for what he was.*

From: [www.gorevidalnow.com/2012/08/we-miss-him-for-what-he-was/](http://www.gorevidalnow.com/2012/08/we-miss-him-for-what-he-was/)

### On religion:

"The great unmentionable evil at the centre of our culture is monotheism. From a barbaric Bronze Age text known as the Old Testament, three anti-human religions have evolved — Judaism, Christianity, Islam. These are sky-god religions. They are, literally, patriarchal — God is the Omnipotent Father — hence the loathing of women for 2,000 years in those countries afflicted by the sky-god and his earthly male delegates. The sky-god is a jealous god, of course. He requires total obedience from everyone on Earth, as he is in place not for just one tribe but for all creation. Those who would reject him must be converted or killed for their own good. Ultimately, totalitarianism is the only sort of politics that can truly serve the sky-god's purpose.

"Because there is no cosmic point to the life that each of us perceives on this distant bit of dust at galaxy's edge, all the more reason for us to maintain in proper balance what we have here. Because there is nothing else. Nothing. This is it. And quite enough, all in all."

Vidal was made honorary president of the American Humanist Association in 2009.

## Vale Phyllis Diller



Phyllis Diller died in her sleep at age 95. She was an atheist. When asked what she would like to be remembered for, her reply was:

"For being funny. Well, I should say being kind. I am a kind person. I'm kind to everybody. I treat everybody the same, and I'm proud of that. In fact, that's my religion."

In other interviews she also stated:

"We were not created by a deity. We created the deity in our image."

"Religion is such a medieval idea. Don't get me started. I have thought about every facet of religion and I can't buy any of it."

# News

## The FitzFiles *From little things ...*

I bring you reports of progress on the enlightenment front in the 21st century, courtesy of a very proud grandfather. He reports that this week his five-year-old grandson gave his mother a report on what he had done at his Sydney school on this day.

"Today," he said, "we were talking about how the Earth was made, and I was the only one who was right. Steve said it started with ice and Hamish said God made the Earth! But I told them that the Earth was made in space from dust and meteors and little things.

"How could God make the Earth? God's not even real!"

OK, hands up, all those who think it would have been better to fill the kid's young, vulnerable and defenceless mind with all kinds of gibberish about how it was actually what Gore Vidal called one of the three main "sky gods" — from Christianity, Judaism and Islam — that made the Earth. Great — now lower your hands and bunch your fist. Now give yourselves an uppercut for condoning child abuse.

Peter FitzSimons is a writer and journalist. His latest book, *Eureka, The Unfinished Revolution* will be released on 1 November 2012.

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## The world has more atheists — and the numbers are increasing

According to the latest global poll released by Red C Opinion Poll, part of WIN-Gallup International, a world-wide network of leading opinion pollsters, the number of self-declared atheists in the world has risen by nine percent since a measure was last taken in 2005.

The massive poll, conducted in 57 countries among 51,000 people asked a single question: "Irrespective of whether you attend a place of worship or not, would you say you are a religious person, not a religious person or a convinced atheist?"

It shows that on average 59 percent of the world said that they think of themselves as religious, whereas 23 percent think of themselves as not religious and 13 percent think of themselves as convinced atheists. There are enormous variations from country to country. The countries with most self-described atheists are China (47 percent), Japan (31 percent), Czech Republic (30 percent), France (29 percent), South Korea (15 percent), Germany (15 percent), Netherlands (14 percent), Austria (10 percent), Iceland (10 percent), Australia (10 percent) and Ireland (10 percent).

The most religious countries are: Ghana (where 96 percent of people define themselves as religious), Nigeria (93 percent), Armenia (92 percent), Fiji (92 percent), Macedonia (90 percent), Romania (89 percent), Iraq (88 percent), Kenya (88 percent), Peru (86 percent) and Brazil (85 percent).

One of the most dramatic reductions in the proportion of the population considering themselves religious occurred in Ireland: from 69 percent in 2005 to 47 percent in 2012, placing Ireland on the index of religious belief at position 43 out of 57 countries.

The poll also showed that the poorer people were, the more likely they were to be religious.

One anomaly that the pollsters have themselves questioned is in Turkey, where those who say they are religious is only 23 percent while those defining themselves as non religious is 73 percent.

From *The Freethinker* [www.freethinker.co.uk](http://www.freethinker.co.uk)



# Merchandise

<http://www.cafepress.com/aussieatheists>

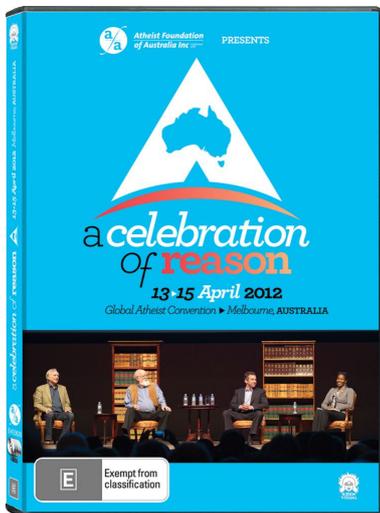


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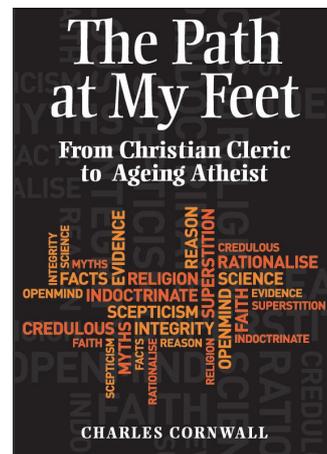
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## Philosophy

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.

# a celebration of reason



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The 2012 **Global Atheist Convention, A Celebration of Reason**, brought together a line-up of atheism's brightest stars. Inspired by the success of the Atheist Foundation of Australia's first convention in 2010, and attracting twice the numbers, the 2012 convention was a joyous and momentous event, and a feast of what some of the world's finest thinkers have to offer. A triumph of humanism, reason and secular values, the 2012 Global Atheist Convention will be remembered as a landmark moment in the history of atheism in Australia and beyond.

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