

# *The Australian Atheist*

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“ I am Malala ”





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# From the Editor

It is Tuesday evening 7 November, 2012 and I'm feeling good. The man in the magic underwear has failed in his bid for Presidency of the USA. Thank you, America! I have been wondering since Mitt Romney was given the nod to represent the Republicans whether it was actually possible for a nation to vote for a Mormon. It is bad enough that religion is so entrenched in the US political system and that fundamentalist Christians wield so much influence — but to elect a Mormon as President of the country would be really scary.

Our Facebook page was alive with comments ranging from relief to excitement to ambivalence. Jason Ball (our man on Facebook), noted the following ...

Obama wins, but also:

- Same-sex marriage legalised in Maine and Maryland and Washington
- A proposal to amend the state Constitution in Minnesota that would have defined marriage solely as a heterosexual union was defeated by voters
- First openly gay woman elected to US Senate (Tammy Baldwin, Wisconsin)
- First openly pansexual woman elected to US Senate (Mary Gonzalez, Texas)
- First Asian-American woman elected to US Senate (Mazie Hirono, Hawaii)
- First disabled female veteran elected to the US House of Representatives (Tammy Duckworth, Illinois)
- Ex-Mormon, first open atheist elected to Congress (Kyrsten Sinema, Arizona)
- Record number of women elected to Congress

A good day for diversity ♥

I am sure everyone is aware of the plight of Pakistani girl Malala Yousafzai who was shot in the head by the Taliban. No words are adequate to express the way in which most of the world feels about Malala. The image on page 15 captures it beautifully.

Members Danny Jarman and Charlene Jackson have spoken on behalf of the AFA or atheism in general (see page 8 and 11 for reports), and Matthew McArthur was on radio. Matthew's conversation "The influence of religion on culture and politics" with John Pilbrow on SYN Radio can be heard here.

<http://atheistfoundation.org.au/2012/10/30/debate-the-influence-of-religion-on-culture-and-politics/>

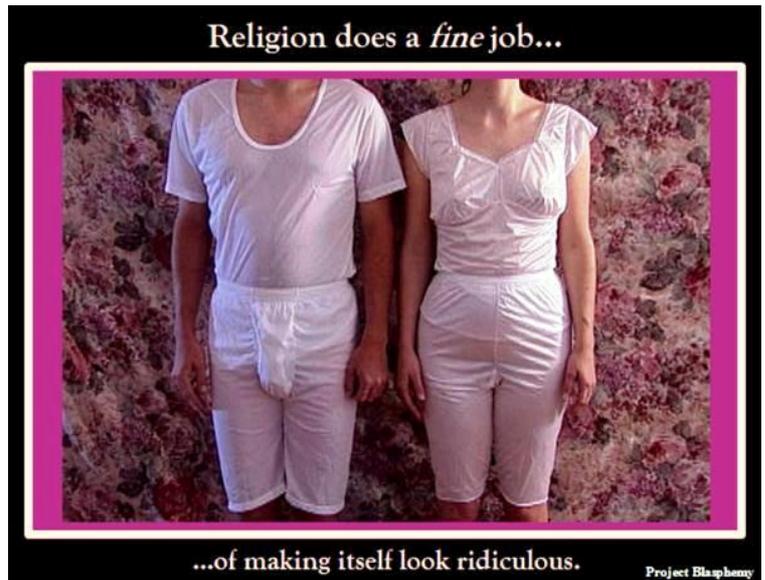
The AFA is sincerely grateful to *all* our members for their ongoing support and commitment. We have had a wonderful year, especially with the 2012 Global Atheist Convention in April being such a huge success.

Thank you to the AFA and GAC committees, Forum moderators, Public Relations Team, membership administrator, website administrators and technicians, Twitter and Facebook administrators, volunteers and writers and proof readers. Special thanks to Nigel Sinnott — you are fantastic.

Supreme thanks to my Co-Editor, Tom Melchiorre. Who'd have thought grammar could be fun? Not me. And I still don't.

Last, but by no means least, to David, my partner-in-life and president of the AFA — thanks for being the other half of our incredible atheist journey.

Happy New Year everyone!



# Letters to the Editor

Having just read the latest edition of *The Australian Atheist* (Issue 35), I write to congratulate the Editor, Co-Editor and all contributors on yet another outstanding contribution to the cause of atheism.

I was particularly impressed with the articles by Volker Sommer and Chris Fotinopoulos. The replies of PR team members E Black, David V and my good friend Jac were excellent.

What really chuffed me above all else, however, was to learn that two more members of the AFA, Peter Woolcock and Trevor Treharne, have now each published a book. Reading Eustace Black's reviews left me in no doubt that I would have to buy both books for myself.

For those who, like me, like to download their books onto their iPads or Kindles I'm happy to say that Woolcock's book, *Western Values versus The Gospels*, is available for download from Amazon. I've just downloaded my copy and looking forward to reading it.

**Charles Cornwall (AFA member and author of *The Path at My Feet*)**

Although I found Cliff Willard's article "Beyond Atheism?" *The Australian Atheist* (Issue 35), interesting, I do not agree with his statement that "I'm all in favour of "strong" atheism as opposed to "weak" atheism, which appears to be little different from being a non-believer."

If by non-believer Cliff means a non-believer in deities, then the statement is just a category mistake. A non-believer in gods and goddesses is an atheist, and tags like "weak" or "strong" are irrelevant.

Cliff compounds the muddle by adding: "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."

Being a "non-believer" or an atheist may not be "a philosophy as such", but it is still a philosophical (or existential) opinion or position. By "a philosophy as such" I suspect that Cliff means an ideology or worldview, in other words a group or parcel of philosophical opinions or beliefs that together give guidelines for living and ethical decision making. Atheism can be part of such a group.

Neither atheism nor non-belief "requires" to be backed up by rational argument — nor does theism or belief in flying saucers — but it is prudent for people who champion atheism (as true) and the rights of atheists to offer reasons why atheism makes more sense than supernaturalism or magic.

If atheism matters, it is because it is a more accurate reflection of reality than theism and magic; and categorising atheism as "strong" or "weak" is a bit like saying someone is "a little bit pregnant".

What matters is that atheists are honest about their atheism, and rid themselves of — and stand up against — cultural atheophobia, such as the bleat that atheism is "negative" (so is not having dementia). Being an atheist is no more shameful than having freckles, red hair, dark skin or Ruritanian ancestry.

**Nigel Sinnott**

See article "My Atheism" on page 18. *Editor*

The following letter was published in the *Ethical Record* Vol. 117 No. 9 October 2012.

Barbara Smoker is a humanist and freethought advocate, former President of the *National Secular Society* (1971–1996), former Chair of the *British Voluntary Euthanasia Society* (1981–1985) and current Honorary Vice President of the *Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association* in the United Kingdom. At 89 years old, she hasn't lost her punch! *Editor*

A contributor to the *National Secular Society* (NSS) website, who recently complained of the way he was often described in the media as having "lost" the faith he was born into, asked for a stronger word. I replied, "We atheists have definitely not "lost" our immature beliefs: we have outgrown them, confronted them, retracted them, spurned them, vetoed them, shaken them off, abrogated them, repudiated them, quashed them, shed them, rebuffed them, overcame them, invalidated them, abandoned them, rescinded them, expelled them, scrapped them, dropped them, discarded them, renounced them, rejected them, cast them off, disowned them, disdained them, ditched them, overturned them, dispensed with them, dumped them, remedied them, counteracted them, rectified them, overhauled them, transformed them, modernised them, replaced them, survived them, regurgitated them, even abjured them ... Just a few suggestions."

**Barbara Smoker**



# From the Inbox

**D**ear Atheists

You choose to believe there is no God, yet you choose to blame the world's problems on him. "What about all the evil in this world" I hear you say? Why are innocent babies born with disabilities, why don't all murderers, rapists, and thieves receive the justice they deserve? Why are there murderers, rapists and thieves? Where were you when I needed you!

You think if he was real, and if he really did love us, our world would not be as corrupted as it is right now. If he did everything he said he was going to do, the world would be a much better place to live in. But when did he say that the world will be a perfect place where all humans will live in peace? Surely you can't blame all the world's problems on him.

I heard one of your fellow atheists saying "Religion is the cause of all the problems in this world" but what does that have to do with God personally? He does not have strings to control the every movement of all his "followers". These people, who call themselves Christians, are a disgrace to Christianity, and God himself.

Killing in the name of God or "Allah" is nonsense. True Christians believe God will deal with them in his time; there is no need for revenge from human effort. A lot of the modern religion has been corrupted by self-righteous pastors who lead their church further and further into a false sense of God's direction and will. Though there are churches that preach the wrong message, there are still many churches, all over the world, which heal both physical and psychological pain of those

who seek help, churches which are filled with the Lord's spirit and his love.

I believe true religion is a personal experience; it is not about belonging to a group which share the same belief, it is the personal relationship you have with your God.

I am aware that some of you used to be Christians and have since left the faith, you probably thought: "Jesus loves me. Now that I'm a Christian, I've got God here to protect me from danger and losing those I love." But if you had been faithfully seeking him you would have known that choosing the Christian lifestyle is far from an easy task. If you truly experienced his presence and his peace, you would never have considered leaving him.

I am confused to why you choose not to believe in God. Ancient civilisations believed in Gods, and why would they just make up a supernatural being out of thin air. I believe a much more realistic explanation would that there is a real God, the one true God, and the other civilisations took that, and created their own.

Why do you have to understand the universe and all its secrets? Do you even have the mental capacity to comprehend that amount of knowledge? Why can't you just accept that there are some things that you won't understand? I believe there are some things that only God should know, and in good time, everything will be clear to us.

Your motto is "the celebration of reason", I earnestly seek your reply; show me your reason for choosing the lifestyles you live.

**Antony**

Dear Antony

Thank you for your letter to the AFA. I hope I can be of help in answering your questions.

To begin, may I say that I am one atheist amongst millions, and so what I have to say are my own thoughts alone. Atheists do not have a creed or set of beliefs, and so we are very diverse in our opinions. The AFA's definition of atheism is

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

This might be all that members of the AFA have in common, though, of course, where any group of people come together we are bound to find common interests, be it horticulture, bootscooting, heavy metal ... or a passion for fine cheese!

*You choose to believe there is no God, yet you choose to blame the world's problems on him. "What about all the evil in this world" I hear you say? Why are innocent babies born with disabilities, why don't all murderers, rapists, and thieves receive the justice they deserve? Why are there murderers, rapists and thieves? Where were you when I needed you!*

*You think if he was real, and if he really did love us, our world would not be as corrupted as it is right now. If he did everything he said he was going to do, the world would be a much better place to live in. But when did he say that the world will be a perfect place where all humans will live in peace? Surely you can't blame all the world's problems on him.*

I feel it is more accurate to say that I find no evidence for one, rather than that I don't believe in one (which rather implies there is



one to believe in, in the first place). Having said that, for me there is no blaming of this non-existent god. After all, that would make no sense.

I understand your point though, in that atheists do often point to all the bad things that happen in the world, but that isn't to blame a god. It is more to make the point that *if* a god was all loving, then why would he allow these things to happen? I think atheists say this to try and open the eyes of a Christian, or other theist, to the problems with their logic.

Can you be angry with Santa Claus or the tooth fairy?

*I heard one of your fellow atheists saying "Religion is the cause of all the problems in this world" but what does that have to do with God personally? He does not have strings to control the every movement of all his "followers". These people, who call themselves Christians, are a disgrace to Christianity, and God himself.*

If you have people who are passionately and personally committed to following a creed, no matter how little it makes sense, and that creed conflicts with another group of followers and their passionately held creed, you can see that we have potential for trouble.

If you can pretend for a moment you do not accept there are gods, and look at it with an atheist's hat on, you will see a fearful picture of people prepared to kill or go to war for the honour of their one imaginary friend over another's imaginary friend. You will see people separated from their families for having different beliefs. Sometimes not only different beliefs but for just being themselves. This is incredibly sad, frustrating and despairing to a person who sees the world with logical and compassionate eyes.

*Killing in the name of God or "Allah" is nonsense.*

I so agree with you.

*True Christians believe God will deal with them in his time; there is no need for revenge from human effort.*

I accept you have an idea in your mind of what constitutes a "true Christian". I'd make two points. Firstly, every other Christian believes that they are a true Christian ☺

Secondly, I am not sure I am too fond of the idea of a god that is going to give people their come-uppance at the end of their lifetime. Please note I said "the idea of". If I were to invent my own god, I think it would be a much more amazing character to fit this amazing world we live in, rather than this very petty character!

*A lot of the modern religion has been corrupted by self-righteous pastors who lead their church further and further into a false sense of God's direction and will. Though there are churches that preach the wrong message, there are still many churches, all over the world, which heal both physical and psychological pain of those who seek help, churches which are filled with the Lord's spirit and his love.*

I am glad you find that there are churches that do good in the world.

Is it possible that it is because there are good people in the world doing good things together? From my own experience, a group of atheists together can be incredibly supporting when a fellow atheist is suffering or needs assistance. The difference is that they don't need to first pass some kind of test to be assisted, and there is no ulterior motive beyond helping a fellow human in trouble. No rewards in an afterlife, and no appeasing of conscience that you are following orders correctly.

Likewise, it is my experience in

a group of young new mums, sharing information, experiences, clothing, and support. Human beings coming together can do wonderful things, and if they are doctors and psychologists they can use the best treatments available to address those you mention as needing help.

*I believe true religion is a personal experience; it is not about belonging to a group which share the same belief, it is the personal relationship you have with your God.*

This would seem like a personal meditation? How do you know it is not all in your mind? Do you have evidence for something external to the thoughts in your head?

*I am aware that some of you used to be Christians and have since left the faith,*

I am not in that category as I have never experienced anything beyond what I strained to create myself when I was a child, looking for the slightest of signs and portents that I might be getting "answers". But since I got no answered prayers or any sign that the world was different I abandoned the idea.

I think you are correct in that many atheists were once Christians who have left their faith, and it seems to be a long and carefully thought through process of searching for what is really true. That same search for meaning that brought them to religion is the same thing that brings them out of the other side of religion when it no longer makes sense and does not stand up to rigorous, or even mild, questioning.

*... you probably thought: "Jesus loves me. Now that I'm a Christian, I've got God here to protect me from danger and losing those I love." But if you had been faithfully seeking him you would have known that choosing*



*the Christian lifestyle is far from an easy task. If you truly experienced his presence and his peace, you would never have considered leaving him.*

It would seem to be a case of blaming the seeker, rather than accepting that there is nothing there to accept. It can take courage and personal integrity to really face the delusions we hold.

*I am confused to why you choose not to believe in God.*

Simply, one is not required for the universe to exist.

Stephen Hawking said recently, "Science can explain the universe without the need for a creator", \* so to accept a god I would have to see evidence linking that god to the laws of physics. As far as I am aware, there is none.

I can take the advice and knowledge of our best scientists, or I can go back two thousand years to a time when we had very little clue about evolution or astronomy.

Which would you choose?

When I say take the advice of scientists, please note I do not have to take this on faith. Every claim that is accepted in the science community can be rigorously tested by following the same experiments, should you choose to, and arrive at the same results. Even if I do not have sufficient knowledge and skill to do this myself, others in the field can do it. I am told there are few so ruthless at picking new knowledge apart and testing it to destruction than scientists!

*Ancient civilisations believed in Gods, and why would they just make up a supernatural being out of thin air.*

I think it would be very understandable for ancient civilisations to make up gods. We have always been curious about those big questions: Where do we come from? Why we are here? Sometimes a made up answer is

more comforting than no answer. Just ask any parent of young children!

*I believe a much more realistic explanation would that there is a real God, the one true God, and the other civilisations took that, and created their own.*

Do you have a good reason for believing this?

*Why do you have to understand the universe and all its secrets?*

I find this is the easiest of your questions! Answer: Because this world is *amazing!* I am stoked that I live in a time when we are learning so much about our world. That I got to be born at all is statistically incredible, but that I should live in this age is ... well ... beyond brilliant. No words to describe how lucky I am and how awesome this is.

*Do you even have the mental capacity to comprehend that amount of knowledge?*

Speaking for myself ... it is a struggle! But that doesn't mean I don't get a thrill from learning the gist of it, be it in evolutionary science (who would have thought hippos were related to whales!), getting my head around the fact we have robots on Mars. (Wow those pics!), those awesome views from the Hubble telescope ... new understandings across all fields of science. It is mind blowing. Who would NOT want to know! Our lives are short, and I am deeply grateful for every little bit more discovered in my lifetime. I would love to live a very, very long life just to see what happens next.

*Why can't you just accept that there are some things that you won't understand?*

I do. I think most human beings do. But much of the joy of our existence is in learning more and more, don't you think?

*I believe there are some things that only God should know, and in*

*good time, everything will be clear to us.*

To me this sounds self-limiting, and only you can know the reasons for it. I would ask yourself why you would want to restrict your knowledge in the one life you can be certain you have.

*Your motto is "the celebration of reason",*

Actually, atheists don't have a motto. This was the slogan chosen for the most recent Global Atheist Convention. The previous convention the AFA held had the slogan "The Rise of Atheism".

I think it was a great slogan, to celebrate reason and evidence and the absence of superstitions. Very life affirming.

*I earnestly seek your reply; show me your reason for choosing the lifestyles you live.*

Once again, there isn't an atheist lifestyle just as there isn't an atheist creed. Some atheists are humanists, but by no means all. It is all up to you. My "lifestyle" is centred around loving and caring for my family, looking out for my aging parents and supporting as much as I am able causes that seek to eliminate injustices for human beings based on race, gender, sexuality and disability. Encouraging secular education and economic fairness. Gardening, cryptic crosswords, music (especially crooners like Dean Martin!) ... and marvelling at new discoveries in biology, astronomy, psychology, neuroscience, physics ... the list is endless really.

Everyone else will have a different list.

I hope this has been helpful to you.

Kind regards,

Kerry

Public Relations Team

Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc

\* [youtube.com/watch?v=Cw8nob9f-qI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cw8nob9f-qI)



# Religion in the 21st Century

By Annie Geoghegan

On 20 September 2012, New Farm Neighbourhood Centre, Brisbane presented a community forum called "Religion in the 21st Century" on the aptly named Turbine platform of the Brisbane Powerhouse. Three questions were to guide the evening discussion:

1. Is religion relevant?
2. Does it affect the way we live our lives?
3. Do we need it?

Given ten minutes each with questions posed after all speakers had presented their arguments, the five speakers were:

Dave Andrews, Christian anarchist and community worker;

Wendy Francis, Australian Christian Lobby (ACL);

Riffat Gurdezi, Young Muslim advocate;

Gerard Hall, ordained Catholic minister and

Danny Jarman, atheist from the Atheist Foundation of Australia.

About one hundred people gathered. Some clearly came for the occasion dressed in their respective religious attire; others just stopped in for a "coldie" on their way home from work and were seemingly curious. They charged their glasses, found a seat and planned to stick around.

The atmosphere was one of calm intrigue devoid of the usual loud social chit-chat that comes with Friday afternoon in the pub. The people were there to listen, not talk. Although it was made clear that heckling wouldn't be tolerated, it seemed to be more of a formality than a threat as people sat quietly waiting for the first of the speakers to approach the podium.

Wendy Francis was the first speaker of the evening. She proposed that, given an alleged rise in Christianity in contemporary China, Christianity had a vital role in the 21st century. When asked to clarify her position on same-sex marriages, she used the terms "love" and "bringing same-sex couples into our hearts" but would not elaborate and clearly deflected any questions that raised the issue of equality.

Riffat Gurdazzi unfortunately found herself representing Islam in a week when Islam was not at its finest. It was a few days after the Sydney riots. Such were the current events of Muslim protests around the world that she found herself rewriting her speech several times during the preceding week. Appearing nervous, she had little to say regarding the beneficial attributes of Islam, so Riffat's ten



**Danny Jarman represented the AFA at the community forum in Brisbane.**

minutes were largely an apology for the wayward Islamists filling the headlines.

While Wendy Francis and Riffat Gurdazzi referred to their holy scriptures in an effort to justify their religions and finding good in their good books, Dave Andrews and Gerard Hall both offered interesting insights pointing to the mystery and purpose of life and how they are both notionally intertwined with the human experience.

Danny Jarman from the AFA spoke of his personal experience as a Pentecostal leader and contrasted this with his experiences as an atheist. Unlike the speakers before him, he didn't read from a prepared speech and used science-based evidence and real-life experiences. While he made many relatable points invoking hoots from the audience, one of the most pertinent points in Danny's talk was when he quoted a long list of abusive statements, including racism, sexism and bigotry, which originated from members of the ACL Facebook group.

Question time engaged only Wendy Francis and Danny Jarman, with Wendy being asked to clarify and justify her position while Danny was asked to further relate his personal experiences.

It became clear early in the evening that many speakers would struggle to justify their religion, and struggle they did. As it turned out, Danny, without a religion to justify or defend, connected on a personal level with real-life, relevant experiences and realistic hopes for a future without religion.

It was a great night for the heathens.



# Doctor slams 'arrogance' on euthanasia

By Melissa Davey

Health Reporter SMH

24 October, 2012

[www.smh.com.au/opinion/political-news/doctor-slams-arrogance-on-euthanasia-20121023-28318.html#ixzz2ApZohAPh](http://www.smh.com.au/opinion/political-news/doctor-slams-arrogance-on-euthanasia-20121023-28318.html#ixzz2ApZohAPh)

The views on euthanasia held by the Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, and the NSW Premier, Barry O'Farrell, are "supremely arrogant", says a leading Sydney primary care physician.

David Leaf, a Dying with Dignity NSW board member, said mounting evidence that supported legalising euthanasia was being ignored. He said assisted dying programs worked, with no evidence of heightened risk for groups considered vulnerable to euthanasia, including the elderly, uninsured, poor, physically disabled and mentally ill.

Mr O'Farrell has described himself as "strongly opposed" to euthanasia, while last year Ms Gillard said she was concerned it would "open the door to exploitation and perhaps callousness towards people in the end stage of life". Ms Gillard added there were no appropriate safeguards to protect vulnerable people from using euthanasia as an "out".

"For Julia to pretend not to know of eight separate jurisdictions around the world where voluntary euthanasia is working is wilfully ignorant," said Dr Leaf, a primary care lecturer at the University of NSW.

"Numerous independent audits of existing euthanasia laws from several jurisdictions have shown them to be safe."

Dr Leaf said politicians were either not up to date with evidence, or ignoring it.

"Safe laws are already working well in Oregon, the Netherlands, Belgium, Washington State, Switzerland, Montana, and Luxembourg," he said.

"In Oregon in the US, those choosing euthanasia are white, well off and well educated, and that is the same as in Belgium and Holland."

However, a professor of law at the Australian Catholic University's public policy institute, Father Frank Brennan, who visited Oregon and interviewed doctors and clinicians about physician-assisted suicides, said physicians were concerned the law impacted the doctor-patient relationship as well as relationships between doctors, as the American Medical Association considers physician-assisted suicide as unethical.

"I met with doctors who have strong ethical objections to their colleagues prescribing deadly medications," Father Brennan wrote in the online Jesuit publication, *Eureka Street*.

"You don't have to be Catholic to think that doctors should do no harm, that patients are free to

forego futile or burdensome treatment, and that palliative care be utilised to relieve pain."

But Dr Leaf criticised Father Brennan and "other Catholic lobbyists" for using emotive terms like "legal killing", "suicide", "death by doctor", and "lethal injection" in their input into the debate. "I'm not anti-Catholic, but I'm anti-bullshit," Dr Leaf said.

"Euthanasia is voluntary for both the patient and their doctor. There are doctors who don't do abortions and in the same way doctors can choose not to assist people to die."

But a paper that was submitted last year to the Canadian medical journal *Current Oncology* said that assisted dying programs were flawed as well as under-funded.

Researchers said in the Netherlands euthanasia for anyone over the age of 70 and "tired of living" was being considered.

"Legalising euthanasia and assisted suicide therefore places many people at risk, affects the values of society over time, and does not provide controls and safeguards," the authors of the report wrote.

Reprinted with Permission



Dr David Leaf is an experienced GP and has also completed the Emergency Medicine training program. He is currently a Campus and Clinical lecturer in Primary Care at the UNSW. He has previously served overseas with the RAAF and was decorated for bravery in East Timor in 2004 after a serious helicopter crash.

These days, he is troubled by the intrusion of religion on everyday life, especially in the health sphere.

He is a board member of *Dying With Dignity* NSW and a member of the AFA for five years.

David has published articles on Voluntary Euthanasia in the *British Medical Journal* and the *Sydney Morning Herald* as well as making appearances on television and in debates. His current projects aim to dispel the willful misinformation about VE promoted by the largely Catholic opposition.

# Heretical Happenings

## Keeping you in the know

It has been about six months since the 2012 Global Atheist Convention – A Celebration of Reason took place in Melbourne. By all standards it was a great success. Atheism and the Atheist Foundation of Australia became newsworthy and those attending shared a wonderful weekend, one that will be remembered for a long time to come.

That event followed on from the 2010 convention, with both of them attracting audiences of record-breaking numbers that have not been replicated anywhere on the planet. The overseeing GAC Committee worked nearly four long and hard years in their production.

Already there are calls to repeat the exercise in the near future. The enjoyment of such occasions, created by top-notch speakers and performers, great food and incredible surroundings, is more than difficult to replicate by other means. The bonus for many atheists who attended is the recognition that such world-class gatherings play a significant role in promoting the idea of living life successfully and happily without superstition. The blend of having fun and doing good at the same time is a hard combination to beat.

As a not-for-profit organisation, the AFA has to approach holding conventions with great caution. The costs are enormous and have to be recuperated, availability of speakers is always problematical as most are in heavy demand, and the logistics of everything coming together for an event are horrendously difficult to achieve to say the least. GAC Committee Members need to put aside “normal life” for a couple of years and be totally committed to running a successful convention. Numerous volunteers covering a myriad of duties are also an essential element.

As you can imagine, putting on GAC 3 will require favourable circumstances on many fronts to fall into place. At this stage of proceedings, the idea of another convention is glimmering in the background, waiting for an initiating spark to set the wheels in motion. That spark may or may not happen in the short term, but it will happen eventually.

In the meantime, the AFA has to get on with the business of encouraging atheism and for it to be looked at as a serious idea in the wider community.

At the moment, a subcommittee of the AFA has been working on a submission intended for the Australian Bureau of Statistics regarding the Census question on religion. “What is the person’s religion?” is the question on the Census form. This is a leading question that can elicit a religion of baptism answer even though the person may no longer have a religious inclination. The category of “No religion” is a box at the bottom of that segment. The “No religion” response in the 2011 Census was 23.2 percent, significantly higher than in the previous one (2006). Coupled with that, about 9 percent did not answer the question. It would not be too much of a stretch to assume most are not religious.

The “No religion” category is on a steep rise and nearly all religions are going backwards even with the influx of immigrants from highly-religious nations. Changes in the Census question are needed to accommodate the existing demographic mix and not one representing the population of early last century. The AFA intends to work closely with other secular organisations in petitioning the ABS to alter the question on religion to produce a clearer and more accurate picture of the beliefs or non-beliefs in the population. This is vitally important as religious leaders are using a stacked deck with statistics to favour a privileged position for themselves, with the end result being that the tail that is religion is wagging the political dog on many issues.

Members are urged to send their own submissions to the ABS pointing out that the leading question needs altering to a fair-for-everyone type as well as suggesting that the box for the large demographic of no religion must be re-positioned to a more prominent place on the form.

A submission does not have to entail suggestions for change, only that change is needed on these two fronts. The AFA will make the suggestions as to alterations. A simple submission asking for change, pointing out the reasons as I have enunciated above, is all that is required. How to make a submission can be viewed here.

<http://abs.gov.au/websitedbs/censushome.nsf/home/2016submissionform?opendocument&navpos=140>

Until we meet again,

*David*



# Is it Okay to impose religion on our kids?

By Charlene Jackson

Amy Ruse, Channel Ten's Audience Producer for the program *Can of Worms*, contacted the AFA seeking an atheist with personal experience regarding imposing religion on children.

Quite a number of AFA members came forward with their stories of woe, and eventually Charlene Jackson was selected. Charlene pointed out very succinctly the problems related to religious indoctrination even though time restraints by the program did not allow for a proper expansion of the topic.

We sincerely thank Charlene for being a fine representative of the AFA, although not identified as such on the show, and hope to see her in a similar role when required in the future.

Below is the letter Charlene wrote to the producer followed by her thoughts on the experience.

*Can of Worms* is a "light-hearted" discussion held each week on Channel Ten. Three celebrity guests comment on a variety of subjects put forward by the host. The featured topic of the week includes audience participation.

The logo for the TV show 'Can of Worms' is a red circle with the words 'CAN OF WORMS?' in white, bold, sans-serif capital letters.

#### Celebrity Guests

Julie Goodwin - Australian cook and singer who won the inaugural season of *MasterChef Australia* in 2009.

Matt Okine - Ghanaian-Australian Comedian and Actor and finalist in Australia's national comedy competition, *RAW Comedy*.

John Safran - Australian documentary maker and radio broadcaster.

This is an important topic and I cross my fingers that your show treats it with the sensitivity and respect it deserves.

Most people who were, as children, raised in very religious homes and then removed themselves from that lifestyle struggle with anxiety disorders, depression, insomnia and post-traumatic stress disorder in the years that follow. The fear and guilt of leaving behind a God who is all-encompassing and who can condemn you to eternal damnation is a thought that many have to contend with. It seems illogical to so many, but you can't understand it until

you are raised in a fundamental religious family. Even though you know that it is nonsense and the evidence points to the fact that the likelihood of an afterlife is incredibly slim, you can't help the moments that sneak up on you with "yes, but, what if?" Those moments freeze you. Those moments stop your heart, stop your breath and paralyse you completely. It stops you from sleeping at night for fear of dying before the morning comes and has you desperately searching for the long-lost Bible your mother gave you just in case there might be something there to convince you that it's true. You



can't tell yourself it isn't real in those moments. You can't say, "Chill out, it's all a sham!" Your rational mind slips into the background and lets the fear wreak havoc.

When I tell people that I will never allow my children to attend religion classes, people roll their eyes and ask "What's the harm?" But people are apathetic because they see "Christianity" as the watered-down version that they heard in Sunday school once or twice a year when their parents thought they should go for Christmas or Easter. For the children who grew up *knowing* the scripture — learning about the cities and nations burned, the rape and torture of women, the lion's den, whales swallowing men whole, and the horrors of the eternal fiery pit — it was real! Children are built to believe their older human counterparts. Evolution-wise, it saved them from immediate danger. If they didn't stop to question everything their parents said, it meant they might not get eaten by the lion around the corner. But what that means when religion enters the picture is Hell-fire is real to a child. Satan is not a fictional character.

We should not be teaching our children morality through fear and guilt. It is child abuse, plain and

simple, to tell your children that if they don't pray and live their lives as an example to God that they will go to Hell; it is child abuse to indoctrinate children. People ask me, when I have children, if I might be the same as my religious parents, except at the other extreme. But atheism has the advantage of merely being the lack of any theistic belief. I don't have a belief system to force on my (hypothetical) children. If my children choose theism over atheism, it will be a struggle for me to understand that choice but we need to teach children that it is okay to ask questions and to find the answers for themselves. I will always encourage my children to ask *why* to everything and if their whys lead to theism when they are old enough to choose, it will be their decision and their right because they have asked the questions to lead them to that decision.

I was born and raised into an deeply fundamental Christian family. I slowly found my way to atheism and am now looking into psychology programs to become an exit counsellor for those who struggle with the psychological issues of leaving their religious background behind. I just felt compelled to tell a tiny snippet of my story.

## What I Thought but Didn't Say

I didn't know what to write today! I have something in the "drafts vault" that I've wanted to share with you for a few days, but since *Can of Worms* was just on last night and I *did* say I was going to talk about the experience, I had best get that out of the way before I move on to other things!

Let's just start by saying I have never been on national television and that probably wasn't the best place to start. As the lowly audience guest, you don't know what will be asked or where they will try to steer the conversation and you don't have the option to say, "Wait! Stop! I have something else I wanted to say!" Do I blame them? Of course not. But instead of the slightly vacant jumble that came out of my mouth last night, I wanted to express how detrimental it is to expose your children to something illogical and tell them it is the truth when there is no way to actually prove that any of it is real.

People have believed in gods for thousands of years, but at no time has anyone actually been able to point at something physical and say "There, look, that's God!" Julie Goodwin expressed why she didn't need to prove that God exists by saying she doesn't need to stick her head in an oven to know it will burn her hair off. But she *knows* that it will burn her

hair off because there is proof that fire is hot and there is also physical evidence that skin and hair burn at the level of heat that you would find in an oven. Her statement was based on physical proof that has been gleaned over the past couple of millennia. It was a completely illogical statement that the audience and the panel took as valid logic, which is the exact reason I don't think religion should be taught to children. It is that illogical validation of an existence of "God" that we shouldn't be instilling in our children.

Julie also talked about framework and community. You can give your children a framework, a community and a set of morals without teaching them about an Invisible Man in the Sky who sees and knows everything that you do, think and say! And, seriously, do we really want our children worrying about the ultimate Peeping Tom? I remember being a child, thinking does God watch me get dressed in the morning? Does he watch me shower? Okay, granted, maybe I was a strange kid; but God is portrayed as a man — who can see everything! That's just a bit (or a lot) creepy! But back to frameworks and communities: religion is divisive. I read the Bible, you read the Qur'an and someone else reads the Dhammapada, but we all do



it in separate churches and temples because our beliefs cannot intermingle. We can say we respect each other's right to choose our religion and say that we love all everyone but there is still that belief that the religion *I'm* in is the right and true way to God. If you pick and choose anything, why don't you pick and choose to just be a kind, loving moral human being who doesn't need a two-thousand-year-old text to tell you how to do it? Religion teaches children that you need to do things and be things because there is an ultimate price at the end if you don't. Religion doesn't teach altruism, it teaches self-preservation on an eternal scale.

And by the way Matt Okine, atheists don't (or none that I've met) teach their children that there is absolutely no God and no way that he would ever exist. We don't teach our children to *know* everything, we teach them to *question* everything. And when you question the belief in God, there are a lot of holes. From what I can tell, most atheists have the opinion that the chances of there being a god are so slim that it just doesn't make sense to even contemplate whether there is one or not. But if God stretched down his almighty hand and waved at us all, we would be the first to say, "Oh geez, sorry! We were wrong. What took you so long on the tangible proof thing?"

But religious people, no matter for how long there is no evidence to back up their claim of some all-mighty, all-powerful being, will continue to buy into their circular logic of "I believe because I have faith and I have faith because I believe". Of course I think it is child abuse to impose that type of thinking on children. It's teaching children to close their eyes and blindly follow anything and everything that seems convenient. It restricts curiosity, a thirst for knowledge and critical thinking skills.

Deep breath! Okay, so you know when you're four years old and your parents help you put out milk, cookies and carrots for Santa and his reindeer? You think Santa is the freaking best! The existence of Santa isn't logical, but mom and dad told you that he exists and they are always right so you know he's up in the North Pole making your presents! Then, when you're six or seven, your parents decide that

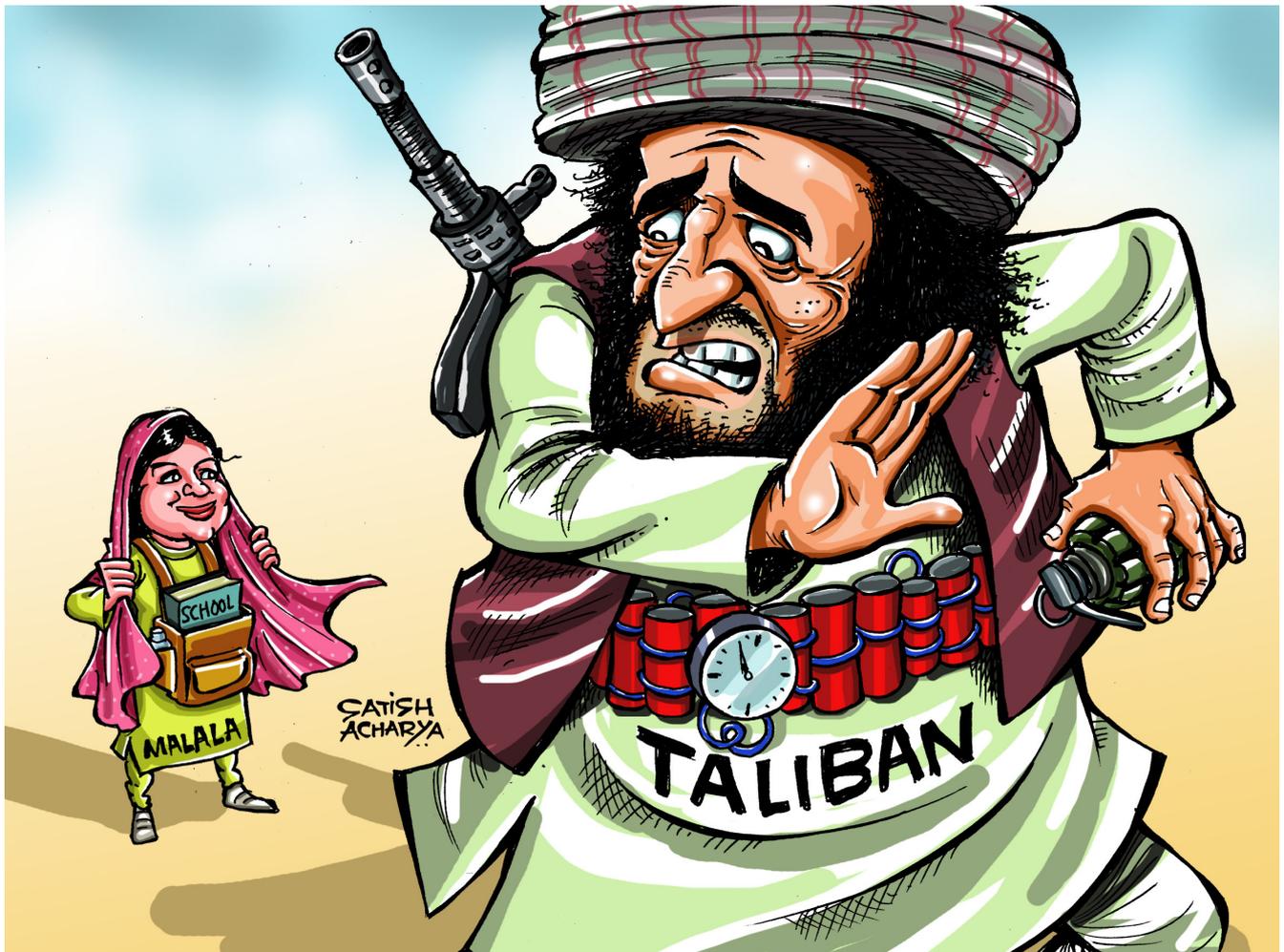
you're too old to believe in fairy tales, so they sit you down and break the news. Santa Claus isn't and never was a real person. And you believe them! Because mum and dad are always right! Now, this is just about presents, one night a year. Think about how a child feels when they know that the Invisible Man in the Sky sees everything you do and say and needs you to be a good little girl or boy because if you are not within the fold, there is a Devil and a Hell that you could go to after you die. That is a pretty serious implication for a little six-year-old to wrap her or his head around.

And if you're a pick-and-chooser like Julie, why not just find another book that doesn't include rape, incest, murder, genocide and misogyny? Why would you choose a book that you have to go through and pick and choose from? God hates gays? Ah, I'll just ignore that bit. Oh, God thought it was okay to sell women after they were raped — to their rapist? Forget about it. Women, like cows, are possessions that shouldn't be coveted? Pshaw! Seriously! Get a new book if you have to skip over bad bits to get to something good! It's not even a very accurate historical reference, let alone a good moral compass.

I think I should just leave it at this for the time being. I would like to go back and reiterate and expand on some of these points in the future but this is my initial response to what I heard on *Can of Worms* while I sat in the audience. I wish I could have said this to them at the time, but hopefully some day someone will have that chance and it will spark something in just one person. Freedom of religion is necessary, but for adults, not children. There is no such thing as a Catholic, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu or Atheist child. There are just children who are too young, impressionable and trusting to introduce them to such large and frightening concepts. Let them run, play, learn and explore. If God really does exist, you don't really need to tell your children anything. Wouldn't the ultimate faith be to let your child live without the shackles of religion and allow God to speak to their heart? If God really exists, you don't need to shove it into their lives: God will reveal himself to them! Take it on faith — I dare you!



# Brave Malala vs the coward Taliban!



**Satish Acharya** is a self-taught cartoonist who wonders what they teach at cartooning schools. Used with permission. Published in Mid-Day [www.mid-day.com](http://www.mid-day.com)



Women in Arab countries are now permitted to drive.





# COURAGE

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**I have a 9-year-old daughter with access to an education.  
I want her to know who Malala Yousafzai is.  
She is the sister of all children and daughter to all humankind.  
The attack on her is symbolic of our failure.  
She reminds us that it takes courage to be free. - Alex Raffi**

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# Iranian Infidels: A secret apostate speaks

By Joseph Power

Hidden among the general populace of the Middle East is perhaps the most important minority in the region, one currently drowning in hellish sectarian warfare between different religious sects — Atheists and Agnostics — those people that do not, or cannot, believe in a supreme being. In a country such as Iran — a cruel Shia theocracy that rules an impoverished nation with an iron fist — a huge force of Revolutionary Guards, mullahs, and riff-raff moral police stand ready to defend the memory of Ayatollah Khomeini, to the death. As my anonymous correspondent informed me, “Some of us are based in Iran, obviously due to this life threat, we are afraid.”

The correspondent in question is an anonymous administrator of the Facebook group Iranian Atheists and Humanists. They stand for, among other things, a democratic and secular Iran, and also to provide support to Iranians who wish to live without religious or superstitious belief. From here onwards, I will be referring to this gentleman as “Omar”, a nod to the great Persian, Omar Khayyám.

Beneath the fanatic despots who run their country, we have the citizens of Iran themselves. In a city such as Tehran, a sprawling metropolis of the kind that could only be compared to Mexico City, Rio de Janeiro or Calcutta, Iranians are buying and selling videos; producing films, plays and books; tuning into satellite television; making and consuming alcohol; and making the best of a strict dress code. Despite the horrific culling of Iran’s youth during the Iran-Iraq war, Iran is a young country once more. Mullahs offered huge material incentives to

encourage their female populace to bear large numbers of children. The result is a populace who are wedged between the jaws of the regime and their own conflicting beliefs.

“Most of our young people live their lives in a confusion of beliefs. They do not know what to believe,” explained Omar. “Some of them are religious, but only agree with their religion to a certain extent. Some are theists, while some are ignorant. The problem is that most of the people cannot categorise themselves properly, simply due to a lack of knowledge.”

Very recently, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, spoke at the UN General Assembly, during which he made a transparent reference to Israel, referred to as “the Zionists”. Ahmadinejad has made numerous references to Israel as a “germ” or “cancerous tumour”, and made multiple threats to annihilate a UN member state. “My personal view regarding the state of Israel is very positive and supportive,” states Omar, “however, problems arise when there’s a religious ideology in policy decisions, which causes problems. I believe both Israel and Palestine should be ruled by secular, fairly-elected governments and people in the region must learn to live together. Fortunately, atheists know it perfectly, and have shown it during times past.”

After the failure of Iran’s Green Revolution in 2009, some pundits believe that the only way the regime will be toppled is via military intervention by the United States. Omar warns against this action, saying that, “most Iranians are deeply against the invasion of Iran, because of our long and rich history. Iranians should be seen as a very patriotic people, especially when we talk of war.”



## Iranian Atheists and Humanists

### About

Support and represent Iranian people who seek to live good without religious or superstitious beliefs. This page is also open for all of humanists and atheists from around the globe who wanted to support their Iranian friends.

### Mission

Support and represent Iranian people who seek to live good without religious or superstitious beliefs. This page is also open for all of humanists and atheists from around the globe who wanted to support their Iranian friends.

### Description

We are here to spread logic and replace religious suppressions with happy life in which everyone can enjoy it.

### General information

PLEASE keep the name of the page when you want to share a post from it. That would help us to be expanded and other people would know about this page and so they can join us.

[facebook.com/pages/Iranian-Atheists-and-Humanists/212399365125](https://facebook.com/pages/Iranian-Atheists-and-Humanists/212399365125)

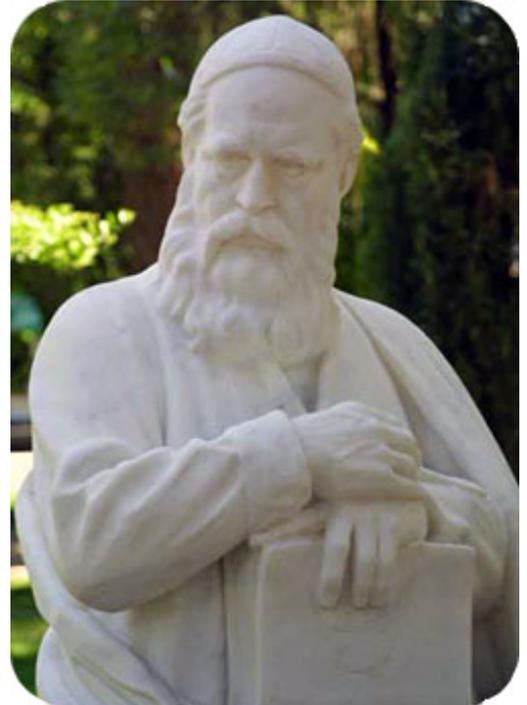


Despite countless Op-Eds appearing in *The Nation* or *The Guardian* arguing to the contrary, Iran appears to be inching closer and closer toward the attainment of messianic weaponry. "The nuclear issue in Iran has divided people into many different groups," said Omar. "Some intellectuals see the nuclear weapon as a very dangerous tool for Islamic governments to have. They argue by looking at what the Iranian regime has done in the past to its own people and due to their ideologies that it is not a very good idea to be armed by nuclear weapons. Some people, though, believe that it is Iran's right to have such technology while it is surrounded by American military bases."

The question of freedom for the Iranian people is an open-ended one. Meanwhile, sadly, millions of people live their lives in a state of suspended animation, unable to overthrow the theocracy themselves and not wanting military intervention to do it for them. People like Omar live in a constant fear due to their beliefs. For what was Persia famous? For its poetry, philosophy, architecture, backgammon, gardens and wine. We can only hope, for secret apostates like Omar that the Iranian people recover some of this Persian spirit, before it's too late.

"The Koran! well, come put me to the test  
Lovely old book in hideous error drest  
Believe me, I can quote the Koran too,  
The unbeliever knows his Koran best.  
And do you think, that unto such as you,  
A maggot-minded, starved, fanatic crew,  
God gave a secret, and denied it me?  
Well, well, what matters it — believe that, too!"

Omar Khayyám.  
*The Rubáiyát* (Richard Le Gallienne translation.)



**Statue of Omar Khayyám  
in Neishabour, Khorasan, Iran**

## Quotes by Omar Khayyám

"The thoughtful soul to solitude retires."

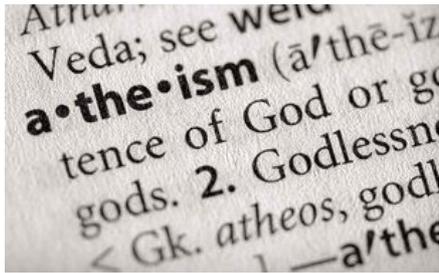
"When I want to understand what is happening today  
or try to decide what will happen tomorrow,  
I look back."

"Ah make the most of what yet we may spend,  
Before we too into dust descend"

"Be happy for this moment. This moment is your life."

# My Atheism

By Nigel Sinnott



An alternative title for this article would have been "What Atheism Means to Me". I have chosen "My Atheism" because it is shorter, and it still emphasises that I do not claim any proprietary or one-and-only correct definition of atheism. I regard myself as an atheist because my answer to the question "Do you believe in God?" is simply no. I have, by the way, been an atheist since about 1954.

The words atheist and atheism come (through French *athéisme*) from the Greek *ἄθεος* (*atheos*), meaning without (or denying) god, godless, or (rarely) abandoned by the gods. It consists of the prefix *ἄ-*, equivalent to the Latin *in-* and *non-* and English *un-* and *-less*, signifying without, free of or the absence of, and *θεός*, god (Latin *deus*).

Atheism, then, is lack of theism, of belief in a god or gods, although philosophers sometimes distinguish between theism, belief in a personal god (particularly one who still affects the physical world), especially if supernaturally revealed; and deism, belief in a divine principle or creator god, but who does not normally interfere in the ordinary world and the affairs of people. Just to complicate matters, deism is sometimes used in the sense of believing in a supreme being as a result of reasoning instead of from revelation. In these senses I am both an atheist and a non-deist.

In Western cultures, at any rate, atheism is generally taken to mean disbelief in the Judaeo-Christian (or Abrahamic) deity God, a title transmuted into a name for Yahweh, Jehovah or El, called Allah by Muslims. A long time ago Christians were regarded as atheists because some denied the existence of the gods and goddesses of Greece and Rome (while others regarded these deities as demons), but almost nobody uses atheist and atheism in this sense any more. Modern atheists do not believe in the god of monotheism (God) and, as a rule, they usually disbelieve in the supernatural altogether.

It is, I think, important that we do not allow ourselves to be led astray by straw-man or Aunt Sally definitions of atheism concocted by people who dislike atheism and want to discredit it. For example, atheists do not have to "believe in" an entity called "no God" in order to qualify as atheists. Atheists do not have to "prove" that "no God" exists or that God does not exist. Indeed, when asked to prove that God (Jehovah, Yahweh) exists, the usual theist fudge is to tell us that we have to have "faith" instead — as if wanting proof is disrespectful. Many atheists, myself included, simply do not "believe in", in other words we lack faith in the religious sense (of a strongly-held emotional conviction). Another fudge is to argue that you "can't be an atheist" unless first you know all there is to know about the universe. No, you do not have to be omniscient to be an atheist; omniscience is an alleged characteristic of God and occasionally of some of the self-important people who claim to be God's agents or spokesmen on

earth.

Similarly you do not have to "know" or be absolutely sure that God does not exist. As our perceptions of ourselves and the outside world are made through our imperfect senses, we cannot be sure of anything in an absolute sense. I am as sure as I can be that I was conceived and born, that I exist now, and that I will die; but — in high theory, at any rate — all of this could be an illusion or delusion. But I operate on the reasonable assumption (to me) that I exist, that the external world exists, and that I can usually make sufficient sense of the world to survive and make my way around in it.

One of the main reasons I do not believe in the entity called God is that an omniscient, omnipotent and all good deity seems a manifest absurdity when I can observe a world around me that is full of misfortune, suffering and injustice. And I am singularly unimpressed by the sophistry that suffering and injustice are the result of "free will" given by God to human beings. After all, much of the suffering is not connected with human beings. And in any case, God, being omniscient, would be well aware of the consequences of giving free will to the human race.

I am also unimpressed by the notion that God wants us to "believe in", love and worship him. Why? An omnipotent deity would be, by definition, invulnerable and self-sufficient, and could not be harmed or threatened by anything that mere mortals do. A jealous, unhappy or angry god is not omnipotent. And a good and omnipotent god would not be in the least distressed because I or anyone else does not "believe in"



or love him. I am reminded of the eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher, David Hume, who wrote that "It is an absurdity to believe that the Deity has human passions and one of the lowest of human passions, an appetite for applause."

Despite all the spin of modern theologians to reinvent or to redefine God in terms such as "Love" and "the ground of our being", the demanding, loving, punitive god of conventional religion still sounds suspiciously like a Bronze Age Middle Eastern warlord or absolute monarch, particularly when his followers claim he and they have been offended or treated with insufficient respect or subservience. Indeed, we should not lose sight during the semantic sleight-of-hand performances of religious orators and writers that one of the essential functions of conventional religions is to provide power, prestige and privilege for the people who run religions.

Religious authoritarians often insist that their so-called sacred beliefs be treated with respect. I maintain that people's rights are entitled to respect, including the right to hold seemingly foolish notions; but religions are not —

repeat — are not — entitled to special respect, nor is any ideology, opinion, belief or theory. So it is the duty of all with backbones who care about freedom of expression to oppose blasphemy laws.

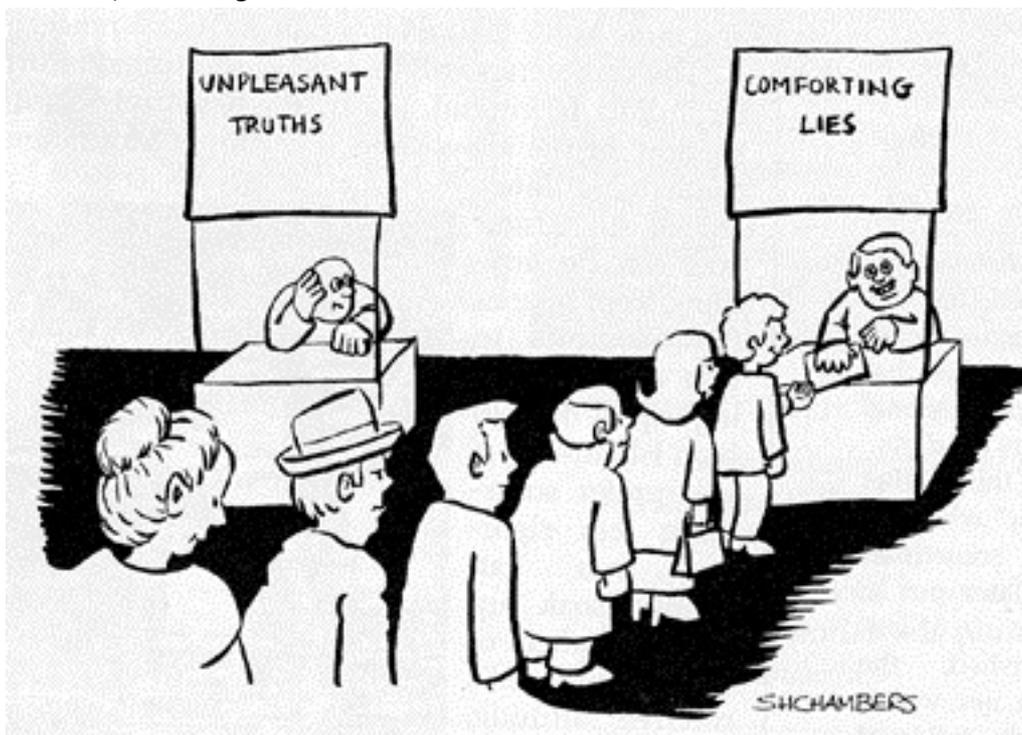
It is also important not to fall for the nonsense that you cannot be ethical or moral unless you believe in God. A Greek philosopher, possibly Socrates, once asked: "Is something right because the gods will it, or do the gods will it because it is right?" I understand morality as the capacity to make ethical decisions and to act wisely on them. Human beings are social animals, and our brains probably have an innate capacity for moral decision making, which is nurtured when we are young by seeing others, especially parents, acting ethically. In other words, I suspect example is probably better than preaching or prescription. Doing something "because God says so" is not really morality, it is obedience, and members of criminal gangs can be loyal and obedient to the gang's psychopathic leader. The excuse that "I was only obeying orders" gets scant respect nowadays, and rightly so.

While discussing atheism I probably need to consider agnosticism as well. Again, there seems to be no universal agreement on exactly what agnosticism means.

The word agnostic was coined by Thomas Henry Huxley in 1869 from a-, non-, without, and the Greek word γνῶσις (gnōsis), knowledge or a judicial inquiry, but later used in European philosophy to signify special knowledge of mystical, supernatural or esoteric wisdom (hence the sect name Gnostics). Today agnostic usually signifies someone who is uncertain or noncommittal about the existence of God, though it can also be used of people who are uncertain of other matters. Further, it can mean someone who claims that nothing is or can be known about the existence of God or of anything other than material phenomena (denial of gnōsis in the sense of supernatural revelation).

However, for Huxley agnosticism meant "not a creed but a method", namely, "in matters of intellect, follow your reason as far as it can take you without other considerations. And ... do not pretend conclusions are certain that are not demonstrated or demonstrable".

I do not regard myself as an agnostic in the popular modern sense of someone who is not sure if God exists or not. I regard the god of monotheism, God, as a monstrous absurdity, and am comfortably confident that such an entity exists only in the imaginations of the faithful. I regard the existence of other gods, goddesses and minor supernatural beings as so remotely unlikely that I can presume they do not exist — and, strangely enough, no one



seems to demand that I must be one hundred per cent convinced that Mars, Odin and Diana do not exist.

As for the notion that nothing can be known about gods or the supernatural, well, if supernatural beings did exist, I can see no reason why they should not communicate with mortals from time to time. Why should they be timid or perverse and want to hide themselves?

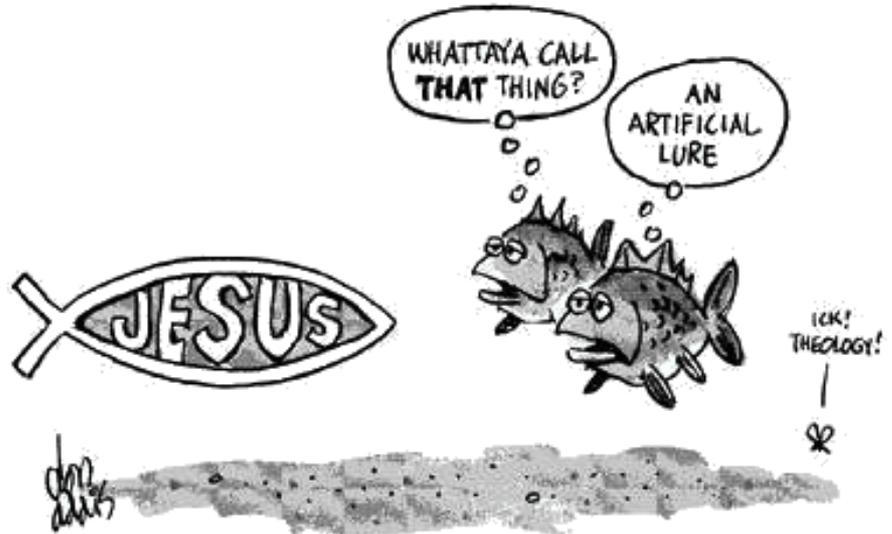
If magic and supernatural beings really did exist, their existence should be one of the most blazingly clear and obvious things in the world around us. Instead, we are told that we have to "believe in" God, and that, despite the absence of evidence, to doubt his existence is a "sin". It all sounds like a very, very large confidence trick, although I do not doubt the sincerity of very many people's religious faith. But why the need for indoctrination, particularly of children.

Yes, I might conceivably be wrong about gods and the supernatural, but were I ever to be persuaded that a deity or deities existed, I cannot imagine that this would cause me to subscribe to an authoritarian ideology like orthodox Christianity or Islam. I dislike all totalitarian ideologies, whether theistical or otherwise, because they lead to oppression and injustice. And I certainly do not need the bribe of

heaven or the threat of hell to make me strive to be a decent human being.

I regard atheism as true, and for that reason well worth speaking up for, particularly when I consider the vast quantity of effort, money and resources that

does not automatically make me wiser or more virtuous than other people. I can be clumsy, hasty, foolish and fallible. I commend to my fellow infidels the semi-facetious but very insightful words of the nineteenth-century English radical M.P., Henry Labouchere:



is still spent on promoting, funding and following theistical religions. However, being an atheist does not mean that I have a key or answer to all the great questions of philosophy, like how did the universe begin — or did it begin? But telling me that God made the universe by magic really tells me very little, and begs a host of other questions. I do not know whether the universe had an ultimate origin, but the mystery for me is that anything exists at all (rather than does not exist), and god-talk does not dispose of this.

Furthermore, being an atheist

"The mere denial of the existence of God does not entitle a man's opinion to be taken without scrutiny of matters of greater importance."

Quite so. But I maintain that atheism is still a matter of great importance, and it needs its champions, just as freedom does. According to the Book of Psalms (14:1 & 53:1), "The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God." But wise and good men and women do more than keep their opinions just in their hearts and to themselves: they have the courage to speak out when necessary, to stand up and be counted.

**Atheism  
is not a religion.**

**It is a personal  
relationship with reality.**

# Letters to the Papers

Dear Editor,

The Catholic Church hierarchy is disingenuous to the extreme regarding voluntary euthanasia. (*Doctor slams 'arrogance' on euthanasia SMH 24/10*)

The RCs have one objection only. Their particular god gives and takes life — period. Its constant clutching at invented straws to support this 'reason' is outrageous.

Of course religious doctors in Oregon will say similar nonsense to support their religious views. That's hardly credible evidence. Doctor Leaf nailed it with his "anti-bullshit" phrase regarding the downright lies being perpetrated by opponents of voluntary euthanasia.

We all die and some of us will die horribly. Considering that undeniable fact, this subject is serious enough that not voting for politicians who oppose the introduction of a system of voluntary euthanasia is a definite option. Australia is a democracy and not a theocracy (yet).

David Nicholls

President

Atheist Foundation of Australia

*The following letter was sent to the Yorke Peninsula Country Times. Letters condemning the views of fundamentalist Christians was unheard of fifteen years ago.*

Dear Editor,

It was heartening to read the letters of support for gays (*YPCT 9/10*) in the condemnation of Mrs Klaffer's rather harsh piece of criticism (*YPCT 3/10*).

There is certainly justification for standing up to religious oppression, especially when the consequences are higher than average percentages of depression, bullying and suicide amongst same-sex oriented people.

Homosexuality is recorded in hundreds of species and is a part of the natural spectrum of human sexuality. To rail against homosexuality is akin to doing the same for blue-eyed people or left-handers.

To give Mrs Klaffer some reprieve from the battering she has rightly received, it must be remembered that religion is renowned for creating unjustified prejudice by instilling mistaken ideas in young people. Not all people of faith are so trapped by their religions but the number is appreciable enough to cause huge problems for those who are gay.

Lesbians, gays, bi-sexual and transgender folk did not choose their sexuality any more than did Mrs Klaffer or anyone else.

As was pointed out in one of the letters last week, other parts of the Bible's abomination list are disregarded. To be on the side that considers prejudice a good thing is now a minority view. The reason for this is because homophobia says more about the homophobic than it does about gay people and it is not saying nice things. It's time to let go of these mistaken thoughts and ideas and make sure that everyone is respected and treated equally.

David Nicholls

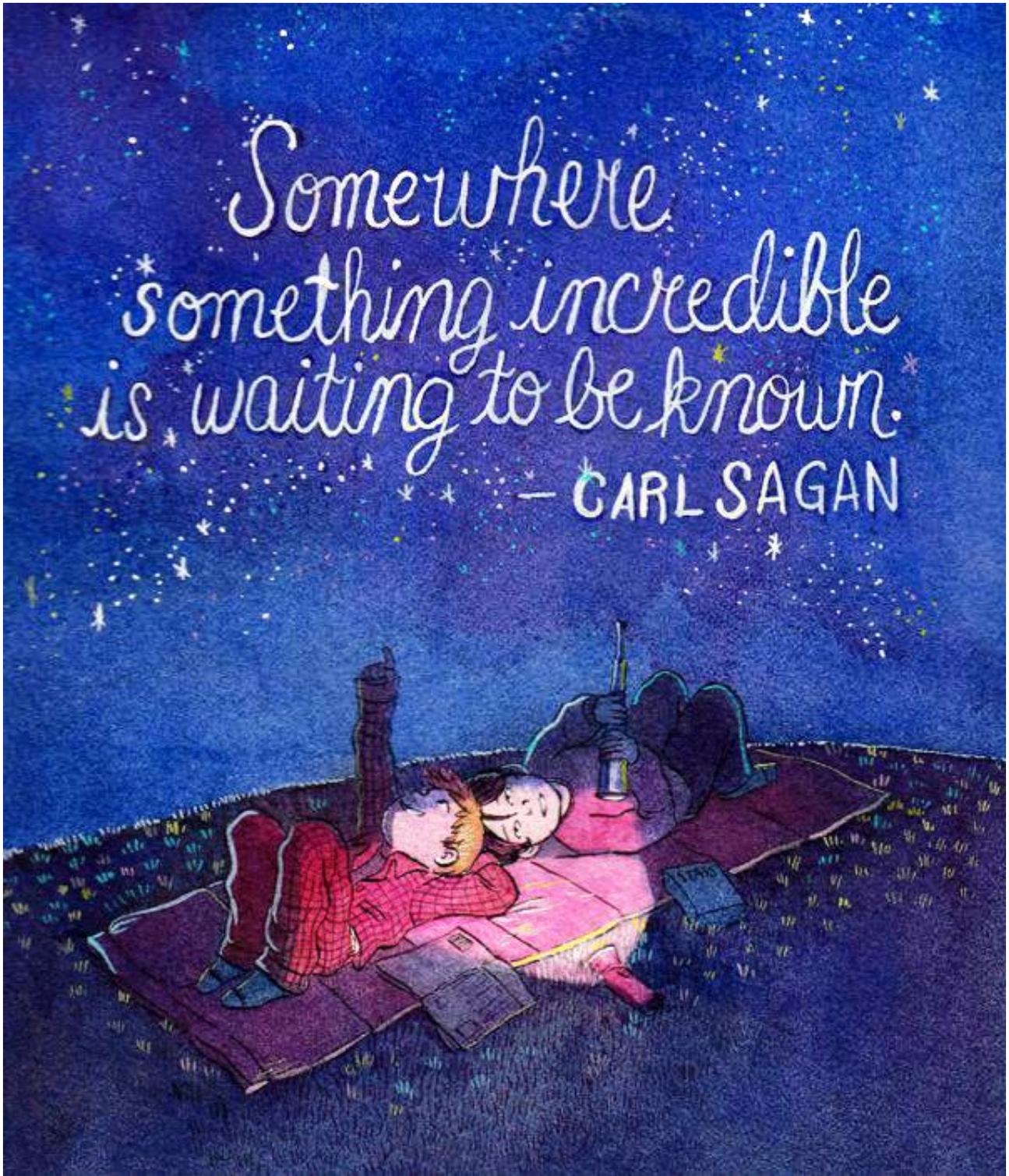
President

Atheist Foundation of Australia

*With the publication of David's letter the editor of the Yorke Peninsula Country Times then closed the topic for further discussion.*

*Editor.*



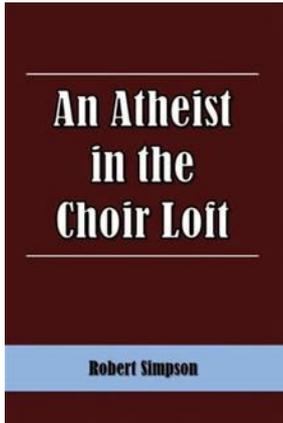


## Carl Sagan

9 November 1934 – 20 December 1996

"Atheism is more than just the knowledge that gods do not exist, and that religion is either a mistake or a fraud. Atheism is an attitude, a frame of mind that looks at the world objectively, fearlessly, always trying to understand all things as a part of nature."

# Book Review



## An Atheist in the Choir Loft

By Robert Simpson

**Publisher:** Xlibris Corporation  
**Published:** 1 August 2012  
**ISBN 13:** 9781462850839

**Review by Eustace Black**

**D**on't be misled: this isn't a book about a choir-singing atheist. I was very relieved to hear that the choir loft in the title was just an upstairs part of the church, where the author sat one Sunday and did some deep thinking. Those thoughts, and others like them, are the content of the book.

This is a plain book, a simple book, unlike some others I have received for review. Robert Simpson offers no claims of hidden knowledge or Things That Must Be Known, and there is no jacket blurb touting this as "the book every atheist and believer should read".

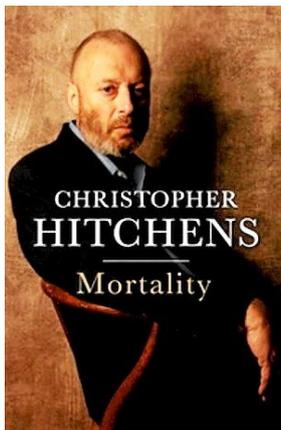
Indeed, when I began reading *An Atheist in the Choir Loft*, my early impression was that I had picked up an ordinary book in all senses of the word, and that I would be hard-pressed to find anything remarkable for review purposes.

In the search for some gimmick of complexity, I almost overlooked one of the principal benefits of the book.

The hidden treasure is Simpson's use of ordinary language. One by one, the tenets of faith are brought into the light, and debunked with plain talk.

Simpson's book is good, honest medicine for the thinking mind. Take it all at once, or repeat in small doses. There's solid, sensible explanation of why foundational items of faith are at least highly implausible.

This is not a confrontational book, but it has the potential to topple a lot of personal faiths, one by one.



## Mortality

By Christopher Hitchens

**Publisher:** Allen & Unwin  
**Published:** 1 September 2012  
**ISBN:** 9781742374611

**Review by Ben Akerley**

**I**n 8 June, 2010 while on a book tour for his best-selling memoir *Hitch-22*, Christopher Hitchens was stricken in his New York City hotel room with excruciating upper body pain that resulted in a lethal diagnosis — stage 4 oesophageal cancer (Hitch reminds us there is no stage 5). Ironically, in the autobiography he was promoting, he had declared unequivocally that he would want to face death with both eyes open, never suspecting that he would get to carry out that resolve just 18 months later. On 15 December 2011, one of the most important intellectuals of the last forty years bid us farewell at the M.D. Anderson Cancer Center in Houston, Texas, where he joked that he had been living dyingly.

His valedictory opus, *Mortality*, consists of seven completed chapters sent successively to his editor at



*Vanity Fair*, which the scribe with his undiminished mordant sense of humour satirised as dispatches from Tumorland. The editor later decided to include a fragmentary eighth chapter which was still a work in progress.

Near the end, the horrific loss of his voice was vastly superseded by the terror of no longer being able to write since he had stated: "Writing is not just my living and my livelihood, but my very life." He proved that affirmation by continuing to write on an astonishing array of subjects in addition to penning this final volume despite the death sentence he had been handed. Never one to wallow in self-pity, he confessed to habitually indulging in hard drinking and smoking and that burning the candle at both ends often gives a lovely light.

The religious who have commented extensively on his cruel fate fall into two camps:

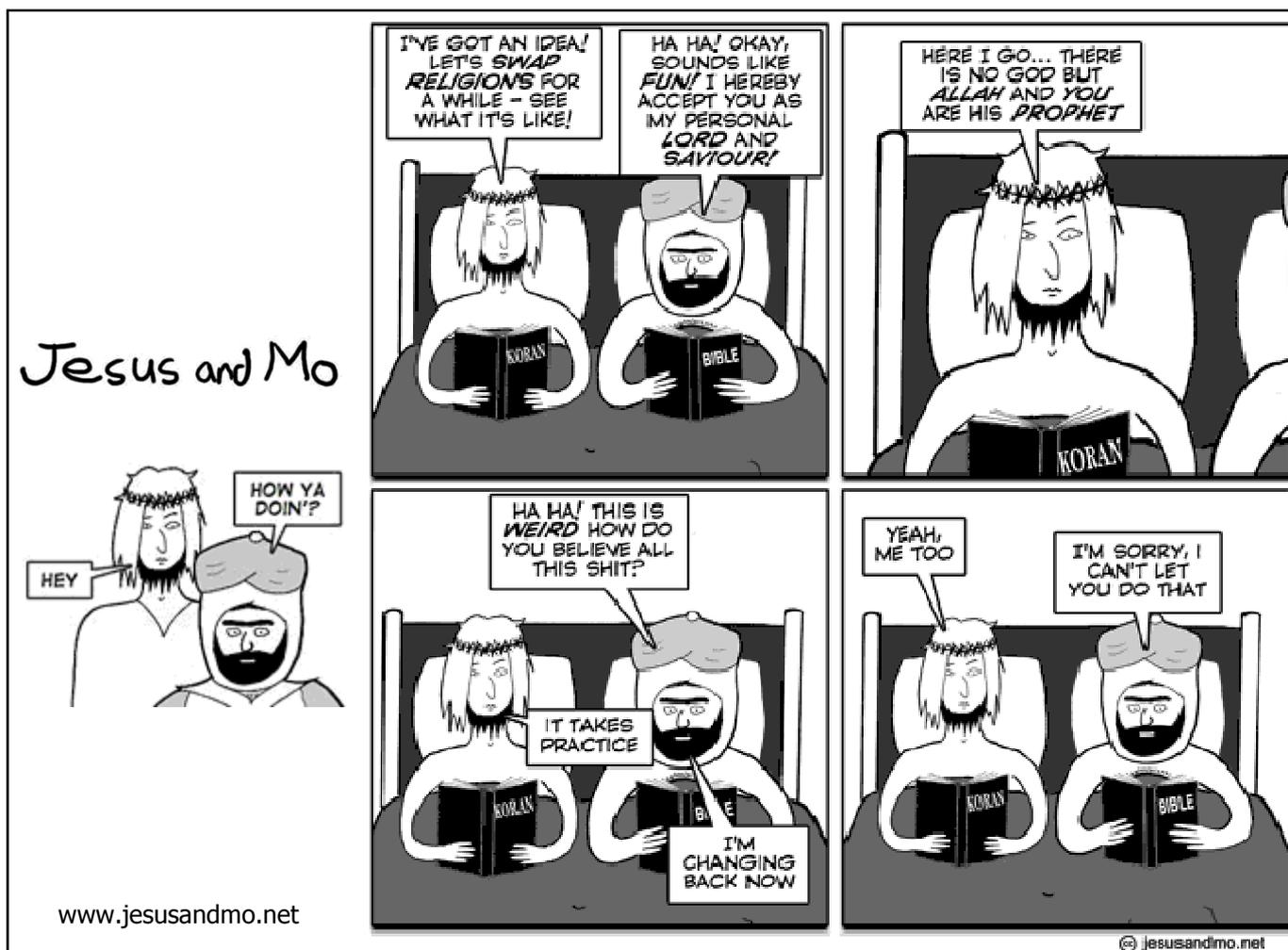
1. those who sincerely believe he deserves this tragic end as God's revenge, and
2. those who earnestly pray for the salvation of his soul. Hitch was flattered to a point that at least the latter petitioners thought he was worth saving.

He also quipped with tongue-in-cheek about the unlikely event of a deathbed conversion: "If I convert, it is better that a believer dies than that an atheist does."

The writer previously subscribed wholeheartedly to Nietzsche's famous adage: "Whatever doesn't kill me makes me stronger." However, after enduring the severely debilitating side-effects of his medical battle with the big C, he equates the rigors of oncological treatment with torture in both the physical and psychological sense.

This slim tome reveals a devout non-believer who refuses to cower in the face of the unknown as he describes how disease transforms our experiences and radically changes our relationship to the world around us. Would that we all might emulate his noble example and confront the Grim Reaper with the same dignity, grace, wit and fearlessness of this staggering literary giant whose untimely passing at age 62 leaves a void impossible to fill.

Ben Edward Akerley is the author of *The X-rated Bible: An Irreverent Survey of Sex in the Scriptures*. A retired schoolteacher, he lives in Los Angeles and writes book reviews and articles for the online newspaper [thefrontpageonline.com](http://thefrontpageonline.com) and other publications. He also travels extensively as a hobby, having visited at least 100 foreign countries.



# News

## Vale Paul Kurtz 21 December 1925 – 20 October 2012

Humanists and atheists are mourning the death of humanist Dr Paul Kurtz, former editor of the American Humanist Association's *Humanist* magazine and founder of the Council for Secular Humanism, who died on 20 October 2012 at the age of 86. His death means the loss of one of secular humanism's most prominent advocates.

"Paul Kurtz worked tirelessly for decades to see secular humanism become accepted as an alternative philosophy to traditional religion," said Roy Speckhardt, the executive director of the American Humanist Association. "The attention and guidance he gave to the humanist movement had an unmistakable global impact."

Paul Kurtz served on the American Humanist Association Board of Directors from 1968-1981 and as editor of *Humanist* magazine from 1967-1978, before establishing the Council for Secular Humanism.

In 1973 he worked with Edwin H. Wilson and the American Humanist Association to create the draft of what would become the Humanist Manifesto II (an updated Humanist Manifesto III was adopted in 2003).

"Humanism has been shaped by many people since the beginning of the 20th century, and Paul Kurtz was one of the greatest contributors to the development of our nontheistic philosophy," Speckhardt said.

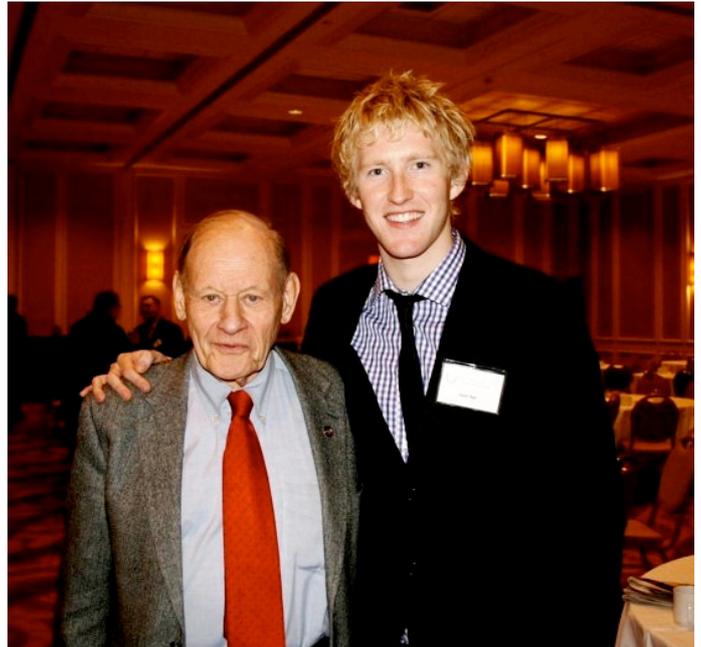
Kurtz published over 800 articles and authored more than 40 books, many of which have been translated into scores of languages. In his most recent major statement, Kurtz declared that "Our planetary community is facing serious problems that can only be solved by cooperative global action." In *Neo-Humanism Statement of Secular Principles and Values: Personal, Progressive, and Planetary*, published in 2010, Kurtz offered 16 detailed recommendations for a humanistic world.

"These are the vital principles and values that a secular, personal, progressive, and planetary humanism proposes for humanity," Kurtz wrote about his statement. "Today the campaign for equal rights and for a better life for everyone knows no boundaries. This is a common goal for the people of the world, worthy of our highest aspirations."

In 2007 the American Humanist Association presented Kurtz with the Humanist Lifetime Achievement Award. During his acceptance speech, he stated, "I am a secular humanist because I am not religious. I draw my inspiration not from religion or spirituality, but from science, ethics, philosophy, and the arts." After leaving the Center for Inquiry and the Council for Secular Humanism, Kurtz established the Institute for Science and Human Values in 2010, a humanist think tank based in Tampa, Florida.

Kurtz was born on 21 December 1925 in Newark, New Jersey. He received his BA from New York University in 1948. Columbia University was next, where in 1949 he earned his MA and his PhD in philosophy was awarded in 1952.

Kurtz later became Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at the State University of New York at Buffalo. That post followed time teaching at Vassar, Trinity, and Union colleges, as well as the New School for Social Research.



**Paul Kurtz and Jason Ball  
at the Center For Inquiry's World Congress  
in Washington DC (2009).  
Jason was invited to speak on a panel on  
student activism.**

<http://www.americanhumanist.org/news/details/2011-11-humanists-mourn-death-of-paul-kurtz-humanist-philoso>

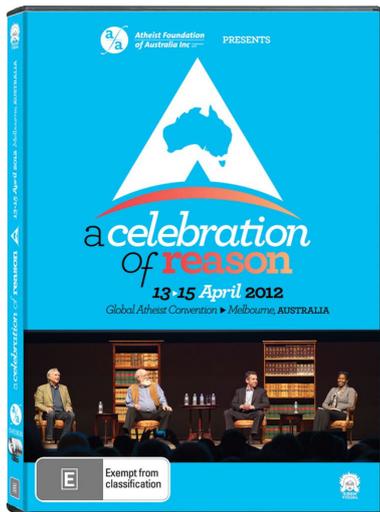
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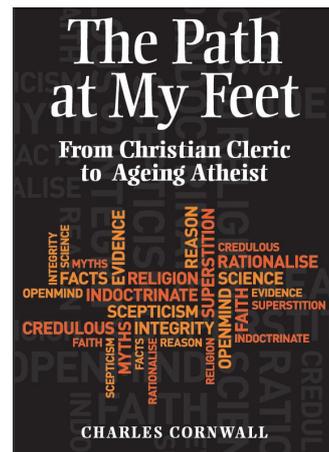
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## Philosophy

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.

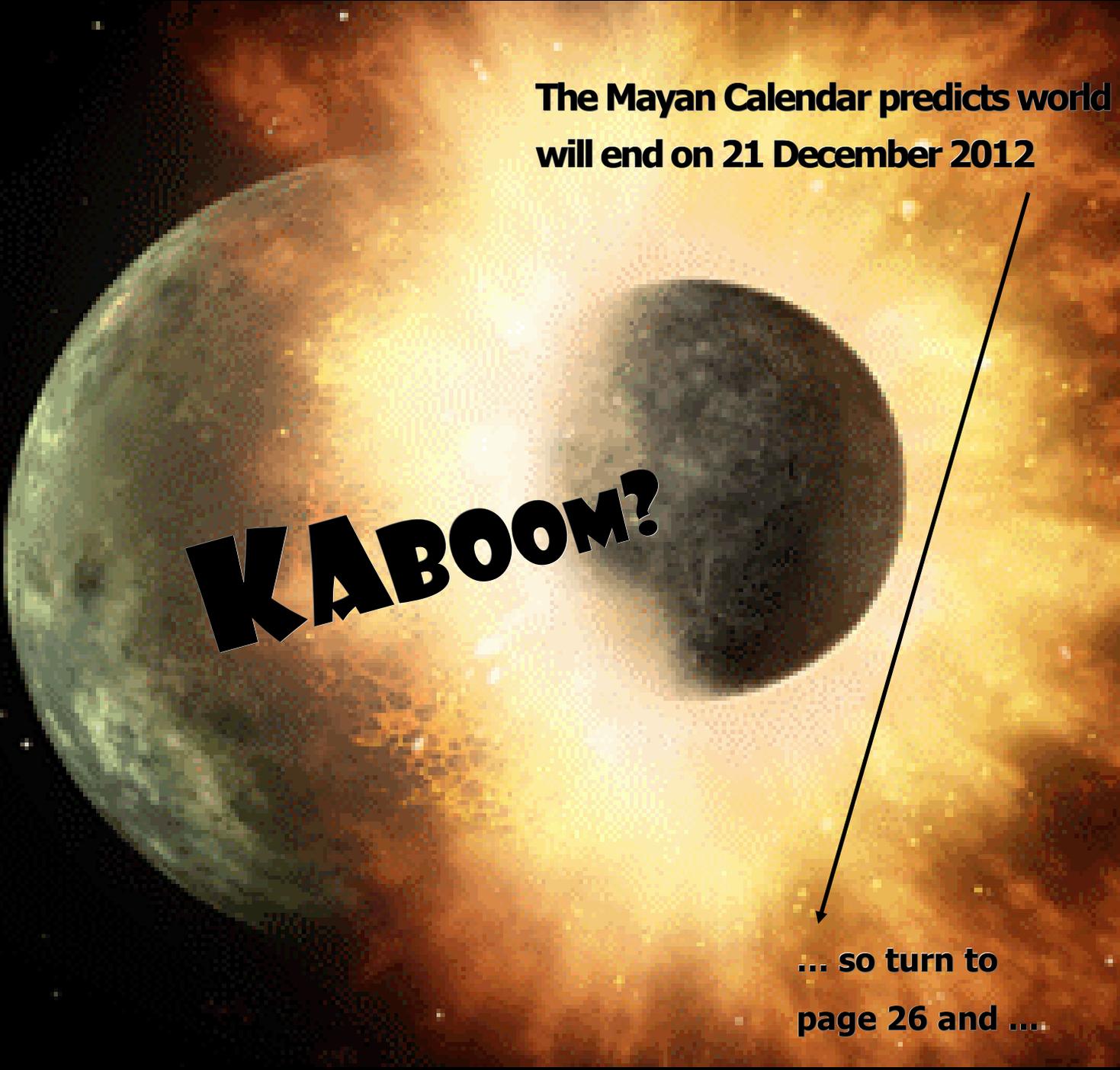
To serve as a focal point for the fellowship of non-religious people.

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.

**Were the Mayans correct?  
Will this be the final edition of *The Australian Atheist*?**

**The Mayan Calendar predicts world  
will end on 21 December 2012**



**KABOOM?**

**... so turn to  
page 26 and ...**

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