

**Atheist Foundation  
of Australia Inc** Established  
1970

*Promoting scientifically credible & factually reliable evidence*

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# The Australian Atheist



**DON'T PANIC**



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# Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc

Established 1970

Promoting scientifically credible & factually reliable evidence

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## Our 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.

## Our 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 full development of their potential as human beings.

To promote atheism.

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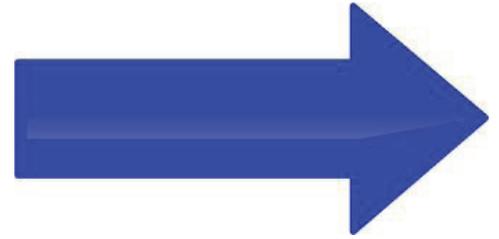
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*The opinions expressed in this magazine do not necessarily represent the opinions of the Atheist Foundation of Australia*

## High Court Challenge

For those who don't know the background, Ron Williams is a father of school children in Toowoomba. In 2012, he won a legal stoush in the High Court against the Commonwealth Government funding of the national school chaplaincy program. On 20 June 2012 the High Court decided in Ron's favour, challenging the commonwealth government's authority to enter into funding agreements and to draw money from consolidated revenue in relation to matters that were beyond the powers of the Commonwealth.

In response to the decision, the Commonwealth Parliament on 28 June 2012 passed and the Governor General assented to the Financial Framework Legislation Act (No 3) 2012. The issues raised by the new legislation are matters that are important to every Australian. If the citizens of Australia were fully aware of what has been done, they would most probably consider the Financial Framework Legislation Act (No 3) 2012 to be totally unacceptable.

A directions hearing in the matter is set down for Friday 13 December 2013 at High Court of Australia, Level 23, Law Courts Building, Queens

Square, Sydney. Donations can be made to support Ron Williams:

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Hello readers,

Given the time of year it is, this was originally going to be a christmyth edition. However, for two reasons, I decided to go with Marvin the manic-depressive android for the cover.

Firstly, I decided that as atheists, we have enough of our lives defined by the fairy tales of theists. We shouldn't be buying into that as acceptable.

Secondly, I couldn't pass up the opportunity to celebrate issue number 42. It will only happen once and what a perfect opportunity to honour my favourite author and one of my favourite atheists; Douglas Adams.

For those who don't know the importance of the number 42, that is your homework, to find out. Having turned 42 this year, I am ever hopeful that the answers to life, the universe and everything will come to me this year. I'll keep you posted. lol.

I would like to thank the various contributors to this issue, many of whom are using pseudonyms. It is a sad indictment on the world that contributors feel the need to use pseudonyms because of a belief that they may be discriminated against or harassed for not believing fairy tales.

I invite other members who may be interested in telling their stories, to come forward. We have members with some interesting tales of deconversion and establishment of a relationship with reality. Some sad, some funny, some disturbing, all incredibly readable and interesting.

I hope you enjoy reading the magazine as much as I enjoyed putting it together. If you have any comments, suggestions or you would like to submit something to me for inclusion, please contact me at: [taa@atheistfoundation.org.au](mailto:taa@atheistfoundation.org.au)

Until next issue, take care

Tracy

## Lee & David

I received an email from Lee and David letting us know how much they are enjoying retirement.....

*Dear AFA members and friends,*

*Lee and I have been overwhelmed by the expressions of goodwill regarding our retirement.*

*We thank and appreciate all who sent messages via email, Skype, letter and phone.*

*All your kind thoughts have meant a great deal to us both.*

*David and Lee  
Retired – and loving it!*



## Not Alone Project

There is a new website for non-believers to share their stories. They can be published, in a completely safe environment, which doesn't judge its participants in any way. This is an internet "safehouse" for those who fear coming out, and a place to share stories, freedoms and inspirations. Those who publish their work here have the choice of remaining anonymous, or publishing their names in their articles.



<http://www.notaloneproject.com/>  
Twitter: [@ContactNotAlone](https://twitter.com/ContactNotAlone)

## Not Alone Logo

The "Not Alone" logo represents the thoughts of those who are secretly irreligious, and the feeling of isolation and loneliness associated with this. The "thought bubble" represents the appearance of isolation and thoughts of being alone. The red dot in the black represents "you" thinking you are alone. The final thought bubble, shows you however that one step beyond your current situation, there are others like you.

# President's Message

Hello AFA Members,

I recently attended a debate at Sydney University. The debate was organized by the Sydney University Muslim Students Association. The AFA was approached to provide a speaker for the event. However, interest in our involvement evaporated when we received no response to our communication that we would accept with a few conditions, including "no segregation of the audience".

After failing to receive a response to our conditions, we heard that the debate was to go ahead with someone else. Instead, Ian Bryce, Vice President of the Secular Party of Australia debated Hamza Tzortzis, a muslim cleric visiting Australia from the United Kingdom. The topic for the debate was "The Godless Delusion". And yes, the audience was segregated.

In my opinion, Hamza lost the debate as soon as he resorted to personal criticism of Ian and ignored the substance of Ian's arguments. Ad hominem attacks are generally a good indication of a poor argument.

I guess it was typical of these sorts of debates. Hamza was preaching to the converted and Ian was preaching to the deconverted. Was anyone persuaded to change their existing beliefs? Probably not.

Our Editor wrote to the University to complain about the segregation in the audience, and received an unsatisfactory response. I think this exchange says more about Islam and attitudes to it than anything that arose in the debate. Yes, it is an irrational belief system that is prejudiced against women (to the long term detriment of adherents) and yes, institutions are reluctant to confront its weaknesses and contradictions for fear of being accused of racism or prejudice.

Hamza is a fluent young apologist for Islam. The majority Muslim audience loved him. So what is the attraction to young Muslims in a speaker like Hamza Tzortzis? Most believers like to hear someone who puts a gloss of logic and reason over their beliefs.



Watching the debate, I was reminded of William Lane Craig. William Lane Craig is a Christian version of Hamza. Both are basically snake oil salesmen who have a well developed patter that sounds convincing until analysed more closely. Have a look at the articles in this edition of the magazine for a more in depth look at the debate.

On a different note, I continue to be appalled by the news coming from the various Inquiries into child abuse. Only yesterday, the evening news contained yet another story of a Catholic priest convicted of child sex offences. Offences spread over many years and made possible by a

church hierarchy that responded defensively and sometimes aggressively to complaints and protected the offender and punished the victim. Is there any further proof needed that the Catholic Church is not a divine institution?

Just another man made organization like the YWCA, which has also been in the news because of child sex offences by a former staff member. Many members will be following the work of the Royal Commission into Child Sex Abuse. One man-made body investigating others. No divine intervention here!

On a more positive note, the AFA Committee have been exploring options for engaging positively with other atheist and freethought groups to our mutual benefit. We have had discussions with Sydney Atheists and the Secular Coalition of Australia. We are also regularly in communication with the Atheist Alliance International.

Many AFA members are probably members of other groups, or attend meetings and discussions put on by other groups. When lobbying government or engaging with the public, it helps to have the weight of numbers and a united approach.

Michael Boyd  
President



# Joel Kilgour - Vice President

## An Introduction

The AFA has two Vice-Presidents; Joel Kilgour and Danny Jarman. For this issue I sat down and interviewed Joel for you to gain an insight into the Executive Team of the AFA. Next issue I will include a similar interview with Danny Jarman.

*Joel, thank you for meeting with me. I know the members will be interested in knowing more about you.*

*How did you come to atheism?*

Like a lot of others, my journey to atheism was a gradual process spanning a number of years. Whilst growing up in a religious household, an inquisitive mind led me to be always asking questions. A trait that once got me into trouble when I recall being asked to not return to Sunday school due to an argument with the teacher. I couldn't get my head around the notion that if God created the earth in 6 days, why couldn't he do it in 1 day? why not 1 second? I mean, he's God right so why couldn't he do it instantly?

My belief quickly evolved into apathy during my teens, which was maintained until after University when my inquisitive nature turned into a passion for learning about many different sciences and my brain suddenly became a sponge for learning about the origins of life and the universe. It was then that things started to come together for me and the notion of organised religion seemed like an absurd position.

*What was your motivation for joining the AFA?*

I joined the AFA in 2008 after wanting to not only connect with other like minded free thinkers, but to also support the organisation that was the biggest voice in opposing the negative influence religion has on Australian society. It was shortly after

joining that David Nicholls reached out to members to advise that the AFA had been approached by AAI to run a convention in Australia in 2010. With my event management background and eager attitude, I quickly joined the GAC committee to help organise the 2010 convention, a role in which I reprised as one of the Event Managers for GAC 2012. Both events are certainly two of the most personally rewarding experiences I have had the pleasure of being involved in.



*Why did you want to be Vice-President?*

Being part of the 2010 GAC committee 'lit the fire' so to speak in terms of my motivation to stay involved with the AFA so I joined the AFA committee shortly afterward. I see the role of Vice President to not only support Michael Boyd in the direction and leadership of the AFA, but to ensure we are meeting not only the aims of the organisation but also the expectations of our members for what they want from us.

Seeing how experienced, talented and enthusiastic our committee team is, I have no doubt the AFA will

continue to grow and prosper in the future.

*What is the most important issue facing the AFA in the near future?*

I feel the biggest ongoing issue for the AFA is how we can continue to harness the wave of dissent by atheists against the creeping force of religion into society and legislation within Australia. Non believers account for a quarter of the Australian population (and likely to be a lot more) however we continue to be viewed as a minority group. We need to show that we are a voice and can be heard.

*Do you have any specific policy areas etc that interest you?*

Along with the two GACs I was also involved in the recent census campaign and part of the team that put together our submission to the ABS to review the wording of the question 'what is your religion?' on the next census. The ABS received 800+ submissions and over half of those were related to changing that question so I look forward to seeing a positive result when the changes are announced in 2014.

Along with this, my aims will be to work with the committee to look at ways to increase the engagement between the AFA and our membership base, to establish closer links with other free thinking groups and organisations and to look at increasing the number of events either run or supported by the AFA...so watch this space!

*In line with Monty Python's Bridge of Death - Can you tell me the air speed of an unladen swallow?*

Haha. I couldn't say for sure but I've heard those African unladen swallows are quick little ba\$#ards!

# Calling All Members

Hello Members,

In August the AFA Committee of Management (CoM) met to develop a strategic plan and roadmap for the AFA moving forward. Various proposals were discussed and a strategic plan was developed.

Part of that strategic plan is to better engage with members. All of the CoM are members just like all of you. Your opinions on the AFA as an organisation and the direction we are headed, are just as important as ours. The only way the AFA can keep up with a changing world is to keep the focus on our members' expectations.

In light of that, the first thing the CoM seeks input from members on are the aims and the philosophy defined in the AFA Constitution. The constitution needs to be updated in order to comply with the legislative framework the AFA operates in and so we need to incorporate those requirements.

However, we cannot redraft the constitution without member feedback on the aims and philosophy, as they underpin everything we do as an organisation and will assist in defining the framework for the constitution within the legal requirements.

We ask that all members consider submitting comment to the CoM in relation to the aims and philosophy. We won't be able to satisfy everyone, but it is important that we have a majority agreement on what it is we have as our goals and underpinning philosophy as an organisation. Comments and suggestions can be sent to [membership@atheistfoundation.org.au](mailto:membership@atheistfoundation.org.au) or to the Membership Officer at PO Box 1062 Lane Cove NSW 1595.

We also seek comments from members about what it is you think the AFA should be focused on, and any projects you think could be undertaken. Some suggestions to consider, as well as any others you may have, include:

- Engage youth through schools and universities
- Develop factsheets and resources for students and teachers
- Develop a database of electorates and MP's for lobbying
- Develop and maintain relationships with other freethought and atheist organisations
- Engage the LGBT community

The other thing we would like to do to better understand our members is to run a survey. We know that we have a lot of members with a lot of skills and an interest in supporting the AFA. We'd like to find ways to provide opportunities for members to use their skills for the greater cause.

Results of the feedback and details about the survey will be included in the next issue of the magazine. Until then, please think about what you want from the AFA and what you can do for the AFA and let us know.

## Current AFA 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.

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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.

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# The Greater Tragedy of Islam

- Eman Extinguished

*Eman is an islamically raised writer born and educated in Sydney Australia. He studied engineering and works as a corporate professional with a growing interest in writing about the subject matter of this article series. Up until his late 20s he'd identified as muslim and was part of a devout family with conservative leanings. Prayers, fasting, alms giving and sacredness were upheld and his father performed hajj at Mecca several times. Growing up he'd be the one who went against the grain by freely socialising with non muslims, travelling to different continents, taking up hobbies regarded as alien to the median Islamic majority and generally being western cultured. He is the lone member of the family to have questioned Islam to the point he parted ways with it and all other forms of organised religion.*

*Eman has given talks (most recently to Sydney Atheists) on the ideological conflicts within Islam and western secularism and the associated modern zeitgeist. His mission is to introspectively look at the tenets of Islam and discuss them in a light that is unhindered by the taboos he encountered. With this, muslims should be better informed about the fundamentals of their belief and the scepticism and interrogation that one outside of it would subject it to. It's also designed to give an assisting perspective for those muslims that are in the contemplative phase that he once was and for spiritual leaders to contemporise the religion and make it more adaptable to new understandings of co-existence and human self growth.*

To the average onlooker who hasn't lived within the paradigm of Islam or had much association with the religion to really understand its essence and creed, there would be a fair degree of alien fear. Fear at some of the distinctly observable customs and behaviours that seemingly typify that whole faith system.

With only distinct symbolism to go off like burqas, the Taliban, violent protesting, middle eastern dictatorship regimes, reactionary bombings and sermons that are in ill taste and in direct conflict with western values, how can Islam constantly keep on the defence? On what's outwardly observable it's not hard to understand why most typecast this religion into bearded trench coat henchmen from the matrix. Concealing weaponry strapped to every limb and a set of dark shades that mask a set of eyes radiating wrath and dogged determination to assimilate or destroy those that threaten its absolute dogmatic truth.

However, those of us more cross cultured, and fortunate enough to get exposure with the greater cross section of society know that your everyday muslim is not this extreme. By large in the west, and with my travels to the middle east, most muslims do not identify with the aforementioned vigilantes of dogma. It is in fact this overwhelming majority

of everyday non fundamentalist or non extreme muslims that is the focus of this series of articles. When I say the greater tragedy within Islam, I refer to my retrospective hindsight of the mode of thinking and life I was living. Of what I found to be psychologically and personal growth limiting attributes of the doctrine of Islam most muslims subscribe to and abide by. In fact this could be said of monotheism in general.



French born novelist Anais Nin put it quite succinctly. "When we blindly adopt a religion, a political system, a literary dogma we become automatons. We cease to grow".

With that said, and for the rest of this written piece, I will set out to describe my experience growing up and practicing this religion for the better part of 20 years in contrast with the growth and observations of general life made outside of its confinement.

I'm sure muslims reading this will immediately categorise this as a subjective piece of writing that is debateable at every turn, and I wish to state that I welcome intelligent and well considered counter arguments. In return, I make the reasonable request for readers to abandon preconceptions and evaluate my observations, cited examples and deductions from a neutral position not inclined to theism or atheism.

Let's examine my use of the word confinement in the previous paragraph. Confinement in a psychological sense is a strong ingredient for keeping a cult perpetuating and sustained. Is Islam a cult or cult like? Before answering, I'll borrow the definition by Amanda Coetzee author of the article 'cult – a four letter word'. It states:

"The definition of a cult in its simplest terms is any group that uses abusive and/or manipulative methods to attract and retain members".

Besides the universal monotheistic notion of salvation exclusivism, Islam emphasizes more than its monotheistic rivals the dual tenets of the relationship with god as fear and love.

“O you who believe! Fear Allah as he ought to be feared and do not die except as believers.” Quran 3:102

Ibn Mas'ud, a companion of the Prophet Muhammad explained what ought to be feared means. “It means that he is to be obeyed not disobeyed, remembered not forgotten, and shown gratitude not ingratitude.”

So we're being directed to fear a god who is omnipotent, omnipresent sent his messengers and left mankind no excuse to not believe in him. 'He' is perfectly within his right to be submitted to and acknowledged without peer as the prime cause for anything and everything. Believing in god is not enough. No co-deity (Buddha or a son of god) can be associated with him.

Muhammad and all the messengers that preceded him and the accounts of their miracles are to be believed and are a necessary article of faith. He is singular and any belief contrary to the above will land you in hell... for eternity.

Is fear and threat of eternal hell a manipulative cult measure? Most would say yes. God apologists would however say that an eternal hell is legitimate for a creation that pays no acknowledgement to its creator. But would this argument really be consistent with the universal blessing that muslims utter before any undertaking or recitation? “In the Name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful”. Such a heavy ransom for disbelieving that which can't be tangibly proven hardly appears compassionate or merciful.

With acceptance that fear is a perfectly acceptable dimension in a loving relationship, this could have quite mutative manifestations in relationships in the real world. Relationships between parent and child, between spouses, between muslim and non muslim, scholar and student etc... In his book “Mastery of Love” by Don Miguel Ruiz he describes the delineation in a chapter titled ‘The Track of Love, The Track of Fear’.

I recommend you read the whole chapter, but essentially he describes anger, sadness and jealousy as masked forms of fear. “In the track of fear, I love you if you let me control you, if you are good to me, if you fit into the image I make for you”.

He contrasts this with actual love “Love is unconditional. In the track of love, there is no if; there are no conditions. I love you for no reason, with no justification. I love you the way you are, and you are free to be the way you are.... If we are going to change, it is because we want to change, because we don't want to suffer any longer”

So why is the love with our creator imperfect, one sided in this sense and more aligned with fear? Imposing submission through 5 daily prayers, constant remembrance, no ill speaking of anything sacred and the threat of eternal hell are surely fear tactics. Is this a reflection on the personality of Islam's god?

This leads on to the question of how Islam ties into the most important relationship of all. The relationship one has with oneself. Life success hinges on it as Maya Angelou the American author states “Success is liking yourself, liking what you do, and liking how you do it”. Tony Robbins successful life coach pushes this mantra with his words “Know Thyself” and “Be Thyself”.

When living a life in total servitude to a deity and customising your life to what he/she legitimises, do we have the avenue to discover what we really are and live it out? When our goals, passions, pastimes and life purpose is prescribed to us how does this permit for organic growth?

To be muslim is to abide by a code of obligation and restrictions imposed. Obligation with 5 daily prayers, memorisation of the Koran (As much as you can), zhikr (incantations of remembrance to Allah), giving alms to the poor, fasting during Ramadan and restrictions in who you can marry, foods you can consume, most music that you can listen to and the

manner in which you can interact with the opposite sex.

Some obligations and restrictions are intuitive and agreeable with the modern zeitgeist. Things like giving sustenance and shelter to a poor neighbour and the forbidding of murder. But what about the rest? How can one truly find their passions, their gift to the world, and what really gives them happiness if they live in a world stripped of its dimensions by religious restrictions?

For most in the western world the rite of passage is to trial hobbies, sports, crafts and arts during youth, progressing to entering the social arena from a very young age. It's within that social arena exposure to the good, bad, materialistic, manipulative, daring, compassionate and humane happens. Relationships also form and both genders through trial and error, and intermingling identify what gives them positive emotions, what doesn't and which paths take them closer and further from their true selves.

It's a journey of jubilation and pain, but through this, resilience of character, adaptation to change and philosophical contemplation emerge. The true self is discovered and people who attain and live this are the ones most admired. They generally become the best artists, professional leaders and prominent figures because they express deeply developed facets of their personality.

How would somebody deprived of this learning experience be able to assimilate into social circles of people who have? It begs the question do Muslims play the victim card by their own doing? How many times have we heard of employment discrimination because of a beard or hijab or stories of failed compliance for ID checking while wearing a concealing veil? Better yet muslims students boasting that they got disqualified from an exam because they insisted on making ablution and prayer mid assessment despite exam rules being consistent and clear.

I would go to muslim events that had enforced gender segregation and an actual curtain partition between the sexes. Is wider society discriminating against muslims or is it self marginalisation by muslims expecting society to give them a get out of jail free card?

The rest of society is subjected to the laws that govern survival of the fittest, and the lessons learned in the process. If you're sheltered from the big bad world it's logical to assume you didn't develop the resistances, adaptive measures and faculties to everyday challenges that will get thrown your way.

You might say, hang on...muslims socialise just as much as non-muslims. And I must say as a young adult muslim I did find many muslims that intuitively knew that in order to be accepted, or impress people positively with your religion, connection and trust needed to be built with non muslims.

Connections embodying not only trust but also, empathy, respect, love and the cherishing of shared experiences and commonalities. It's quite common to find second and successive generation children of migrant muslims the champions of this endeavour. Volunteering for secular charities, socialising through sporting teams, attending fine art events, going to after work drinks (even if not drinking), appearing in the media, showcasing the more extravagant and artistically appealing facets of Arabic and Islamic custom.

All very admirable and socially integrating measures for anybody wanting to avoid alienation. This is what gave me hope the religion could embed within the modern zeitgeist. However is this within the essence of the Islamic framework for socialisation? Let's go to the Quran for answers.

*"You (O Muhammad) will not find any people who believe in Allah and the Last Day, making friendship with those who oppose Allah and His Messenger (Muhammad), even though they were their fathers,*

*or their sons, or their brothers, or their kindred (people). For such He has written Faith in their hearts, and strengthened them with Rûh (proofs, light and true guidance) from Himself. And we will admit them to Gardens (Paradise) under which rivers flow, to dwell therein (forever). Allah is pleased with them, and they with Him. They are the Party of Allah. Verily, it is the Party of Allah that will be the successful"* [Quran 58:22]

This verse alone doesn't seem to advocate for universal love and humanity. The above tenet is somewhat tempered with later verses on the subject:

*"Allah does not forbid you to deal justly and kindly with those who fought not against you on account of religion and did not drive you out of your homes. Verily, Allah loves those who deal with equity"* [Quran 60:8].



What would you derive from this? A relationship between a muslim and a non muslim is largely transactional and the muslim has to 'deal' with the non muslim. This means beyond the inner muslim sanctum relationships resemble those you have with your doctor, police officer, store clerk etc...

This is terribly insular, seeing as without connection you'll never learn the inner motivators, true sentiments and deep values of a person. It's not hard to see why muslims tend to congregate in suburban enclaves and are guarded around non muslims.

Whether this is a cleverly designed cult insulation tool or just a by-product of thinking, you possess the absolute truth, it's clear that muslims won't be their relaxed selves around non muslims. Well if they're going

to abide by their book's teachings anyway.

How can fresh perspectives enter into a cordoned construct like this? The answer is they don't. So you find the Islamic communities developing their own schools, entertainment events, specialty shopping, muslim friendly swimming areas etc... to further keep their creed intact and protected from destructive external influences.

What do you make of 'moderate' muslims? The ones that politicians, celebrities and journalists of the western world are advocating for. Those muslims you see who are well integrated into western values and genuinely give empathy, love and socially intertwine with their non muslim communities? That partake in non muslim culture and identify with it and call it their own (the elements that they reason is not contravening with Islamic principle or at least discretionally permissible)?

My question is when religion becomes moderate is their still a point for it to exist? Sam Harris, neuroscientist and author of the New York Times bestsellers, *The End of Faith* may have read my mind when he said "Religious moderation is the product of secular knowledge and scriptural ignorance".

What's funny is that for a while I saw a need to resist moderation. A corrosion of the pure creed. Disbelievers just didn't get it and would eradicate my faith if I let them get too much of a foothold into my affections. It sounds silly but childhood psychological indoctrination is a powerful thing that unravels slowly. This itself is a contentious topic that can be read about independently in more depth. The point is only recently did my thinking overturn, to view it as more of an insecurity. Perhaps a fragile creed that fears scepticism and conforming to truths and values that supersedes its own through the forces of modernisation.

*More from Eman next issue-Editor*

# School Chaplaincy

- James Purcell

*James Purcell is a new regular contributor with a particular interest in atheism, politics and public policy. He provides his first piece on the school chaplaincy program in Australia.*

While atheists, secularists and proponents of teaching comparative religion are openly vituperative of Christian Religious Education (CRE) being taught in public schools, the perceived benevolence of the chaplaincy program allows its pernicious influence to fly under the radar and seemingly escape from the same level of criticism applied to the CRE curricula.

In this respect, there is much evidence to suggest that we have our priorities exactly backwards when it comes to challenging CRE more aggressively than we challenge the school chaplaincy program.

For the sake of the wellbeing of the young adults placed in their care, we must do more to highlight the potentially fatal practice of dressing religious missionaries up

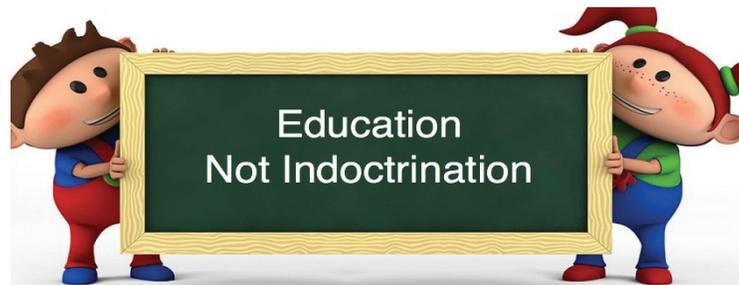
as counsellors and letting them loose on vulnerable young public school students.

Young people face a myriad of difficulties and challenges during their transition to adulthood. Modern technology has done much to enhance their capacity for learning by making information readily accessible but has done precious little to soften the landing for teens jumping out of childhood and into adulthood. It is during this fleeting and precarious transition that young people discover their sexuality, encounter intimate relationships for the first time and struggle to regain their footing amongst the social, physical and psychological changes that inevitably take place.

Parents do what they can to arm their children with the right tools to deal

with this difficult time, however many teenagers still seek out the counsel of their friends, peers and trusted adults when coming to terms with the new feelings and experiences they encounter.

As the custodians and guardians of these young adults between the hours of 9am and 3.30pm Monday to Friday, we might expect public schools to develop support mechanisms and formal counselling programs to protect the wellbeing of their charges.



Many public schools do indeed employ a staff member to act as a counsellor with whom students can speak confidentially and seek advice about difficult problems.

But it is a reality of our supposedly secular public education system that the very people who are tasked with the job of providing unbiased advice to young people are, by definition, pushing a religious agenda rather than putting the welfare of students first.

School Chaplains, who are paid for by the Australian taxpayer, populate public schools throughout Australia where they play at being counsellors, psychologists and social workers. They by and large hold no qualifications in any of the above valuable and noble professions, but rather, can only claim the dubious

achievement of having completed a few days of intensive training in 'pastoral care' or another equally oxymoronic vocational course.

In contrast, psychologists must train for 5 to 6 years and are closely supervised when they enter the workforce to ensure that they do no harm. They are also bound by a strict code of ethics. According to the Code, psychologists must only work within their area of expertise, and they must not substitute their own values for the values of the Code.

We should contrast this approach with the approach of Chaplains as described by ACCESS Ministries. According to their website, the core value of Chaplains is to "teach, live and commend the Christian faith through the ministry of Christian religious education and pastoral care".

A trip to the ACCESS Ministries statement of belief makes the further point that it is "an ecumenical body committed to the basic doctrines of the Christian faith drawn from the Old and New Testament Scriptures. It is committed to the three ecumenical creeds (Apostle's Creed, Nicene Creed, Athanasian Creed) and takes into account the faith statements and traditions of its nominating churches".

The most concerning aspect of Chaplains masquerading as psychologists and social workers in schools isn't that it is an affront to the idea of secular education. It's that their self-described ethos poses a flat out risk to the health and wellbeing of the very students who are encouraged to seek their guidance when dealing with complicated personal issues.

Imagine that a teenage boy, concerned and confused about the fact that he is attracted to members of the same sex, seeks guidance, support and counsel from his school chaplain as he is told he ought to do in just such a situation.

A trained psychologist, social worker or counsellor would be compelled to provide unbiased advice and support, free from judgement and religious dogma. Chaplains, however, are compelled to do the exact opposite.

What help could a Chaplain possibly give to our hypothetical student, given that the Bible teaches that homosexuality is a mortal sin? It seems extremely unlikely the Chaplain would reassure the student that his feelings are entirely normal and nothing to be ashamed of. It seems even more unlikely he would tell the student those feelings will, eventually, lead to a fulfilling sex life and a loving relationship.

Likewise, a frightened teenage girl seeking advice about her pregnancy probably won't be given an unbiased overview of her options considering the Bible's view on abortions.

These are just two examples, but the same conflict of interest applies to a broad range of issues about which young adults may seek advice.

In fact, it is hard to imagine any real life situation where a Chaplain would be better placed to provide support and advice than a trained psychologist, social worker or counsellor. On the flip side, it is not difficult to imagine circumstances in which a Chaplain's religious bias would lead to catastrophic outcomes for the vulnerable young person who unwittingly confides in them.

That isn't to say that all Chaplains are malevolent. I have no doubt some of the more enlightened amongst them make a conscious choice to jettison their religious bias in order to provide truly bipartisan advice. However, even at their best, Chaplains are still hopelessly underqualified. At their worst, they are a positive menace and a threat to the emotional and physical wellbeing of their charges.

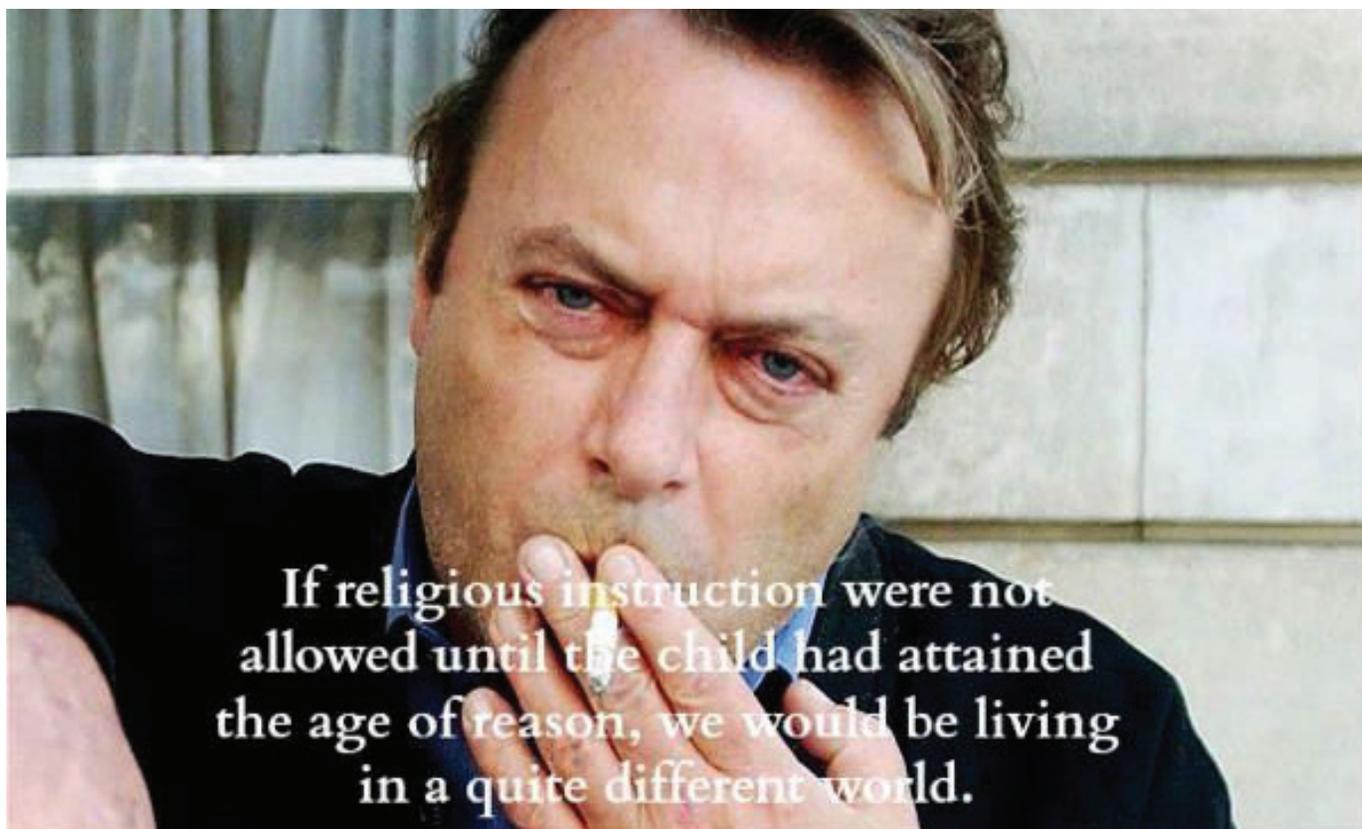
It's not considered polite to call into question the appropriateness of someone else's religious faith. But when that faith is unleashed on vulnerable young minds in public

schools around Australia, the stakes are too high to worry about causing offence.

It's long past time for the Federal Government to acknowledge the risk posed by inserting poorly trained religious missionaries into support roles that would be better filled by trained and qualified psychologists, social workers and counsellors.

After all, it could be your son or daughter who, in a moment of personal crisis, seeks advice from their school chaplain. And when they do, what do you think the Bible believing Chaplain will tell them about contraception, homosexuality, abortion or sexually intimate relationships outside of wedlock?

Chaplains masquerading as counsellors in public schools do as much harm as they would if we dressed them up as doctors and let them loose in hospitals. They are fundamentally unqualified to perform the role they have been given by the Federal Government. Allowing them to continue this work unchallenged can and does cause untold harm to the very students they're supposed to be helping.



# Saying Grace

- Justin Murray

*Justin Murray takes us on his further adventures to experience different theist groups. This issue, he takes us to the Uniting Church and the Catholic Church and his personal experiences with services in both.*

*"If you sin... God loves you. If you are kind... God loves you. If you are selfish... God loves you. If you follow all the commandments in the Bible... God loves you."*

I am nervous, very nervous. There is no need to be. I am about to enter a building where people talk about love. They smile, sing and clap hands. It is a friendly place.

But there are other things here, invisible things. The people who clap and sing say that they can see the invisible things. I cannot. That makes me different from them.

I have to calm down. Then I remember what Kurt Wolff said: "surrender and catch". It is time to put down the weapons of doubt, so that I might catch the meaning that these invisible things have for these people.

I take a deep breath and walk in.

The man at the front is wearing casual clothes: beige cargo pants and a short sleeve cotton shirt. He chats and smiles. There are 53 other people in the room, lots of families and lots of children. The children play and make lots of noise. I remember these buildings as places where children were told to be quiet.

The man pulls out a colourful sash from the square pocket in his cargo pants. It is a colourful sash with a name badge pinned to it. The man puts it around his neck. This signifies a change of role, and an entry into a new world: in that world things are different. In the normal world, if I have a ball in my pocket people can ask to see it. In this world, it is not polite to ask to see the ball. We have to trust the person who says the ball is there.

Sometimes people get angry if asked too many times to take the ball out of their pocket and prove that it actually exists.

But I am here and I want to see that ball. But today I will not ask.

The man with the sash welcomes everyone. He reminds them that they can stay in this room or they can go into the lobby to get a cup of tea. He is not worried about it. A lady brings him a cup of tea. He looks embarrassed and thanks her. He seems humbled by the women's efforts and that she brought it to him in front of everyone.



Behind the man is a stage. Two steps lead up to the stage. The man with the sash does not stand on the stage. There are two singers and a saxophonist on the stage. There is a large wooden platform and a stand where people to speak to the crowd on the stage. There is also a large wooden cross.

The cross is important to these people. It is the torture device deemed to have been used to kill a Jewish man that may have lived 2000 years ago. There are no images of their god in the room.

The people in the room look like they may have been out shopping when they remembered that they needed to come here. No-one is formally dressed. There are people from many parts of the world here. There is an area for children to sit and play to the left of the stage.

The children are allowed to play without hindrance (no attempts are made to re-direct them to quiet activities). This is not how I remember things being done, but I have not been in this type of place for a quarter of a century.

The cool kids sit at the back of the room; they wear black t-shirts with the names of musical bands on them. They are also left to do what they want. Very strange!

People come and go from the room, as the man with the sash suggested they should. I have lost count of how many people are in the room, but the crowd is getting larger. These people only stand when they sing, there is no ritualised process of standing, sitting and kneeling. Again, this seems very strange.

There are four songs in total, all sung together except for one. That one is sung by a young man alone while standing on the flat platform on top of the stage. No-one reprimands the man for this act, which other groups would consider deviant. They are a very strange and fascinating group.

The man with the sash asks us to find someone that we are comfortable speaking to and ask them a question. The question is: "What is the most difficult thing about being Christian?" Now I am not just nervous, I am panicking. What do I do?

The woman next to me turns my way. The same woman had politely asked if the seat next to me was free, before sitting down. The woman in front also turns around. Another woman from the front of the group walks towards us, she says: "Let's do this is together."

The woman from the front asks the question to the woman sitting next to me. She says that it is difficult to be tolerant of people who do not believe what she believes. I try hard not to frown. But I suspect that I fail, as she quickly restates her case: "I guess it is okay to be tolerant, as long as they believe in god. That is okay." Shit!

The woman from the front quickly interrupts: "I often wonder why people have to suffer. I have a friend who has been really sick for the last 12 months..." I am surprised that her concern about this problem of suffering is confined only to her immediate circle of friends.

The man with the sash is talking. He does not ask people to stop talking and listen to him. He just waits patiently. Seeking an escape route, I say: "I think someone wants our attention."

The man with the sash tells the people that they must to stop trying to be perfect people and accept their limitations. In particular he states that no-one can be a perfect Christian. He says that grace undermines perfection – I do not know what he means, but everyone else agrees.

We sing another song and then it is time to read from their holy book. A book written over many years in languages that these people do not speak by men in another part of the world. The story is about a farmer hiring day labourers. He pays them all the same wage no matter how long they worked. Some workers are angry with the lack of procedural justice displayed by the farmer.

The man with the sash explains that this story shows that it does not matter how long a person believes in their god. It is more important that they believe, for then they will be allowed to live on after their physical bodies die. I do not believe in their god, and finding myself wondering what they think will happen to me when I die. I remember that as a child, I was told this same story about the farmer and workers. But it was explained to me that it meant that I was a bad person and had to admit this or I would be punished forever. It is strange that this book is not consistently interpreted.

Later, the man with the sash tells the people that they should not judge others or force their morality on others. He used the example of same sex marriage.

I leave with more questions than I had before entering the building. I have decided to visit there again to seek some answers.

## Contesting Authenticity

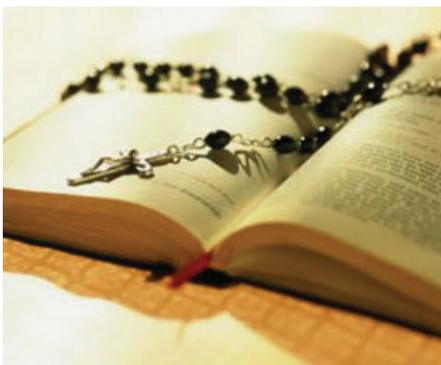
- Justin Murray

*"At school a Christian brother lectured us on sin. I thought: you know nothing about sin." Man with many layers*

On an unseasonably warm spring day, a man dressed in multiple layers of clothes: black coat, covered with flowing white robes and a scarlet red poncho, stands in front of a crowd. Behind him is a towering statue of a Jewish man who was believed to live 2000 years ago, and who was tortured to death by the soldiers of the Roman Empire.

The man dressed in multiple layers believes that the statue represents one part of a three part deity that he worships. To his left is another statue, a polytheistic demi-goddess: a depiction of the mother of the Jewish man.

Further to his left is a series of 12 paintings of the capture, interrogation and death of the Jewish man. In front of him is another, even more towering statue of the Jewish man reaching down from the clouds to pull another man up towards him.



The man dressed in multiple layers normally speaks in Latin, the language of the empire that killed the Jewish man, who he believes to

be a god. This time he uses English to address the crowd, as he has an important message that they must understand. He says, "Our next meeting will be on Friday the 13th." Pausing to make a joke, he adds, "I hope none of you are superstitious."

I know the man dressed in multiple layers. He is my cousin. We went to high school together. I know that he was a peripheral member of the high school community. He was persistently bullied with taunts about his alleged homosexuality. On this day, 41 people follow his every word. He has two assistants that hold and move objects for him. They also arrange and straighten his clothes when he moves. He is now a central figure in this church.

After the service is done, I speak to him for the first time in 23 years. Before I know it, some stupid words leave my mouth: "So, are you happy doing what you are doing?" He looks away and after five seconds walks away without saying anything.

I pause before entering the building. It was constructed in the 1970's and would later be described to me as horrible, but necessary for this group of people. The group contains five families, but the majority of them attend this ceremony alone and are middle-aged or older. I am told later by the man with the lop-sided moustache that this is not the case, rather that they are a young community that choose to worship their god in this way.

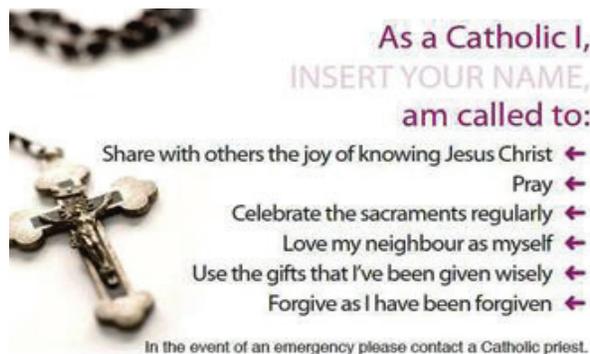
I am also told that the young people in the group are surprised and pleased with this way of doing things. This is hard for me to confirm, as they do not speak to me. The man with the lop-sided moustache insists that the children have been "unknowingly robbed of their heritage" by what he calls the "new way" of worshipping their god. He notes that there is a gulf between the "new way" community and his community. The man insists that his way of worshipping his god is not nostalgia but a continuation of what he calls "correct traditions". He describes the devotees of the "new way" as undisciplined and sloppy.

I am later approached by four older men, including the man with many layers and asked why I am there. The women and children avoid me. Almost all wear formal clothes; the women all wear long sleeves and long dresses or trousers. All of the men appear to have hats. All of the people in the room, except three of them, are Anglo-Celtic.

Most of the women and girls wear lacy coverings on their heads. It seems their god does not like seeing women's hair. Within family groups all women wear the covering or all do not. They are consistent in this

practice. Any children who make noise are told to be quiet or are removed from the building. The people are completely silent during the ceremony. The man with a lop-sided moustache later tells me this is very important and the fact that the ceremony is undertaken in a language that he does not understand is an important part of that practice.

A small choir sing at the back of church. The songs are also in this language. There is a raised stage at the front of the room, there are 4 steps that need to be climbed to be on top of it. The man with many layers also has a black hat. It seems important to put it on and take it off at specific times during the ceremony. Another man assists him with this task. There are two assistants, wearing white flowing robes that continually assist the man. They move around and hold objects that the man with many layers needs to conduct the ceremony. I wonder if the man is incapable of doing these things himself. The assistants even move the man's clothes for him. Maybe he is very ill and frail.



For me, the ceremony is exceedingly dull: as I can't understand what is happening and I do not speak or understand this language that is rarely used anymore. The man with many layers only uses English once. I wonder if it is hard to sell in the marketplace of ideas I am later told that this is not the case.

The group seems very concerned about incorrect behaviour, something they call "sin". It is the defining characteristic of their identity. The man with the many layers considers himself to have a very good understanding of the various forms of incorrect behaviour. Food and drink

are served during the ceremony. Some do not eat and drink. The man with the lop-sided moustache later reveals that these people have not admitted their bad behaviour to the man with many layers or have engaged in some incorrect behaviour that means they must not eat or drink. These people are to be considered "unclean". Interestingly the food and drink that are served are considered to be meat and blood from the actual body of their god.

At the end of the ceremony, the man with the many layers exits the building while the people continue to sing the final song. The people then speak to their god before leaving. Most speak to the demi-goddess. She seems to be of great importance to the people. Although, she is subservient to the main god. The people then meet outside for tea and cake.

At this time, the man with the many layers suddenly insists that everyone speak to their god again. This is done in three languages, but not in a language I can understand. I am beginning to think that the man with many layers does not welcome my presence here. While speaking to their god, the man with many layers insists that everyone is quiet and looks at him. The man with the lop-sided moustache and another man to whom I was speaking both mention that this is unusual behaviour for the man in many layers.

I speak to the man with the lop-sided moustache for more than two hours after the ceremony. He is very generous with his time. During that time, the man with many layers seems to be avoiding me and eventually leaves with these parting words: "It would be good to see you come back again... You could take more notes during the ceremony". I then remember that my note-taking during the ceremony had been met with stares and sighs by some. I am now sure that I have broken several taboos during my time with the group. I will have to be much more careful, if I visit again.

# Researching the Research

- Rayne

Rayne from the AFA Forums offered to assist in providing members some guidance in how to assess research. Rayne describes herself as a constantly hungry, bruise-prone bibliophile living with a black cat who has a fetish for eating iPhone cords. Often found sitting outside yelling at birds while drinking peppermint tea and listening to metal, Rayne enjoys wearing large coats in air conditioned rooms.

Ten years ago, my dial up modem was my gateway to what I thought was a fast way to access information from around the world. Ten years on, internet technology has seen a vast amount of growth, providing faster access to an even greater expanse of information. I foolishly thought that this would be the start of a revolution of critical thinking. No longer would I have to explain to family members how flu shots worked. I thought wrong.

In an age where I can access information in any language from my smartphone while eating a bagel on a train, I'm still subjected to posts on Facebook from friends asking which naturopathic remedies they could take for blue lips and severe stomach pain. Social media it seems has made it easier to spread information – just not accurate information.

Pseudoscience has successfully managed to infiltrate the lives of many. Often dressed up in a darling sheep's costume, the convincing wolf that is pseudoscience has slandered its way into the medical field – mingling with real science and tricking the world into believing that

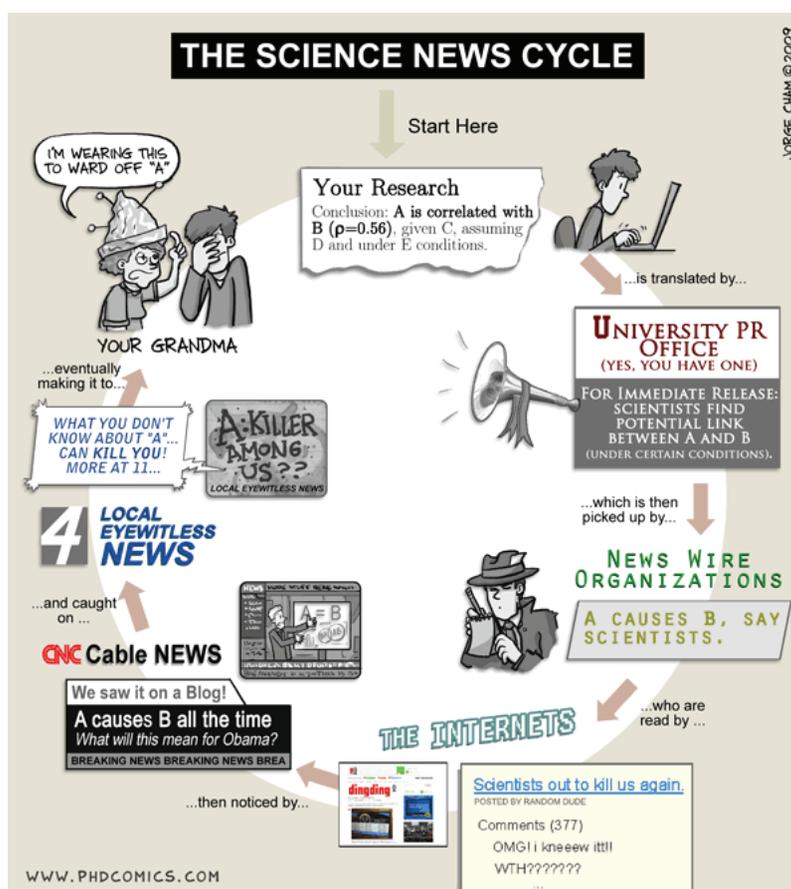
paying \$60 for a bottle of shampoo that claims to be formulated from “unique amino acids and all natural placenta” will make your hair look like Scarlett Johansson and smell like a

It took me years of study and a university degree to be fully able to ‘research’ a research study and spot inconsistencies and fallacies within a piece of work or product. Being able to critique a research study isn't just useful for eliminating pseudoscience but it's useful for evaluating any study that promotes itself as a scientific study worthy of publication.

Many individuals still make the mistake of taking a study at face value, particularly if it mentions the words “scientific study” by a “doctor” regardless of said doctor's field of expertise, in relation to the research topic. Media outlets still insist on dumbing down research results which is problematic if the findings get lost in translation.

Fortunately, with the age of information, many are now becoming aware that a study is worthless, unless we can examine and assess the quality of the study itself.

In light of the ever growing pile of unscientific nonsense and pseudoscience promoters plaguing our lives, here are some handy hints in how to separate fact from fiction:



bowl of petunias.

Unfortunately since science has never promoted itself as having all the answers – which is true, science doesn't have all the answers, this allows pseudoscience to jump in and fill the gaps in knowledge with answers that lack supporting evidence but which are dressed up convincingly with enough scientific vocabulary, that it sounds plausible to the average reader.



### 1. Look at the researcher or promoter of the product.

Just because someone is a Doctor or has a Ph.D or labels themselves an expert, doesn't make it so. Look at the credentials of the person who is promoting the pseudoscience product or study. Doctor Alan Cantwell is a long time AIDs conspiracy theorist, who has written many books on the subject of how AIDs is nothing more than biological warfare injected into Hep B vaccines, yet he's a retired dermatologist.

### 2. Look at the sources used in the study.

Is the research new? Is it an elaboration on previous research? Have a look at the literature review. The purpose of a literature review is to examine the current body of research around a particular topic, explain the current research findings and provide a context for the reader to establish where the study fits into the current field of work around a topic. Without a literature review, the reader will have little knowledge as to where the research is coming from and how the research came to be. Literature reviews are good for establishing if the topic of the study has been examined before and what previous studies have stated.

Further to that, where are the author's sources coming from? If the author is making a claim, it's not only vital to assess the claim, but the source of where that claim came from. Is the source a quality research paper? Is it a website or a book? If so, how credible is it? If someone tells you the sky is pink, not only should you do your own research into the pinkness of the sky but also examine the quality of where that claim came from – did the claim come from a meteorologist or from my next door neighbour who seems to think chocolate is how the devil enters your body?

### 3. Ask yourself, why is the research being studied?

Examine why the author is doing the study and what's in it for them. Do they have an agenda? Are they going to gain anything by writing a study on how drinking nothing but tea will lead to spontaneously growing a

third foot? In addition to examining the author's sources, the funding sources of the study must be looked at. Perhaps the study has been funded by a coffee distributor wanting to discredit tea for its own gain? Are the funding sources impartial? Are the researchers themselves impartial to the study?

### 4. Does the language make it look like it's trying too hard?

If a study cites that a certain amino acid in shampoo can make your hair shiny, but can't or doesn't explain how or even what amino acid they use – even in simple terms – it's probably trying too hard to look like legit science by using the occasional fancy sounding buzzword. Further to that, examine the specific language of the article – does it use emotional language? Does it use scare tactics by using scientific terms without explaining them in simple terms?

Also does the study use vague language that can never be explained in depth? Words like "toxin", "holistic", "detox", "chemical free" and "natural".

### 5. Are the claims realistic?

What sort of claims is the study making? Are they realistic or is the study telling you that by eating an orange a day, you can reverse the aging process and develop telekinesis? One example is to type "Stem Cell Cream" into Google and examine the results. My first result exclaims "Derived from adult stem cell with 387 growth factors". Funtimes.

### 6. Does the claim rely on testimonials to back it up?

Pseudoscience has a hard time backing itself up with empirical evidence – generally because there is none. So in the absence of empirical evidence, pseudoscience relies on testimonials, that are often written in such a way as to make us believe that the product or service completely revolutionised the writer's life. Remember kids, anyone can write a testimonial.

### 7. Has the study been designed correctly?

When executed, a poorly designed

study can present results that are less than reliable. Has the study accounted for any extraneous variables? Has the study attempted to reduce researcher bias or the placebo effect? Is there a control group? Can the study be replicated in a clinical setting and can we expect the same results by replicating the study?

### 8. Does the study or product claim exclusivity or a worldwide conspiracy?

If a person makes a claim that they and only they have figured out the cure to a disease that medicine is still working on – chances are they've been dipping into some battery acid a bit too much. Look for key terms like "secret" or "things doctors don't want you to know" or "you need to wake up!". If the product makes claims to a worldwide conspiracy involving doctors, scientists and pharmaceutical companies, please click that back button on your browser.

### 9. Does the study rely on confirmation or refutation?

Pseudoscience loves to make grandiose claims about itself. Pseudoscience also loves to make assertions that don't allow for the possibility that they can be shown to be false by way of an experiment or observation. This is called falsifiability. In other words, while science accepts the notion that an experiment could be designed that could refute its claims, pseudoscience does not allow this.

### 10. Does the study of promoter make unprovable claims about individuals who disagree with them?

Often this tactic is aimed at individuals who are advocates against the product or study. One notable example is the anti-vaccination community and their numerous claims against Doctor Paul Offit. In 2011, Meryl Dorey of the Australian Vaccination Network asserted that Dr Paul Offit still continues to receive revenue from a patented vaccine after it was sold – this claim has been rendered false.

# Logical Fallacies

To complement Rayne's article on researching, I have decided to run a regular column on logical fallacies. Logical fallacies are arguments that are structured in such a way that the conclusion reached does not follow a logical or reasonable path from the premises provided. I encounter logical fallacies regularly on the AFA Forums, from both atheists and theists. I also hear them at the various debates the AFA supports. You will probably have encountered them yourselves. So I will focus each issue on different commonly used logical fallacies. We'll have a look at why they are illogical, and some examples

## Ad Hominem

Ad hominem is a Latin term meaning 'to the person'. It is an argument made against the person as opposed to the idea or concept actually being discussed. They are usually personal attacks.

An ad hominem argument is a logical fallacy because even if the person using it is correct in their comment about the other person, it says nothing at all to the actual argument.

The ad hominem is, in my opinion, one of the worst types of logical fallacies. It's a clear indication when this one is used that the person using it has absolutely nothing in their arsenal of logic and reason to argue against the idea. If all you can do is attack the person, you've lost the debate.



### Theists

- As an atheist you are just angry at god
- You were obviously abused by a priest or something and you are angry at the church
- You just want to live an immoral life without consequences

### Atheists

- You are an idiot for believing fairy tales
- You are too scared to think for yourself
- You don't have a high enough IQ to understand the argument



## Strawman

The strawman argument is one where the debater takes the argument and, rather than argue against it, inflates it and creates a completely different (usually more extreme) argument and instead argues against that.

The strawman is a logical fallacy because you lack credibility when you fail to address the actual argument presented and must instead create a different version.

The straw man is a very common logical fallacy. It is a poor debater that introduces the straw man argument. If you cannot logically argue against the concept or ideas being discussed, you gain no credibility by making up a different argument.



### Theists

"The writings of Charles Darwin, the father of evolution, promoted the justification of racism.....Therefore, the Legislature of Louisiana does deplore all instances and all ideologies of racism, does hereby reject the core concepts of Darwinist ideologies."

### Atheists

- So you think it's ok for priests to rape children then because you believe in god
- So you believe the earth is only 6,000 years old then if you believe in god

# One God Too Many

- Sten Bjerking

*Sten is an active member on the AFA forums. He has written a book on the christian god and we will be serialising it across this and future issues. The first segment is the introduction, provided here.*

*My Old Philosophy gave many shocks  
To Human Sheep who moved in Mental Flocks,  
But all my pristine Heresies are now  
By Science rendered Very Orthodox*

I believe it was my very good fortune that I avoided intense religious indoctrination as a child, and my further good fortune to read Bertrand Russell's *Why I am not a Christian*, when quite young. At the age of sixteen I rejected Christianity.

In my country Australia during my formative years it was unusual for a child not to receive some indoctrination. The subject "Religious Instruction" was taught in schools and could only be dodged if parents wrote to the principal asking for an exemption. My parents were not church people but had the opinion (so common then and not uncommon today), that some religion would do a child some good.....No letter was written.

The input from school, some from the boy scouts, as well as being dragged to church a number of times in my early years (as a guest of friends whose parents were church people), gave me enough conditioning to cause me considerable anguish in my early teens. Lying awake at night and fearing the prospect of going to Hell, (being convinced this was my destination), I would sometimes resolve to go to a church soon. Anxiety about such matters always seemed to lift in the daylight hours.... I didn't go.

My relief when I realised that the truth of Christianity was in question was absolute. I was reborn into agnosticism. With the passing years my drift has been away from an agnostic position to that of atheist. I am unequivocally atheist as far as the Christian, Islamic, Judaic god is concerned.

Coincidentally, my brother, two years my senior, became a born again Christian at almost precisely the time I rejected it. As the reader would imagine we had some rather heated discussions, and I was prompted to read a good deal of the Bible to obtain ammunition for my arguments. The more I read, the more perplexed I became that people took this book seriously.

Over the years I have met many people who are not practising Christians, but are vague on the subject of their religious beliefs. Some told me about a dispute with a priest or pastor, as the reason they left their church. They were still burdened with some belief, and uncomfortable with their situation. Not having had good reasons for ceasing religious devotion they faced a dilemma.

There are many fronts on which Christianity can be challenged. The damage done by this religion is clearly illustrated if we look at the bloody trail left by Christian churches over the centuries, and the ruthless suppression of knowledge that conflicted with church dogma. The damage still continues today as churches retard medical scientific progress in areas such as stem cell research, and hamper the efforts being made to control the spread of HIV/Aids by discouraging safe sex.

Christians can be remarkably resilient when confronted with facts about the dubious history of the church. I have listened to many who dismiss what has happened in the past as the work of those that have "got it wrong" when interpreting their god's

will. Claiming to be guided directly by the Bible's message, (not so directly for most who rely on the clergy to decipher the message) today's Christians smugly believe they are on the right track, whereas many in the past were not. The obvious fact that the predecessors were getting their message from the same text, (and if we go back far enough - Council of Nicaea 325 A.D. - selected which gospel should be included, and which not) doesn't seem to cause concern.

I disagree adamantly with today's Christians who dismiss the wrongs of the past as due to the errancy of the followers, whilst maintaining that the message in the Bible is without blemish. The Bible is a collection of texts that can be cherry picked to support virtually any attitude or prejudice the reader wants. Persecution of homosexuals, slavery, polygamy, murder, and even killing one's own children are condoned in the text.

The Bible and common beliefs of Christians are the subject matter of this book. Although many Christians think all Christian knowledge stems from Bible scripture, this is clearly not the case. There is so much ambiguity in the text, that the translator can interpret it in many ways, and there have been countless revelations experienced by numerous historical figures that have added to this so called knowledge. Protestants may find it irksome to know that a large part of what they accept as truth today had its origin in the Catholic Church.



Christians believe that their god is omniscient (knows everything), omnipresent (is everywhere), infallible (incapable of making a mistake), omnipotent (all powerful), and the ultimate example of goodness. I am criticising the Christian god's performance, judgement, and compassion from this perspective.

In my opinion, there is little point in selecting a story from the Bible that describes a miraculous, impossible event, and dissecting it. The story about Jonah being swallowed by a whale is a typical example that has been used in movies, and put to music in the song "It ain't necessarily so". The obvious fact that a person can't live in the stomach of a whale, is not relevant if you believe that a god who can do anything had a hand in it.

My approach is not to question stories such as this, but to question why certain things were done, or not done, given that their god has all this ability. I also question the authenticity of the Bible as the work of scribes whose account of events is being dictated by an omniscient being. From this direction, I challenge the above story because the account calls the creature that swallowed Jonah a fish. Someone living at the time this was written wouldn't have known that a whale isn't a fish, but an omniscient god surely would have.

My focus is to show that the god portrayed in the Bible is clearly neither omniscient, omnipresent, infallible, nor omnipotent. He certainly is not the ultimate example of goodness, and therefore, not worthy of being regarded with any degree of reverence. The biblical god is most certainly a god created in the image of man, by man, and not a very nice man at that.

The reader may question why I confine my attack to the Christian religion. I do not completely, because the two other desert dogmas of Judaism and Islam share a belief in a large part of the Old Testament which is the subject matter of the first part of the book. The Islamic religion

also acknowledges Jesus Christ as a prophet although with a somewhat lesser status than Mohammed.

I think it will be a good while yet before a significant number of muslims will be as susceptible to conversion from their irrational beliefs as Christians in the West are today. In many Islamic countries the hold that religion has on the people is absolute. Saudi Arabia for example is 100% muslim according to the CIA World fact book, and other Middle Eastern countries are almost the same. Although some have a small percentage of other religions represented, there is zero acknowledgement of persons with no religion.

Not many years ago, my wife and I were touring Egypt with the help of a local tour guide. Wanting to put the guide at ease (and thinking I would get more candid expressions of opinion from him), I told him that my wife and I were not Christians. He reacted with surprise and asked what religion we were -- to which I replied "none". His response was a look of incredulity, and I could see he was very uncomfortable with my disclosure.

The West now finds itself in a difficult situation as more and more Middle Eastern immigrants enter Western countries, bringing the Islamic religion with them. The potential for future conflict on religious boundaries is obvious and yet Western governments find themselves in the awkward position of having to help fund Islamic schools and give tax benefits to other Islamic institutions, thus assisting the development of this volatile situation. They must do this because Christian schools and churches enjoy these favours and to deny them to other religions would be obvious discrimination.

The only solution is for governments to stop funding Christian establishments so they can then say no to muslims. I believe some Christian clergy foresee this development and are trying to deflect it by making statements in favour of funding Islam. We have even heard the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr

Williams, saying that Islamic Sharia law should be allowed to operate in the UK. It is difficult to avoid a cynical view of this.

The verse at the beginning of each chapter is taken from a delightful and little known publication: The New Rubaiyat (Omar Khayyam Re-Incarnated) by Ame Perdue. Perdue claims (tongue in cheek), to be the re-incarnation of Omar Khayyam at the beginning of the book. He doesn't give a supernatural explanation for this, instead suggesting that the molecules that had comprised Omar's brain had by chance randomly re-assembled to form his own. I hope the reader enjoys these extracts.

Not far back in mankind's short history, a belief in polytheistic religions was the norm. The Romans, Greeks, Egyptians, Chinese, Vikings and many other civilisations had hundreds of gods. Most people today have no belief in these deities that have been cleanly discarded to the scrap heap.

Today, a belief in monotheistic religions is the norm as Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and others have replaced the polytheistic religions from the past. Hinduism may be an exception with its millions of deities. Although some argue that all the lesser gods are manifestations of the supreme god Brahman.

The polytheistic religions are regarded as primitive or heathen religions by today's faithful who portray the idea that a belief in one single god is almost a self evident truth. I have never seen a convincing argument supporting this notion and although I applaud the demise of all past deities, I believe that that one single god is still -- one god too many.



# An Anglican & A Catholic

- Bob Irwin

Bob has worked in the fields of Earth Science and Business Creativity, and is an author. He is currently preparing a book-length critique of Christianity: its history and culture, and the claims and contradictions which underpin this religion and its ruling hierarchies. Where possible, he takes a light-hearted approach, such as with the inclusion of cartoons. (You'll notice that style in the articles he writes for The Australian Atheist.) Some concepts, though, are far too disturbing for humour.

If you thought from the title that this would refer to former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, who seems to portray the dual role of Anglican and Catholic ... well, no, but he does get a mention.

This piece is about an Anglican recently elected to a top position, and a Catholic who also won an election, arguably a far bigger one. Specifically, it highlights some profoundly absurd statements they made.

## New, but no change

The Anglican Bishop of North Sydney, the Reverend Dr Glenn Davies, was elected, in August 2013, by the Sydney Synod to the position of Anglican Archbishop of Sydney following Dr Peter Jensen's retirement and according to the new Archbishop, God played a role in his election.

Upon his promotion, the conservative evangelical, Davies said of the Archbishop's role '[he]...should encourage parishes to proclaim Christ and invite people to be saved\* through him.' While that is incredulous to people not locked in a God- and Jesus-centric head frame, it is exactly what could be expected from the new incumbent in trying to gee up his flock.

However, Dr Davies has not been so enthusiastic and welcoming when it comes to his fellow-Christian Catholic brothers. In 2010 – around the exciting times across Catholicism with Mary MacKillop's canonisation – Bishop Davies claimed Catholic saint-hood 'goes against the teachings of the Bible.' Davies said the Roman Catholic Church makes up 'human regulations to determine who is a saint'. whereas saint-hood

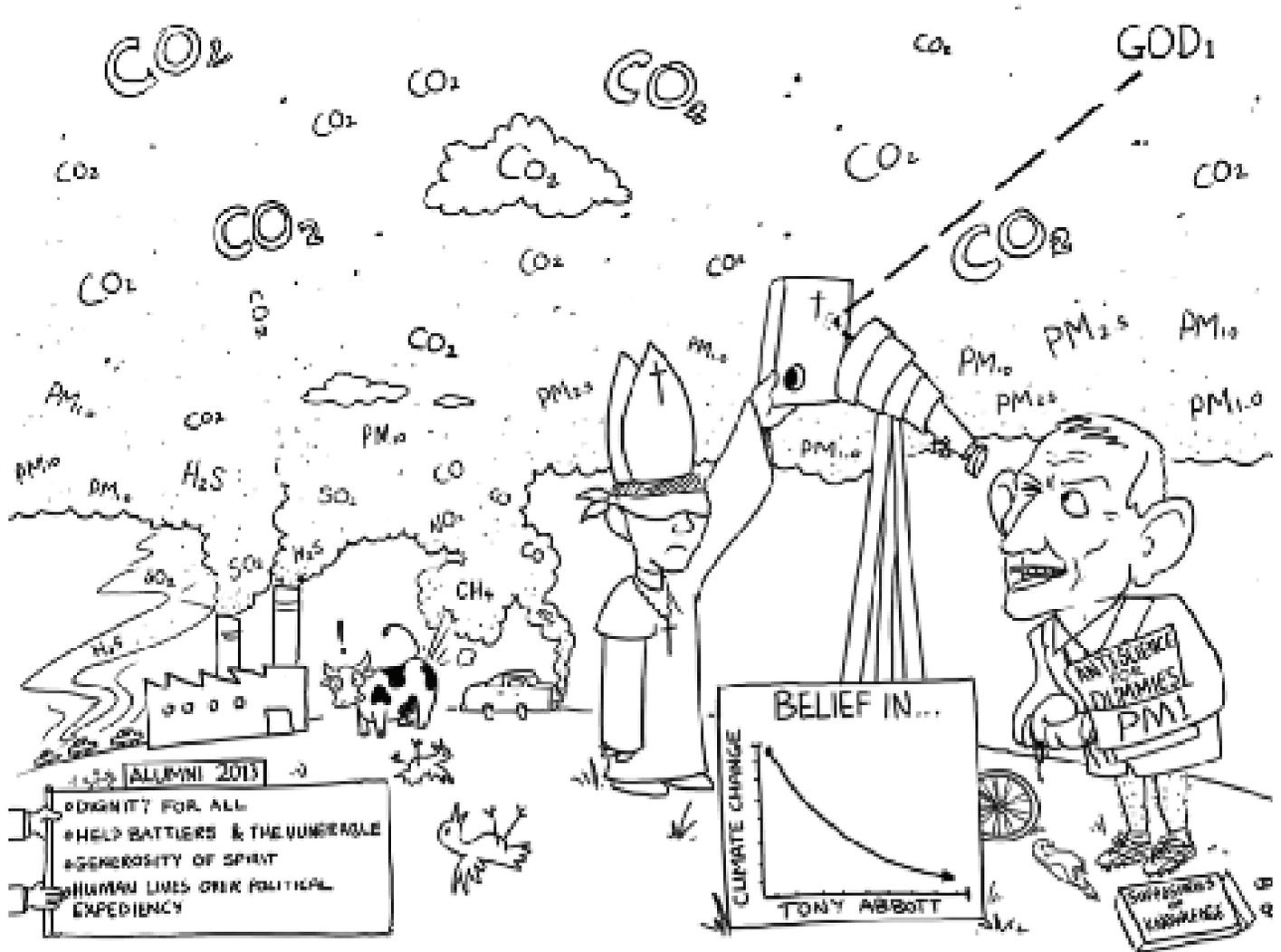
is 'a gift of God'. (He sort-of got the 'makes up' bit right.)

Dr Davies said this despite his website claiming: 'The overriding challenge for any Christian, whether they be Anglican or not, is to be faithful to the Lord Jesus Christ and to be obedient to his word.' As far as Catholics are concerned saint-hood is consistent with 'his word'. Hardly a notch for religious tolerance and understanding by Dr Davies!

One might wonder how Tony Abbott reacted to such a slamming of one of the mainstays of his faith: saint-hood – especially given his efforts at inter-faith dialogue. For example, Mr Abbott spoke to a large gathering of Sydney Muslims just weeks out from the 7 September 2013 election.



The entertainment provided so bountifully by Peter Jensen looks like it will continue.



Dr Davies is so detached from reality that he believes ‘studying scripture is learning about how God made the world.’

**Another detachment from reality**

This time, Tony Abbott’s. Mr Abbott infamously stated just four years ago, and without evidence, that ‘The climate change argument is absolute crap...’ Several months later, in 2010, he offered a religiously-framed qualification: ‘... there was a little bit of rhetorical hyperbole in there which does not represent my considered position. I am not as evangelical about this as Prime Minister Rudd is. I am not theological about this the way Prime Minister Rudd is, but I do think it’s important.’ Well that should have cleared it up for everyone! (Odd that Mr Abbott claims to ‘take pride in being consistent.’)

Mr Abbott made another climate-science-related faux pas in July 2013 when he, as leader of Australia’s Federal Opposition, referred to carbon dioxide and an emission trading scheme as a ‘so-called market in the non-delivery of an invisible substance to no one.’ Mr Abbott seemed to be saying that invisible substances – in this case carbon dioxide – may be non-harmful. So, what might he think about radiation and electricity? I dare him to visit a nuclear power-plant site without wearing the required protective safety gear or poke around in a live power point.

In 2011, Mr Abbott publicly claimed that carbon dioxide is invisible and weightless. And in a way he was right... in outer space it would be weightless; as it would be for any matter, including the new Prime Minister. However, here on Earth

it is not invisible. You might not be able to see it right in front of your face, but the effects of an excess or concentration of carbon dioxide – and other pollutants such as carbon monoxide and hydrogen sulfide – in the atmosphere can be seen as pollution, which appears in people’s lungs, as measured in water acidity, and with global climate change and global poisoning readings, and as smog over a city on a still day.

Add to this the industry-generated particles suspended in the atmosphere, namely PM10, PM2.5, and PM1.0. Particulates below PM10, when breathed in, enter the lungs causing respiratory problems, and can even penetrate lungs and go into the blood stream resulting in serious illnesses. These, and the other airborne toxins, are inhaled mainly by city dwellers – for example, by cyclists on congested roads.

What does Mr Abbott think: before we eventually damage the biosphere beyond repair and poison ourselves to mutation, even extinction, His God will fix it all up, save\* the world, and everything will be just fine?

Perhaps Mr Abbott reckons his God can perform a bit of divine maintenance, when required. While Dr Davies disagrees with Mr Abbott on Catholic saint-hood, he might agree with Mr Abbott on this one. After all, they share a massive over-riding belief... first imagined in ancient times, only to be revised, modified and embellished across the centuries, and perpetuated generation upon generation, vested interest upon vested interest, while being underpinned by the fear of

death: a conviction that their God (presumably He is the same one) made everything... immutable; never to change – unless by God's will or through expedient theological proclamations.

Or might they believe, even hope, that global environmental catastrophe is part of God's plan in heading for the so-called biblical end of the world?

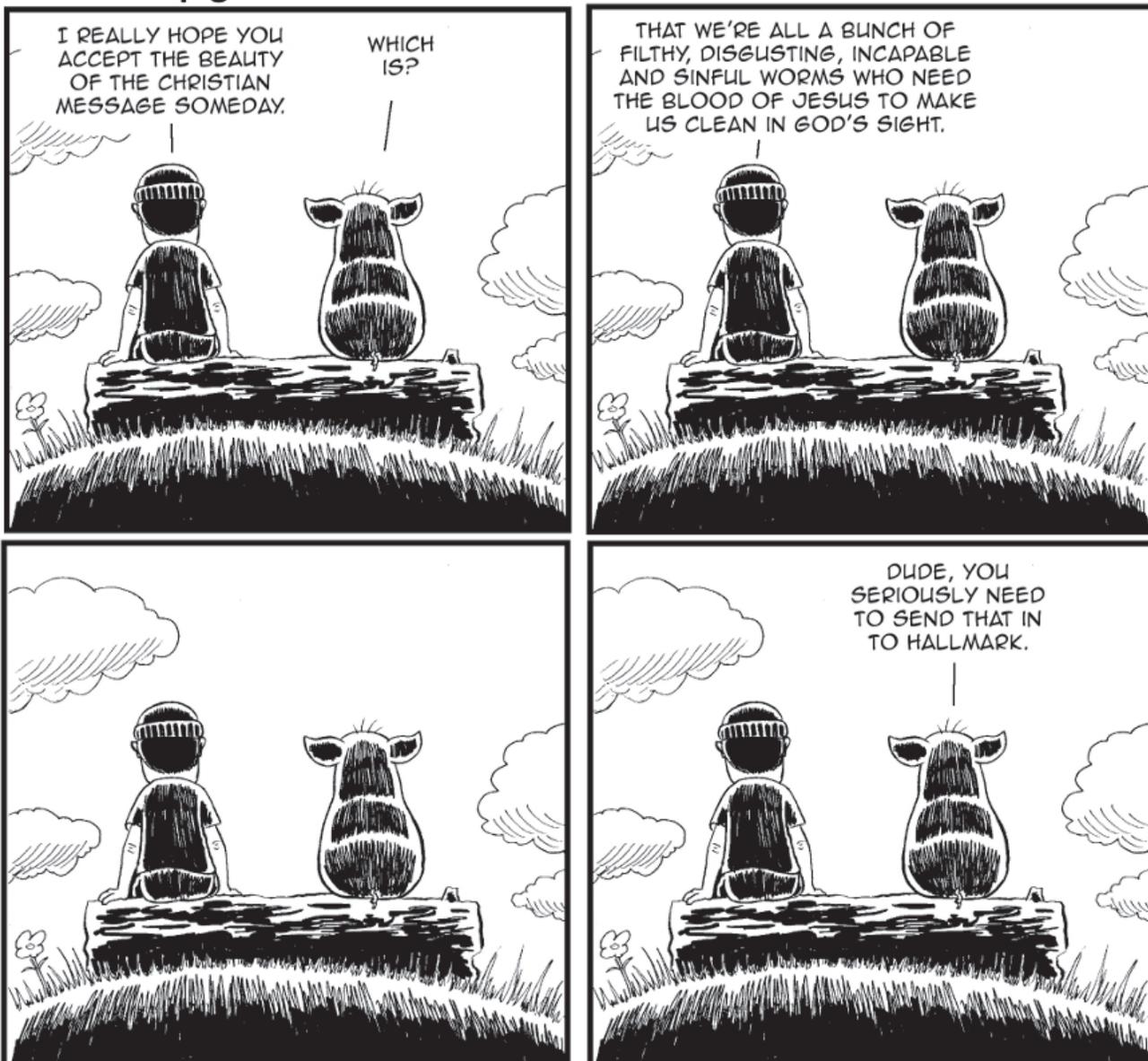
In any case, given Mr Abbott's deeply entrenched Catholic beliefs, there appears to be a contradiction over him not believing in an invisible substance, or it being non-harmful. While he might not think that invisible carbon dioxide is harmful, Mr Abbott (like Archbishop Davies) does believe in an invisible Being, Who,

according to biblical scripture, from his place above the sky impregnated a virgin so she could bear a son to facilitate an end to the world and save\* only those who believe in him and his dad, and just look at the harm that belief has caused.

*\* 'I am the way, the truth, and the life. None goes to the Father except through me.'*

Written somewhere between 50 to 300 years after Jesus died, the gospel of John, 14:6, attributes, without evidence, this piece of restricted selectiveness to Jesus of Nazareth.

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# Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry

- Ian Michaels

For a number of reasons, I have been an interested observer of the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry. As a nonbeliever who strongly challenges the tendency of religious voices to automatically assume moral authority on all sorts of issues in society, I was keen to see whether these organisations did, indeed, “practice what they preached” when faced with such a grave moral issue of their own. As a human being, I was appalled at the harm, violation and exploitation of victims, and naturally wanted to see justice and compensation for their suffering. Also, as a member of society, I wanted to see anyone found to have broken society’s laws brought to account for those transgressions.

The Inquiry and surrounding publicity was arguably one of the contributing factors in the announcement of the recently commenced Federal Royal Commission. From my perspective, events leading up to it saw a distinct lack of co-operation, dismissals as “unnecessary” and repeated obfuscation from some religious groups at every turn, finally being overwhelmed by calls from victims and their representative groups for an open inquiry.

In light of this, it was instructive to witness that George Pell’s response to the announcement of the Federal Royal Commission included the defense that his church was not “the only cab on the rank”. Juxtaposing these two perspectives raises some questions: if you acknowledge that there’s abuse in other institutional environments, why take the lead so strongly in arguing against any inquiry at all? Won’t that mean that child abuse in other institutions will also likely go unaddressed? Are they effectively saying that such “other” abuse is of relatively little concern to them, because it’s not on their patch? If so, this sits oddly

with their usual professed approach of imposing moral views on everyone else in society, whether they are religious or not.

David Marr’s recent Quarterly Essay on George Pell gave some excellent insight into the overall history and issue of abuse within the Catholic Church in Australia, including some of the lead up to the three main abuse inquiries (the Victorian Inquiry, the NSW Special Commission of Inquiry into the Maitland/Newcastle Catholic Diocese and the Federal Royal Commission). Instead of reproducing that here, I shall outline some of the more notable events leading up to the establishment of the Victorian Inquiry, by way of background and context.



## Notable events leading up to announcement of the Inquiry

In 2011, Justice Philip Cummins, who was conducting an inquiry on “Protecting Vulnerable Children in Victoria” had his remit widened “to consider extending mandatory reporting of child abuse to include clergy and church workers and whether there were “doctrines or practices” in Victorian churches that discouraged people reporting child abuse”, as a result of calls for a Royal Commission into the Catholic Church’s so-called “Melbourne Response”. The final report (handed down in March 2012) included recommendations for “a formal investigation” into the way that religious organisations handle child abuse cases. The investigation is

recommended to be given the power to compel evidence, both oral and written.

By way of reply, an opinion article by Peter O’Callaghan QC (the “Melbourne Response” commissioner) appeared in The Age (and other Fairfax publications) on 20 December 2011, which defended the “Melbourne Response” process and challenged critics to prove that an inquiry was needed. In response to that article, a coalition of victims’ rights groups, lawyers and welfare agencies announced their intention to continue pushing for a Royal Commission, law changes and better support for victims. This was given greater impetus by the Cummins Report being handed down, and prompted further public calls by victims groups for a Royal Commission.

The issue was kept in the public consciousness by Victoria Police reports being revealed on 13 April 2012 in an article in The Age, which indicated an excessively high rate of suicide and premature death by victims of clergy abuse, “which appear to be a consequence of sexual offending”.

Four days later, on 17 April 2012, the Victorian Premier and Attorney General announced a Parliamentary Inquiry into religious institutional handling of abuse (see “Baillieu bows to pressure on church sex abuse probe”, The Age 17/4/12).

Reactions to the announcement of the Inquiry were somewhat mixed. While many were happy to see any investigation into these matters, others who had pushed for a full Royal Commission were disappointed at not getting this, and publicly expressed concerns about whether it would be sufficiently robust, transparent and independent.

## Anatomy of the Inquiry

The Inquiry is being conducted by the Victorian Parliament's Family and Community Development Committee. There are six committee members, drawn from both Houses of Parliament, with the Chairperson being Ms Georgie Crozier MLC.

The summary Terms of Reference asked the Committee to "inquire into, consider and report to the Parliament on the processes by which religious and other non-government organisations respond to the criminal abuse of children by personnel within their organisations". From this, it can be seen that the Terms of Reference were wider than religious institutions, and also touched on organisations as diverse as vicsport, Victorian Institute of Teaching, Scouts Victoria, the Salvation Army and the Department of Human Services.

## Key Points and Impressions from the Inquiry

The date for the final report from the Inquiry has been extended from 30 September 2013 to 15 November, so it was not available at the time of publication. When it is released, *The Australian Atheist* looks forward to updating members and readers with those findings.

From a distance, it appeared that early fears that the inquiry would not have sufficient "teeth" were premature. Members of the Inquiry seemed to approach their task diligently, forensically, and with commendable regard for victims and their interests.

## Salient points to come from the Inquiry

The Victoria Police submission and evidence was damning of the Catholic Church. Graeme Ashton told the Inquiry of "concerns that existing protocols within religious organisations may be more focused on internal church issues such as legal liability and public relations rather than long-term interest of victims", and that police had not received a single referral from the

Catholic Church for investigation. This was rejected out-of-hand by the "Melbourne Response", who were ultimately only able to point to a handful of referrals out of more than 300 abuse cases dealt with, with approximately 97% being upheld;

Professor Patrick Parkinson, once tasked by the Catholic Church with reviewing its "Towards Healing" protocol, gave evidence that comparing the statistics indicated that the Catholic Church has had (conservatively) six times the rate of all other Australian churches combined. He also indicated that despite his previous involvement with the "Towards Healing" protocol, he had withdrawn his support for it, based on recent poor administration;

Broken Rites, a well-known victims support group, also produced a scathing submission focused on the Catholic Church, backed up with verbal evidence to the Inquiry;

Chrissie and Anthony Foster gave a harrowing account of the abuse of two of their three children by the same Melbourne priest, with one daughter suiciding and the other being left with life-altering physical injuries from self-harm. They also spoke frankly about a meeting with George Pell at which they attempted to explain what had occurred, and were shocked and appalled at the reception they received;

Historically, there appeared to be a common inclination to deal with matters of this type internally. While those appearing at the Inquiry could generally point to policies and protocols emphasising a "preference" for allegations to be reported to police, this was often not done based on the claimed wishes of the victim(s). By contrast, some victims and advocacy groups gave evidence that they experienced widely varying (and sometimes absent) levels of "encouragement" and assistance to take their complaints to police;

Catholic Church Insurance (CCI) revealed that it had paid out approximately \$30 million to around 600 victims of abuse. Under

questioning, it was also admitted that at times, an attitude of "admit nothing" was adopted. Later, external commentary alleged that CCI was more involved in dictating the policies of the Towards Healing process than merely advising, and outlined apparent conflicts-of-interest where their involvement in the process had a bearing on financial outcomes, which also benefited them by reducing the amounts they would be liable to pay;

Catholic Archbishop Denis Hart admitted to, and apologised for, failings including not recognising paedophiles or occurring abuse, not listening to complaints, covering up allegations and moving known offenders to other parishes;

Catholic Archbishop George Pell admitted to, and apologised for, similar failings. However, he rejected suggestions that the confessional seal be broken in any instance, including where knowledge or suspicion of child abuse was involved.

This is only a brief summary of key events and evidence flowing out of the Royal Commission. For anyone who may be interested, submissions and hearing transcripts are available online, and may be viewed at <http://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/fcdc/inquiry/340>

The Inquiry has undertaken a mammoth task, one which has seen the date for reporting its findings extended twice. The holding of the Inquiry itself is a welcome step towards churches and religions being publicly accountable for their actions, in a similar way to other institutions of society. For too long, religions have been inclined to consider themselves "above the law" in some respects, and have been widely viewed in society as beyond reproach, and therefore questioning. Along with the NSW and Federal investigations into abuse and responses to it, the Victorian Inquiry may be an indicator that this unwarranted and unquestioning regard of religion is slowly changing, and it is certainly not before time, if so.

# Sydney University Debate “The Godless Delusion”

On Tuesday, 24 September, Michael Boyd and I attended the debate held at Sydney University as part of *Islamic Awareness Week*.

The debate was run by the Sydney University Muslim Student's Association. The debate was between Hamza Tzortzis, a visiting muslim cleric from the United Kingdom and Ian Bryce, Vice-President of the Secular Party of Australia.

The debate didn't start well. Firstly, there was segregation of the audience (See my complaint to the University on the following page) and secondly the debate was delayed from starting so that the audience could pray. Women were sent downstairs to pray so that the muslim god would not get confused with mixed gender voices coming from the same location.

Hamza spoke first as he represented the affirmative argument.

I had great difficulty following the arguments from Hamza. He is a great speaker and a wonderful showman. However, his arguments lacked any sort of reason, logic or substance.

His first argument was clear enough. The *Kalam Cosmological Argument*. This is not new and has been debunked so many times, it hardly deserves any sort of counter argument. A list of googled websites should be sufficient against this ridiculous argument.

It was Hamza's second argument that really made my brain start to hurt. He created context for the argument by

explaining Shakespeare's sonnets and the perfect beauty of the iambic pentameter within them. I would

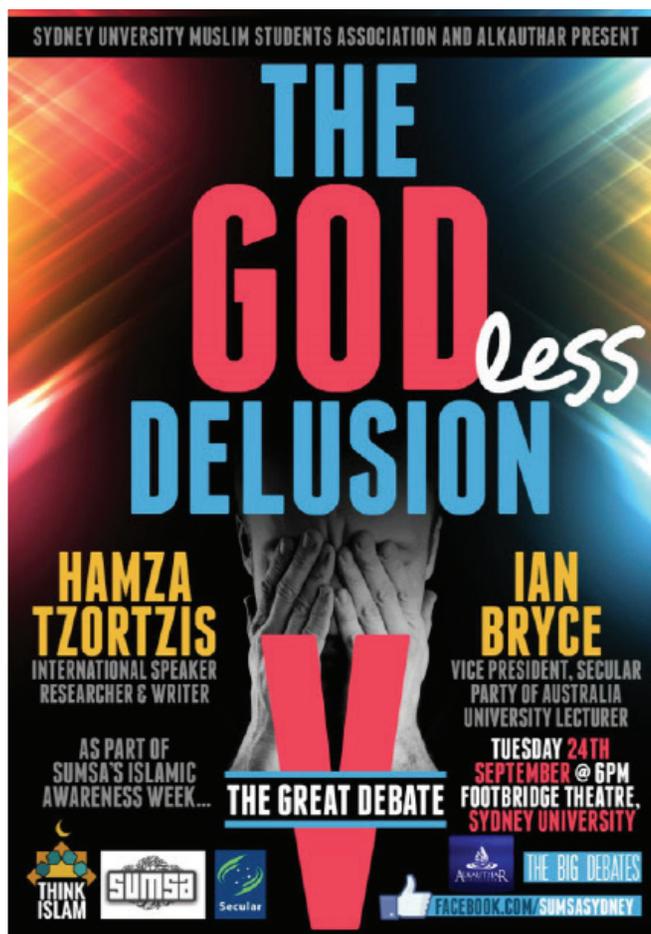
Thankfully Ian Bryce brought logic and reason back into the room when he spoke. Ian had two main arguments:

1. What science tells us
2. What morality tells us

For the first argument, Ian broke down basics from physics, biology, medicine, paleontology, astronomy, neuroscience, reproduction, life and death and quoted many passages from the Koran contradictory to scientific knowledge. It was basically an annihilation, point by point.

For the second argument, he discussed basic atrocities that go against modern accepted moral stands. This included bacha posh as a form of paedophilia, threats of death for apostasy, denial of free speech and free thought, segregation, subjugation and terrorism.

For me, Ian was the clear winner. However, I also note that the audience was made



not disagree with this description. However, Hamza then went on to argue along the lines of:

1. The language in some quatrains of the Koran are perfect
2. No Arab speaker could write language so perfect
3. The Koran is written in Arabic
4. Therefore, Allah

I kid you not, that was the argument. I was left wondering whether this meant that as 126 of Shakespeare's sonnets are addressed to a young man, called the "Fair Youth", whether that young man is also a god?

up of predominantly muslim students and they would argue that Hamza won the debate.

What I found most disturbing was Hamza's continued ad hominem attacks. To me, that was a clear sign of a lack of argument. However, to the muslim audience, that was entertainment. I left wondering why anyone would bother debating at all under those conditions.

- Tracy Burgess

# Sydney University Debate Aftermath

I was particularly disturbed by the segregation of the audience at the Sydney University debate. It was held in the Footbridge Theatre, owned by Sydney University and funded by Australian tax payers. The debate was also not a closed function. It was open to the general public. In Australia, in 2013, I do not expect segregation by gender.

I sent the following email to the Vice-Chancellor of Sydney University:

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Dear Dr Spence,

I wish to draw to your attention a situation that caused me great concern.

On the night of Tuesday 24 September, I attended the debate organised by the Sydney University Muslim Students' Association (SUMSA) at the Footbridge Theatre. This event was open to the public in a building belonging to the University of Sydney with the presumed support and encouragement of the university.

Upon arrival I was handed a flyer for SUMSA and advised "women on the left, men on the right" for seating arrangements at the event.

To say that I am appalled that Sydney University would endorse an event that incorporated segregation of the audience by gender, is a gross understatement. I am an alumni of Sydney University, having completed my Masters Degree through the School of Government. That my alma mater would permit segregation causes me significant consternation. This event was heralded as being part of a celebration to raise awareness about islam. At this point, I am most certainly aware that islam promotes segregation.

It is a sad day indeed to find myself in a situation where, in the University I have always held so dear, I would be directed that parts of a building's seating arrangements were off limits to me based solely upon my gender. I fail to see how my gender should factor into this equation at all in a tertiary institution in a secular state in 2013. If I was to attend a mosque for whatever purpose, I would expect to be treated differently because I am equipped with a vagina. I do not expect that situation to arise though, in a setting of higher learning with the ideals that can usually be ascribed to such an institution.

Yours, in Disappointment

Tracy Burgess  
Editor, The Australian Atheist  
The Atheist Foundation of Australia

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Dr Spence responded:

Dear Ms Burgess

I am sorry that you were offended by the audience seating arrangements at the SUMSA Debate on Tuesday evening. The University, of course, does not endorse or practice segregation.

The event you were attending, however, was organised by an individual student club, the Sydney University Muslim Students' Association (SUMSA). I am advised that the University of Sydney Union, which is responsible for our clubs and societies and the appropriateness of their behaviour, has taken specific advice from the Anti-Discrimination Board on this issue. The advice they received was that segregation did not in itself represent discrimination, particularly given there was no preferential treatment involved.

Further, the advice suggested that this represented a cultural matter that required sensitive understanding

The USU has therefore continued to work with SUMSA to ensure they operate within the rules of the Union program whilst at the same time being sensitive to their culture.

Yours sincerely

DR MICHAEL SPENCE  
Vice-Chancellor and Principal

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So I emailed the Student Union requesting a copy of the ADB advice. To date, no response has been received from the Student Union, which is somewhat disappointing.

I also took the matter up with Peter Fitzsimons, columnist with the Sydney Morning Herald and currently up for election on the Sydney University Senate. Mr Fitzsimons wrote a wonderful article, which can be read at: <http://www.smh.com.au/comment/debating-sex-and-the-university-20131012-2vend.html>

The point is not "discrimination". Under the Anti-Discrimination Act, s.24 "discrimination" is defined as an act that treats one gender "unfairly". It could be argued that an audience member could hear just as well from either side of the room so there was no unfairness. This completely misses the point.

Segregation is the issue, not discrimination. In a free society, we do not segregate people based upon gender or any other difference. I do wonder what the response from the university would have been if the audience had been segregated by skin colour. I believe it would have responded very differently!!!

# Arab Atheists & Humanists

A group of Arab Atheists and Humanists are reaching out for assistance in funding for a web hosting server for three years.

Their self description is:

*We are a group of atheists from the Middle East. We, as atheists in the Arab countries, suffer a lot of oppression, since our countries do not believe in freedom of thought or freedom of expression. The types of oppression we face come in many ways from threats and imprisonment to actually being killed as a punishment for being an apostate from Islam. Here are some true examples of the reality we live in:*

1- Saudi Arabian journalist Raif Badawi was sentenced to seven years in prison and 600 lashes for the crime of "insulting Islam."

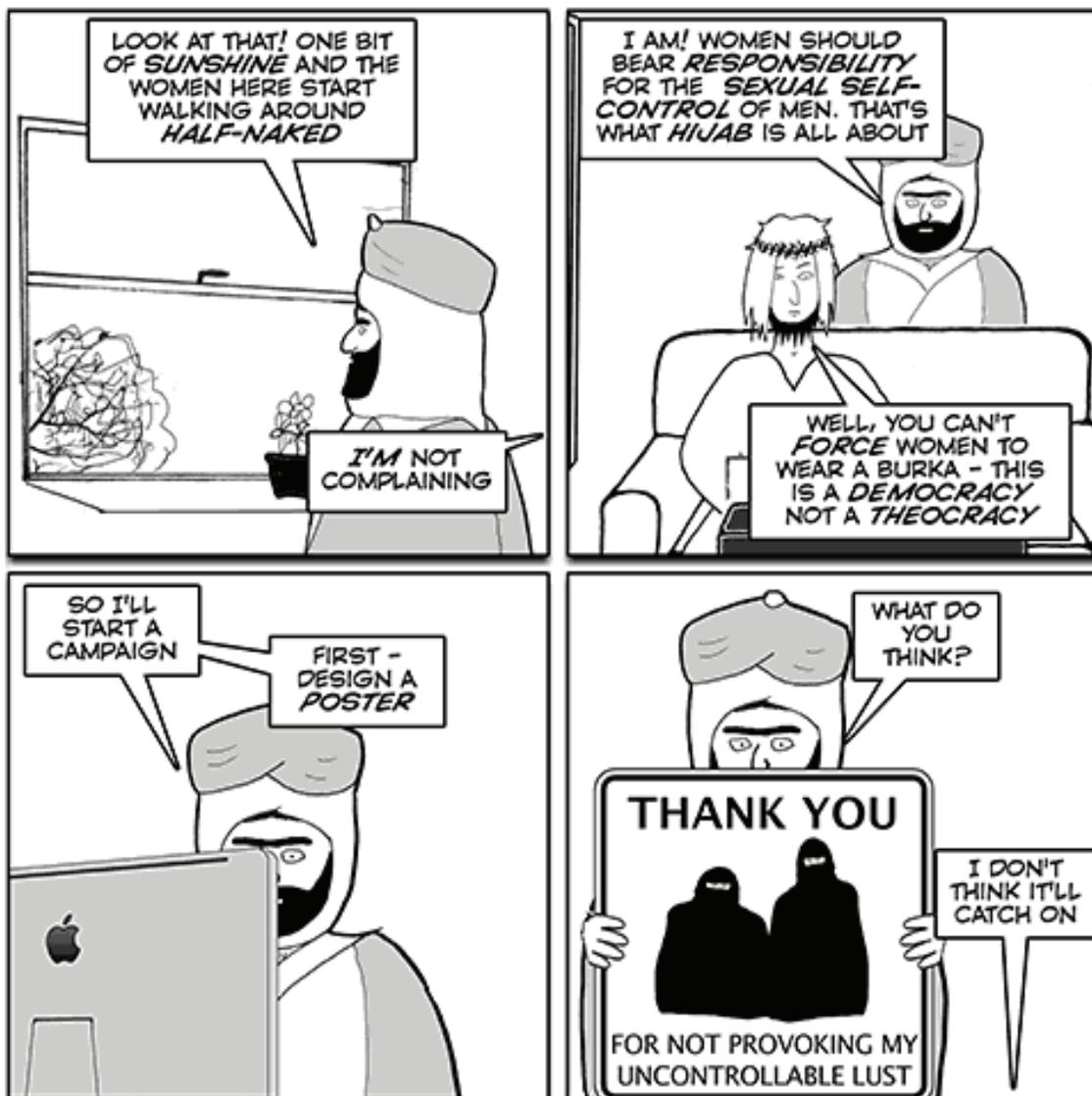
2- Saudi Arabian writer Hamza Kashgari, 24, imprisoned since February 2012 on charges of apostasy for insulting the Prophet Muhammad on Twitter.

3- Alber Saber is an Egyptian blogger arrested on 13 September 2012 on allegations of having shared the YouTube trailer for the anti-Islam film Innocence of Muslims on his Facebook page.

Their main goals are:

- Creating a platform for all Arab thinkers whether atheists or agnostics to speak their mind away from social network censorship and misuse of their flagging systems by extremists.
- Reaching to those people who are taught thinking outside of the box is "haram", unlawful or a taboo and to clear the bad images that religious leaders put in them about us atheists.
- Teaching people the importance of tolerance and that we (atheists or any minor religious or non-religious groups) are not danger to their religion or belief as long as they keep their religion from influencing others or holding back their freedom of expression.

You can donate here: <http://igg.me/p/582542/x/5314648>



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# Festival of Dangerous Ideas

The festival of Dangerous Ideas is held annually at the Sydney Opera House. It has become a 'must-see' annual event for many, and a 'must-do' for some of the most controversial and confronting speakers in the world today. Featuring over 30 contentious and thought provoking sessions, we were spoiled for choice with this year's FODI line-up. I attended various sessions with a group from the AFA.

## **This is not a Conspiracy Theory**

-Kirby Ferguson

This session was hilarious but also informative. The genre of modern 'conspiracy theories' really started with the JFK assassination. Since that time we have some weird and wacky theories about everything from fluoride in drinking water to the September 11 World Trade Centre terrorist attacks.

Frightening statistics from the US show that 63% of people believe in at least one conspiracy theory. That is truly astounding. The 9-11 truthers and the Birthers (arguing that Obama is not an American citizen with conspiracies around falsified birth records) being the most popular in the US.

The psychology behind conspiracy theories is similar to that at the foundation of religions. It is all based upon seeing false patterns. It's human nature to believe in purpose behind everything. It is difficult for humans to truly grasp concepts of randomness and chance.

## **New Religion v New Atheism**

- Peter Rollins & Lawrence Kraus

This was an odd debate of sorts. I am now of the opinion that "New Religion" is actually just dressed up atheism. Rollins explained that he believes "Atheism" is a "shadow of the fundamentalism it attacks" and then bizarrely went on to talk about haunted houses, Winnie the Pooh

coming downstairs and Batman with his fear of dealing with the death of his parents.

Rollins then moved into his major argument about why New Religion is important. It is because we are all "broken" and need to come together in our "broken-ness" and heal together. It sounded less like religion and more like group psychotherapy.

Krauss seemed lost for words in responding to the completely irrelevant arguments of Rollins. However, he rallied and asked the logical question of why we would need to replace a religion that is false and doesn't work with a "New Religion" that is false and based on human angst. Why not use reality and the world as it actually is to heal the human condition.

## **To Believe is Human, to Doubt Divine**

- Peter Rollins

Peter Rollins again, and this time we were treated to a litany of why human beings are broken, including:

- A negative mood of life
- Fear that the universe is meaningless
- Life is about continual loss
- We are ripped from the womb and then ripped from the breast and weaned
- We have a pursuit of 'stuff'
- Nothing behind the curtain will make you whole and complete
- Sacred is the depth dimension of all existence

All of the above goes nowhere to proving "god" as a concept or a fact. The most it goes to is that Peter Rollins is a very disturbed man with severe mother issues.

I found Peter Rollins to be a great speaker and very engaging but I left after two sessions with him, completely clueless as to what he believes.

## **The World is Not Ready for Women in Power**

- Julia Baird, Arlie Hochschild, Hanna Rosin, Vandana Shiva, Anne Summers

This was a very topical session, given recent history of mysogyny in Australia with the first female Prime Minister.

The panel were very engaging and thought provoking. They discussed research on the difference between men and women and their approaches to power and leadership. All very strong women themselves, they gave hope that it is possible for women to be equal in this world.

The question remains whether men are ready for women in power. However, do we need to wait until they are ready? For some ideas, the time comes when they must out, whether everyone is ready for them or not. If we were to wait until everyone was ready, slavery would still be a fact in the US and women still would not have the vote.

## **The Unbelievers**

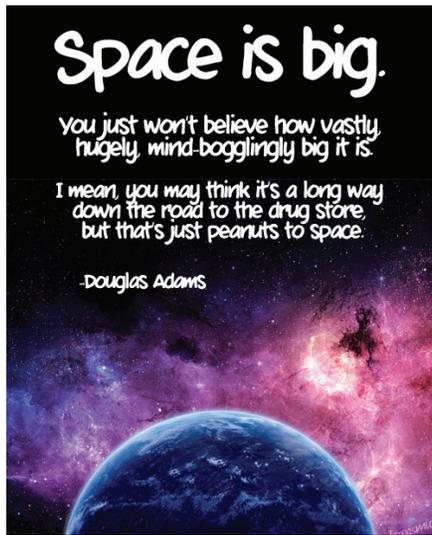
This was the session most atheists were waiting for. The premier of The Unbelievers. It was worth the wait and lived up to expectations.

The Unbelievers is a documentary film following Richard Dawkins and Lawrence Krauss around the world, both on stage and in conversation, and includes appearances by individuals including Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, Woody Allen, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Tim Minchin, Ricky Gervais, Cameron Diaz, and Stephen Colbert.

The premiere was presented by Lawrence Krauss with the directors of the film; Gus and Luke Holwerda. I loved the movie following the "rock stars of reason" on their crusade for rationality in an irrational world.

# Life, The Universe & Everything

This issue of *The Australian Atheist* is dedicated to Douglas Adams. As it is issue 42, it seems only fitting. Those who know me, know that I am an avid reader. My spare room is filled with over 4,000 books and I have approximately 300 e-books stored for the kindle. I have a few authors that I read regularly. Douglas Adams is one such author.

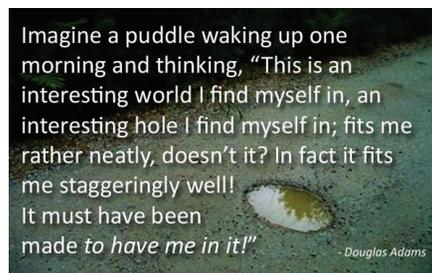


I first read the Hitchhiker's series at the age of fourteen. Since then, I have read them again and again. Each time, I get something new. The layers of humour and insight in his novels guarantee that I can continue to read them regularly for the remainder of my life and will discover something new each time.

## Biography

Douglas Adams was born in Cambridge in March 1952. He was the creator of all the various manifestations of The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy. Other publications include Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency and Long Dark Tea-time of the Soul. In 1984 Douglas teamed up with John Lloyd and wrote *The Meaning of Liff*.

One of Douglas's all-time personal favourites was written in 1990 when he teamed up with zoologist Mark Carwardine and wrote *Last Chance to See* – an account of a world-wide search for rare and endangered species of animals.



Douglas died unexpectedly in May 2001 of a sudden heart attack. He was 49. He had been living in Santa Barbara, California with his wife and daughter, and at the time of his death he was working on the screenplay for a feature film version of Hitchhiker.

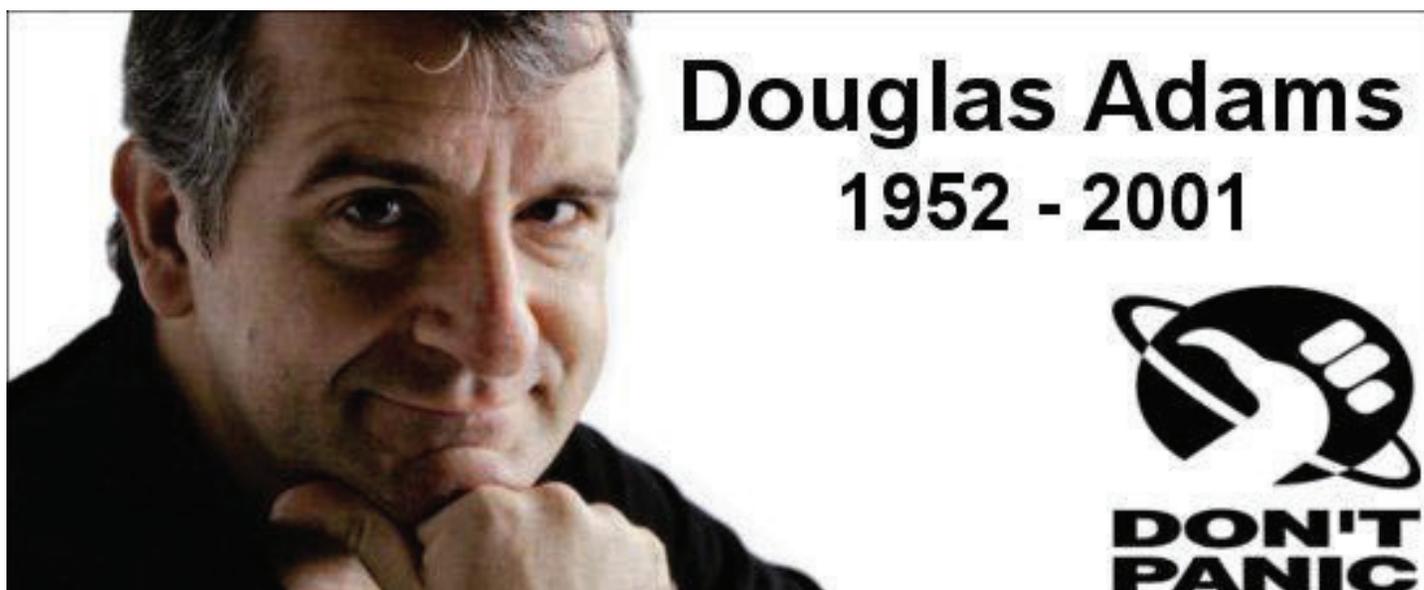
## Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy

The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy is an electronic book that provides tourist and traveller information for those travelling the galaxy.

The series of books follows the adventures of Arthur Dent, a hapless Englishman. Along with Arthur are some other major characters. There is Ford Prefect, who named himself after the Ford Prefect car to blend in with what was assumed to be the dominant life form, automobiles. Ford is an alien from a small planet somewhere in the vicinity of Betelgeuse and a researcher for the eponymous guidebook. There is also Zaphod Beeblebrox, Ford's semi-cousin and the Galactic President. There is (my favourite) the depressed robot Marvin the Paranoid Android. Finally of the major characters, there is also Trillian, formerly known as Tricia McMillan, a woman Arthur once met at a party in Islington and the only other human survivor of Earth's destruction.

## 42

The significance of 42 is that it is the answer to life, the universe and everything, the ultimate question of existence as provided by the mega computer; Deep Thought.



# A Brief Chat With a Publisher

- Warren Bonett

I will never read all I want/need to read — it's one of the laws of the universe. This epic tragedy never diminishes, it only grows. In the last couple of years some of the best books for decades have been released and I haven't even caught up on my 1990s titles yet, or those Enlightenment philosophers I've been meaning to study. Still at least I don't suffer from, the 'I've read/know it all syndrome', a condition that I see everyday. It's an ugly malaise that settles on some people way too early in life (basically any age under 95).

To illustrate my pain, In the last 3 months new releases include God Bless America by Karen Stollznow; 50 Myths of Atheism by Russell Blackford; Ian Frazer's Biography by Madonna King; Damned If I Do, Philip Nitschke's memoir; My Brief History: A memoir by Stephen Hawking; The Happiest Atheist by PZ Myers; Beyond the God Particle by Leon Lederman; Pandemics by Peter Doherty; part one of Dawkins' autobiography An Appetite for Wonder; Abominable Science by Daniel Loxton; The Mathematical Secrets of The Simpsons by Simon Singh and; The Explainer by contributors to The Conversation. That's less than a quarter of the good stuff to come my way since July. And

what am I reading now? The Selfish Gene by Richard Dawkins — a book I already read more than 20 years ago. By Zeus! That book is nearly 40 years old what am I thinking?!

The 30th anniversary edition comes with plenty of footnotes revealing Dawkin's more current reflections on aspects of this seminal meme-generating work. These additions powerfully demonstrate his own continuous reading and learning since he was a young man. He refers to new authors and old who have crossed his path since publication who have modified his thinking in one way or another. They also reveal a man positively enthusiastic about revising earlier ideas.



Still as great as it is, re-reading this superb piece of popular science means that I am not reading

something else. Perhaps this is how the aforementioned read-it-all syndrome begins, as a kind of paralysing indecision of where to go next. Although I mostly feel an increasing eagerness to get to the next one, whatever it is. Luckily I am also a member of a Big Ideas book club (Fiction one month, Nonfiction the next) so I have the extraordinary good fortune of being able to discuss these books, whatever they are, with others every month. If you aren't a member, join one or start one. It's like doing a university course in thinking but more fun. I might add that it can be a great and relatively under-the-radar means of promoting critical thinking for people across a range of backgrounds and beliefs.

In the coming months I will review some of these books as well as explore some of the questions we regularly hear at our bookshop: what book can I get my niece who's parents are fundies? what can I get my Dad to challenge his thinking? All my friends are religious what should I do? I've just realised I'm atheist where do I start? I've read Dawkins, Hitchens, Harris and Dennett what now? I've written/am writing a book on atheism should I go to a publisher or self publish? There may even be the odd interview or two.



Step 1 - We admitted we were powerless over our addiction - that our lives had become unmanageable  
 Step 2 - Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity  
 Step 3 - Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood God  
 Step 4 - Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves  
 Step 5 - Admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs  
 Step 6 - Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character  
 Step 7 - Humbly asked God to remove our shortcomings  
 Step 8 - Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all  
 Step 9 - Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others  
 Step 10 - Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it  
 Step 11 - Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood God, praying only for knowledge of God's will for us and the power to carry that out  
 Step 12 - Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to other addicts, and to practice these principles in all our affairs

**Relying on religion to cure alcoholism is just  
 Substituting one addiction for another.**

# Book Review - There Was No Jesus, There Is No God

Author- Raphael Lataster

Raphael Lataster is unique, in that he is both a Religious Studies scholar and an atheist and skeptic. He has written a book that is a perfect resource for anyone who wants to understand the research around the historicity of Jesus.

The book is both academically sound and thoroughly readable. Raphael has a wit and writing style that both informs and entertains the reader.

Bart Erhman is a well known biblical scholar with many books and articles about the historicity of the Jesus character. I view this book by Lataster as being more informative than anything I've ever read by Erhman. It's more accessible and infinitely more logical.

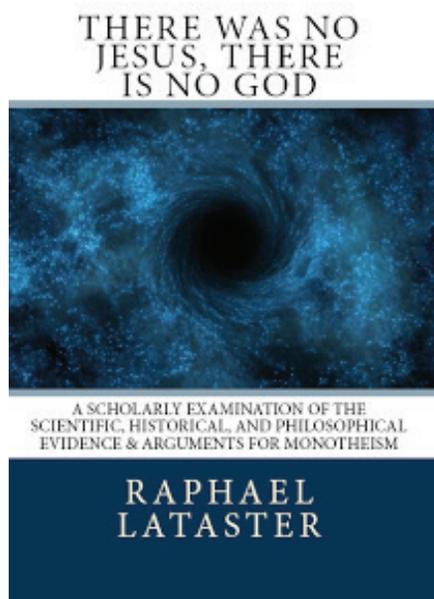
The book is written in two parts. The first looks at the evidence for the existence of Jesus. That is the historical Jesus, not the Biblical Jesus, and yes, there is a difference.

Lataster provides a framework for analysis and uses reason and logic to establish the truth about the historical existence of Jesus. Using Bayes Theorem to assess arguments, he provides a framework for reasoned analysis that the lay person can follow.

Lataster provides explanations about standard scholarly arguments for the existence of Jesus. I had some idea before reading the book. However, seeing the illogical arguments in black and white really drive home how ridiculous they sound. Arguments such as if the bible was falsified then it would have inconsistencies. The bible has inconsistencies, therefore it must be true. Or if the bible were a manufactured book, it would not say

negative things about Christians. It does, therefore it must be true. When you see these arguments spelled out so plainly, it does make you wonder at the logic of academia.

Lataster is respectful to his fellow academics but drives a truck through the arguments. The book is funny, entertaining and very educational for anyone wishing to understand the Historical Jesus arguments.



Lataster is also very respectful of people's beliefs. He is considerate and instead of ridicule, the style is more of an educational smooth train ride through the philosophical arguments.

The debate about the miracles of Jesus and the resurrection seem pointless after reading this book. There is not even enough evidence that Jesus existed as a person, let alone that he may have been the "son of god".

The second part of the book focuses

on the god argument. Lataster again explains clearly the existing scholarly arguments for and against the existence of the Christian god.

He then reviews the philosophical arguments for other gods and the reader cannot help but be drawn in by the logic and reasoned arguments. It's not abusive or disrespectful. It is more subtle than that. The tone for me was more about education and information than to annihilate the beliefs of others.

Once again, in the second part of the book, it is informative but also very readable. Lataster systematically breaks down the arguments one by one, until you are left with nothing but smoke and mirrors. This is most definitely a go to reference guide for atheists preparing for debates or discussions with theists. The information is easy to read, easy to grasp and ready to go in any discussion.

I thoroughly recommend the book to atheists and theists alike. The title may turn off the theists but they need to understand exactly what the debate is about. It's difficult to see how anybody would want to continue arguing the topic after having read this book. Lataster's arguments are so clearly elucidated, backed by evidence and within a logical and reasonable framework for assessment, it is impossible to draw any alternative conclusions.

A thoroughly enjoyable book that I know I'll read again and again and I will also keep it as my go to book for any theist wanting to argue about the character, nature and existence of Jesus.

# Book Review - Love vs Goliath

Author- Robyn Oyeniyi

This book is written in the style of a personal diary and, as such, would mainly be of interest to the close friends and family of the author. In that style it is emotive, exaggerated, poorly written and has so many exclamation marks that I nearly stopped reading.

The book tells the story of one woman's fight to gain a spousal visa for her Ugandan husband in order to bring him and his four children to live in Australia. There is no doubt that Robyn Oyeniyi was passionate about her cause and fought bureaucracy with an admirable determination.

The author meets John Oyeniyi, a Ugandan asylum seeker, in Melbourne and they fall in love. However, he is deported to his home country without warning because his application for a protection visa was refused. After his deportation, she goes to Uganda and they marry. In the few days she is there she meets his four children from a previous marriage. She returns to Australia alone and the long saga to get him and his children here starts.

It appears that DIAC does not believe the marriage is valid, and Ms Oyeniyi has to prove that it is a union based on mutual love and commitment. This seems to be the overall intention of the book as well: to convince readers that it was indeed a love match, and that the couple went through physical, emotional and financial hell to be able to live together in Australia. For example: "It seemed to me unless you are rich, don't fall in love. Don't expect your civil rights. Don't expect fairness. Too bad if people die or are kidnapped (our children) in the interim." Unless I fell asleep while reading, her step-children weren't kidnapped, and no one died during this fight for spousal visa.

I have no doubt that Robyn Oyeniyi went through her own personal hell, but the inclusion of a truly horrific photograph of a dead woman and child in Africa, seemingly left to rot on the road, is not relevant to the book at all. Ms Oyeniyi states "it could happen to my children" - an example of the exaggerated style aimed to get sympathy. This borders on the dishonest.

She meets John's children briefly when she visits Uganda to marry, not being there long enough to establish a loving, intimate bond with them, and yet she calls them her children or "our children" throughout the book. They are never called step children. I can't help wondering if this is also intended to tug at the heart strings, as the wicked step mother is still in the public consciousness from all the fairy tales we are brought up with.

Ms Oyeniyi apparently sees the DIAC reasons for viewing the marriage as suspect or racist, or that it's just bureaucracy gone mad. She doesn't consider such issues as the fact that she's about 10 to 15 years older than John; she earns a six figure salary when he is penniless; she is tertiary educated when he is not; she is an Atheist and he is a Muslim.

She does make many valid points, mostly towards the very end of the book. She believes that any citizen of this country should be able to marry anyone they like. I would have appreciated a discussion of why situations like hers are allowed to develop and why it is so incredibly difficult to have the issues examined within a reasonable time - this is a year out of her life she'll never get back. However, that is a discussion for elsewhere.

A very important question is raised: why are 69% of partner visa refusals overturned on appeal at the MRT? Something is very wrong here. Why is nothing done about this apparent incompetence and ignorance of the law by the decision makers in DIAC?

The book is about Robyn Oyeniyi's frustrating battle with bureaucracy, trying to keep in touch with her husband who is in Uganda and then Qatar - he is not safe in his home country and so he then goes to Qatar looking for work. This frustration causes her physical and psychological damage - which she feels is evidenced by the fact that she goes out without painting her nails - anyone who knows her would know that this is a major issue for her. Not painting her nails comes up twice.

The effort she goes to in her fight causes enormous financial hardship - evidenced by the fact that she only visited the hairdresser about twice in the year it took to resolve, not to mention the hardship of not being able to afford massages or pedicures. These 'first world' tragedies are just not going to do anything to engender sympathy towards her cause.

I read this book as someone who has vacillated between rage and despair at my country's appalling treatment of refugees and asylum seekers and was anticipating a thoughtful debate on the issues - this didn't happen.

She eventually succeeds in getting visas for John and his children, but I cannot recommend this book to people fighting for the cause of asylum seekers or refugees to this country. It may provide some hints to others going through the same thing, but they aren't obvious to this reader.



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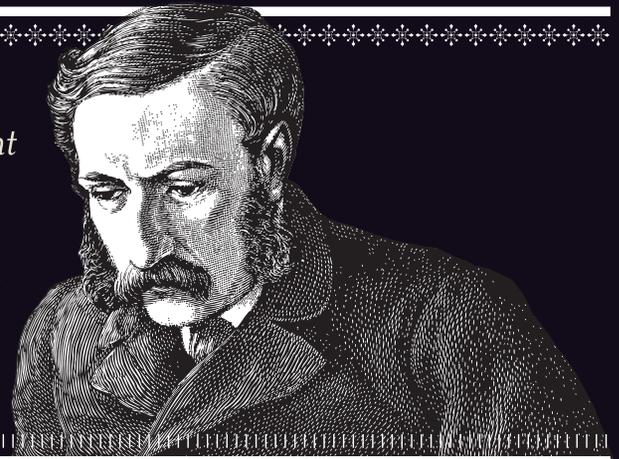
Please note that memberships used to be due for renewal on 1 June every year. Earlier this year we changed it so that renewal dates are now the anniversary day of joining the AFA. This was done to make it easier to manage. It is also fairer for all, if all memberships fall due on the anniversary of joining. If you are at all unsure as to when your membership renewal date is, contact the Membership Officer at [membership@atheistfoundation.org.au](mailto:membership@atheistfoundation.org.au). Otherwise reminder notices do go out when membership is due for renewal.

*"The only position that leaves me with no cognitive dissonance is atheism. It is not a creed. Death is certain, replacing both the siren-song of Paradise and the dread of Hell. Life on this earth, with all its mystery and beauty and pain, is then to be lived far more intensely: we stumble and get up, we are sad, confident, insecure, feel loneliness and joy and love. There is nothing more; but I want nothing more."*

**- Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Infidel**

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*However long Jewish, Christian and Muslim theologians struggle to find multiple meanings in this text, the dominant seems to be this: Abraham's unquestioning willingness to heed gods command to sacrifice the thing he loved most is what qualified him to become the father of what are called still the Abrahamic faiths*

*~ Susan Neiman ~*



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*Imagine a puddle waking up one morning and thinking,  
"This is an interesting world I find myself in — an interesting hole I find myself in — fits me rather neatly, doesn't it?  
In fact it fits me staggeringly well, must have been made to have me in it!"*

*~ Douglas Adams ~*



*Does anyone truly believe that our ancestors lacked rules of right and wrong before they had religion? Did they never assist others in need or complain about an unfair share? Human morality must be quite a bit older than religion and civilization. It may, in fact, be older than humanity itself*

*~ Frans de Waal, The Bonobo and The Atheist ~*

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