



***Atheist Foundation  
of Australia Inc*** Established  
1970

*Promoting scientifically credible & factually reliable evidence*

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# The Australian Atheist



## Atheism

The Message is Clear

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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 community of non-religious people.

To offer verifiable information in place of superstition and to promote logic and reason.

To promote atheism.

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

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## Hello readers,

Well another issue put to bed. It's been a busy three months. It always seems to come around so quickly.

This issue we have a lot of new contributors and also some of the wonderful regulars. I'd like to take the opportunity to thank everyone that contributes to the magazine. We have a lot of talented and creative members. If you would like to contribute artwork, stories, articles, poetry etc, please email me at [taa@atheistfoundation.org.au](mailto:taa@atheistfoundation.org.au)

We've just come through Easter and I don't know about the rest of you but I'm over the depressing christian aspects I have thrust upon me. Celebrations of zombies rising from the dead, carpenters being publicly crucified to atone for a sin committed by two people that didn't exist for eating from a tree of knowledge does my head in.

On the atheist front, it's been a busy time for the Atheist Foundation of Australia. We had a billboard campaign on the M4 Motorway in Sydney. For those not from Sydney, the M4 is the largest carpark in the world during peak hour traffic times. This gives people a lot of time to sit and read the various billboards on display. We received a lot of positive feedback and a lot of new members who came to us through the billboard. So welcome aboard all the new members. It's certainly a campaign we will consider repeating in other high traffic areas around the country into the future.

We've also had a few media releases to address various societal issues. Two relate to health care. There's a public hospital in Western Australia where christian groups are trying to dictate their terms for involvement and control of public space. The other issue is the exemption given to Christian Scientists in the new public policy on financial penalties for parents that refuse to vaccinate their children.

The third media release relates to the Reclaim Australia rallies. This one is particularly important to me. I attended the counter protest rallies for this. I would never advocate for any religion. I firmly believe all theist beliefs are ridiculous and without merit. However, I object to the targeting of one group in society. As atheists we attack ideas, not people. The last thing we would do is align with the right wing fascists and christian fundamentalists that seem to be littered throughout the Reclaim Australia rallies.

Finally, I'd like to send out a welcome to Sarah Bluett, newly elected to the AFA Committee of Management. I'll see if we can get an article introducing her to everyone for the next issue.

Until next issue, take care.

Tracy



### ERRATUM

Issue 47, January-March 2015, "Meddling and Melding", page 20. At the end of the third column, thirteen words are missing.

The sentence should read (the missing words are bold):

"However, it is clear to those without a Catholic Church agenda that it is merely part of the melding process – to gather **science within the bosom of the Church, where it was once firmly held.**" (Which leads into the cartoon that follows at the top of page 21. The 13 words must have been trapped behind the sooty smoke.)

We apologise for this omission.



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# President's Message

Hello AFA Members,

The AFA has been busy since the last issue. In March, we had the Annual General Meeting. From that meeting we have some changes to the Committee of Management and Executive.

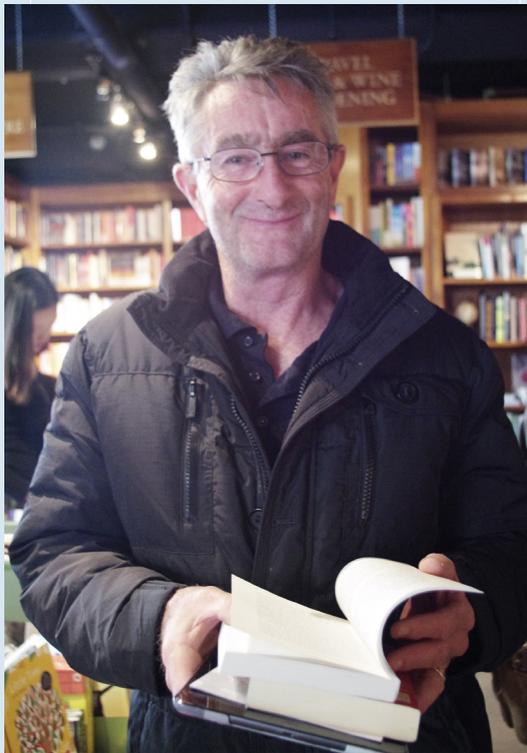
I would like to thank Victor Franco for his time on the committee. Victor made the decision not to stand for election again this year due to the many and diverse interests that take up his time.

I would also like to welcome our new Committee of Management member, Sarah Bluett. Sarah has a wealth of experience in event management and worked tirelessly with the Richard Dawkins events late last year. She is a valuable addition to the committee.

In the Executive we have had one change. Joel Kilgour elected to not run for Vice President again this year. He has a lot of commitments and did not believe he could give the time needed to the role. However, he thankfully remains on the Committee of Management. Kylie Sturgess was elected to take up the Vice President role made vacant by Joel. Kylie has been on the Committee of Management for a year and I think she will be a good fit for the role.

I would like to thank all current and previous members of the committee who work tirelessly for the Foundation.

The AFA has been busy over the last few months with various tours. Richard Dawkins, The Unholy Trinity and Robin Ince have all been well received and tickets sold fast. We'll continue to bring some of the best thinkers and interesting atheist personalities to you into the future.



We continue to focus on religious influence on public policy and have issued various media releases on these types of issues. It's critical to continue the fight to keep fairy tale influence out of education, health, justice and community welfare. It's a constant battle and we remain vigilant I'm always encouraged by the drive of our members in calling government to account.

We are currently looking at our communications strategies and I would like to call on any members with a background or experience in media relation, public relations or communication strategies to get in touch with us. We have work that you can assist with if you have time to spare. Email your interest for the Communications Team to the Membership Officer at [membership@atheistfoundation.org.au](mailto:membership@atheistfoundation.org.au)

We are also establishing and strengthening ties with local city and state based atheist and free thought groups across the country. As a national foundation committed to our stated aims. Two of those aims are best served by supporting local groups:

- To encourage and to provide a means of expression for informed free-thought on philosophical and social issues
- To serve as a focal point for the community of non-religious people

City and State based atheist groups are encouraged to contact the editor of the magazine at [taa@atheistfoundation.org.au](mailto:taa@atheistfoundation.org.au). Tracy will be promoting the different groups through the magazine and will forward the details to the committee to establish working relationships.

Until next issue

**Michael Boyd**  
President



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# Comforting Thoughts

## That Have Nothing To Do With God

by *Kylie Sturgess*

Sydney Queer Atheists is an organisation of queer, GLBTIAOQQ and gender/sex/sexuality/romanticism diverse atheists, agnostics and other nonbelievers based in Sydney - though they welcome you wherever you happen to be! It's a non-autonomous group, for everyone who is queer-friendly and atheist-friendly.

In 2015, the Sydney Queer Atheists' theme for the Sydney Mardi Gras was No Abuse - No Excuse - No Exemption for Religions from the Anti-Discrimination Laws.

The official site for the Sydney Queer Atheists is at <http://www.queeratheists.org/> and there is a Meetup for the group at [meetup.com/Sydney-Queer-Atheists](http://meetup.com/Sydney-Queer-Atheists).

For this interview, I spoke to Kate Alway, who runs the Sydney Queer Atheists, amongst other atheist, queer and student groups.

**Kate Alway:** The Sydney Queer Atheists started in 2009, when Sydney Atheists were denied the right to have billboards. It's interesting, they've finally gotten some now in 2015! At the start, we began with bus ads - we built some buses out of fridge boxes and marched down Mardi Gras instead of the real buses doing it, which was nice because we got to put our own messages out there.

It was an interesting mix of people out of Sydney Atheists. From that, we became our own group. Ever since then, we've mostly been doing Mardi Gras floats. We've done a few other things. We've had our own banners in Marriage Equality Marches, but nobody's really quite as interested in marriage equality as in all the other issues, so we've found that Mardi Gras has been our main forum so far. We tried to do a few other things.

You can do a fair bit in the way of getting the word out there when you have half a million people watching, 100,000 other people dancing around inside and wanting to check out what's going on with all the other floats!

**Kylie Sturgess:** It looked incredible on the television. I got to see a part of it...



**Kate:** Being in the float every year, I think it's the best place to be. You don't really get to see what everybody else is doing once they set off. This year it's back on TV, on SBS. That's exciting and we actually get to see it.

**Kylie:** What's the response to atheists taking part?

**Kate:** It's been really good. When we were a bit new and exciting seven years ago, we got a lot of people coming up and telling us how they appreciated us being there. It's interesting since we're always put in the religious section - I've given up even asking to put us elsewhere!

In fact, we got a lot of the religious people telling us how much they appreciate us being in the Mardi Gras. That's nice to hear and now, we're part of the furniture.

We're expected to be there and the people who run Mardi Gras think we're great, so that's fantastic. That's very helpful too because, of course, a lot of people are atheists, especially in the queer community.

Everybody was very excited about our theme this year. We actually took a really political message about the permanent exemptions that the government has for religions.

Not everybody knows that this is the case, but those who do know are pretty upset that such a ridiculous thing is happening. It's not even something that Tony Abbott has put in. It's been there for quite a while.

**Kylie:** What exactly is involved in this exemption?

**Kate:** Our anti discrimination laws are what we consider keep us safe. Other countries have other ways of doing this. We have a set of laws that say you can't discriminate against this bunch of people and that bunch of people, most bunches of people - but are sometimes contentious about who is actually included and mentioned, but they do a pretty good job in general.

However, they are not for everybody. Religions specifically are given a permanent exemption, not just the kind of exemption where you apply and go, “Hey, I’ve got this woman’s group. I really don’t want men sort of trumping through. Can I explain myself? Please let us be exclusive here.”

Religions, on the other hand, do discriminate. They are welcome to keep queer people, atheists, whoever they like out of their schools, out of their shelters, out of their hospitals. There are some other measures in place to stop them doing all of these. Yet, somehow the majority view about religions [stepping over the line] is considered to be acceptable.

We have some other measures to stop people doing just whatever they like and kicking everybody out of everything, but they’re obviously not working well enough because people are still discriminated against.

There are still women’s shelters that won’t accept trans women, one of the most vulnerable groups in our society - which just makes everybody even more vulnerable because if you get into a crisis situation, you may be turned away from the very people who are there to help you.

Some years ago now, there was a student teacher who was on her practicum and she went on her school excursion and she was picked up by her girlfriend at the end of the excursion. The next day in class, the students asked who the other woman was and she said, “My girlfriend,” - because why would you lie? She was dismissed and that messed up her entire degree.

We thought this was what happened back in the ‘70s, when the unions came

out and got really upset and had success with stopping teachers being dismissed when they were found out to be gay. But no, this case was only a few years ago and these things are still happening today. In fact, at that time, even the head of the Teachers Federation came out and said, “Yes, she should have lied about [being gay]”...

**Kylie:** Because that works so well for the military after all!

**Kate:** ...Absolutely! Yes, to their credit [that dismissal of the practicum teacher] was eventually rescinded. It took a long time for them to realise that, “No, that’s not an acceptable thing for the union to say.” The woman who had all that happen to her? Her life was significantly changed by that.

Do you see many people identifying as both? For example, you were at the Mardi Gras - what were some of the people who joined in like?

**Kate:** In our float, we actually accept queer friendly, atheist friendly people at a minimum. I don’t ask people what their identities are. Sometimes you often enough find out if they are happy to tell you, as you’d hope everybody is.

Outside of that, there is a huge correlation between non believers and various queer people. I’m using “queer” here as an umbrella term because LGBT is actually very limited and only describes parts of the community.

**Kylie:** I’m sorry. I actually looked it up. I thought to myself, “What’s a good politically correct umbrella term?” Queer is a far better way of putting it, is it?

**Kate:** Yes, but these terms are still very much contested. Some people really don’t like the term queer because, in some places and sometimes, it’s being used very much as a slur. Anybody who has had that used against them in a significant way is not going to like it.



Yes, these things are still part of our life even though we would like to think that they’re not, because our protections are partial and haphazard. Whenever that’s the case, it always comes back to the people who have more privilege.

The people who have intersectional identities and have other things going on, maybe they’re seeking asylum, they’re coming from a religious family or all sorts of things - and they are at risk.

**Kylie:** Do you think there’s a big correlation between LGBT and atheism?

I use it because it is a development on isolating certain sections; LGBTIAQ, it goes on. There’s no specific one set of letters that is really going to make everybody happy. This makes sense because it is an evolving set of communities and a big set of terms.

Yes, the asexual community is burgeoning but could be overlooked by anybody who sticks too closely to LGBT and gender queer communities, agender communities, all sorts of these things going on. All these communities, there’s a great correlation with non belief, at least in its widest forms.



I think it makes absolute sense. If you're being questioned by religion, you're going to question religion surely. Of course, not everybody does. But it's great that everybody is involved one way or another. There's still a big hurdle in getting people to actually identify as atheist or any other particular thing, agnostic.

**Kylie:** Why?

**Kate:** I think there are a few reasons; one is that there's a great perception of atheist communities being full of obnoxious, straight, white, rather privileged men. Sadly, there's a lot of that around as much as we try to pick away at it!

A big reason we do these floats and do Sydney Queer Atheists at all is to make a place where it's not like that. It's all well and good to tell people that the community is better than all that, but it's got to be better.

Also, there are other reasons. I think the queer communities are, what, thirty years ahead of us in community development, fighting for rights and all the good things? So there's a lot there. People who get involved in queer communities that are fairly atheist often don't need us so much. They don't need atheist communities as

well, they don't need another set of ways to interact with a good bunch of people. They don't need the fighting for the rights quite as much - because they've got it going on somewhere else.

I find all the interesting people who are not connected in the same ways, have something a bit different going on, or are political and actually see the value of the ideas, not just the social connection - which are both good things.

**Kate:** You can find us at [queeratheists.org](http://queeratheists.org). That will take you to our Facebook group and our meet up group. You can contact us and you can see our Mardi Gras photos too. [Queeratheists.org](http://Queeratheists.org) is a great place to get us.

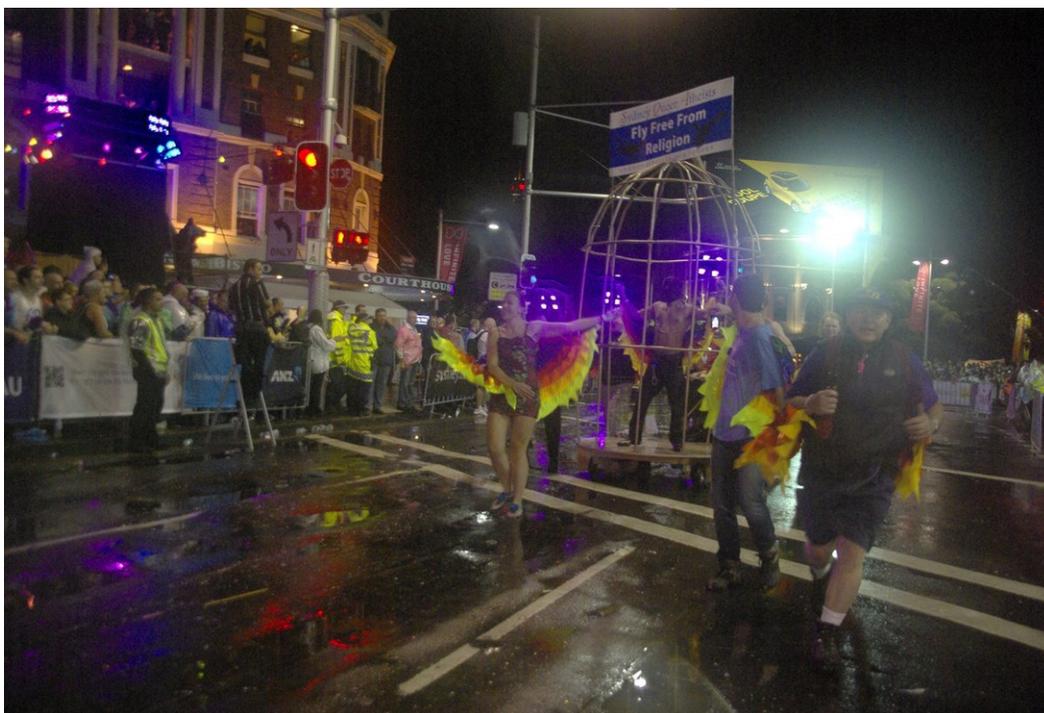
Starting your own groups, I think my biggest advice would be just to do it. Just do it. These days it's easy to start something, to set up a Facebook group and let a few people know. You start getting people. It's not all easy, it takes some time finding

enough people and getting people on the same page.

There are some great people and there are some great things you can do. I think having an idea of where you want to get to in the end if you want to make changes in society or you want to be visible or you want to do something else, but don't worry if that's going

to take forever because it's worth it even just having a small group that does a few social things and starts throwing some ideas around. It's all worth it.

I'd be very happy to help anybody who's thinking of doing something anywhere. I'd be delighted to talk to you and share anything I can because it'd be great to see more groups around.



Both come together very much, but people don't always want to address them, so the people who do come to us and that's fantastic. I really love that.

**Kylie:** Where can we find out more? Do you have any advice on starting your own group if they're not in Sydney, for example?



# Religious Dissent

by Declan Stylophone

Declan Stylophone is a technologist, musician, journalist, filmmaker, blogger, parent, member of the AFA, survivor of 13 years of Catholic education, science fiction aficionado, former DJ, music nerd ...take your pick.

There was a sickening sense of déjà vu on February 15, 2015. We awoke to the news that a gunman had fired on a meeting to discuss free speech in the wake of the Charlie Hebdo and Port de Vincennes massacres.

This time it was in Copenhagen, and one person was dead. There was no information on the killer, but when a second person was killed in a subsequent attack on a synagogue, the picture was coming into focus. It seemed inevitable that these murders would be in a similar category to the ones committed the previous month by Amedy Coulibaly and the Kouachi brothers, who declared to the streets of Paris that they had “avenged the Prophet”. The Copenhagen attacks were unfolding in a similar way: first shoot at people who drew Muhammad cartoons, then move on to target some Jews.

The meeting at Copenhagen’s Krudttonden Café was attended by artist Lars Vilks, who had attracted the fury of some Muslims because he had depicted the prophet Muhammad in his work. Also present was Inna Shevchenko of the Femen group, famous for topless protests against sexism and religious patriarchy.

The gunman killed film director Finn Norgaard, who was attending the free speech debate at the Krudttonden Café. His work was not in the same league as the religion critics he was listening to that night. His films had included a documentary for Danish television about an Australian boy who dreamed of becoming the world boomerang champion.

Also killed was Dan Uzan, a member of the Danish Jewish community who had volunteered to guard places which might be the target of anti semitic attacks.

It’s worth revisiting the commentary which followed the Charlie Hebdo killings. While initially condemning the violence, many public figures proceeded to smear the targets of the attack. Columnist and philosopher Thomas Wells had declared the Charlie Hebdo victims to be “assholes” and “opportunistic parasites”. Even Pope Francis joined in, declaring that people who cause offence can “expect a punch”. It was a shocking comment, which weakened, if not outright contradicted his statement condemning the Charlie Hebdo massacre.



Pope Francis’ explained his pugilistic tendencies by saying “you cannot provoke, you cannot insult”. His words were uncannily similar to the cover of an edition of Charlie Hebdo from 2012, where two religious figures also intoned “faut pas se moquer” (“you must not mock”). That cover was drawn by Stéphane Charbonnier, one of the victims of the Charlie Hebdo attack.

The prescience of that cartoon is a clear example of the satirical nature of Charlie Hebdo. It is rude, irreverent, provocative and puerile. But it is also part of a vital

media culture with roots going back a century. The satirical newspaper Le Canard enchaîné was started in 1915, and it is still being published today, with a mix of cartoons and satire alongside serious journalism which has included some high-profile exposés. The British Private Eye is often cited as a comparable publication. One of the victims of the January 7 attacks, Cabu, was a contributor to both Le Canard enchaîné and Charlie Hebdo.

Charlie Hebdo was the more risqué cousin of the more established satirical papers, heavier on the cartoons and the mockery, but still mixing serious commentary with its insolence. Politicians were a primary target from the start, and its name, coined in 1969, was a reference to then President Charles de Gaulle. Imagine an Australian magazine in the Menzies era called “The Weekly Bob”, and you get the idea.

Sometimes its shock tactics would fall flat, but when it hit, it hit hard. The far right in French politics would frequently cop it from Charlie Hebdo. After National Front leader Marine le Pen tried to distance herself from her party’s fascist and nazi heritage, Charlie Hebdo portrayed her applying a razor to her pubic hair, which resembled Hitler’s moustache. The left was also targeted mercilessly. After allegations that President Francois Hollande was part of a love triangle, Charlie’s cartoon showed him with his penis emerging from his suit trousers, the speech bubble pointing to the phallus declaring “I’m President”.

But religion was also in the line of fire. When France’s top-ranking Bishop, André Vingt-Trois seemed to endorse a violent backlash against gay marriage laws, Charlie Hebdo responded by saying the Bishop had three fathers, and had a picture of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit engaged in a three-way anal sex



orgy on the cover. It was high-octane blasphemy, but a serious social justice campaign was its motivation.

The standard of the humour was sometimes at the level of juvenile dirty jokes, but it reveled in its puerile side, satirising itself, and relegating its filthiest images to the back cover.

The heritage of being an equal-opportunity offender was so well-established it seems bizarre to suggest that Muslims were somehow treated unfairly by the magazine. Sometimes it would portray Muhammad in an uncharacteristically serious mode, like the cover showing the prophet of Islam with his head in his hands, despairing at the idiotic extremists who worshipped him. At other times, he was a joyous figure, nowhere more so than when he was portrayed as the magazine's guest editor, declaring on the cover that anyone who didn't die of laughter would get 100 lashes. Of course there were also risqué portrayals, like the one recasting the prophet as Brigitte Bardot in her famous nude scene in the film *Le Mépris*. But it was never any different for Christians, Jews, politicians, celebrities. Everyone was treated the same.

The Copenhagen attacks started the cycle again. The morning after the murders, Australian Muslim commentator Mohammed El-leissy said on ABC TV "the thing about cartoons, I know that they've been called freedom of expression and the like, but there is an underlying racism under this that I think we need to

also explore... there is a mockery behind it and Muhammad is the poster boy for Islam so by default you're also mocking many Muslims."

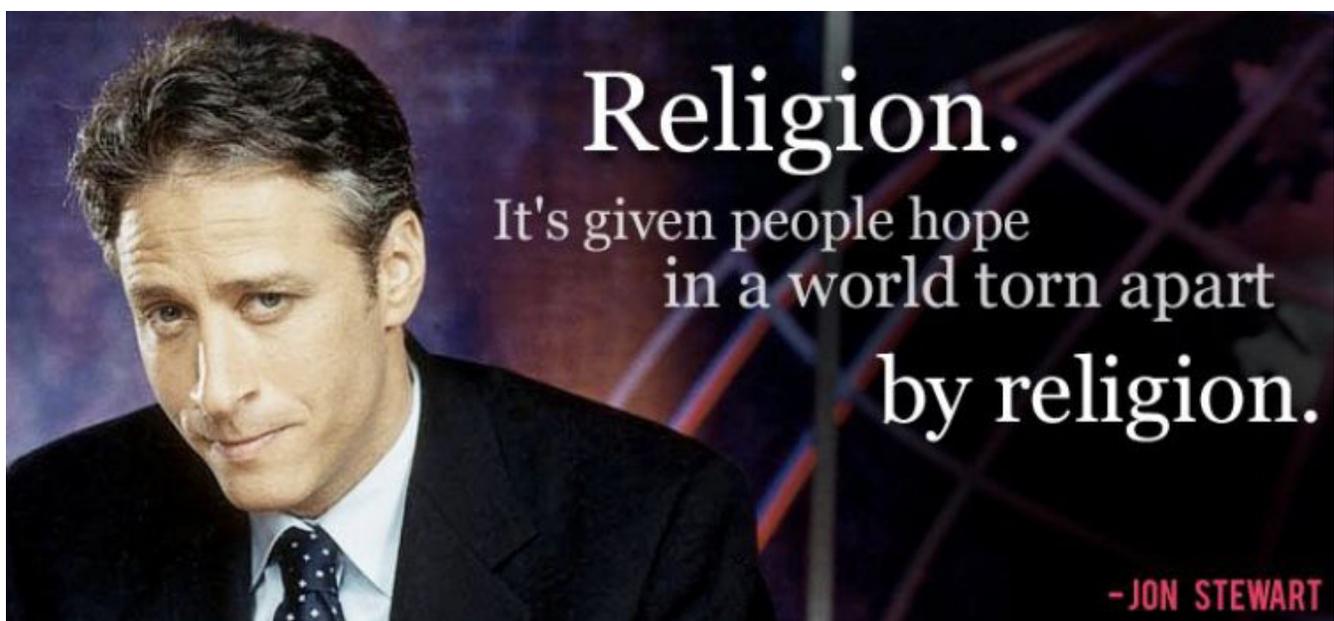
It was a typical argument, but it is one which ignores the diversity of El-leissy's own community. There were plenty of voices from the Muslim world who were were putting a very different view. Maajid Nawaz, the founder of the counter-extremist group the Quilliam Foundation, sees blasphemy and heresy as a right, arguing that all the great prophets - Moses, Jesus and yes, Muhammad too - were all viewed as heretics by the religious orthodoxy of the time. Somali-born activist Ayaan Hirsi Ali called on the mainstream media to republish the Muhammad cartoons, and to stop its self-censorship.

A particularly strong argument came from Asra Q. Nomani. She had already faced censure from the powerful Muslim orthodoxy for trying to end gender segregation in mosques. She outlined an organised campaign funded by Saudi Arabia aimed at ensuring that only the conservative voices within the religion are heard. Any liberal voice is shamed, shunned, threatened and worse. In Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq and elsewhere there are countless cases of people facing prosecution for blasphemy, apostasy and other "crimes". The penalties are often brutal: death, flogging and long jail terms are typical. Those who do not feel the heavy hand of the state also risk violence at the hands of less enlightened civilians.

Another example of the demonising of liberal or dissenting voices from within Islam came when the British Islamic Human Rights Commission named the winners of its "Islamophobe of the Year" Award. The UK recipient was Maajid Nawaz, a Muslim who has been arguing for a more liberal and diverse form of Islam. Less than three months after the brutal massacre in Paris, IHRC was also criticised for naming Charlie Hebdo as the recipient of the International Islamophobe of the year.

Despite the campaign to silence them, the dissenting voices from the Islamic world are giving strong leadership, and there are many of them. The principles of freedom of thought, freedom of religion and freedom from religion apply just as much to the east as they do to the west. The cultural relativist argument that people from countries with a largely Muslim population are somehow less deserving of these freedoms than people in western countries is patronising to say the least.

Just as many Christians love Monty Python's *Life of Brian*, even in the face of allegations that it is disrespectful to Jesus, Muslims also deserve to enjoy a laugh at their own religion. In the same spirit we oppose racism and discrimination, we should support our freethinking friends in the Muslim world, and give them just as much support as their counterparts elsewhere.



# The Pizza's Pope

by *Bob Irwin*

Francis, often thought of as the “people’s pope” and a “breath of fresh air” for his weighty religious institution, only two years into his reign is talking about an “early” retirement, while he dreams of eating pizza, anonymously.

Since 1415, the year of Pope Gregory XII’s abdication, only one other pope, Benedict XVI, in 2013, stood down from the position as infallible leader of the Catholic Church; today with around 1.3 billion followers.

Surprising as his move seemed at the time, some may presume to speculate that Benedict was persuaded to resign because of physical decline, which was apparent leading up to his retirement as he became ever-more stooped and unsteady on his feet, and his expression vacant; and the Vatican leadership did not want another lengthy period of the world’s media showing the physical frailty

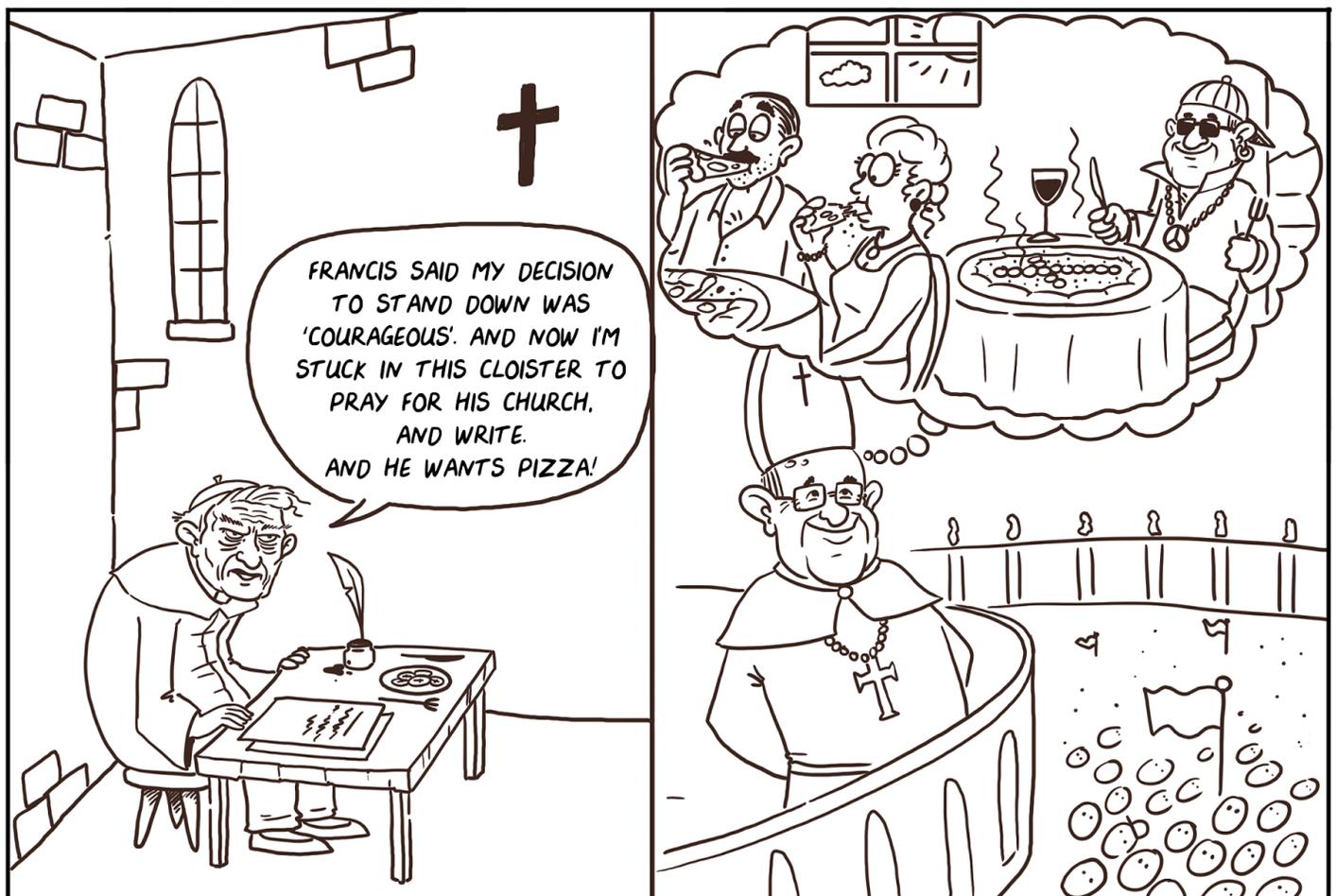
and imperfection which characterised the final years of the formerly-robust John Paul II, Benedict’s predecessor to 2005. John Paul suffered increasingly from the debilitating Parkinson’s disease during the decade before his death.

Until Benedict became Pope Emeritus one would have thought that pontiffs had a job for life. Benedict’s latter-day precedent appears to indicate otherwise, for now his successor is talking about a possibly short-term pontificate, while being able to eat in a pizzeria; away from his legion of admirers, unrecognisable.

In March 2015 Francis was quoted as saying “The only thing I would like is to go out one day, without being recognised, and go to a pizzeria for a pizza.” He added, “I have the feeling that my pontificate will be brief: four or five years; I do not know, even two or three.”

Francis continued, “It is a somewhat vague sensation. Maybe it’s like the psychology of the gambler who convinces himself he will lose so he won’t be disappointed and if he wins, is happy. I do not know. But I feel that the Lord has placed me here for a short time, and nothing more . . . But it is a feeling. I always leave the possibility open.”

Make of such thinking what you will. It may help to acknowledge the religious epiphany of immaturity and a lengthy period of indoctrination which can warp reality as neural pathways are set by the dictates of ancient scripture: never to be doubted, indeed which must be obeyed – in the past under pain of torture or incarceration or death or excommunication; today to get and keep your job as a priest, or be a member of the flock. And to think that such writings stem from the wild imaginations



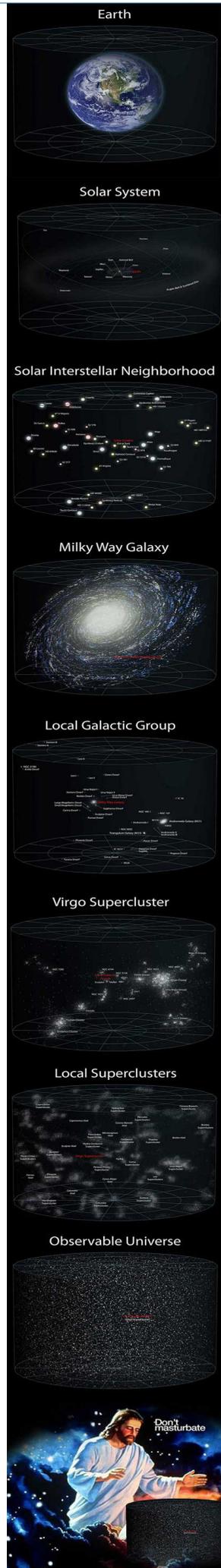
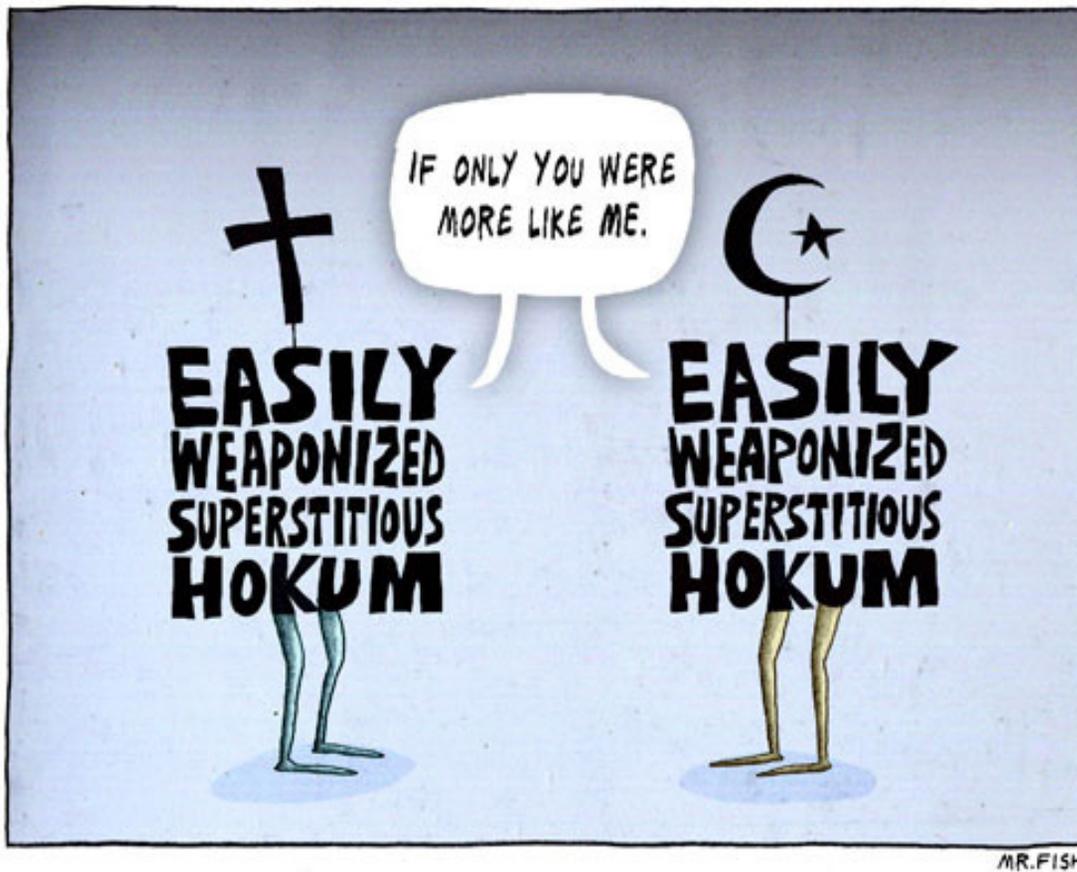
and wishful guesswork of those from many centuries ago who could have known no better; and perpetuated and stipulated ever since by those with a vested interest in their authenticity as the word of their God and their ultimate place as hallowed texts, the “truth” of which must not be contested.

As for the recent changed attitude to what used to be a papal job for life, maybe we shouldn't be too surprised – the Catholic Church has been in the business of change over recent times (change which doesn't contradict scripture, that is; well, not by too much anyway). Think of the Vatican's dramatically altered and pragmatic approach to science: from ownership and control of science centuries ago, to opposition as scientists presented – progressively, as accurately as they could – how the universe and our world came into being and evolved ever since, to cosying up to science over recent decades so it could appear to be a “part” of science in the Vatican's ongoing attempts to meld

science within scripture (refer Issue 47, “Benedictus or Bust” and “Meddling and Melding”).

One benefit for the Catholic Church with the early retirement of its head priest is that its devotees and potential popes do not have to wait so long for the next round of voting by the College of Cardinals for all the fuss, commotion and excited anticipation leading up to white smoke appearing from the Sistine Chapel chimney, and the announcement of who next will sit on the throne of St Peter until they die, or retire – in Francis' case, to eat pizza.

Get ready for an entrepreneurial pizzeria proprietor to design a “Francis” pizza with typically Argentinian ingredients of beef, provoleta, oregano, parsley, garlic, onion and chilli, and a splash of olive oil. Accompanied by a glass of red and followed by a coffee. I think Francis would like that.



# One God Too Many

by Sten Bjerking

Sten is a regular of the Atheist Foundation of Australia forums. He has written a book on the christian god which we have been serialising in the magazine. This is the seventh installment.

*Were I a God I think that I should Hate  
All Sycophantic Cringers, and should rate  
Among my Favoured ones the Sapient Wag  
Who Laughs at Me and My Profound Estate.*

## Faith - Getting It

One of the biggest weaknesses in the belief system of Christians is exposed when we consider the question, “how do you get faith?” The answer in the majority of cases is - by having it already.

A child will almost always adopt the faith of his or her parents when given a thorough indoctrination with input from church, family, and peers. The founder of the Catholic Jesuits made this claim with the famous words, “Give me the child until he is seven and I will show you the man”. It is hard to imagine a convincing argument to the contrary.

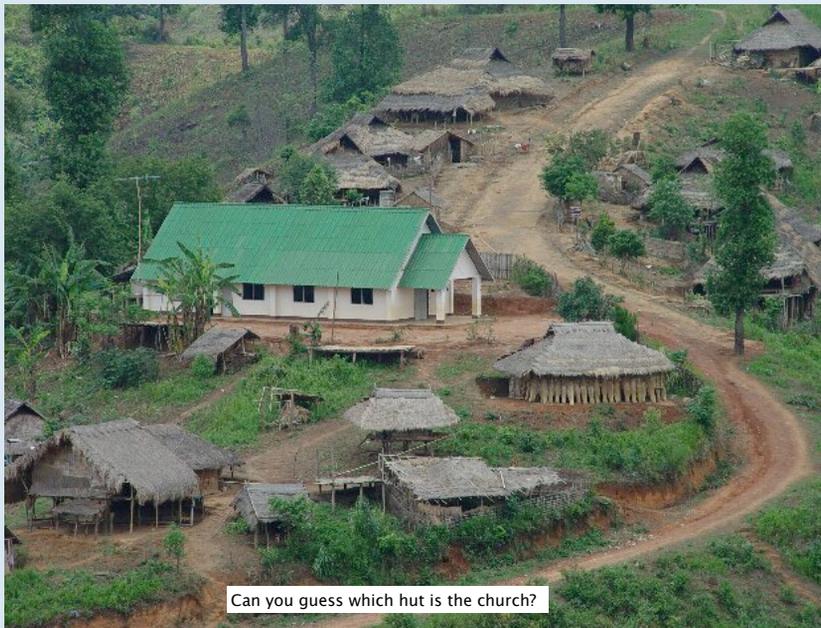
Sometimes a child's faith never wavers into adulthood, never doubting the religion inherited from parents, progressing through the steps of confirmation and in some churches the experience of being “born again”. Even though in some cases the progression is not as seamless and some may discontinue observance, the conditioning is firmly in place and the individual is vulnerable to conversion back again.

The efforts of missionaries in third World countries certainly results in the conversion to Christianity of many without childhood indoctrination, but most often this is in less developed societies where the people are most vulnerable.

The poor and uneducated are often a soft target for evangelists carrying a Bible in one hand and a fistful of dollars in the other.

In Thailand, where I now live, Christian missionaries are very active in Hill tribe communities in the Northern part of the country. Some of the Hill Tribe people are extremely poor and have very simple religious beliefs including Animism and

I visited a village together with an employee of a charitable organisation (secular of course), that I had been doing some work for. I observed that there were two churches in this quite small village and enquired of my companion why. “They are different churches,” he replied, “One is Christian and the other Catholic.” I doubt a Catholic would find this as amusing as I did.



Can you guess which hut is the church?

Christian missionaries have little success in the mainstream community of Thailand which is very strongly Buddhist. We can imagine how difficult it is for Christianity to make progress in Muslim countries where Sharia is the law and the death penalty enforced on those who convert from Islam.

The point here is about fairness. If Christianity is the only way to salvation as Christians believe then they must also accept that some people a given a far better chance than others.

Ancestral worship. missionaries have been very successful in these communities and many villages now have fine churches surrounded by bamboo huts.

There are many, many, different denominations at work here, competing for the souls of these people, whose culture is being destroyed as a consequence. The authority of the traditional leaders is undermined and some of the converted even disassociate themselves from fellow tribal members. The missionaries are not troubled by this as for them the achievement of getting more souls for Jesus outweighs any other considerations.

## Prayer, Blessings, and Curses

An essential by-product of having faith is to believe in the power of prayer, to value a blessing, and perhaps fear a curse. Christians simultaneously believe that God is omniscient and omnipresent but still needs to be told through prayer that something requires his attention. This is surely a contradiction? He should know already if he had these abilities.

Catholics seem to be sceptical about the omniscience and omnipotence of God showing reluctance to trouble him directly. Instead many prefer to ask a



favourite Saint, or the Virgin Mary, to act as an agent presenting the case to God on their behalf, either thinking God is too busy to listen to them, or believing the agent will present a better case.

Most other Christians don't have this reluctance and go the direct route with a barrage of requests. Some even claim success in obtaining trivial favours such as a car park from their prayers. We must question the arrogance of people who, knowing that there are millions of starving, homeless, terminally sick people in the World, who's prayers remain unanswered, yet believe that God ignores the pleas of the genuinely needy and helps them with their parking problems.

Blessings are similar to praying as it is implied that the person performing the blessing is conveying some spiritual favour on the recipient. Lay Christians freely give their blessings to each other, but blessings given by a priest or pastor, generally, are considered to have more substance. The higher the ranking of the clergyman the more effective the blessing will be, is implied.

Cursing doesn't seem as popular in modern times as in the past. God did quite a bit of cursing in the Old Testament, starting early in the Garden of Eden. God even gave some of the major characters in the Old Testament the ability to lay on a curse. Noah, for example managed to put one on Canaan as described in an earlier chapter.

In the New Testament Jesus curses a fig tree and kills it. He was annoyed at the tree for not having any fruit which was a bit unfair as it was out of season. Theologians have been trying to make sense of this apparently uncharacteristic display of temper by Jesus. Some suggest that the story is a metaphor, and it is Judaism that is being cursed. (A story like this can be described as a metaphor for a wide range of alternative themes. The only limitation being the imagination of the interpreter.)

There have been a number of scientific trials in recent years to test the efficacy of prayer. The most recent and largest of these was conducted by an American, Doctor Herbert Benson, and the results published in the American Heart Journal

in April 2006. The results clearly showed no identifiable effect from prayer.

A survey by the National Sleep Foundation in March 2010 found that Afro-Americans in the US pray much more frequently than Whites. The study showed that 71% of the former prayed before going to bed whereas only 32% of the later did. Given the disparity between these groups regarding economic well being, and other issues, the conclusion that prayer has no effect is obvious. Alternatively, it could be argued that white prayers are more effective than black.

I know of no trials testing the effectiveness of blessings or curses, although the famous cursing of the philosopher and rationalist Spinoza only 350 years ago is worth a mention. The Portuguese Jews of the Synagogue of Talmud in Amsterdam, who took exception to his rationalist ideas, excommunicated Spinoza. He was cursed most comprehensively with a curse that went on for over 200 words and the action was endorsed by the Vatican and others. Apparently suffering no ill effects Spinoza managed to live on for a further 21 years.

### **Losing Faith**

The famous American philosopher Daniel Dennett gave a presentation titled "The Evolution of Confusion" in October 2009 where the main topic of discussion was "Non Believing Clergy".

Surprising as it may seem, Dennett suggests that there are a large number of priests and ministers who are secretly atheists. He, together with his colleague Linda LaScola as the interviewer, are studying the cases of six clergy who have lost their faith. These six have given detailed information about their situation in the strictest confidence because they are still practising. They have all indicated that they are the "tip of the iceberg" as they believe there are many, many, others in their situation.

In his most informative and entertaining talk Dan Dennett discusses the dilemma of these people and draws a parallel between their plight and that of gay people in the past, (still today in many societies), who could not "come out" for many reasons.

Although the behaviour of these clergy appears to be dishonest in the extreme, Dennett presents a compelling argument on behalf of these pretenders showing how difficult it is for them to escape the trap they find themselves in.

For me the most interesting part of the lecture was the explanation of how these unfortunate people found themselves in this situation. Dennett suggests that many lose their faith before they are ordained, whilst studying at the seminary. This he claims is because they are confronted with the very dubious history of the Bible and lose confidence that it really is the unerring word of God.

In exchange for the destruction of their faith the seminary students learn how to put "spin" on answers to probing questions from their flock, as well as techniques to avoid some of the hardest queries to answer. They learn responses that really say nothing but have a profound ring to them. One of the functions of theologians, Dennett suggests, is to equip the priests with this weaponry.

Having read a number of books that feature priests that have lost their faith, (sometimes the expression "having trouble with their faith" is used which doesn't sound so abrupt but means the same thing), the lecture didn't surprise me too much as there is most often a quantity of truth behind the fiction produced by novelists.

Practising Christians should have some difficulty with this though as they gaze at the man in the pulpit and wonder if he believes what he is preaching. Catholics may also ponder about the quality of absolution granted by a closet atheist, who may be behind the screen.



# Know Your Fruit Loops

by Jac Dittmar

## The (International) Church of the Four Square Gospel

Yes, an unlikely and curious name for a Church or a religion, but it does exist and is of some significance, historically at least. The Church claims to have over 8 million followers world-wide, with 60,000 churches in 144 countries.



It has all the standard ingredients for a loopy church (yes, yes, they're all loopy): Pentecostalism, evangelicalism, anointing, divine healing, the return of Christ, final judgment, eternal punishment for the wicked, and my personal favourites: baptism by immersion and speaking in tongues. Here in Oz, there are 67 congregations, with 37 (franchised) churches in N.S.W., 5 in Qld, 3 in Vic. and 22 in W.A., but none (so far) in S.A., N.T. or Tas.

The Church was founded around 1927 by preacher Aimee McPherson (nee Kennedy), the daughter of a Salvation Army mother. She more or less began her career in 1915, preaching through a megaphone from a fully painted-up 'Gospel Car', along the east coast of the U.S.A. She soon got some rousing tent revival-meetings going, speaking in tongues and doing the old standby: faith-healing. Drawing some very large crowds, her obvious talent to suck-in the gullible culminated in her building a 5,200 seat church complex-theatre-stadium in LA.

Now here's the significant bit. Sister Aimee was one of the first (if not the first) of the modern day evangelists to recognise



and embrace the power of the then emerging new media: radio broadcasting and the cinema newsreel. In a sense, she 'wrote the handbook' for the highly profitable mega-churches we see today. Aimee became quite well known and influential, and to her credit, a significant voice for marginalised women, albeit with an ulterior motive. She ultimately broke away from affiliation with all other religious groups, and by adding a few symbols and mysticisms, and, as is befitting any decent fruit-looper, a few extra spoons-full of jiggery-pokery, founded her own religion viz. The Church of the Four Square Gospel.

In 1926 Aimee disappeared from the face of the earth, reported in newspapers to have been kidnapped. She turned up 5 days later in Mexico, and unsubstantiated allegations emerged that she had been involved in a tryst with a married engineer from her Angelus Temple radio station. The whole affair of her (alleged?) kidnapping, as well as her unbelievable popularity that seemed to irritate some of the influential sections of the community, caused many to turn against her. It's a long and complicated story, but if you're interested: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aimee\\_Semple\\_McPherson](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aimee_Semple_McPherson)

You'd think that that would be the end of the Church of the Four Square Gospel, wouldn't you? Of course not! Aimee continued to amass a fortune (surprise!), died of a barbiturate overdose in 1944, and her son subsequently took control of the International Church of the Four Square Gospel, and it's still doing very nicely, thank you. Item number 21 in the

list of the Church's Creedal Statement urges that members of the Church must believe "In Tithing as God's Plan". Wouldn't you know it?

Oh yes, and that somewhat irritating name: "The Church of the Four Square Gospel". Here's the explanation from the official U.S. web site:

The term "Foursquare Gospel" came about during an intense revival in the city of Oakland, Calif., in July 1922. To a crowd of thousands, Aimee Semple McPherson explained Ezekiel's vision in the book of Ezekiel, chapter one. Ezekiel saw God revealed as a being with four different faces: a man, a lion, an ox and an eagle.

To Sister Aimee, those four faces were like the four phases of the gospel of Jesus Christ. In the face of the man, she saw Jesus our Savior. In the face of the lion, she saw Jesus the mighty Baptizer with the Holy Spirit and fire. In the face of the ox, she saw Jesus the Great Burden-Bearer, who took our infirmities and carried our sicknesses. In the face of the eagle, she saw Jesus the Coming King, who will return in power and victory for the church. It was a perfect, complete Gospel. It was a Gospel that faces squarely in every direction; it was the "Foursquare Gospel." The four symbols perhaps most identified with Foursquare today are the cross, cup, dove and crown which stand for Jesus the Savior, Jesus the Healer, Jesus the Baptizer with the Holy Spirit, and Jesus the Soon-Coming King, respectively.

And to be sure of the Church's ongoing success, the first stage of its Mission Strategy proclaims:

"The church starts when workers bring the lost to Christ, and plant local congregations. The goal is responsible disciples, who evangelize and reproduce themselves."

So they're into sex. Amen.

# Mulholland's Wager

by *Jim Mulholland*

Jim Mulholland was raised in the Free Methodist church – a conservative evangelical Christian tradition. In 2008, Jim resigned his pastorate, recognizing his lack of belief and religious contentment made it problematic for him to pastor a Christian congregation. Over the next four years, Jim came to realize he was no longer a Christian. He'd become a post-religious person. He has a blog at [leavingyourreligion.com](http://leavingyourreligion.com)

In the 17th century, Blaise Pascal made an interesting argument in favor of believing in God. Pascal argued that – even if there is no way to ultimately confirm the existence of God – a rational person would be wise to believe in God. He claimed, if eternal bliss was at stake, there was little to lose and everything to gain by such a belief. This argument came to be known as Pascal's Wager and is often touted by religious folk in debates with atheists.

Of course, there are two obvious problems with Pascal's Wager. First, Pascal assumed the Christian God was the correct god. He failed to factor in the possibility that Buddha might be sitting on the heavenly throne. If Allah turns out to be the one true God, Pascal and millions of Christians lose their wager.

More troubling, Pascal's argument implies God's indifference to the motives of belief. The passionate worshipper and the self-interested opportunist are both rewarded in Pascal's framework. This issue led many Christians to criticize and reject Pascal's approach. They argued an omnipotent God would sort the sheep from the goats, rejecting those motivated solely by hopes of heavenly reward.

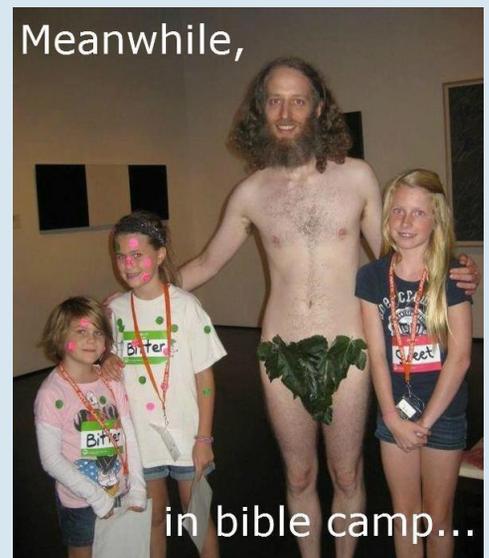
While I never found Pascal's argument compelling when I was a Christian, I've thought more about it as an atheist. In a sense, my decision to disbelieve in God is a wager. I'm betting that – if God exists – God is very different from the deities portrayed by the great religions, that God doesn't really care whether I believe in those understandings or not. I believe living a life of integrity and character is crucial to happiness and any God worth admiring would applaud and reward such a commitment.

Perhaps I'm wrong. Perhaps God is jealous and demanding. Perhaps only those who choose the proper religious formula will know everlasting life. I thought this once and bet my life on Jesus. That makes no sense to me any longer. If God turns out to be the God of judgment and damnation, I think Lucifer was right to rebel. I have no interest in worshipping such a God. I'd rather be damned. I'm reminded of what the Christian writer, Madeline L'Engle, said when asked if Gandhi was in hell. "I'm not certain where Gandhi is, but wherever he is; that is a place I'd like to be."

Let me be clear. I no longer believe in God. I think this life is all we have and we should live it as fully as we possibly can, treasuring the good moments. The only God I have any interest in is a God who shares my enthusiasm for humans living life fully. If such a God exists, this God will not be interested in dogmatic belief, worship and praise, sacrifice and submission. Such a God would find Islamic suicide bombers, celibate Christian priests and Buddhist detachment equally sad. While I don't believe this God exists, such a God would be the only God I could admire.

For these reasons, I give little thought to God any more. While others continue to ask me about my belief, I find my disbelief a dull topic of discussion. I've begun to respond to such questions with one of my own, "If God doesn't exist, would that change how you live, how you treat others and the choices you make?" If it would, I suspect such belief is very much like Pascal's wager – it is motivated more by fear or reward than by genuine enthusiasm.

Think of it this way. I have limited time to invest in life. I've decided to invest my time completely in living life well. I am no longer giving my time to efforts and activities preparing for an afterlife. I'm betting that any time given to preparing for the afterlife is time wasted. If there is an afterlife, the best way to prepare for it is to live this life fully. That's Mulholland's wager.



Oops...

Leviticus 11:7-8

(7) "And the swine, though he divide the hoof, and be clovenfooted, yet he cheweth not the cud; he is unclean to you.

(8) Of their flesh shall ye not eat, and their carcase shall ye not touch; they are unclean to you."

Know Your Bible



# Sounds of Sodomy

Irish Christians have distributed leaflets with a poorly thought out slogan. The pamphlets ask “Should children be exposed to sounds of sodomy?” and adds: “Should the sounds of sodomy echo in the halls of a Christian home?”



Social media went into overdrive. I don't know if the christian groups anticipated the response, but from a spectator's point of view, it was hilarious.



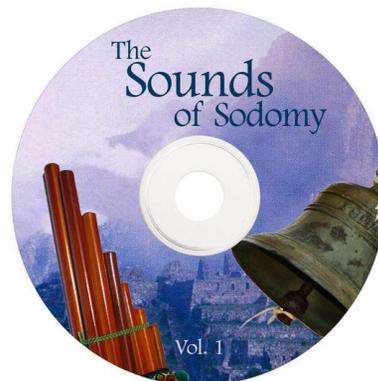
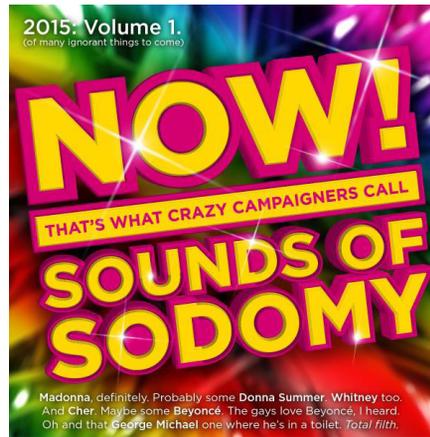
There were Simon and Garfunkel references:



Some requested guidance:



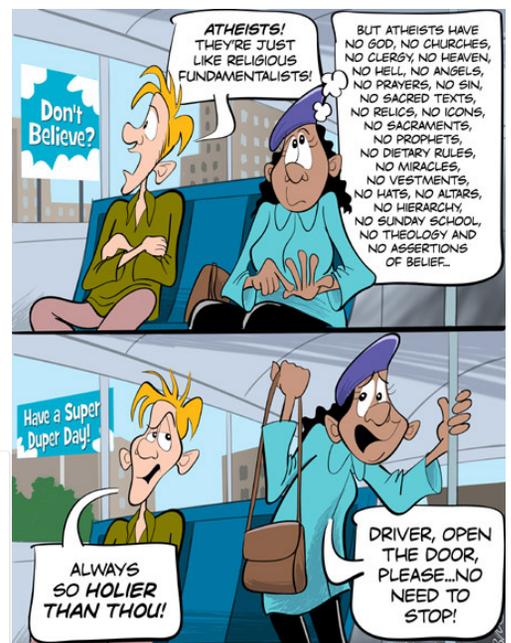
Some took to photoshop:



Some stated the obvious:



While it is incredibly funny and social media responded with appropriateness to the idiocy, it is also important to note the hateful and hurtful intent behind the campaign. The impact of religions on our society needs to stop.





# Bangladeshi Bloggers

Two horrific murders have occurred in Bangladesh over the past two months. The victims were both Bangladeshi atheist bloggers, murdered for comments on Islam allegedly made online.

In the most recent attack, three knife-wielding assailants targeted Washiqur Rahman, hacking the 27 year old to death near his home. Police detained two suspects and retrieved three knives at the scene of the crime. A third suspect escaped.

According to The New York Times, the two suspects told investigators that an acquaintance had ordered them to kill Rahman because of “some comments against Islam” that he made on social media. However, they reportedly did not read the comments themselves. Police said Rahman’s blog did not appear to center on religion, though fellow writers said he opposed religious fundamentalism.

Asif Mohiuddin, who was also the victim of a machete attack in 2013, but survived and now lives abroad, described Washiqur on his Facebook page as a “humanist” and a true wit. “He was a good friend. We spent hours over tea discussing blogs a few years ago. He had a great sense of humor, his satires were amazing. I named him the George Carlin of Bangladesh! Personally he was very polite, a nice human being. He wanted with all his heart, a true secular country, where everyone could practice their freedom.”

The death of Washiqur Rahman is the second of its kind in as many months, raising fears that religious extremists are singling out writers who criticise Islam and promote secular values in the developing Muslim majority country. In late February, a prominent American-Bangladeshi blogger Avijit Roy was similarly hacked to death outside a book fair after he had received death threats

from extremists. Roy’s wife was also attacked, but survived, and has since returned to the USA where the couple lived.

Farabi Shafiur Rahman, was arrested for Roy’s murder. He had allegedly issued death threats to the blogger on Facebook last year, writing: “Avijit Roy lives in America. So it’s not possible to kill him now. But when he returns home, he will be killed then.” The Times reported that the two had engaged in a debate over religion over the Internet.

Roy returned to Bangladesh from the USA about one week before he was murdered, to celebrate publishing his new science book (in Bengali), ‘From Vacuum to Universe’. Bengali police said he should have asked for protection when he entered Bangladesh. People shouldn’t have to ask for protection for having freedom of thought and expression in this world.



“When more than 90 percent of ever-married women in Egypt—including my mother and all but one of her six sisters—have had their genitals cut in the name of modesty, then surely we must all blaspheme.”

# Teaching Love - Preaching Bigotry

by Mike Meyerson

Christianity claims to be a faith centred around love, compassion and tolerance. But is this the case? I had access to the fortnightly Newsletter of a faith-based school which claims to be serious about education and upholding “Caring Christian” values. Disconcertingly, however, the school chaplain wrote articles in the Newsletter disparaging, believers in other faiths, in particular, those who belong to the Jewish faith and non believers. The chaplain quoted passages from the bible to support his teachings. I will critically engage with these teachings and then using the same technique will demonstrate how easy it is to use scriptural passages to disparage the church/clergy. There will, however, be a significant difference — the claims made by the minister cannot be historically validated, whereas the claims I will present are easily verifiable.

## Turning Away from the Lord

In Issue 4, term 3, 2009 we are told how the ancient Jews turned away from the Lord. The chaplain mentions what a terrible blunder these Jews made by turning away from God and how God rebuked them for this behaviour. (The Chaplain’s Connection, Issue 4, term 3, 2009) *“My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water.”* (Jeremiah 2:13)

We are told by the chaplain that God “didn’t like it when the Children of Israel [the Jews] indulged in what became practically their national sport: chasing after other Gods” (Issue 8, Term 3 2009). *“They went after other Gods, from among the gods of the peoples who were around them, and bowed down to them. And they provoked the LORD to anger.”* (Judges 2:12)

The chaplain describes (May 2008) how in the days of King Josiah, in 640 BC, Israel [the Jews] turned away from God. The temple in Jerusalem was neglected and abandoned, and had become a place of worship for Baal and other pagan “gods”. Josiah, however,

outlawed all pagan worship and ordered restoration of the temple for God. When cleaning out the Temple’s treasure room, Hilkiah the High Priest found a scroll that he brought to the king. It turned out to be the “Book of the Law of the Lord that had been given through Moses”.

When he read the scroll, Josiah tore his clothes .....and said....*“great is the Lord’s anger that is poured out on us because our fathers have not kept the word of the LORD; they have not acted in accordance with all that is written in this book”.* (2 Chronicles 34:21)

The chaplain maintained, *“Israel’s most precious possession, the Word of the living God, had been ignored, misplaced and forgotten. How can that have been allowed to happen?” We must learn from past tragedies. We too have been given the precious treasure of God’s word. We must be careful not to ignore it and so lose our way as Israel [the Jews] had in the days of Josiah”.*

The Chaplain’s message is that the Jews are guilty of turning away from the Lord and fail to learn from past mistakes.

There is, of course, an abundance of scriptural evidence in the New Testament demonstrating how the Christian Church has ignored, misplaced and forgotten God’s word. Why does the Chaplain not utilise this material? For example, Jesus told his followers to obey God’s law as it is written in the Old Testament. The penalty for not doing so is eternal damnation. (Matt.5:20). Jesus said: *Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil* (Matt 5:17). *Truly I tell you: so long as heaven and earth endure, not a letter not a dot, will disappear from the law....* (Matt 5:18). See also Matt 5:19,20, Matt. 23:3, John 7:19, John 5:46,47, John 3:4.

Jesus clearly stated that his followers live according to the same law, the Jewish law, from which according to the chaplain the Jews had turned away in 640BC. The Church and the clergy have, however, turned away from these laws and therefore the Lord.

## Hypocrisy / Pharisees

In the newsletter (Feb 2008) we are told about the world’s most expensive dessert, which costs 25000 dollars, and was served in a New York restaurant. On a health inspection the restaurant was found to be so unhygienic, that the eatery had to be closed. The restaurant was contaminated with cockroaches, live mice, mouse faeces and flies. The Chaplain described how embarrassing it was that the world’s most expensive dessert was being served in the city’s most unhygienic restaurant. This story, he says, is reminiscent of what Jesus said of the Pharisees. The chaplain quotes verses from Matthew in order to demonstrate the hypocrisy of the Pharisees. E.g. *Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence...Matt: 23:23.*

He also quotes Matt 23: 25,26, 27 and 28 in which Jesus castigated the Pharisees for their hypocrisy and berated them for lacking justice and mercy and being greedy, self-indulgent and wicked.

The Chaplain has somehow likened the repugnant and unhygienic state of a restaurant in New York with Jesus’ castigation of the Pharisees. The Pharisees were of course Jewish. It would not be difficult for the uncritical mind to assume that because the Pharisees were Jewish, the Jews are hypocrites. Is this the Chaplain’s intention?

## Hypocrisy / Bad Company

The chaplain illustrates the malevolence of hypocrisy in The Chaplain’s Connection, August 2007. He describes an experiment wherein the peer pressure exerted by the group influences the individual to make a bad choice. The chaplain then quotes from 1 Cor 15:33, “Bad company corrupts good people”, and then quotes a passage from Galatians 2:11-13 in which Paul disparages those who have been circumcised. *“When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face*



*because he was clearly in the wrong. Before a certain man came James, he used to eat with the gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray.”*

The chaplain has used these clumsy verses to convey the message that keeping bad company can corrupt good people. It's clear that the bad company, the hypocrites, are all Jewish, and lead others astray. Moreover, the verses that the Chaplain chose to quote refers to the Jews disparagingly as the circumcision group. Is the lesson intended to depict the Jews as bad company and hypocrites?

Importantly, the chaplain omitted to tell his readers that not only was Paul circumcised but that Paul took it upon himself to circumcise Timothy (Acts 16:3). Paul and Timothy therefore both belonged to the circumcision group! One must conclude that Paul is a hypocrite and that the chaplain is not explaining the scriptures in a transparent fashion. “Out of context” is perhaps the best way to describe the chaplain's method of teaching.

### **Hypocrisy / Deception**

The Chaplain again makes use of the Pharisees to illustrate hypocrisy. (Newsletter Issue 4 Term1 2009). The Chaplain wrote, “*Jesus was challenged one day by the Pharisees, who queried why Jesus' disciples seemed (my bold) to be breaking some of their traditions. In response, Jesus criticised their hypocrisy in being so secret about their traditions, but failing to honour God in their hearts*”. He then said to the listening crowd: “*Listen and understand. What goes into the mouth does not make him unclean, but what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him ‘unclean’*” (Matt 15:10-11). *Our mouths speak what flows out of our hearts.* (Luke 6:45).

The Chaplain fails to explain the nature of the question posed by the Pharisees. The Pharisees merely asked Jesus why the disciples did not wash their hands before eating, “*Why do the disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? For they wash not their hands when they eat bread*” (Matt 15:1,2).

By not washing their hands before eating the disciples were not “seeming to break

the tradition” they were breaking the tradition. The Pharisees' question was pertinent—every child knows they should wash their hands before eating. The Chaplain also failed to tell us that the laws that the disciples were breaking the same laws that Jesus demanded (a few verses later) must be kept for all time. (Matt 5:17,18).

Jesus should have either admonished the disciples for breaking the law or should have admitted that he was wrong in insisting on adherence to the law. Instead he attacked the Pharisees on an unrelated matter by accusing them of breaking God's commandment to honor one's parents (Matt.15:4). Simply put, Jesus resorted to attack as the best form of defense.

### **A Matter of Evidence**

In Issue 2, Term 1, 2009 of the Newsletter the Chaplain relates how Jesus heals a blind man but has to touch him twice before he can see clearly. The Chaplain postulates that Jesus did the two stage healing on purpose in order to “make a point about the spiritual blindness of those around him”. The chaplain emphasises that ‘in the preceding verses the Pharisees despite having seen a great miracle, have demanded Jesus give them a “sign”’. To which Jesus said: “*Do you have eyes, but fail to see?*” (Mark 8:18) Jesus' behavior was churlish because elsewhere he was forthcoming with signs. See John 20:30, Acts 2:22 and Mark 16:20. The chaplain omitted to mention this important detail. The chaplain's message is that by demanding some evidence with regard to Jesus' claims this makes the Jewish Pharisees stubborn, “spiritually blind” and perhaps dumb and arrogant. Is, however, the request for evidence in such circumstances something that should be condemned?

It's hard to see how the request of the Pharisees is anything but reasonable. It's hard to understand why a compassionate Jesus did not give sight to all the blind people on earth. Why do it for just one individual? Better still cure everyone of every disease and wipe out all disease forever. That would have been a mighty sign.

The Chaplain summed things up as follows; “Just as the blind man goes

from total blindness to partial sight to full vision, so the people around Jesus are in some cases totally blind to who he is, some are beginning to see, and the disciples have begun to see clearly. The same is true in the world around us today. There are those who are actually blind, those with limited sight, and those whose eyes have been opened...” In other words those who believe in Jesus have sight but all others are spiritually blind. It's not difficult to see how this sort of teaching instils intolerance of those of other faiths and non-believers.

### **HEAVEN IS RESERVED FOR CHRISTIANS**

In the Chaplain's Connection Nov. 2007 the chaplain quotes Jesus: “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me”. (John 14:6). The Chaplain claims that anyone who claims to lead us to God without bringing us to Jesus is leading us away from the truth rather than towards it.

John Shelby Spong discusses this issue in his book “The Sins of the Scriptures”. Spong asserts that phrases such as “No one comes to the Father, but by me” becomes the basis that Christians alone control the doorway to God. There is no other way to God other than through Christ.

Should a particular religion claim to possess the truth in an unchangeable form then it follows that this religion must have a monopoly on salvation or the pathway to the holy. It also then follows that this claim is likely to be asserted vigorously and offensively. Those of other faiths (or of no faith) are by definition lost, benighted or invincibly ignorant. Spong continues, saying, if they are lost then any missionary tactic is appropriate, because it is our God bidden duty to save them whether they desire to be saved or not. If they are benighted, we can relate to them and their religious understanding as being pitiable, uninformed and primitive.

Finally if they are invincibly ignorant, then any tactic that may be used to open them to the truth is justified. This makes cruelty, torture and warfare in the pursuit of the purity of religion legitimate”. Spong cites claims of this nature as legitimising religious bigotry and persecution.



The chaplain has quoted verses from the Bible in order to discredit non-believers, and those who belong to other faiths, in particular Jews. I will now demonstrate how easy it is to use scriptural passages in the same manner as the chaplain in order to discredit those who belong to the Church/clergy. The claims made by the Chaplain and myself differ, however, in one important way. None of the claims made by the Chaplain can be historically validated but the claims I will make are all verifiable.

I needed look no further than the Ten Commandments in the Old Testament in order to demonstrate the extent to which the church/clergy have turned away from the lord.

#### **You shall not murder.**

The Church has murdered on an unimaginable scale. Think, crusades, inquisition, witch hunts, genocides, 40 year war between Catholics and Protestants.

#### **You shall not commit adultery.**

Church ministers have shamelessly committed a crime far worse than adultery. They have sexually abused and raped countless innocent and defenseless children over many centuries.

#### **You shall not steal.**

The Church stole property, and monies from countless individuals during the centuries of the inquisition, witch hunts and crusades. The Catholic Church dishonestly profited from selling indulgences.

**“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices-mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law-justice, mercy and faithfulness...” Matt 23:23**

The clergy have not demonstrated justice or mercy during the vicious centuries of the inquisition, witch hunts, slavery, or in their abuse of children. They showed no justice or mercy to good men such as Galileo who merely pointed out the correct relationship of the sun and the earth. They mercilessly tortured and killed the brave men who first translated the bible into English.

**“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites!**

**You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence...” Matt 23:25**

The property and assets of the innocent victims of the inquisition, and witch hunts, were greedily seized by the clergy. The clergy were greedy and enthusiastic participants in the slave trade accumulating huge wealth from the misery they inflicted on others.

**“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like white-washed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men’s bones and everything unclean. In the same way on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness...” Matt 23:27, 28**

The clergy are far from righteous. They have dishonestly covered up the crimes of their fellow clergymen who over many centuries abused children. They have been wicked in killing countless innocent women dishonestly accusing them of being witches. They have wickedly tortured and killed countless individuals on trumped up charges of blasphemy.

**Jesus instructs his followers to live according to the Jewish laws and traditions and to exceed the standards of righteousness set by the scribes and Pharisees (Matt 5:20).**

The Clergy have defied Jesus’ instructions and have failed to keep the Jewish laws. They have not exceeded the standards of righteousness set by the scribes and Pharisees.

**Jesus instructs his followers to engage in self mutilation and to cut off body parts such as eyes and hands should they offend us (Matt 5:30), and to undergo castration (Matt 19:12).**

The clergy have done much to offend but have not cut off their offending parts. They have, however, castrated many young boys.

**Jesus instructs his followers not to store up treasures on earth (Matt 6:19-20).**

The Clergy have accumulated huge stores of money, property and treasure.

**Jesus instructs his followers to pray in the closet (Matt 6:6). He also stipulates that prayer should be non-repetitive (Matt 6:7).**

The clergy pray openly in huge and elaborate Churches. Their prayer is often repetitive.

**Jesus criticised the Pharisees for treating their labourers harshly and not assisting them in their work (Matt 23:4).**

The Clergy enthusiastically supported slavery and resisted its abolition. I can find no record of the clergy assisting slaves in their labours.

**Jesus did not approve of fancy clothing (Matt 23:5). He complained that the Pharisees were showy in their dress and that the borders of their clothes were too wide.**

The clergy dress in ostentatious robes, gold for the pope, (a huge gold mitre atop his head), flaming red for cardinals, deep purple for monsignors. Their clothes have wide borders.

**Jesus was against erecting fine tombs (Matt 23:29).**

The clergy have built exceedingly ornate tombs.

The reader must by now have appreciated that it is simple to use scriptural verses in order to denigrate others. The words of Jesus regarding the mote in someone’s eye are pertinent.

Is it not obvious that those who teach religion are not representatives of a force for good? How about teaching love and tolerance? By that I mean love of everyone and tolerance of all, especially those who do not share your faith or have no faith. If everyone did this peace may finally come to earth! There is something seriously amiss when such offensive teaching is repeated over several years in a place of education and goes unchallenged. This is the very thing children should be taught to detect! Was there not a single person amongst the hundreds involved with this school sufficiently offended to speak up and have the situation addressed? I wrote to the School Foundation detailing my concerns and included examples of the Chaplain’s teachings. My correspondence was received but sadly, or should I say predictably, I received no reply regarding the issue.



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# Atheism, Religion, and the Operative Mechanism of Intolerance

by *Christis Tombazos*

Christis is an Associate Professor in the Department of Economics at Monash University. He is a new contributor, bringing rationality and reason to some topical issues.

A tragic shooting took the lives of three young students of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill on February 10, 2015. Violence of this kind is not uncommon in the United States, and it generally attracts relatively little attention by the national media.

Yet, on this occasion, much was made of the fact that the offender, Craig Stephen Hicks, had proclaimed to be an atheist and the victims, Yusor Mohammad Abu-Salha; Deah Barakat; and Razan Mohammad Abu-Salha, were Muslim.

It is not surprising that this terrible crime was seized by the more prominent apologists of Islamic fundamentalism, such as Reza Aslan, to build an argument that the new phenomenon of voluble atheism may have served as a catalyst for the crime. It is however astounding that thoughtful and credible journalists working for prominent American newspapers and magazines, including the Washington Post; the New Republic; and the New York Times made – more or less – similar claims. Given the integrity and seriousness of such journalists and outlets, their rhetoric on this issue is particularly troubling. This short article is an attempt to engage this rhetoric.

Consider for example Nicholas Kristof of the New York Times. In “Muslims,

Marriage, and Bigotry” Kristof juxtaposes the North Carolina incident against recent actions by a group of Alabama probate judges who – in the name of their Christian faith – went to great lengths to undermine federal statutes that require them to issue marriage licenses to gay couples.

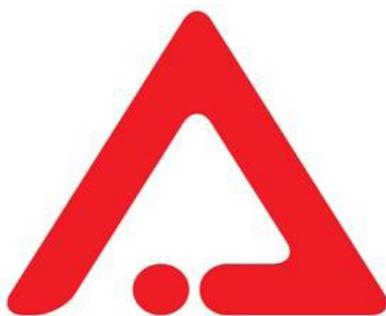
Reflecting on these events, Kristof notes that Alabama and North Carolina can offer a common lesson of “...combating the intolerance that can infect people of any faith – or of no faith”. This is an extraordinary statement. It overtly implies that religion and atheism have the same capacity to serve as catalysts of intolerance. It suggests that the operative mechanism of intolerance is the mere presence of difference in perspective, rather than the content of different perspectives. Put crudely, it implies that the likelihood of a person of faith being intolerant toward an atheist is equal to that of an atheist being intolerant toward a person of faith. The falsity of this statement, and the many similar such statements which appeared in the press, should be obvious to Mr. Kristof and his colleagues.

Atheism is a critique of ideas. It advocates the importance of reason and critical thinking over dogma and superstition. It does not prescribe bigotry toward specific

groups of people (e.g., homosexuals, apostates, infidels, and so on). Religion, on the other hand, does.

Precisely for this reason North Carolina and Alabama do not offer a common lesson but two very different narratives. The former is a case of a mentally deranged individual who committed a violent, terrible, and reprehensible crime and who also happened to be an atheist. The latter is a case of religious intolerance committing a reprehensible crime.

As it turns out, recent statements by Hicks’ wife suggest that the murders were motivated by a trivial dispute over parking rather than matters of faith. This information is useful in understanding the circumstances that led to this particular crime, but it is entirely unnecessary in recognizing that atheism – as a movement – had no role to play. Whatever Hicks’ particular motivations, using North Carolina and Alabama to draw a common lesson of moral equivalence between religion and atheism fails to distinguish intolerance of certain groups of people from the intellectual intolerance of bad ideas. The former is appalling and contrary to the foundation of a civilized society. The latter, which is proudly championed by the global atheist movement, is the very precept upon which such a foundation may be built.



ATHEIST  
ALLIANCE  
INTERNATIONAL



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**FOR A SECULAR WORLD**



# Not a Dangerous Idea But a Silly One

by *Michael Boyd*

Simon Smart wrote in an article published in the SMH on Friday 3 April that the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the most dangerous idea in human history. Exactly what is this idea?

A God creates the world and then peoples it with humanity. So deficient is his creation that he decides to destroy all humanity in a great flood sparing only one man and his family. That family became our ancestors, and eventually grows into the population that by 33AD includes the inhabitants of a small Roman town in the Middle East and presumably all of the rest of humanity, then unknown to the inhabitants of that small place. He sends his son to die a horrible death at the hands of an unruly mob led by powerful forces of authority. This man God then rises from the dead with a message to his followers that the end is nigh and only those who believe in him can have eternal salvation. The purpose of his death is to atone for the sins of past generations.

Leaving aside for a moment the fact that no evidence has ever been found for the great flood, that we know that humans arose in Africa from a group of hominids who evolved like all the other mammals, that the idea of humanity descending from one family of several individuals is contrary to all the scientific evidence, at the heart of the story is a morally corrupt idea that the sacrifice of one innocent will wash away the sins of humanity and usher in a new age of goodness.

One of the disturbing features of the Old Testament is the behaviour of the God of Abraham in regularly cursing and punishing the descendants of individuals who offend him. No rational person today would endorse a system of justice that punishes the children of offenders for the sins of their fathers, but this is the justice of the Old Testament. Christians will say that the death and resurrection ushers in a new approach, but is that really the

case? In fact, the resurrection story is a continuation of the injustice of the Old Testament. An innocent victim must die to pay for the sins of the past. Is this really a dangerous idea or a silly one?

The article claims that the resurrection “alters the whole of human behaviour and all our responsibilities. It turns the universe from meaningless chaos into a designed place in which there is justice and there is hope and therefore we all have the duty to discover the nature of that justice and work towards that hope”. In fact, history has shown that this new era was not filled with justice and hope, but for millions of individuals was marked by poverty, injustice at the hands of powerful elites and dare I say it unexpected and sudden death at the hands of God in natural disasters like flood earthquakes, famine and plague.

The lot of humanity in the western world only began to improve when Science and the thirst for knowledge threw off the shackles of religious dogma and man began to take some control over his own destiny. Since the Enlightenment the world has changed for the better for many humans, particularly in the West. What was the role of the resurrection in this? The development of the rule of law that grants some level of justice to millions of humans today owes little to the idea of the resurrection, and on one view contradicts the central idea of an innocent being punished for the actions of others. Advances in science, agricultural production, medicine and civil society have given hope to millions. What was the role of the resurrection in these improvements? Certainly, the rise of a scholarly class in Europe owes much to Christian monasteries and centres of learning preserving and rediscovering the knowledge and philosophy of the ancient world. We also owe a debt to the scholars of Islam and China in science, maths and astronomy.

Many of the enlightenment thinkers were avowed Christians. But where does the idea of the resurrection feature in the march of knowledge and material and social improvement? Many Christians may argue that the idea of the individual and the concept of personal freedom springs from Christianity. It is difficult to discern this from the resurrection story, based as it is on the exact opposite notion that mankind’s sins can be assuaged by the death of an innocent victim. This is the antithesis of personal responsibility as is the notion that belief in the one true god alone is sufficient for redemption.

There is no evidence that the universe is a designed place, and plenty to suggest the opposite. Justice has only become a reality for a substantial part of mankind in the last few centuries, and even today is denied to a huge proportion of mankind, due to poverty and avarice. For many individuals hope remains a distant goal, or no more than a wish for a bright future that will follow death.

So, while the resurrection itself was not a dangerous idea, some of the ideas of Jesus were dangerous, particularly his exhortation to followers:

“If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple.” Luke Chapter 14.  
Now, that’s a dangerous idea!



# Are Christians Christian? Are Jews Jewish?

by *Mike Meyerson*

## ARE CHRISTIANS CHRISTIAN?

Christians, by definition, believe in Jesus and also believe that Jesus is God. It follows that in order to be a Christian one must live in accordance with Jesus' teachings. I will analyse whether Christians do live according to the teachings of Jesus, as well as his apostle, Paul.

## POVERTY/POSSESSIONS

Jesus emphasised the importance of poverty on several occasions. Examples are: if you are not prepared to leave all your possessions behind, you cannot be my disciples (Luke 14:33).

It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God (Matt.19:23,24).

Go sell your possessions and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven (Matt. 19:21).

Poverty, is a non-negotiable condition for followers of Jesus. It is also an essential requirement in order to get into heaven. Few Christians follow Jesus' instructions with respect to money and possessions and just about all Christian sects have acquired great wealth. The evangelical churches brazenly glorify wealth.

## PRAYER

Jesus was adamant that prayer should be a private matter. He castigated the Pharisees for being overt in prayer saying: "when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets...when thou prayest, enter into the closet, and when thou hast shut thy door pray to the Father which is in secret"

(Matt. 6:5, 6 KJV). Followers of Jesus, while quick to agree that the Pharisees are hypocrites, almost uniformly ignore Jesus' advice. They pray openly in Churches, school assemblies and other sites.

## DIVORCE AND MARRIAGE

Jesus outlawed divorce in Matt. 19:6 saying, "they [married couples] are no longer two individuals: they are one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, man must not separate". Later, Jesus made an exception to the rule, allowing divorce in the case of a wife committing adultery (Matt.5:32).

Jesus also forbade marriage to someone who is divorced, labelling anyone who does so an adulterer (Mark 10:11).

According to the Australian Institute of Family Studies, 46% of all 1999 marriages in Australia will end in divorce. Many of those who get divorced are likely to marry someone else who is also divorced. Since the vast majority of Australians, are Christians, it follows that probably more than 50% of Christians defy Jesus' instructions with respect to divorce.

Paul, on the other hand, would have no one get married! Paul advised: "I should like everyone to be as I myself am [single]... To the unmarried...I say this: it is a good thing if like me they stay as they are" (1 Cor. 7:7,8). See also 1 Cor.7:27,28. Christians who get married are therefore not following Paul's advice, and those who get divorced, or marry someone who is divorced are defying Jesus.

## VIOLENCE IS FORBIDDEN

Jesus was against violence. Christians agree that Jesus' words: "All who take the sword die by the sword" (Matt. 26:52), mean that violence must be rejected. Christians have overwhelmingly ignored this advice. Wars, crusades, inquisitions, burning of heretics and witches are examples of violent acts sanctioned by the Church but obviously disapproved of by Jesus. Christians are fond of the stirring music and words of the hymn "Onward Christian soldiers marching on to war".

## KEEP THE LAW

Jesus insisted that his followers live by the Jewish law. Jesus said in John 7:19, "Did not Moses give you the law? Yet none of you keeps it".

He also said: "Do not suppose that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I did not come to abolish but to complete (Matt 5:17) . Truly I tell you:so long as heaven and earth endure, not a letter not a dot, will disappear from the law until all that must happen has happened" (Matt 5:18- See also Matt 5:19).

And, "I tell you, unless you show yourselves far better than the scribes and Pharisees, you can never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 5:20).

Christians prefer not to follow Jesus' instructions to keep the law but have chosen instead to go with Paul and reject the Jewish law. Who can blame them? The Jewish law is rigorous. Still, you'd think Jesus would have more authority than Paul, and Jesus is not joking when he says that unless you follow the law "far better than the scribes and Pharisees" you will be barred from the kingdom of heaven.

The decision to defy Jesus and not keep the Mosaic law is all the more bizarre because that law was dictated to Moses by God, and Jesus is God.

## NO NEED TO WORK—THE LORD WILL PROVIDE

Jesus taught that we need not worry about planning our lives or working! God will provide for all our needs in the same way as he provides for the birds! "I tell you not to be anxious about food or drink... and about clothes. Look at the birds in the sky; they do not sow and reap and store in barns, yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Do not ask. What are we to eat? What are we to drink? What shall we wear? Set your mind on God's Kingdom



and all the rest will come to you as well” (Matt.6:25-34).

The Protestant work ethic was not for Jesus! Not many Christians trust Jesus on this one and sensibly provide for themselves.

### JUDGING OTHERS

Jesus was adamant that we not judge others. He said: “Do not judge, and you will not be judged. For as you judge others so you will yourselves be judged, and whatever measure you deal out to others will be dealt to you” (Matt.7:1). (Also Luke 6:37).

Thankfully, Christians have rejected this instruction! The world would be a strange place, indeed, if Christian countries did away with judging. There would be no judicial system. Criminals would have free run of the place. Bringing up children without being able to judge their behaviour would be difficult. The school system would be in chaos.

### HAIRSTYLES

Paul, was not averse to judging, but had strong views on hairstyles. He gave us these instructions: “Judge for yourselves: is it fitting for a woman to pray to God bareheaded? Does not nature herself teach you that while long hair disgraces a man, it is a woman’s glory? For her hair was given as a covering” (1 Cor. 11:13,14).

Paul therefore recommended that males have short hair but that women should have ample hair-cover for their heads.

Christians, in the main, tend to wear their hair as they wish. They are also comfortable with images of Jesus sporting shoulder length hair. I am yet to see a rendition of Jesus with a short back and sides.

### DON’T CALL ANYONE “FATHER”, DON’T CALL TEACHERS “TEACHERS”

“Do not call any man on earth ‘father’” (Matt. 23:9).

“Nor must you be called ‘teacher’” (Matt. 23:10).

Christians not only call their fathers “father”. They also call Catholic priests “father” and they call teachers “teachers”.

### FAMILY VALUES

Jesus requires his followers to hate their own families! “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, even his own life he cannot be a disciple of mine” (Luke14:26).

Christians, generally, reject this advice.

It’s clear that Christians do not practise their religion in accordance with Jesus’ teachings. Those who call themselves “Christian” are therefore not really Christian. Jesus would categorise such individuals as hypocrites. Perhaps “unchristian” is a less harsh descriptor. At any rate, there are no Christians!

### ARE JEWS JEWISH?

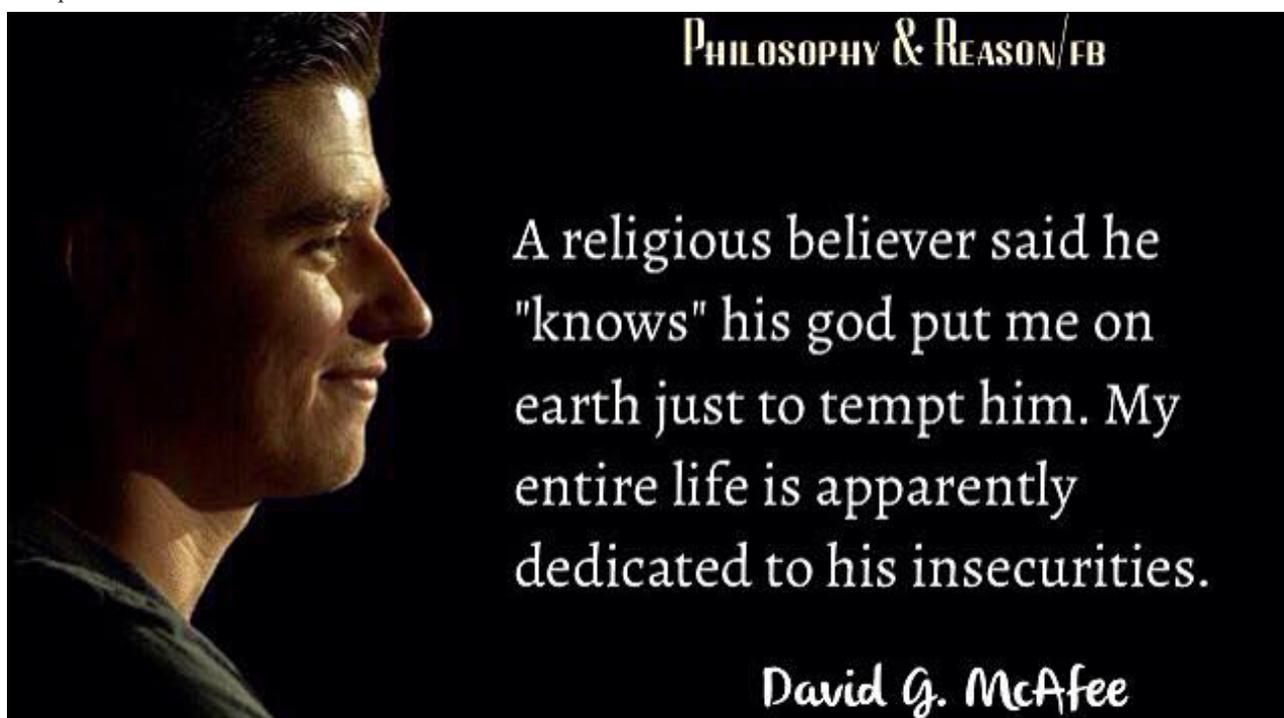
Jews maintain that in order to be Jewish you have to be born of a Jewish mother—matrilineal inheritance. Let’s accept this view and then examine its implications.

The first Jew according to those who believe in Judaism was Abraham. The mother of the first Jew was therefore not Jewish. It follows that, according to Jewish law, Abraham could not have been Jewish and therefore none of his children were Jewish. There are, therefore, no Jews.

Let’s be generous, however, and accept the notion that Abraham is an exception to the law of matrilineal inheritance because God declared him to be Jewish so making him the first Jew. There nevertheless remains a problem. None of Abraham’s three wives was Jewish. Therefore, once again, none of Abraham’s children were Jewish, and since none of his children were Jewish, none of their descendants can be Jewish.

It’s clear that if we accept that one is only Jewish if one’s mother is Jewish, then there are no Jews.

In summary, Christians aren’t Christians and Jews aren’t Jewish. If everyone understood this truth the world would be a very different, but much better place. One need just consider the countless number of people that would have been saved from being murdered, tortured or persecuted for no other reason than their beliefs. Think about it!



# Media Release

## A Cold Day in Hell for Reclaim Australia

The Atheist Foundation of Australia (AFA) does not support the Reclaim Australia protests which are to be staged around the country on the 4th of April 2015. While the AFA does not promote, advocate, or endorse religious beliefs, we also cannot support ignorance, bigotry, jingoism, racism, or xenophobia.

It is important that everyone understand some basic facts:

1. Sharia law is not being enforced anywhere in Australia. It is fear mongering to even make the suggestion, or imply that all Australians will one day live under Islamic religious rule.
2. There is no credible evidence that halal certification funds terrorism.
3. Banning the burqa is an infringement of personal liberties. We would prefer that people to learn why such religious attire is unnecessary and choose not to wear it voluntarily.
4. One of the aims of the AFA is “to encourage and to provide a means of expression for informed free-thought on philosophical and social issues“. We encourage all Australians to reject ignorance, bigotry, persecution, racism, xenophobia, and these divisive and misguided protests.

This is a protest coordinated by Christian groups. The “Rise Up Australia Party” is the political arm of the “Catch the Fire Ministries” known for their extreme and offensive statements, such as that the Black Saturday Bushfires were God’s punishment for abortion laws in Victoria. Based on the policies and pronouncements that we have seen so far, it would be a cold day in Hell before before the AFA could endorse anything from RUAP, and this protest is no exception.

We encourage all Australians to reject ignorance, bigotry, persecution and xenophobia – and these divisive protests, which unfortunately embody all of those characteristics.

Michael Boyd  
President  
Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc

## From the Editor

There have been a small number of members that have asked why the AFA took this position. It was very clear from the inception of the Reclaim Australia Rallies, that they would attract far right extremists, bigots and christian fundamentalists.

Danny Nahliah of the Catch the Fire Ministries and Rise Up Australia Party was to be the key speaker at the Melbourne Rally. Shermion Burgess (ADL white supremacist) was a speaker at the Sydney Rally. Pauline Hanson was the main speaker at the Brisbane Rally. None of these are people that the AFA would ever want to align with. I also note that after the event the Jewish Communal Lobby have advertised to provide free legal coverage for anyone arrested at the events.

The AFA is against the proliferation of all religions. However, we do not support bigots and racists to target one section of the community for attack. I am proud that I was at the counter rally in Sydney.

Tracy Burgess  
Editor



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# Media Release

## **Hospitals are for Health Care**

The Atheist Foundation of Australia is not surprised by the lobbying of religious leaders in Perth who are demanding a room be made available for their religious practices in a children's hospital.

The Western Australian Government has provided a room for multi-faith observance in the hospital, but that's not good enough for Roger Herft (the Anglican Archbishop of Perth) and other religious leaders.

President of the AFA, Michael Boyd, pointed out the irony of Archbishop Herft in describing the multi-faith room as "an empty shell for people who are grasping for hope". It is our opinion that quote could be used as an accurate description of prayer itself. Ironically, if prayer cured illness we would not need hospitals.

The AFA supports a scientific, evidence based health care system, and there are no scientific studies verifying the efficacy of prayer. In fact, a study conducted by the Templeton Foundation in 2006 of 1,802 coronary artery bypass surgery patients concluded those who knew they were being prayed for fared worse.

The AFA refutes the assertion by Margaret Court, senior pastor of the Victory Life Centre, that "we are a Judaeo-Christian nation and I think we seem to always be bowing to minority groups and I think it's very, very wrong." Australia is not a Judaeo-Christian nation. Australia is a secular nation.

If valuable room is to be set aside for reflection, meditation, solace, or prayer it should accommodate people of all faiths, and those with none. As such, it should not be given over to the symbols of any one religious tradition. Space in an Australian public hospital, built and operated with public funds, should be available to all members of the public who need to use it in a non-discriminatory manner.

Michael Boyd  
President  
Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc

# Media Release

## **Diseases Don't Respect Religious Belief**

The Atheist Foundation of Australia accepts evidence-based medical science, which overwhelmingly supports vaccination. Vaccinations reduce the prevalence, spread, and severity of disease and maximise herd immunity, which protects those who are unable to be vaccinated.

The AFA welcomes the Federal Government's encouragement of vaccinations and tightening of exemptions. However, we are bemused and concerned that the Government considers personal religious beliefs are more important than public health.

"The government's goal of increasing vaccination rates is a noble one." commented AFA President Michael Boyd. "However, retaining any religious exemption ignores the reality that vaccine-preventable diseases simply do not respect religious beliefs."

"Diseases will infect vulnerable people regardless of which gods they pray to, sometimes with serious health consequences. Exceptions based on faith from proper medical treatment increases the risk for the rest of the community."

Anti-vaccination proponents are likely to be already looking at ways to exploit this loophole, and we would not be surprised if the number of people professing this religious belief was to suddenly jump.

In Australia, people are free to personally practice their religion as long as it does not negatively impact on the rest of the community. Compromising vaccination programs due to personally held religious beliefs unquestionably places other people at risk.

The AFA calls for the Federal Government to strictly limit exemptions from vaccinations to people with genuine medical reasons for doing so.

Michael Boyd  
President  
Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc



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# Atheist Community

## *Sydney Atheists*

The Atheist Foundation of Australia is reaching out to the various city and state based atheist groups across Australia. The local groups provide opportunities for atheists to meet one another and have like minded discussions. This issue we focus on the Sydney Atheists. The President, Steve Marton provides us a background on the group. We will be featuring other groups in future issues.

Sydney Atheists was formed in 2006. Initially it consisted of two separate organisations, one a Meetup and the other an incorporated body. The incorporated body had gone into factional distress. In 2013 a new committee was elected with a formal structure and a new constitution that complied with the State statutes for incorporated not-for-profit organisations.

The Meetup and the incorporated bodies were unified to become the one organisation with the elected committee responsible for the combined group, financial, activist and other obligations and duties.

As of the year 2015, the committee has consisted of seven people originating from seven countries; Australia, Egypt, Germany, Hungary, Iraq, Turkey and the United Kingdom. They represent various branches from three former religions; Christianity, Islam and Judaism. The committee varies in age from 23 to 60 with backgrounds and experiences varying from accounting, law, management, medical, science and social sciences.

Sydney Atheists conduct two major monthly events with some satellite events. The major ones are the Monthly talks that occur on the 2nd Friday of the month, which are our chief means of raising funds. Topics include atheism, escaping faith, philosophy, psychology, religion, science and technology. Occasionally we have nights geared toward a different type of entertainment including debates and comedy shows. Entrance to our events generally varies between \$5.00 and \$10.00. We usually have between 60 and 80 attendees. Sydney Atheists' biggest event is the coming tour of Professor

Peter Boghossian from the University of Portland in Oregon on Friday 12th of June. Peter will discuss "From Faith to Reason: How to create atheism". Entry to this event is \$20 if paid before May and \$25 thereafter. Tickets can be purchased online at [trybooking.com/HJVF](http://trybooking.com/HJVF)

We have two monthly gatherings that coincide on the last Thursday of each month. They are both casual evenings without specific agendas, though occasionally we include a topic for discussion. One is the Social Lounge which is open to all ages, with a Young Sydney Atheists social at the same time which is more specifically available to those in the 18 to 39 age group. Before the evening is complete, there is usually



intermingling between the groups. There is no entry fee to either of these events.

We also have suburban Meetups in the north, west, far west and the south of Sydney. A new feature for Sydney Atheists is a Young Sydney Atheists social in the west. Again these are informal social get togethers.

Our overriding mantra is to be welcoming, friendly and fun. Our attendees include people who have escaped almost every religion imaginable as well as those who have never known anything other than reality. We often welcome people who are still on their journey of religious escape. Our committee ensures that every new person is addressed and made to feel comfortable at our events. This is something that the religious do very well.

Although there is no membership requirement to attend Sydney Atheists functions, a Supporter Membership is available for \$20. This gives the holder priority in obtaining seats for events, a discount on event pricing, eligibility to vote in our elections and a means of supporting the organisation both financially and in spirit. Our membership page is at <http://www.sydneyatheists.org/p/donations-and-membership.html>

Through our events, memberships and donations we were able to raise funds for our very successful Billboard campaign. We were able to share the cost of the campaign as equal financial partners with the AFA. This campaign either directly or indirectly touched between one and two million people. The people who saw the billboard were numbered in their hundreds of thousands. Those to whom it was mentioned in their church services was in the order of tens of thousands. The campaign was covered by news.com.au, the Daily Telegraph, the Courier Mail, the Herald Sun and the Adelaide Advertiser. The article was then mentioned in both theist and atheist sites around the world including countries as distant as the USA, UK, Germany, the Netherlands, Italy and Nigeria.

The slogan that was placed on the billboard stated "Have you escaped religion? We have!" Determination of the slogan went through a process of requesting suggestions from the membership of Sydney Atheists, looking up other slogans from other sites, and noting quotes from atheist legends. A panel of eight reduced about 120 quotes down to around 40. An evening was conducted to consider and vote on the most appropriate slogan. The three most highly voted quotes included two by Mark Twain. They were not used as they were either derisory or wordy in terms of Billboard space, which left the slogan that was ultimately used.

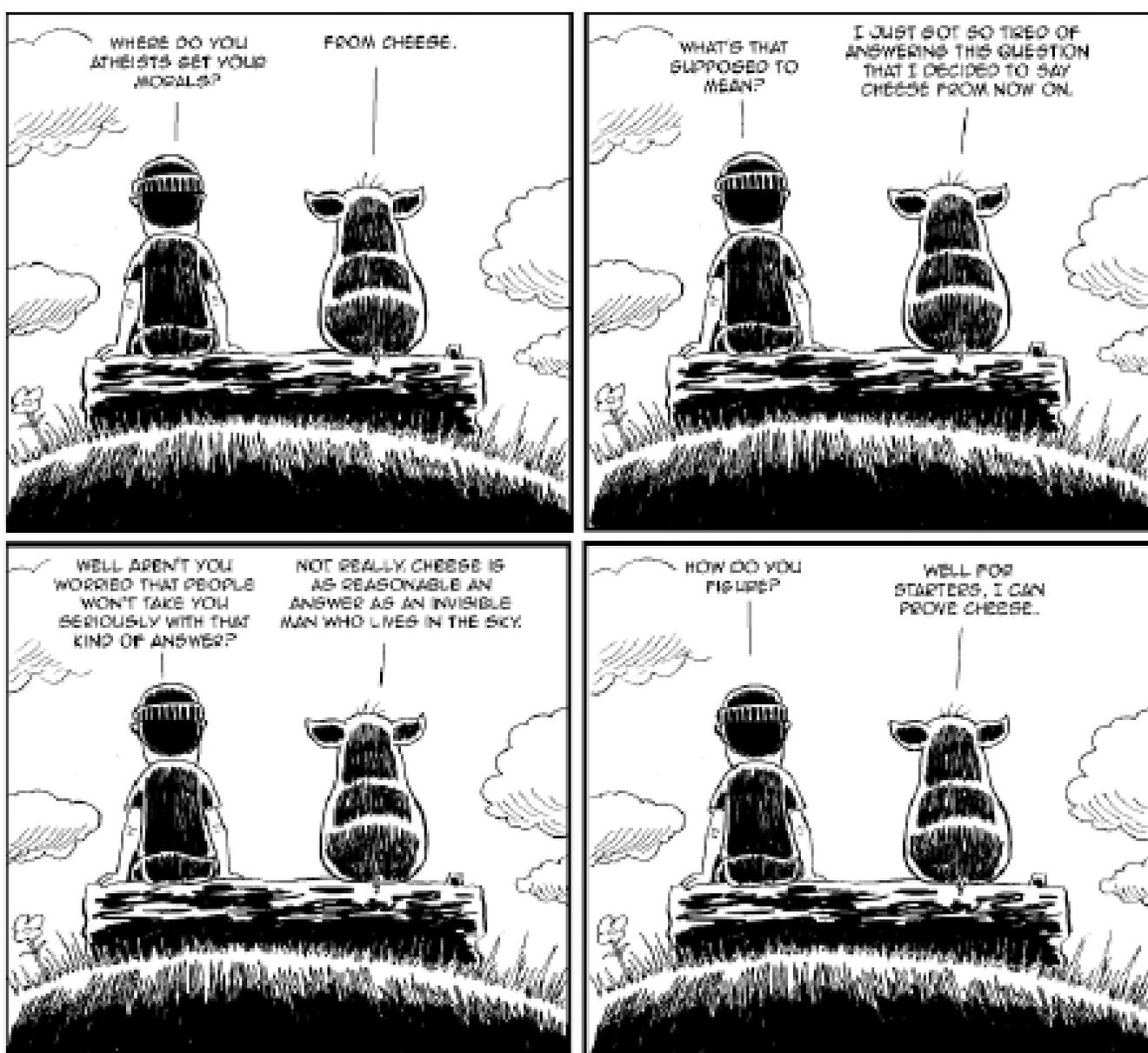
The beauty of the slogan was that it was not derisory or inflammatory. It asked a simple question "Have you escaped religion?" In so doing, it was suggesting that the reader consider their beliefs. It asked them to consider whether religion was something to escape and begged the question as to whether it was worthwhile escaping. The punch came with "We have". In other words, we as atheists have escaped religion and we think that such escape was and is worthwhile, consider joining us.

Sydney Atheists received a handful of very generous donations to put the

billboard up, and subsequently received some very generous donations to repeat the event which in conjunction with the AFA we hope to do later in the year. In combination with that, we are hoping to instigate an Australia wide "Escape religion" day in September.

Yours sincerely,

Steve Marton  
President  
Sydney Atheists  
[sydneyatheists.org](http://sydneyatheists.org)  
<http://www.meetup.com/sydneyatheists/>



theadtheistpig.com



# Online Atheist Community

## Women Without Religion

The Atheist Foundation of Australia is reaching out to the various internet social media based atheist groups across the world. The online groups provide opportunities for atheists to interact, share and have like minded discussions. This issue we focus on the group Women Without Religion.

The name “Women Without Religion” (WWR) is all at once a description, an affirmation and challenge – to the perceived established order. As the name suggests, this is a group that all about atheism and women – unbelief from a feminist perspective.

The most visible part is the WWR Facebook page, which is the public “front-of-house” where key messages are posted for public discussion, and the WWR group page for free discussion of atheist and feminist issues between group members.

At the time of writing, the Facebook group currently has more than 5,400 members, and the page has garnered more than 24,000 “likes”.

Annie Chant, the creator and founder of WWR, is a long-term AFA member and moderator at AFA Forum. She found that her participation in online atheism on Facebook, and that of other female atheists she knew, was too often a function of gender:

*“Women Without Religion began in response to inherent misogyny in some quarters of the atheist movement. As a regular atheist Facebooker, I found it hard not to notice that all the atheist pages were covered in ornate images of well known atheists such as Dawkins and Harris yet female atheists such as Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Taslima Nasreen were nowhere to be seen.” says Annie.*

The problems that Annie and other female atheists encountered online were by no means limited to lack of recognition for prominent women in atheism:

*“In all the atheist groups I tried to contribute, I was confronted with being hit on, threats of rape and physical violence, not being taken seriously, pictures of breasts being posted in serious threads*

*for the benefit of the women engaging, suggestions on how to make myself more appealing to men, suggestions on how to make my posts more appealing to men and my avatar [profile picture] being critiqued for attractiveness.”*

Far from being a problem limited to a few rogue male contributors, Annie saw that this was actually the “status quo” in existing atheist Facebook groups:

*“The admins took no steps to appease anyone but straight white men in their groups or (to) provide a place where... women, LGBTQI’s and straight men can contribute equally. I came to understand that the all male cast of admins groups I had attempted to engage in, were maintaining the status quo”.*



Annie saw that something could be done about it, and decided to act:

*“I realised that under these conditions, there was no foreseeable way that the cycle could end and atheist women could be heard so, with the help of trusted atheist female and male friends I’d met through the AFA and my atheist feminist husband Wolty, I realised we could springboard a new kind of atheist group, one that does not exclude women and one that advocates for atheist women and LGBTQI people without excluding straight atheist men and Women Without Religion began.”*

And with that, WWR started in December 2013 as both a Facebook page/group and as an online forum. As things have evolved, only the Facebook page and group were retained going forward.

It’s a truly international group, with a diverse list of countries represented within the membership. To convey some sense of just how diverse, there are currently 29 Admins for the group, selected to reflect membership as far as possible. They are drawn from countries and regions including North America, Australia, Europe, Africa, New Zealand and PNG. True to Annie’s vision, WWR has remained an accepting, inclusive safe-zone:

*“The admin team of WWR comprises of wonderful atheists from the LGBTQI and straight spectrums from all parts of the world. The group with nearly 6,000 members and the page with 24,000 exclude no genders or orientations. It is heartening that LGBTQI people also know their voices are equally valued by WWR team and members”.*

What is unapologetically excluded is sexism, misogyny, discrimination, xenophobia and all forms of bigotry. WWR is described in the rules as:

*“...a benevolent dictatorship. A group moderated by the admins for the good of the whole. We have a particular vision for the atmosphere and standards of our group, if you don’t share that vision, there are plenty of other groups to accommodate your individual vision– or feel free to start your own. “*

To maintain a safe space for members, any breaches of the rules are dealt with promptly, including by removal of the contributor from WWR where warranted. For instance, early on in WWR’s life, there was an influx of Muslim men applying

because they (apparently) mistakenly thought that “women without religion” = “OKCupid.com”. It almost goes without saying that this is contrary to the idea of a safe space for women, and resulted in a great deal of work for Admins vis-a-vis disabusing and removing them.

Importantly, WWR is not an anti-male space, and welcomes men who genuinely support, and are interested in, the views and perspectives of atheist feminist women.

There are strong links between WWR and the AFA. A significant proportion of the WWR Admin Team are members of both the AFA and AFA Forum, and there is regular crossover in general contributors to both as well.

A typical day at WWR might see discussions about:

- religious privilege and how this negatively affects women;
- legal changes looking to wind back womens’ reproductive rights, including rights to legal and safe abortion on demand;
- a WWR member relaying the difficulties they experienced in leaving their religion;
- LGBTQI equality issues, including Marriage Equality;
- Members seeking advice and input from other members, in dealing with issues of religion and/or feminism they’re experiencing in real life.

Please come over and check out WWR at:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/WomenWithoutReligion/>

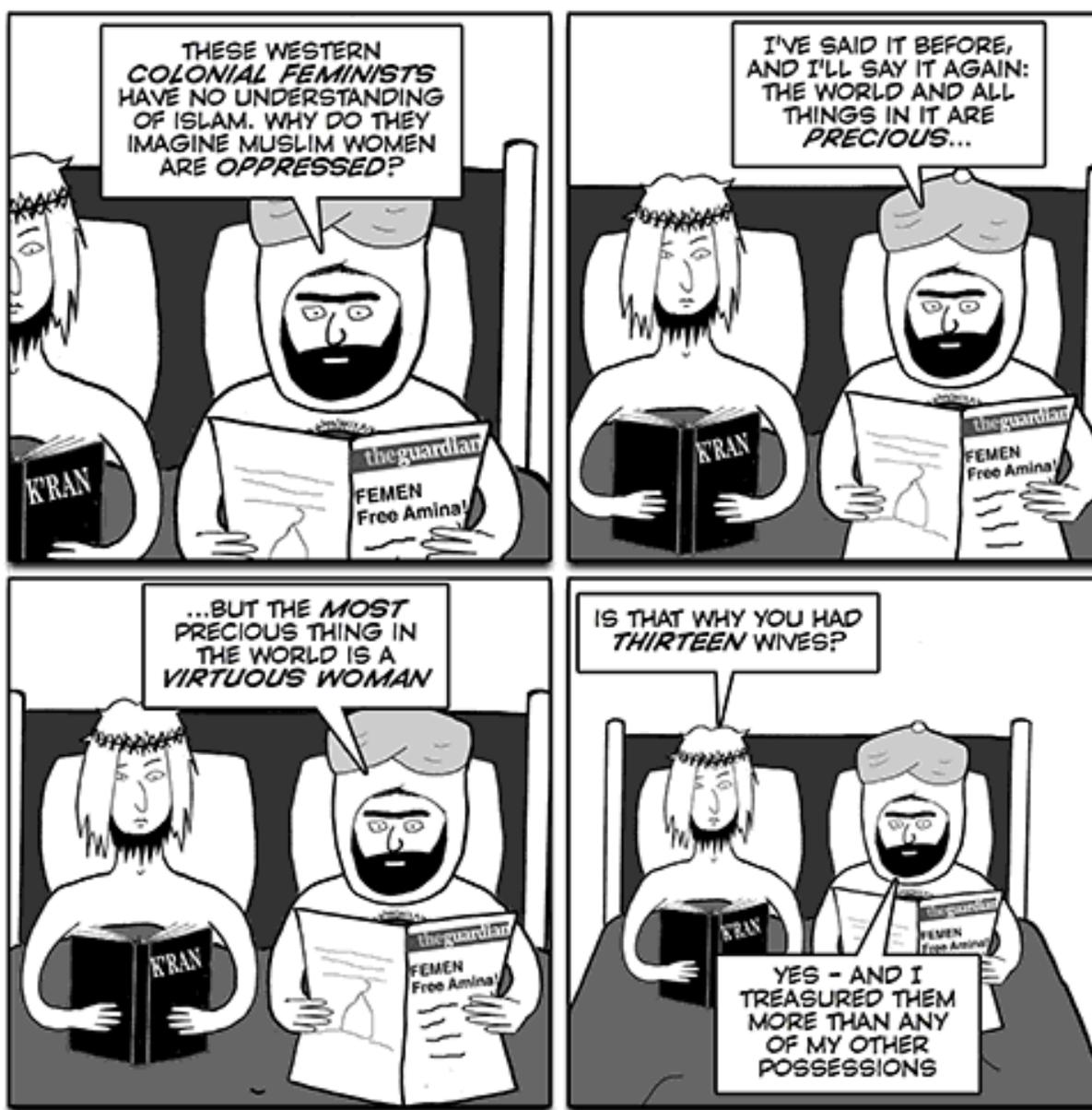
<https://www.facebook.com/WomenWithoutReligion>

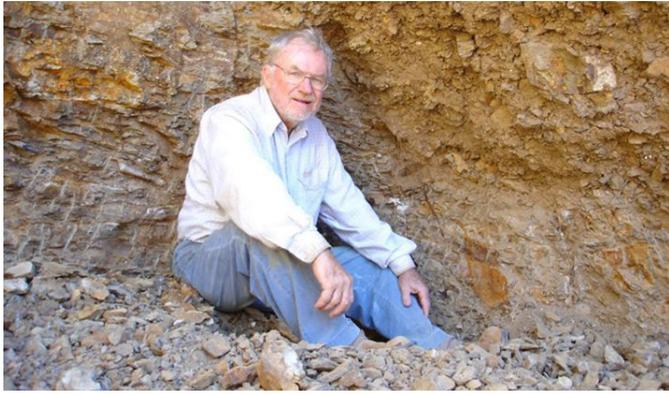
WWR also has a twitter handle - <https://twitter.com/womenwithoutrlgn>

Like any group, it is as good as the contributions and participation of its members. Reflecting on this, Annie says:

*“We don’t assume to have all the answers, the best we can hope for is that everyone can speak honestly without distraction and without fear.*

*That’s all I wanted.”*





## *Vale - Geoff Beikoff*

Geoffrey Noel Beikoff was a member of the AFA for a number of years. In late January 2015 a donation of \$5,000 was received by the AFA from Geoff. In early February a letter of thanks was sent to Geoff. The letter was returned by a family member advising that Geoff died on 10 February at the age of 72. The family member asked the AFA to stay away and that they did not agree with the (non) religious stance of Geoff.

We note from the funeral notification that a religious service was held for Geoff. In the interests of family sentiments, the AFA did not send a wreath. We'll remember Geoff in our own way.

To  
question and critically  
examine all ideas, testing them in the  
light of experiment, leads to the discovery of  
facts. 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. 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.

# The Death of Dad

*by Louella Harley*

Louella shares with us her thoughts upon the death of her father. Death is particularly hard for atheists as we have no illusory comfort of seeing our loved ones again in an afterlife. The pain is real and raw.

My dad was an atheist and taught me to think critically so, as I matured, an atheistic view on religion was the only reasonable position for me to adopt also. Not everyone wants to talk or hear about death. If that's you, please skip to the next article now.

My dad lived a full life, including one third of it after he retired. He had two undergraduate degrees (engineering and science) and a PhD in mechanical engineering and did decades of volunteer work while working fulltime. Tennis and travel were passions. His health was great til the last couple of years which were a downward spiral into deeper and deeper disability and dependence, both physically and mentally.

About 3 months before he died, I wrote (to no-one but myself):

*"My 92 year old dad's quality of life is pathetic. He has dementia, he's incontinent, he's lost mobility, he's partially blind and mostly deaf. If ever there was a case for euthanasia...it would be a kindness to him and to my mum."*

Nine days before he died, my dad was taken to hospital with an intractable infection. A kindly doctor gently told mum and me that this would be what he died from. My parents had moved to a unit in a supported living environment three years earlier. Nursing care is available 24/7 if needed. It was the wish of both of them to be together at home at the end.

It took considerable polite assertiveness on my part to convince the somewhat forbidding, but nevertheless well-meaning, hospital palliative care nurse that my parents' firm wishes were for him to die at home and that he could receive high quality palliative care there. So he was delivered home to spend the last days of his life with my mum, his wife of just short of 66 years. He was kept pain free with heavy drugs.

He lived for six more days. He mostly slept peacefully, but would occasionally open his eyes and respond with a slight squeeze if you held his hand. Mum and I are grateful that we were there when he took his last breath, which was when two nurses were routinely changing his position. This happens quite commonly, I learned. How had I got to my mid-50s and not known this? I think we should talk more about death and good ways of dying for the elderly.

If readers are still here, thank you for letting me talk about my father, a great man.

We didn't have a funeral, just a private cremation and a small family gathering to remember his life. As mum said, most of their friends are already dead. It's a grieving person's prerogative to use black humour, I maintain. As atheists, our deceased loved ones do live on... in our memories...and that's enough.



# Book Review

## *Religion: The Greatest Confidence Trick in History - Dennis Morris*

Dennis Morris was president of the Humanist Society of WA from 1998 and continued in that role until he stood down after a stroke in 2006. He was an enthusiastic participant and worker in all the activities and meetings of the Society.

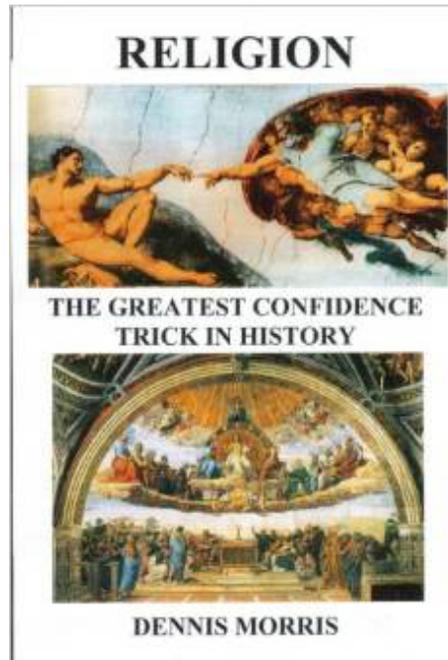
In 2014, Dennis was presented with the Outstanding Humanist Achiever award for his dedication to the humanist movement in Australia.

He regards religion and the various forms of superstition it promotes as a problem to humanity

His thoughts on the subject are contained in his latest book: *Religion: The Greatest Confidence Trick in History*. dedicated by the author to "All those who, over many centuries, were sexually abused, cruelly tortured or slaughtered in the name of religion: including those who have been denigrated and persecuted for merely daring to pursue scientific knowledge"

Earlier books by Dennis Morris were *Science Religion and Freethinking*, *The Gospel of the Freethinker*, *Religious Prostitution*, *Religious Absurdities*, and

*From the Seed of our Ancestors' Primitive Superstition Grew all Belief Systems.*



In his latest book he said that such work commenced, when as a child he was first introduced to the sciences and critical thinking.

The latest book is a very good critique of religion and how it has been used to

exploit and program people throughout history.

Dennis provides a comprehensive background on ancient belief systems and the purposes they fulfilled. He then moves into the earliest of the three Abrahamic religions and explains the evolution of Judaism over time from paganism to monotheism and from matriarchal to patriarchal.

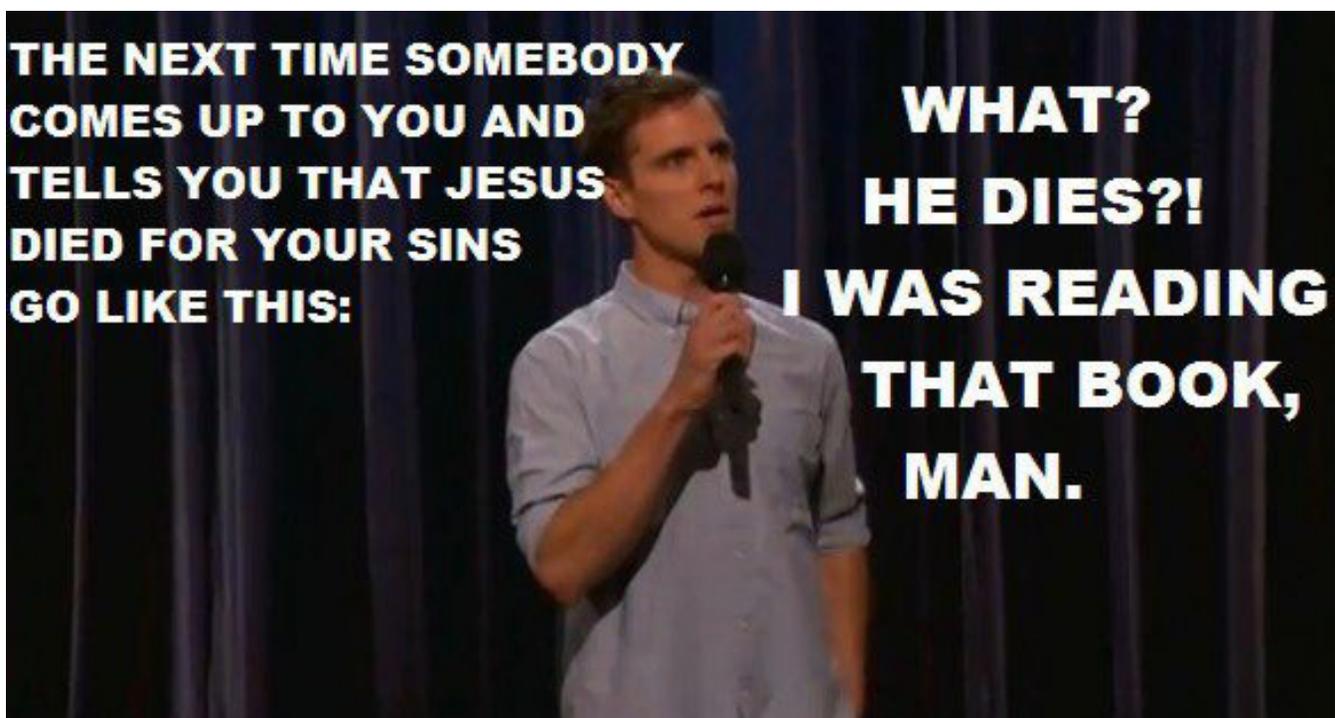
Dennis then moves on to Christianity and covers the contradictions and wholesale plagiarism from earlier belief systems. He looks at the bible as a moral example and the legacy for the modern world.

Finally, e covers various sects and offshoots and a review of Islam and the Koran.

The book is comprehensive, insightful and yet, very readable. I recommend it for every atheist bookshelf. It's definitely a 'go to' book for those 'discussions' with those of faith.

Publisher: lulu.com (July 9, 2013)

Paperback: 300 pages



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## MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION/RENEWAL FORM

### SECTION A: Membership Type

**New Membership**

**Renewal**

*Membership currently includes four (4) issues of The Australian Atheist magazine per year. If you choose a membership option with the printed magazine, please note that the \$10.00 per annum is to help cover printing and postage costs.*

**Membership type (Please tick)**

**Note: All prices include GST**

**Single**

With PDF magazine \$35.00 p/a

With printed magazine \$45.00 p/a

**Couple**

With PDF magazine \$55.00 p/a

With printed magazine \$65.00 p/a

**Pensioner Concession Card Holder**

With PDF magazine \$20.00 p/a

With printed magazine \$30.00 p/a

**Student (PDF only)** \$20.00 p/a

Sustaining – Assists the AFA in sustaining ongoing critical work \$100.00 p/a

Sponsorship – Makes even more of the AFA's critical work possible \$250.00 p/a

**Payment Options**

Cheque/Money Order Send to: Atheist Foundation of Australia  
PO Box 4284  
SHELLHARBOUR VILLAGE NSW 2529

Direct Deposit Bank Commonwealth Bank  
NOTE: Please enter your Account Atheist Foundation of Australia  
NAME in the reference BSB 065 503  
section Acc # 1012 0389

**Donation** \$

**Total** \$

### SECTION B: Details of Applicant

Family name/surname

Given name/s

Title

Mr  Ms  Other

Date of birth

D /  M /  Y Y Y Y

Occupation

Street Unit/Street number/Street name

City/town/suburb

State/Province/Region

Post Code/ZIP

Country

Contact number

Email address

How did you hear about the AFA?

Are you a member of the AFA forums?  Yes  No

If YES, what is your forum user name?

### SECTION C: Declaration and Signature

*I agree with the Aims and Philosophy of the Atheist Foundation of Australia (AFA)  
and hereby apply for membership.*

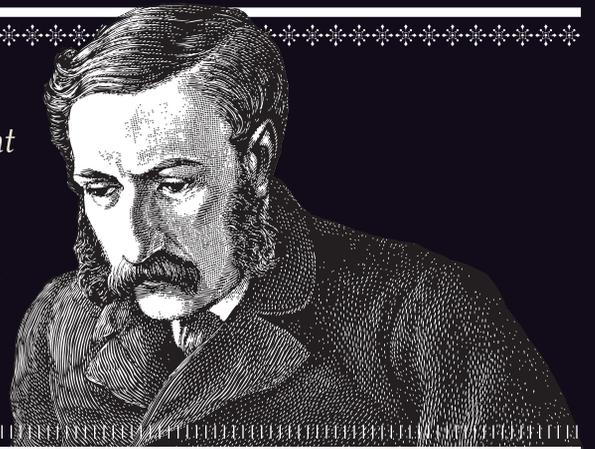
Signature

X

D /  M /  Y Y Y Y

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* ~