



**Atheist Foundation
of Australia Inc** Established
1970

Promoting scientifically credible & factually reliable evidence

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The Australian Atheist



Religion

Dividing People for Millennia

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Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc

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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,

I apologise for the delay with this issue. I have been on holidays in Japan. I had an absolutely lovely time. However, I've had to hit the ground running as soon as I got home both for the AFA and at work. (Picture of me below relaxing in Japan as evidence that I can actually relax sometimes).

I can't believe it's the end of the year again. What happened to 2015? I want to start again as I'm not sure what happened. We're about to enter the Christmas period again. At least Christmas isn't as miserable and depressing as Easter. I quite like carol singing, Christmas trees and tinsel. However, it can be a frustrating time having to explain to theist friends and family that the holiday has absolutely nothing to do with Christianity or Jesus' birth and was in fact based upon elements stolen from various pagan religions in the early Christian church. Also, I have no understanding of what Frosty the Snowman was doing in Bethlehem, but there you go.

On the back page of this issue, you will find an advertisement for Think Inc's Sam Harris Tour in January 2016. I'll be going and hopefully I'll see you there. An email has been sent to members with a promotion code for a 10% discount on tickets. In case you missed it, the code is *AFA*. For those who didn't see Sam Harris at the Global Atheist Convention in 2012, trust me, you'll love him!

There are a lot of media releases in this issue which is indicative of the monumental work being done by the Communications Team of the AFA. These guys are there ready with a response and editorial for any issue arising. Public comment is a critical aspect of being an atheist. Woo and religion need to be called out in the public space when it intrudes upon the lives of the rest of us. I encourage all members to make comments on articles, blogs etc wherever religion is being used to intrude upon the freedoms of others.

There are currently rumblings that Malcolm Turnbull may stop funding the National School Chaplaincy Program. I'm not getting my hopes up just yet. What is good news is that the Census question on religion has been amended. Let's hope this results in a more accurate record of the level of religiosity in Australia. We know it is nowhere near that identified in any previous Census. Perhaps with appropriate demographic data, governments can actually see that religiosity is on the downward trend in Australia and start to make some appropriate changes to public policy, public funding and tax subsidies.

The front cover of this issue has my favourite fundies - The Westboro Baptists. If you've never heard of them, they are definitely worth googling. They are very original in their nuttiness. Hateful, awful people. However, they make me laugh in a black comedy kind of way. Sadly, they believe their own tripe, much like most fundies.

Finally, as always, I put a call out to anyone with a creative streak who would like to submit articles, poems, drawings, cartoons, photography etc. Email me at taa@atheistfoundation.org.au

Until next issue, take care.
Tracy



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President's Message

Here we are, coming to the end of another year. The AFA has been very busy in 2015 with tendrils in all directions to counter religious incursions into secular society. It can be tiring to be constantly arguing the same old arguments against the same old issues. However, it can't be ignored. To ignore is to accept and condone.

In Australia, we are seeing the continued rise of religion camouflaged into public policy and politics. In NSW, QLD and at the Commonwealth level, it has become like playing 'whack-a-mole'. Every time we whack one piece of idiocy down, another rises up. The Gayby Baby incident in NSW was just the most recent from a government with a very fundamental bent. A video made for school children about the experience of kids growing up with gay parents was blasted by the Education Minister and banned from being played in schools. What a great idea. Of course we don't want our children growing up tolerant and accepting of others. This is just a further intentional policy decision by Minister Piccolli, who also removed Ethics Classes as an option on the SRI forms for new enrolments at NSW public schools.

At the Commonwealth Government level, we have at least seen the back of Tony Abbott with his undisguised Catholic agenda. However, we still have genuine concerns about the continued funding of the National School Chaplaincy Program (NSCP). There were also calls from backbenchers in the LNP to place a religious requirement on refugees and asylum seekers. Abbott may be banished to the back bench, but we still have the likes of Brandis, Pyne, Dutton and Frydenberg with right wing Christian agendas. The AFA will strongly and loudly oppose any public policy that favours one religion over another.

Globally, religion continues to populate news stories. Thirteen senior cardinals,

including George Pell have written a secret letter (not that secret as every media outlet seems to have a copy) urging him not to be so liberal in his approach. The church is not yet ready to enter the twentieth century, let alone the twenty first. ISIS continue to cause death and destruction to muslims and non-muslims. Indonesia continues to have virginity tests for qualification as a female police officer. The orphanage established by Mother Theresa in Calcutta is to shut its doors rather than be forced to allow gay couples to adopt.

Every day, in every country of the world, there seems to be some new form of



wackiness, evil or ineptitude because of religious belief. Every instance needs to be called out. Every instance needs to be stopped. It's an ongoing battle for logic and reason in this world.

The AFA continues to work with atheist and freethought groups across Australia and globally to call out the religious incursions when we see them. Any member wanting to be more active should contact the Membership Officer at membership@atheistfoundation.org.au

Next year the work continues. We will be working to bring you more events as we did this year. We had several great speakers out this year supported by the Atheist Foundation of Australia.

We will also be lobbying the Federal Government in relation to the National School Chaplaincy Program, the NSW Government in relation to Ethocs Classes and the subterfuge implemented in relation to parental consent, marriage equality, right to end of life decisions and no doubt more issues will arise requiring vocal advocacy.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all members of the Committee of Management of the AFA. Without whom, none of the work would happen. They are a great bunch of people and I can't thank them enough for the work they do on a volunteer basis for the atheist community of Australia and internationally.

I'd also like to point out that this is our 50th edition of The Australian Atheist magazine and I'd like to thank Tracy, who has been the editor since issue 41. She took over from Lee Holmes who also did a wonderful job.

Finally, as we come to the end of another year and enter the holiday season of Santa and turkey, I would like to wish everyone a very Happy Holiday and New Year. Eat, drink, be merry and drive safely. Roll on 2016.



Observations on Two Powerful Catholics

By *Bob Irwin*

The Karma Before the Storm

When senior people in government or business are relieved of their tenure, it is generally a case of one or more of: being elevated beyond their capabilities; concealing their plans prior to promotion; failing to deliver what they promised; no-one of sufficient competency or ambition to challenge them; internal and external agendas; and so on. Inevitably, they get what's coming to them . . . often followed by outbursts of disbelief (sometimes confected), sour grapes and even revenge. For whatever reasons, Tony Abbott was removed as prime minister and a new, more popular captain picked as his replacement by his Liberal Party parliamentary colleagues.

Cartoonists, while happy to have new figures and emphases to work on, must be feeling some sadness at the demise of Mr Abbott. The former PM was a cartoonist's dream: the accoutrements (budgie smugglers, boxing gloves, bicycle, and footie shorts and boots), a number of physical aspects (including a strong, muscular and hairy body) and movements (such as a stiff-jointed and splayed-feet walking style – which reminded some of George W. Bush's strutting) found their way readily into cartoons. Mr Abbott was easy fodder for satire.

There was his entrenched conservative religiosity and his pronouncements, especially on climate change and renewable energy which were non-evidence-based – a topic I also touch on in “Are You Listening?” in this issue.

And the broken (political) promises – a pattern which continued after being rolled. Mr Abbott, immediately following his removal, said there would be no sniping, wrecking or undermining. Consider then his opinions expressed soon after when he appealed to Liberal Party members, and presumably voters, not to resign from or

abandon the Party because he is no longer the PM – as if they would just because of his removal! Is he living in a fantasy world to believe his demise would cause mass resignations or voting for other parties? Or just unable to accept the tough, and sometimes brutal, reality of politics and his own responsibility for the negative outcomes he experienced? And might he also be surreptitiously undermining Mr Turnbull and the new PM's supporters?

Mr Abbott went on to claim that he could have won the next election due around Spring 2016 – a view contrary to popular opinion (behind in 30 polls in a row and trailing the opposition leader and the now incumbent as preferred PM). And when asked a difficult question about his attitude to and relationship with Mr Turnbull, Mr Abbott refused to give a direct answer, saying much “dirty water had flowed under the bridge” and it was “not the time to go into all this now” . . . yet he was going into it himself, selectively, and it appears with a degree of not-so-subtle vengeance.

The notorious “captain's picks” also played a role in his defeat. It was as though he was asking for forgiveness (something the early Christian writers attributed to Jesus) rather than seeking permission or agreement for his choices.

But should anyone be surprised at Mr Abbott's behaviour given fundamental Christianity is based substantially on superstition, ancient myths and non-evidence-based stories, while their God is the ultimate arbitrator when it comes to responsibility and accountability? No, not really . . . his neural pathways were set decades ago to a particular, and predictable, way of reacting.

If Mr Abbott had stuck it out at the seminary (thus avoiding the pain of losing the position of PM), and with his academic ability and determination there might now be, instead of Archbishop Anthony Fisher, Archbishop Anthony Abbott – seamlessly replacing his spiritual mentor and advisor, the now Vatican-based Cardinal George Pell.



The final say goes to Fred Chaney AO.

“Neither common sense nor faith is a reliable guide to rational decision-making. For that, you need evidence. And an evidence-based approach to politics is at the heart of liberalism.”

The well-respected Fred Chaney was a former Deputy Leader of the Liberal Party, government minister, and Liberal parliamentarian for twenty years until 1993.

The Calm Before the Storm

During his recent visit to the USA, Pope Francis spoke to Congress, calmly and reverently, but he stirred up ultra-conservative Republicans (over his abhorrence of the death penalty), and Francis irked victims of Catholic clerical sexual abuse and their families (who believe they have been let down).

Regarding the latter, putting things into some sort of relative perspective are the following three audiences Francis had in his visit:

- Celebration of Mass on the Benjamin Franklin Parkway in front of 1 million.
- Meeting and offering words of hope to 100 convicted and suspected killers, rapists and mobsters.
- Meeting with five abuse victims – not all Catholics and not all victims of clerical sexual abuse by his priests.

Francis expressed his opinion that “God weeps for the sexual abuse of children” (He must have shed mega-litres of tears). The Pope said he owes victims of sexual abuse “gratitude for their great value” (whatever that meant) before announcing his commitment as pontiff to “ensure that youth are protected and that all responsible will be held accountable” (why wasn’t this principle in place

decades, even centuries, ago?) True to bureaucratic Vatican form, Francis has set up an advisory commission and a new Vatican department (under the auspices of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith) to investigate bishops accused of covering up or not preventing sexual abuse of minors.

One victim spokesperson asked “Do we need a commission to study something we’ve known about since the 1980s?”

It is worth noting that thirteen years ago the US Conference of Catholic Bishops pledged to oust any guilty clergy, yet around forty priests facing serious abuse accusations are still on assignment.

Under Francis’ pontificate the clerical sexual-abuse scandal drags on without proper and timely resolution, just as it did under Benedict; and as at that time there are storms of protest.



Freedom of Belief

By Hugh Harris

“Religious freedom” is often just a Trojan horse for religious privilege. That’s why we should instead be promoting the freedom of all beliefs, including atheistic ones, writes Hugh Harris.

In early November, the Australian Human Rights Commissioner, Tim Wilson, will host a Religious Freedom Roundtable. Different faith and non-faith groups will come together to discuss “religious freedom” in the context of our secular society.

The main item on the agenda will no doubt be the same-sex marriage debate that has seen the collision of traditional religious beliefs with community standards. If gay marriage is allowed, how will this affect religious freedom?

Sydney Archbishop Anthony Fisher gave a preview of what we can expect to hear at the roundtable with his recent article for ABC Religion & Ethics. In it, he describes a nightmare vision of a future Australia in which bishops are gaoled for discriminating against gays, religious tax exemptions are gone, and there’s no more religious instruction in schools. It’s hardly the Earth-levelling apocalypse promised by Christian eschatology; this is simply a dream induced by fear of the Christianity’s dwindling influence.

Fisher’s article demonstrates that Christian leaders and lobby groups are mainly concerned with protecting “religious” beliefs. But what about other beliefs?

The United Nations Declaration of Human Rights (UNDHR) safeguards the right of “freedom of thought, conscience

and religion”. But we don’t hear about freedom of thought or freedom of conscience as often as we hear about religious freedom. Strange, since freedom of thought is in fact the progenitor of human liberties including freedom of speech and freedom of religion. US Supreme Court Judge Benjamin Cardozo described freedom of thought as “the matrix, the indispensable condition, of nearly every other form of freedom”.

Adopting this term could help prevent “religious freedom” from becoming a Trojan horse for religious privilege. We’ve had enough of that already. Widespread exemptions to anti-discrimination law allow religious service providers in education, health and aged care to discriminate on who they employ and on what beliefs they promote. Notably, many of these organisations are government funded, which means that our taxpayer dollars go directly towards buttressing these beliefs.

Tax exemptions are enjoyed by charities. Some of these are also religious groups. This is uncontroversial. But tax exemptions are also enjoyed by religious organisations on the basis of their religiosity alone. Australian taxpayers - many of whom are nonbelievers, many of whom prefer the writings

of atheist Christopher Hitchens to those of theologian David Bentley-Hart - contribute about \$31 billion a year to religious organisations. It’s impossible to know how much of this money is being used for bona fide charity, but what we do know is that much of it is actually being used for “the advancement of religion”, which the law says is a legitimate charitable purpose.

When freedom of belief is threatened, the oppressive force is often religion itself. We see it on the news every night. In Saudi Arabia, secular writer Raif Badawi is flogged and sentenced to 10 years imprisonment, and Shia activist Ali al-Nimr is sentenced to beheading and crucifixion.



In addition, the UNDHR protects all types of beliefs. Article 18 protects theistic, non-theistic and atheistic beliefs, as well as the right to profess any religion or belief.

Given non-faith based beliefs are granted equal protection under the UNDHR, the phrase “religious freedom” provides an undue emphasis on “religious beliefs”. In our submission to the roundtable, The Rationalist Society of Australia suggests using the far better umbrella term “freedom of belief”. This accurately describes the rights protected by the UNDHR without elevating particular types of beliefs.

We see it when mobs hack secularists to death in Bangladesh, and the local police chief seemingly admonishes the victims for offending religious sentiment. Salman Rushdie, Theo van Gogh and Charlie Hebdo all represent the right of free expression against the tyranny of suppression.

World religions are better organised and better equipped to fight the battle of beliefs than non-believers are. Many non-believers used to be apathetic about faith rather than opposed to it. They've tolerated the gradual impost of things like the contentious National Chaplaincy scheme (its federal funding having twice been ruled unconstitutional), and policies resulting in Australia having one of the largest proportions of children studying at religious schools in the OECD?

The 2016 Census will for the first time offer the choice "no religion" at the top. In previous surveys, it was hidden at the bottom, underneath a list of "other" choices. When the results are published in 2017, there's little doubt that non-religion will become the largest religious denomination. The 2011 Census recorded "no belief" at 22.3 per cent, and even

then, another 8.5 per cent failed to record a theistic option. Given the 2012 WIN-Gallop poll recorded it at 48 per cent and a 2013 Roy Morgan survey recorded it at 37.6 per cent, the next Census looks certain to record a huge bump in non-belief.

Two potent forces - the scourge of Jihadism and the Royal Commission into Child Sexual Abuse - have conspired in the minds of many Australians to strip away the veneer of deference shielding religion from scrutiny. Following on from the New Atheism movement, a second wave of opprobrium gathers pace. A second coming of sorts, the awakening conscience of non-believers who demand an equal voice and equal treatment under the law. Those who previously gave the creeds of Abraham the benefit of the doubt, who averted their eyes from their excesses and scandals, have had to finally agree that enough is enough.

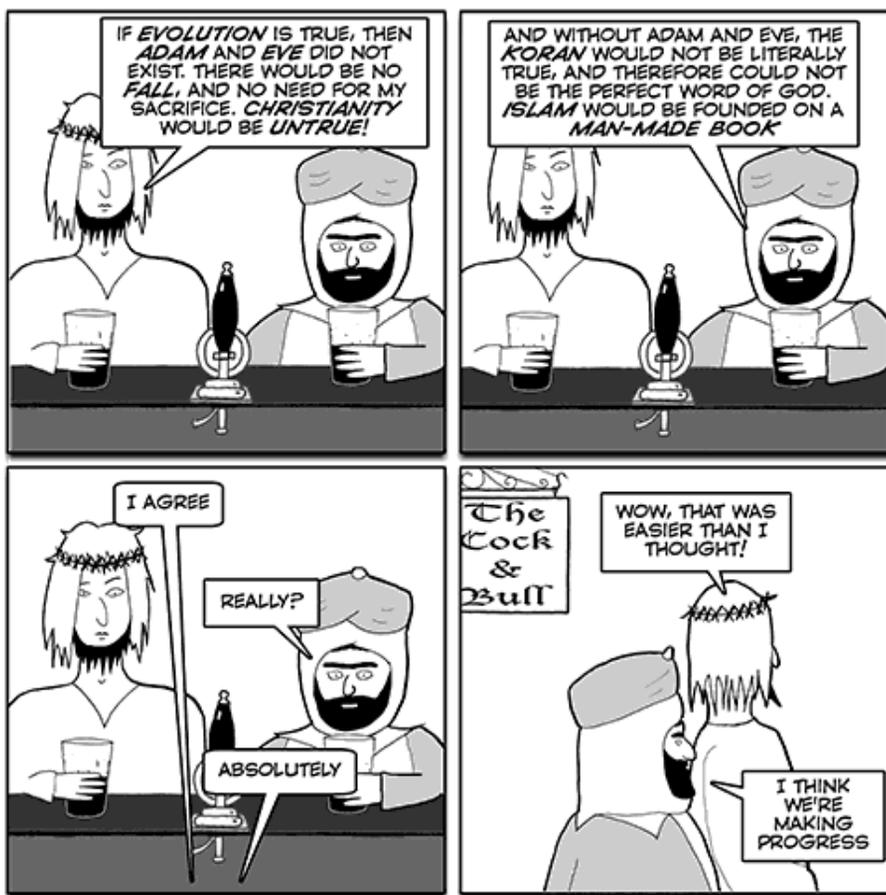
Amongst the multitude of faith interest groups, there will be only four non-religious groups represented at the Religious Freedom Roundtable. Our simple task: to promote the message that is contained within the very definition of

UNDHR itself, that the beliefs of non-believers carry equal weight with those of believers. When we "let freedom ring", it won't be in order to discriminate against others.

And for those such as Archbishop Fisher who fear the clang of a fast-closing door, I offer the following consolation. The heathens in your midst don't want to invert the current situation. We aren't advocating that you have to pay for evangelical atheists to preach Nietzsche and Dawkins to your children. Nor should your children grow up to face discrimination by government funded secular businesses.

We think this would be unfair. We hope you can acknowledge the obvious asymmetry.

Sigmund Freud said, "The voice of reason is soft, but persistent." Well, perhaps it's time for unbelievers to raise their voices. And in doing so, let's get the emphasis right. Let's talk about "freedom of belief", inclusive of the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.



HOW TO DE-STEREOTYPE A MUSLIM WOMAN



My Story

By Baharak Mohabbatalab

Baharak is a member of the Atheist Foundation of Australia. She has agreed to tell her story and it makes great reading. She's a brave woman and reminds us all that atheists are struggling all over the world.

My name is Baharak Mohabbatalab. I am an Iranian citizen. I was born in 1979 in Tehran, Iran a year after the revolution. I grew up in a non-religious family, however, my mother's family is deeply religious. They are deeply involved in the mosque in one form or another and work for the Iranian government. Luckily for me, my father did not pass down the indoctrination that he received as a child. He doesn't feel any sort of proxy is needed to be religious or belief in the existence of an omnipresent being. My father was a Muslim, so I became one as well.

I was arrested 5 times between the ages of 16 and 23. At the age of 16 I was arrested for riding a bike. Six months later I was arrested for wearing a short coat. At the age of 17 I was arrested by the sharia police for having nail colour and, at the age of 20 for having makeup and the last time at the age of 23 for attending a party. Each time I spent 2-3 days in jail and attended Hejab Court and paid a fine, but the last time I attended court and received 40 lashes for attending a party.

I was so angry about religious teachings and rules that didn't make any sense to me. So I started asking questions about small things like why music is Haram (forbidden). Why makeup is forbidden. Why the discrimination of women that has to be endured under the Islamic regime: From the very fact that women are a second-class citizen. Women's testimony legally is worth half that of a man's. You get half what a boy does in inheritance if you are a woman. Women have to be covered, if you're a girl or a woman, and there are certain fields of education or work that are closed to them because women are considered emotional. Why does God hate women so much?

Then I started reading about the way the Islamic scripts and Hadith were gathered.

After a while I came to believe that the whole of religion is nothing but man's invention to fight reality and impose order.

At the age 25, luckily I married an open-minded guy. He introduced me not only to role-playing, but also to the notion that God was a complete fantasy. He and I would debate the issue back and forth for hours, and this went on for years. My husband and I always wished to be recognised as Atheist, what we believe and what we truly are. We were both from the generation born in the years after the hideous Islamic revolution in Iran. We are not Muslim. Islam was imposed on us through war and invasion, equating to authoritarianism, brutality and corruption. We've been fighting against the theocracy from the day we reached the age of reason despite all the pressure from the oppressive regime and despite the fact that they did their best to educate us in the fanatical Islamic tradition throughout the education system.

Iran is a dangerous place to be different. People are persecuted for political views, their race, gender, sexuality and religion. In Islam, sowing seeds of discord is considered a grave sin, and someone who denies God's existence can easily come under suspicion of creating dissension among the faithful. In most Islamic countries, being an atheist is not outlawed outright, but the laws against religious defamation often leave enough leeway to take action against atheists, and human and civil rights groups record such cases again and again.

Iran is an intensely hostile environment in which to express non-Islamic religious beliefs, let alone a lack of belief. Indeed, for many Iranians, atheism – mulhad in Arabic – is far more disturbing than believing in a different religion. Atheism,

as argued by many clerics in Iran, leads to dissolute lives, carnal pursuits, immoral behaviours, and ultimately, eternal damnation. Iran, as reported by The Washington Post, is among the seven countries where atheism can attract capital punishment. As Max Fisher (December 10, 2012) stated which countries have laws explicitly targeting atheists. There are not many, but the states that forbid non-religiousness – typically as part of “anti-blasphemy” legislation – include seven nations where atheism is punishable by death. All seven establish Islam as the state religion. Though that list includes some dictatorships, the country that appears to most frequently condemn atheists to death for their beliefs is actually a democracy, if a frail one: Pakistan. Others include Saudi Arabia, Iran, Afghanistan, Sudan, the West African state of Mauritania, and the Maldives, Malaysia, an island nation in the Indian Ocean.

In Iran, societies are also heavily influenced by religion. If we criticised Islam in Iran, we could be prosecuted under religious contempt. If we stayed in Iran, we should always pretend to be Muslim. Worsley our son would have to be a Muslim and study Islamic rolls. He would have had to experience what we went through since childhood. To avoid that, we had no choice but to leave Iran. We decided to leave Iran and wait in Asian countries with friendly visa regulations.

Malaysia, with no visa policy for Iranian nationals and a comparable cost of living, offered an immediate and affordable refuge. Malaysia was a popular jumping-off point for us who arrive on student visa, but unlike our counterparts in North America, Australia, and Europe, we could not acquire citizenship or protection. As we couldn't obtain citizenship or secure residency, we must either return to Iran or migrate to the West or to Australia.



The Iranian community in Malaysia was incredibly diverse. Supporters of the Green Movement, students, supporters and critics of the Iranian regime, promoters of friendship with Israel (albeit rare), and women in all types of dress, from chadors to miniskirts, individuals who fast and pray and those who do not know the direction of the qibla, clerics who promote secularism and those who promote the authority of the vilayat-i faqih, Iranian Kurds, Turks, and Arabs, journalists, artists, and environmentalists: all these and more constitute the community of Iranians who have fled or quietly moved to Malaysia.

However, in 2009 the distrust fostered among the Iranian community in Malaysia, due to the presence of Islamic Republic security agents, helped to reproduce the social fragmentation and polarization that is found in Iran proper. That is, the separation of different groups based on identity categories such as socioeconomic status, political or religious beliefs, and gender. Such fragmentation is widespread in Iran due to the exclusion and persecution of those who hold alternative political and religious views from the regime. The large economic gap between rich and poor, segregated public spheres based on gender, and discrimination of ethnic and religious minorities round out this alienating environment.

The tenuous position that Iranians in Malaysia occupy means that they may distrust each other, particularly those belonging to different classes or religions or those with different political leanings. Thus, many migrants who are obliged to return to Iran avoid other Iranians and some may attempt to pass as another nationality. The Iranian diaspora in Malaysia does not always trust one another. This distrust is also identifiable among many women, who express their desire not to wear the hijab but are uncertain to remove it around other Iranians. This is unlike the vast majority of Iranian women in other diasporic communities, who freely remove their hijab without fear of consequences for their families in Iran or for themselves upon their return to Iran.

Our activism in Malaysia was generally opposed to a reformist agenda as was

common within Iranian Community. We wanted a secular and religion free country. We were often advised by Malaysian and Iranian friends that we needed to cease our activism (political and Atheism) in Malaysia and not to risk our life due to the presence of Iran's security apparatus. Because of the friendly relations between Iran and Malaysia, the Islamic Republic is allowed to extend its intelligence into the country, causing Iranians there to feel as though they have simply moved to another public sphere in which they are subject to surveillance. If we failed to secure passage to a third country, we needed to return to Iran where we might be persecuted under Islamic laws. Additionally, we were still fearful of our families in Iran from being targeted by the regime.

We decided that Malaysia was not safe for us. As a Sunni Muslim state, Malaysia officially bans its citizens from being Shi'i and is apprehensive about Iran's Shi'i propaganda. The Malaysian police monitor Iranian religious rituals, academic speeches, and diplomatic activities, which would otherwise be important ways for the Islamic Republic to monitor Iranians. Iranian political activists in Malaysia exploit this sensitivity of the host country against Shi'i propaganda and report such Iranian activities to the police. At the same time, Malaysian officials are concerned about Iranians' political activities, fearing that their own political dissidents might follow suit. When after the 2009 Iranian presidential elections, supporters of the Green Movement demonstrated at the Iranian Embassy in Kuala Lumpur and gathered in the city centre. Police dispersed them. Yet, Malaysia's eagerness to project and preserve its image as a safe global tourist destination means that the Iranian political opposition living in its borders cannot organise publicly. In Malaysia we had no chance to be Atheist.

After I finished my masters degree in October 2010, I tried to apply for a PhD / Doctorate in western countries such as USA, Canada and Australia. However, as I studied more, I realised that religion does not play a major role in the lives of much of the population in Australia.

Reading that statistic about irreligion in Australia was such a great surprise for me. I did not know such a place exists. I

was sure that Australia is our dreamland, where I can be a free Atheist with no fear of prosecution and death penalty and raise our son religion free, where he can grow up to be honest, informed, compassionate adults, filled with love for life and fellow human beings, and who can speak up for rights and liberties that can never be taken for granted. Isn't it a basic right for humans to believe or not believe freely! I know this is only a dream in Iran, but it doesn't change the fact that people will have different views and beliefs, whether society will allow it or not.

I moved to Australia as a doctorate student May 2012 and on August 2012 I joined the Atheist foundation of Australia and have been an active member, along with my husband. My husband and I have been attending Atheist meetings and gatherings of the Atheist community in Brisbane and since I moved to Sydney on November 2014 we have joined the Atheist community of Sydney for regular meetings, social gathering and discussions.

We have established a large network of Atheist families around us. Therefore, our son is growing up in a religion free environment and does not have to believe in God to be humble, grateful, kind, helpful and respectful of others. He takes his values and ethics from us. Neither religions nor gods are necessary for morality, ethics, or values. They can exist in a godless, secular context just fine. He can understand, question, accept, reject, value, or practice them independently of any form of indoctrination, theistic or otherwise.

Along with our activities as members of the Atheist Foundation of Australia, we are espousing atheism on Facebook and Twitter. Facebook and Twitter made it easy to find people who debate and are interested in secular values. We 'non-believers' have meetings and groups in a lot of Iranian and international cities. There are several Iranian pro-atheism communities on Facebook, run in either English or Persian and mostly focused on aggregating pictures poking fun at religious figures (not limited to Islam – the recently resigned pope, for example, also gets skewered). The groups have anywhere between 2,000 and 200,000 likes each, though many supporters



seem to be foreigners. For example, the Iranian Atheist and Agnostic Facebook page has over 185,787 likes.

The environment in Iran is so hostile to non-believers that even running a Facebook group is a considerable risk. Facebook has been blocked by the theocratic Iranian regime. This form of protest may seem toothless by Western standards, but it amounts to something more daring in the Iranian context. While the apostasy punishments are by far the scariest stick in the government's arsenal, there are more mundane reminders of the risks for Internet activists: we are espousing atheism. Facebook itself has been blocked in Iran since 2009. Iran

has one of the highest percentages of Internet access in the Middle East, but the number of sites Iranians can legally visit is extremely limited. The government has launched "cyber police units" charged with tracking those who try to visit banned Internet or social media sites. As stated by Nouri's research into Iran's Internet and social networking communities shows the increasing ability of government cyber police units to learn the identities of online writers, some of whom are then arrested, interrogated and tortured. (NPR report, February 04, 2013)

Iran is one of the world's most prolific jailers of writers, according to Reporters Without Borders. As of July 2015, at least

65 journalists, bloggers, and social media activists were in prison on various charges related to their speech or writings. Since President Hassan Rouhani's inauguration in August 2013, security and intelligence agents, including the Revolutionary Guards, have apparently stepped up with a crackdown on dissent through the Internet, and Iran's judiciary has meted out particularly harsh punishments for bloggers and social media users.

Despite of all these difficulties, we will not give up and we will try to send our messages to Iran. Freedom for Iran is our mission and we will not stop trying till we stop breathing.

From Religiosity to Morality

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

Sometimes I'm surprised by the incongruities in what I once believed, by inconsistencies I was unable to previously see. For example, a Christian friend recently posted a meme with these words, "The true test of character is what you do when no one is watching." I remember liking that statement when I was Christian, but reading those words as a post-religious person made me laugh. It suddenly occurred to me that – if those are words are true – no Christian has ever had their character tested.

Think about it. One of the central tenets of Christianity is that God is all seeing and all knowing. There is no place where a human can act without God watching and judging. Indeed, the purpose of God's watchfulness is to determine whether our actions should be rewarded or punished. Growing up, I was encouraged to behave because God was watching and I didn't want to disappoint. I was told that one day – when I arrived at the judgment seat

of God – the angels would roll the film of my life and every misdeed would be replayed on some heavenly screen for all to see.

Since this understanding permeates Christianity, it is difficult to see how any Christian could ever know what they'd do if no one was watching. For that matter, what would they do without the expectation of reward or the threat of punishment? How could they truly know if their morality was a veneer intended to impress or a deeply held conviction? For the Christian, the true test of character is what they would do if God doesn't exist.

Ironically, the common Christian judgment of atheists and agnostics tells us much about the answer to that question. Often, I've been asked if – as an atheist – I've abandoned my morality. I understand the source of this suspicion. I was taught that morality had its source in God and those who were without God were

inherently immoral. The Bible warned that without God, "every man would do what he thought right in his own eyes."

Of course, all of this implies that Christians are only moral because of the threat of divine punishment and the promise of divine reward, that Christians assume the immorality of an atheist because they secretly worry about how they would act if not for the watchfulness of God. Their suspicion of the atheist is simply the projection of their own fears. Looking back, I once shared that anxiety.

Years ago, long before I left religion, my oldest son came home from college and asked to talk with me. He told me he'd become an atheist, that he loved and respected me, but could no longer ascribe to a belief in god. At the time, I was concerned. I responded, "Well, I hope this doesn't change how you live and act in the world." He responded, "Dad, what is more admirable? That you do



good in expectation of God's reward, or that I do good without any expectation?" That conversation was one of the many contributing factors to my eventual departure from religion.

As a post religious person, I've revised my understanding of morality. I've realized there is a significant difference between religiosity and morality. Religiosity is that which you do because your religious community says it will please God. Religiosity often includes many of the great moral convictions of humanity, but it can also contain the trivial and even the immoral. The religious sometimes do the heinous because their ultimate question is not whether an action is moral, but whether or not that action is sanctioned by God. Religious codes and moral dictates are not synonymous.

For example, consider the Ten Commandments that many Christians

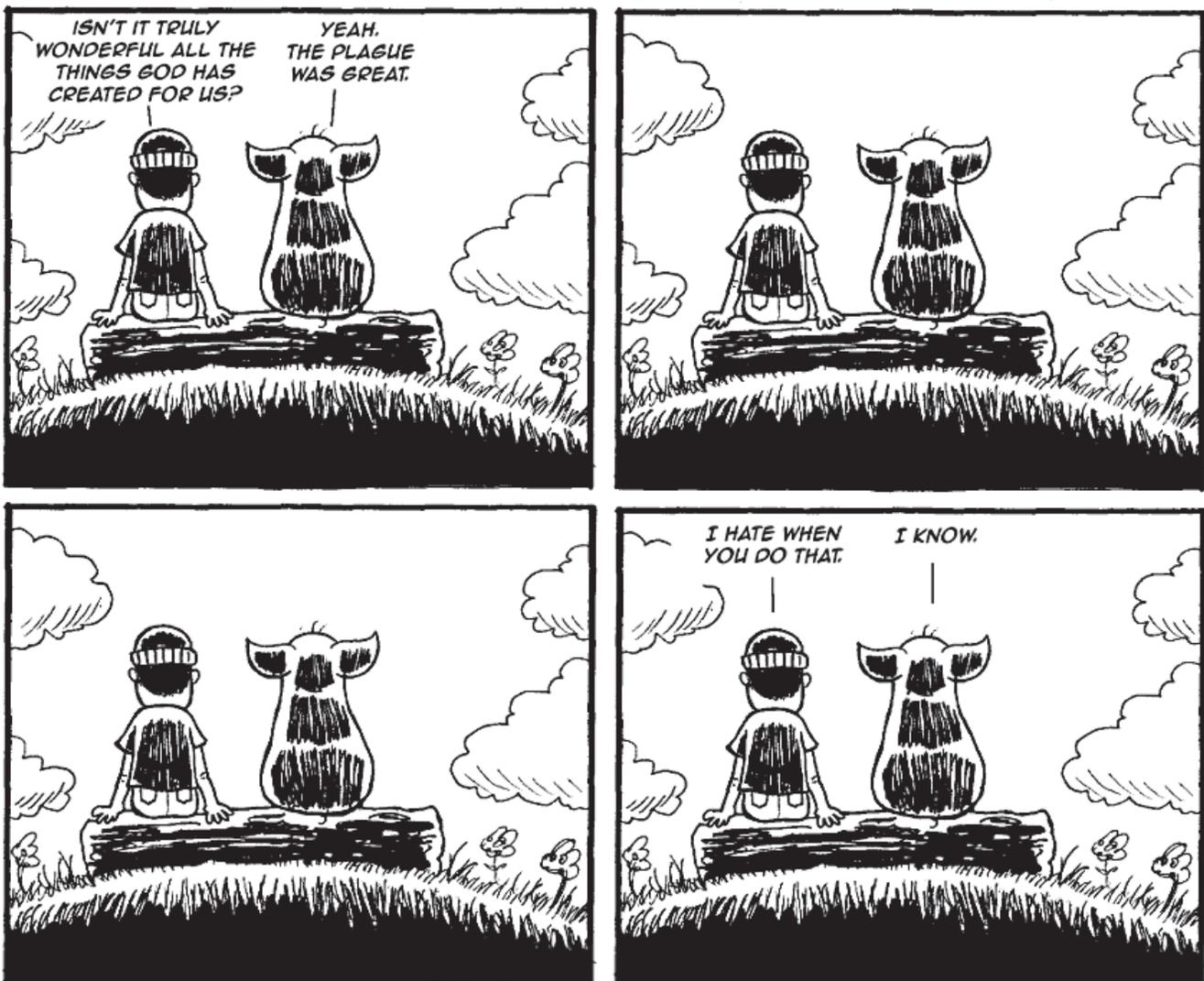
want posted in classrooms and on courthouse lawns. They defend it as a moral declaration rather than a religious one. However, only four of the commandments are widely held moral codes – do not murder, do not lie, do not steal and do not commit adultery. The majority of the commandments are religious codes that trumpet Christian theology – the Christian god is supreme, no idols, no cursing god, and no working on the Sabbath. These set of codes have little to do with morality. Indeed, even most Christians wouldn't argue that working on Saturday is immoral.

Morality is something very different than religiosity. Its source is unapologetically human. It is the consensus opinion of humanity on what is appropriate human behavior. As such, it is relative, shifting as humanity debates and negotiates what it means to be good. It is never absolute; always open the challenge of the

minority voice, to further knowledge, or to new experience. Finally, this corporate formation of morality assumes each individual is a free moral agent. Every person doing what is right in their own eyes is not dangerous; it is necessary. The important question is not what God says. It is always what you and I say.

Today, I often hear proclamations of doom for America and a call for a return to our religious roots. Politicians and preachers warn that our country is descending into immorality and debauchery. They identify the rejection of religion and its mores as the end of civilization. I don't see it that way. I think our nation is finally experiencing the freedom and liberty described by Abraham Lincoln in the Gettysburg Address. We are becoming a government of the people, by the people and for the people. We're throwing off the shackles of religiosity and exploring what we will do now that no one is watching.

THEATHEISTPIG.COM



The Moral Failure of Australian Christian Leadership

By Christis G. 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.

It is alleged that charity is a central precept of the christian faith. Accordingly, charity is routinely the centrepiece of the rhetoric of christian leaders. Yet, it does not often appear to be the singular driver of their actions. Other motivations typically take precedence. From these, the inclination to compete against alternative faiths is arguably one of the most potent.

From a philosophical perspective, this is not surprising. The success of any religion relies on its popularity. This explains why most of the world's religions encourage conversion and penalise apostasy and why religious competition is an organising theme of religious texts. According to the bible, "there are no other gods" (Ex. 20:30), one must "love him" (Deut. 6:5), "fear him" (Deut. 10:20), "cling (or clave) to him" (Deut. 10:20), "burn a city that turned to idolatry" (Deut. 13:14), "not love the idolater" (Deut. 13:9), "kill the idolater" (Deut. 13:9), "not save the idolater" (Deut. 13:9 – Holman Standard Bible), and so on.

To a non-believer living in a western democracy, religious competition is often viewed as a seemingly innocuous concept. Another layer of the banality of scripture. Another sign of the pettiness and insecurity of a fictitious supreme being. However, religious competition is not harmless. Even in the case of the increasingly secular western world, religious competition can have important political and social implications. In some instances it may even determine who lives and who dies. Literally.

Consider for example the public debate that preceded the Australian government's formulation of a response to the unfolding Syrian refugee crisis. Australia's christian leadership weighed in on this debate.

Philip Freier, the anglican archbishop of Australia, announced publicly that he wrote to both to the Prime Minister and the Immigration Minister asking them to give preference to christian refugees "...facing forced conversion or death". The same sentiment was echoed by Anthony Fisher, the catholic archbishop of Sydney. While Fisher recognised that other minorities are also persecuted, he argued that Syrian christians have relatives in Australia and by giving them priority we would be "...honouring these ties and connections". Despite a thin layer of moral integrity, such statements are nothing less than appalling and orthogonal to any sense of decency.

Christians are not the only religious minority being persecuted in Syria by Islamic State. So are the Yazidis, the Jews, the small non-mainstream Muslim sects such as the Druzes and the Alawites, and many others. The call to prioritise christians is a call to neglect other minorities that may be far more vulnerable to persecution. One such example is not a religious minority at all. It is Syria's gay community that has been barbarically and violently decimated by Islamic State. Unlike religious minorities who are offered the option of conversion, Syria's gays are not given options. They are routinely and gruesomely executed by Islamic State in public displays of unspeakable barbarism. So systematic is the extermination of the LGBTI community in Syria that on August 7, 2015 the U.N. Security Council held a special meeting to discuss it. It is telling that the U.N. Security Council has not had similar meetings to specifically discuss other minorities that are persecuted in Syria.

As for the notion of "honouring ties", it does not amount to much more than rationalisation. Australia has a thriving

community of Syrian migrants spanning the gamete of religious affiliations. In this light, the call to honour the christian but not the muslim ties can only be interpreted as a thin disguise of an effort to promote religious competition. Archbishop Fisher's thesis is not materially different than the tribalism of "not saving the idolater" advocated in the bible (Deut. 13:9 – HSB).

Australia's christian leaders have seen the same pictures in the press that you have. They have seen the pictures of Syria's gays routinely being thrown off rooftops (the prescribed penalty according to Sharia law). They have seen the pictures of the hordes of scared and desperate refugees fleeing to save their lives. In the face of barbarism and desperation their first instinct is not one of charity. Their first instinct is not to call for prioritising refugees on the basis of their circumstances – putting at the top of the list the most vulnerable irrespective of religious affiliation. Instead, their priority is to honour their ties with their fellow christians in the service of religious competition.

Moral impoverishment of this calibre does not come naturally. It takes a lifetime invested in the tribal lessons of the bible to override the basic human capacity for empathy.



Terms, Definitions and Distinctions

By Hugh Harris

In discussing atheism various terms are often employed as if their meaning is known by all. Further, the meanings of various terms are often conflated or muddled to suit a particular worldview. The following outlines some of the key terms. It's important to recognise the distinctions which exist between different positions, and not to fall in to the trap of assuming, as many people do, that one position infers another. Such as an atheist is necessarily a materialist. Or that a naturalist's are never theists.

Atheism

An Atheist either lacks belief in or disbelieves in god(s). (Oxford Dictionary) Within the atheist position are a number of sub-positions which follow.

Despite the wild claims of some, Atheism isn't a religion. Since it simply involves the negation of Theism, it's understandable that the adversaries of Atheism take the opportunity to straw man it into equivalence with religion. Though, the advocates of Atheism are often also advocates of other positions listed below.

Weak Atheism

A weak atheist lacks belief in the existence of God(s). This is a metaphysically weaker position than making the knowledge claim no god(s) exist. Weak atheism is also known as Negative atheism.

Positive atheism

The positive disbelief or denial of the existence of god(s). Positive atheism is also known as Strong Atheism.

Wide atheism

The denial of the existence of all gods.

Narrow atheism

The denial of a particular conception of god. Most Theists are typically narrow atheists about other gods such as Zeus, Shiva, or Thor. The Abrahamic religions specifically deny the existence of other gods.

Antitheism

As its name suggests, Antitheism involves active opposing Theism, usually on the basis of an Atheist metaphysical view, and the proposition that religion is on balance a harmful influence on the world. The New Atheists are also Antitheists. Antitheists tend to be strong atheists, at least in reference to the major world religions.

Antitheism seems to be becoming the new bogey word of the religious apologists. The conflation between atheists and anti-theists is evident in a reluctance of some atheists to embrace the term, even movement atheists, combined with the apologist's tactic of using it as a rhetorical bat.

Agnosticism

Agnosticism is the view that the truth values of certain claims – especially metaphysical and religious claims such as whether or not God, the divine or the supernatural exist – are unknown and perhaps unknowable.

Gnostic

The opposite of agnostic, a gnostic believes we can have knowledge of whether metaphysical claims are knowable. The word must be distinguished from Gnosticism, the group of ancient religions which shun the material world. Gnostic derives from the Greek word gnosis, which means pertaining to knowledge.

Theism

The belief in the existence of god(s).

There are various definitions of God or gods. Western conceptions of god include the omni properties of omnipotence (all powerful), omniscience (all-knowing), and all good. Richard Swinburne offers the following:

a person without a body (i.e., a spirit) who necessarily is eternal, perfectly free, omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good, and the creator of all

things

Non-believers tend to use the word “god” in the lower case.

God is understood in the monotheistic world religions as the creator and ruler of the universe. The term is also understood widely to refer to other deities who may occupy the supernatural realm such as the pantheon of Greek gods. So a god can be a supreme being, a celestial being, a spirit or a divinity. In western culture we normally understand god in the more narrow sense as creator and ruler.

Spiritual

This word can mean any number of things, often associated with the human spirit and the soul. Generally, it's concerned with the aspiration to higher levels of awareness, fulfilment, or meaning within life, as opposed to material or physical things. Often invoked as a general term in relation to religious belief, it has also become a quasi-metaphysical position widely adopted by the non-religious, or by non-observant believers, to describe a state of belief in a spiritual realm or a source of meaning for humans.

Combining Terms*

In developing a position, particularly as a non-believer, we may wrestle with our level of certainty that certain things don't exist, or with the epistemological justification for ruling them out altogether. As such, various combinations are used to clarify ones position.

***Agnostic Atheism**

This position accepts both that we cannot have knowledge of whether gods exist and that we don't believe they exist. An Agnostic Atheist will therefore tend to be a Weak Atheist.

***Gnostic Atheism**

Lacking belief or disbelieving in the existence of Gods and believing we can have knowledge of such metaphysical items.



***Gnostic Theism**

Theists are typically gnostic, believing they can have knowledge that god exists.

***Agnostic Theism**

Believing that god exists and also believing that we cannot have knowledge of this.

Naturalism

Naturalism is the belief that the universe can be explained exclusively by natural laws and forces. There are no supernatural, or non-natural entities or causes, or if there are, they will be understandable in scientific, natural terms. (See Naturalism in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.)

Supernaturalism

Not all things that exist are natural. There are some entities, forces, or phenomena that exist beyond the spatial-temporal world that science investigates.

The distinction between naturalism has been problematic as it's difficult to assign a "nature" to the unnatural speculation of supernaturalism. See The False Dichotomy. Richard Carrier has postulated that supernatural might be defined to only include mental processes which are unexplainable by natural forces.

Methodological Naturalism

According to this view the most effective way of acquiring knowledge is through the methods of science, not from logic, deduction or conceptual approaches. Using observation, hypothesis, and empirical disconfirmation is the best way to study the world, and obtain knowledge. Methodical Naturalism is concerned with the means to acquire knowledge—rather than a metaphysical view about the ultimate constituents of reality. (Courtesy, Proving the Negative – Matt McCormick) (Also, refer to Naturalism in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.)

Materialism

Materialism is the view that all things are made of matter and nothing else. While materialism appears to overlap with naturalism, especially ontological naturalism, we should see it as an explicitly metaphysical thesis about the ultimatum constituents of reality, but not as much a view about what the best methods are

for acquiring knowledge of that reality. Some of the Greeks, for instance, arrived at the materialism conclusion through a priori or more conceptual reasoning.

Eliminative materialism

This view denies our intuitive understanding of the mind and proposes that some or all of the mental states we normally refer to don't actually exist. The eliminative materialist believes that with the expansion of our scientific inquiries, there are often concepts such as "demonic spirits," or "celestial spheres," that cease to find a place within our theories. Some terms, like "heat," we keep, but only by radically revising what we think the ultimate physical constituents of heat are. Other terms are too embedded in an old model of reality to be effectively salvaged. The label applies primarily to a position about minds, but we can see the implications for God and many religious concepts. (Courtesy, Proving the Negative – Matt McCormick)

Reductionism

A reductionist believes complex systems and phenomena can be reduced and explained entirely in terms of their parts and their causal interactions. Reductionism in philosophy of mind can be contrasted with emergentism, or epiphenomenalism. According to these anti-reductionist views, mental states, qualia, consciousness or other phenomena are produced by physical processes, but they cannot be explained entirely in terms of them. For a variety of reasons, theists are often anti-reductionists, but reductionism itself as a thesis about explaining objects in nature is distinct from atheism. (Courtesy, Proving the Negative – Matt McCormick)

Belief

Belief: the acceptance that something is true with or without evidence or proof.

Faith

Faith: the acceptance that something is true on trust with or without evidence or proof. See The Perils of Faith...

Knowledge

In everyday usage, knowledge is understood to be sum of what is known, and comprises facts, information and skills.

In Philosophy, theories of knowledge have been propounded for centuries. The most well-known hypothesis is true, justified belief.

Secular

Not involved or requiring religious, supernatural or spiritual matters.

Secular doesn't necessarily entail a denial of religious beliefs, or the demand that society or individuals should abandon religion. It's important to appreciate this distinction. Secular is most often used in connection with the desirability of a separation of church and state. Many Secularists also subscribe to pluralism, and religious freedom, championing freedom to practise or hold one's preferred metaphysical beliefs without coercion.

Epistemology

Epistemology is the theory of knowledge with regard to its methods, validity and scope, and distinguishing between justified belief and unjustified belief. See Oxford Dictionary.

Pluralism

Pluralism is a belief in allowing the co-existence of more than one belief system, political party, ideology or interest group. It's a system whereby society isn't governed by one overriding principle or ideology.

Religious Freedom

The principle, that individuals and groups in society should have the freedom to manifest their chosen religion. This freedom includes no religion, and to change religion or "apostasy."

Religious Liberty

Religious Liberty might seem to be exactly the same thing as religious freedom, but it's more focussed on protecting the right to observe and practise religious beliefs and traditions, in particular when they come in to conflict with secular law. It's often invoked as if it's a natural right, to help sway a debate towards allowing a religious group to privilege their own beliefs on the basis of conscience. For instance, in India polygamy is permitted within Islamic groups, on the basis of religious liberty. In other places in the world sharia law is used exclusively by the Muslim population, even given significant differences to secular law.



Prayer - Part II

Are You Listening?

By Bob Irwin

Part 1 "Can you hear me?", in Issue 49, dealt with how Christians use or misuse prayer to ask for special favours in times of peace and war, and for Church leaders to hold on to their members, and their own jobs. It asked the questions:

- Why the need to pray to their God if He already knows, indeed directs, what's happening on planet Earth, indeed across the universe?
- Is God a paranoid attention-seeker or does He just need to feel loved and connected?



Part 2 considers whether benefits might accrue from praying, indeed if prayers are actually listened to and answered. Done alone or in groups, prayer might make those involved feel good, but does it offer verifiable evidence that a supernatural Being delivers any direct benefit? Let's look at both scenarios, and an alternative means of spending prayer time.

Individual

When praying alone, the person can concentrate on the issue at hand in a situation where they're likely to be relaxed, comfortable and often in peaceful surroundings, free from interruption. Under these circumstances the mind is calmer and potentially more attuned to opening new pathways in the brain, making the person receptive to new ideas or different ways of seeing things.

Contrary to early research about the brain, this organ is not hard-wired, never to change. Its nerve-fibre networks or neural pathways can be altered throughout a person's life . . . how much depends on the attitude and experiences of the individual, including the opportunities they have to be open-minded and inquisitive; and the pressure on them to conform, for example to religious dogma which demands rigid brain patterns while discouraging new connections – unless the “new” thinking complies with the religion's teachings. (While it's an infrequent occurrence, religious leaders do modify or embellish dogma when they absolutely must.)

If a Christian got a new idea or solved a problem while praying by themselves they'd believe the favourable result was an answer from God, when in fact it occurred because they'd put themselves in an environment conducive to mental alertness and idea generation. The person praying might even think of the new ideas as mini-miracles or revelations when in fact they've achieved that state of mind by their own actions and thoughts and the favourable surroundings. In that way it's similar to though not as effective as meditation – covered later.

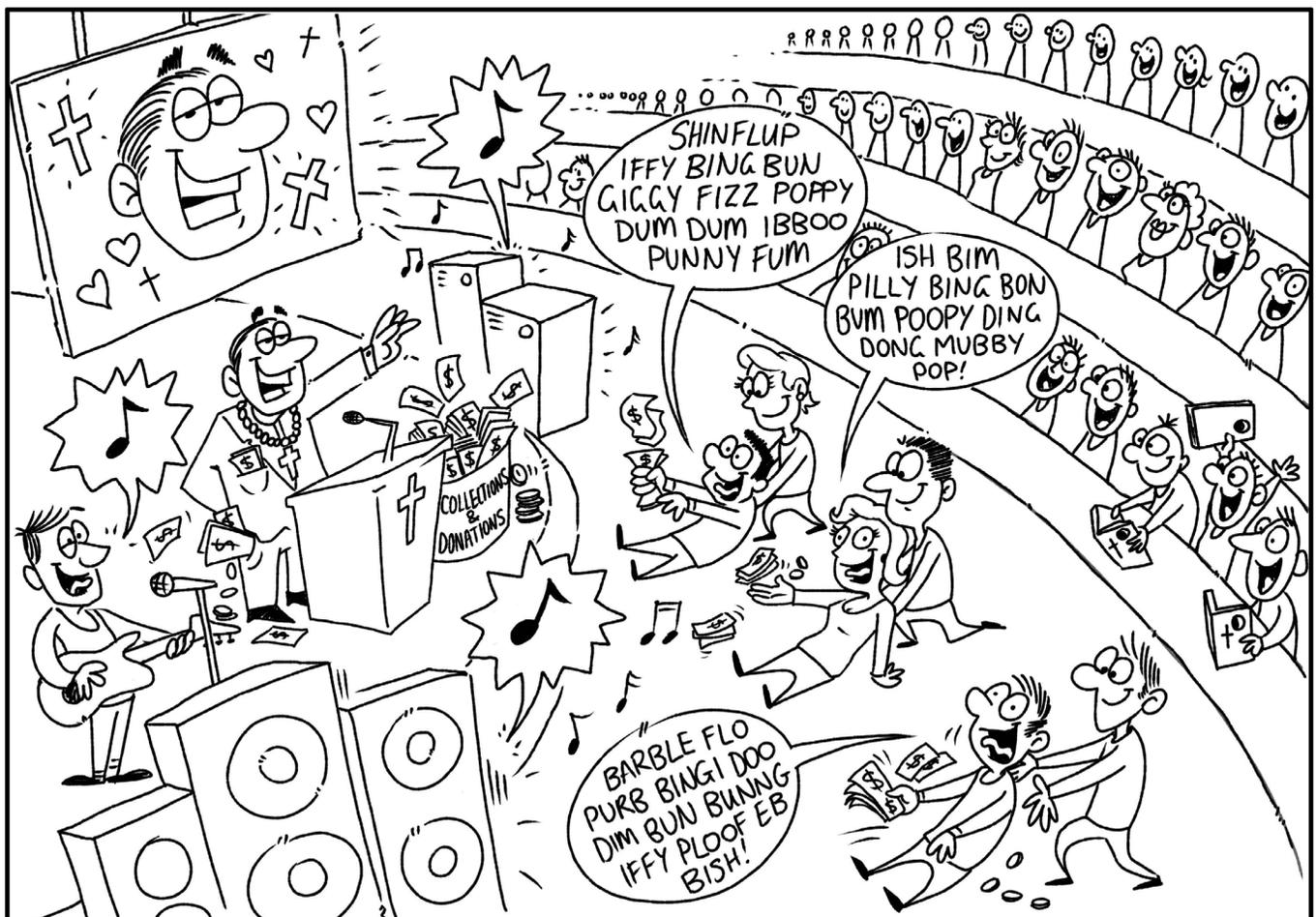
God's role is only as imagined in their mind, or “felt” by this person, who, for any number of reasons, wants or needs the outcome they are praying for. God merely provides an emotional and illusory spiritual platform. (But don't expect locked-in Christians to agree with this, or even to openly discuss the matter.) However, if a prayer is not answered and the desired result is not achieved they will claim it was God's will, or Satan intervened – their ever-convenient get-out clauses.

Group

Participation in joint or mass prayer is a different dynamic from individual prayer. It can create a sense of connectiveness and belonging, and be quite comforting, especially to people who would benefit from companionship. When someone is leading the prayer and/or everyone is praying aloud, there is not the atmosphere for quiet contemplation. It's too distractive for that.

In group praying where prayers are read or memorised standard prayers they are predictable and expected. The pertinent words emerge from the prayers' mouths, but their brains don't need to be connected . . . repetition is what's required – which is incompatible with truly creative thought and new ideas. This type of praying merely confirms – and through habit, entrenches – existing scripture and belief while complying with religious rules and rituals; the latter being quite important to some people.

There's nothing predictable though about the prayer-like and God-connecting



activity known as speaking-in-tongues, during which its participants just “go off”, physically, mentally and audibly. This odd activity is like free-association gone mad as they make seemingly incomprehensible noises which they suppose is a special language unknown to themselves but uttered through their mouths by their God. In heightened states of frenzied unawareness they can experience self-induced ecstasy and deluded feelings of connection to God, Jesus, Mother Mary, saints, or whatever else comes to their temporarily exhilarated minds.

Vulnerable doubters and non-believers have even been known to suffer a bout of conversion when trying out this bizarre religious pursuit. Religious demagogues and their fanatical followers use this state of excited mindlessness to encourage “tongue speakers” to fall down and be caught by willing attendants: their comforting arms acting as a symbol of falling into the protection of church and God. Collections and donations soon follow and are paid willingly by the newcomer for the joy of the moment and the wonderful life which is “promised” to them – as long as they stay devoted to God, Jesus and the religious organisation.

On the Receiving End

The imaginary effect of prayer is not confined to the person doing the praying. There can also be a “beneficial” impact on the recipients of prayer, but in a different way from the “gain” that might come from the act of praying. The recipients being prayed for could be an individual, a family, a team, a church congregation, across a denomination or whole religion, or a country.

When a person or group is aware they’re being prayed for, they can experience positive feelings from knowing that others are thinking about them and care about their welfare – in a similar way to how the placebo effect works. There is no proven gain for people who don’t know they’re in others’ prayers. But don’t expect a fanatical Christian to agree. (A tip: Never get into an argument with one on this subject.)

The people doing the praying can have feelings of self-worth: a sort of altruism,

because they feel they are helping or giving or caring; or advocating the salvation of others, while possibly hoping to acquire some Christian credits themselves. (Another tip: If you’re going to pray for someone, let them know first.)

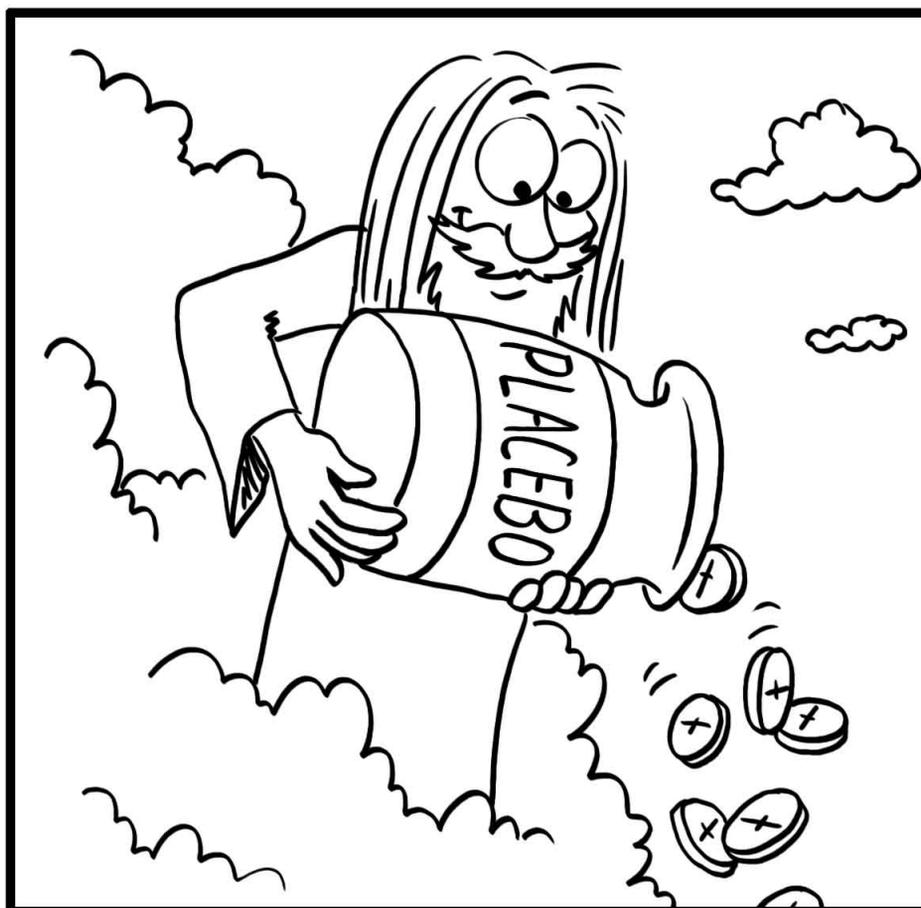
God’s Role

Asking for God’s help through prayer is a strong component of Christian tradition and a regular activity in believers’ lives. Prayer is a crucial part of them being a Christian while trying to cope in a big and uncertain world full of evil and temptation, as the religious leaders teach it to be. After all, they are the self-proclaimed prayer-brokers for their God – facilitating prayer is a fundamental component of their work to help justify their existence, and His.

Practised often, prayer becomes routine, an addiction even: a comfort to the person praying and to the preferred and well-established workings of their neural pathways. When Christians pray to their God, He is the main focal point for their prayer and they want Him to answer their wishes. In reality though, God should be considered as a pretend beacon for prayer. A dispenser of placebos.

Christians believe that prayer is like having a conversation with a magnificent, awe-inspiring spiritual Being Who answers their prayers, while some of the more bigoted ones even go to the extent of claiming that’s something secular people could never hope to replicate. However, the comparison with secularists is invalid, for two reasons: a Christian God exists only in the minds of Christians (no matter who invented Him, or when); and secular people have no belief in or need for Christianity’s God.

Christians make claims that in praying to God He will “give” them wisdom. Their assertions are groundless and possibly perilous. Wisdom is not an outcome of mystery. While attitude, independent thought and life experiences play important roles in gaining wisdom, data is the first tangible step. From data comes information (sometimes these are the same or similar). From information comes knowledge and insight. From experience, knowledge and insight comes wisdom. A God-based wishful thought is not wisdom. Ancient scripture - written in superstitious times by men who could have known no better - may have been thought of as wisdom but it’s not necessarily so today in light of verifiable evidence.



It's a potentially dangerous expectation to rely on prayer to achieve wisdom. Without the factual basis of accurate data and information to begin with there can be no real wisdom, just imaginary ideas and false expectations which risk leading to poorly-informed and non-evidence-based decision making. And no amount of prayer to God can alter that.

Think About it

One alternative to prayer produces results which are more realistic and reliable, while also enhancing personal growth, thinking and insight in ways praying could never achieve – and that's meditation.

Aside from feelings of altruism and togetherness, and recipients knowing they're in others' prayers, prayer is a forlorn and time-consuming pursuit. While (non-religious) meditation doesn't claim to produce miracles such as altering weather patterns, and affecting sporting results and wartime conflicts, it does have definite and sustainable benefits.

The meditator is able to dig deep into their mind and direct concentration and mental and physical energies to their innate capacities. Meditation enables people to enhance and rely on their own skills. It is based on mind self-control

and its relationship with the body, as distinct from prayer which relies on the interventions of an inexplicable divine Being and His Earthly brokers, making meditation a far more dependable and productive way of spending the time.

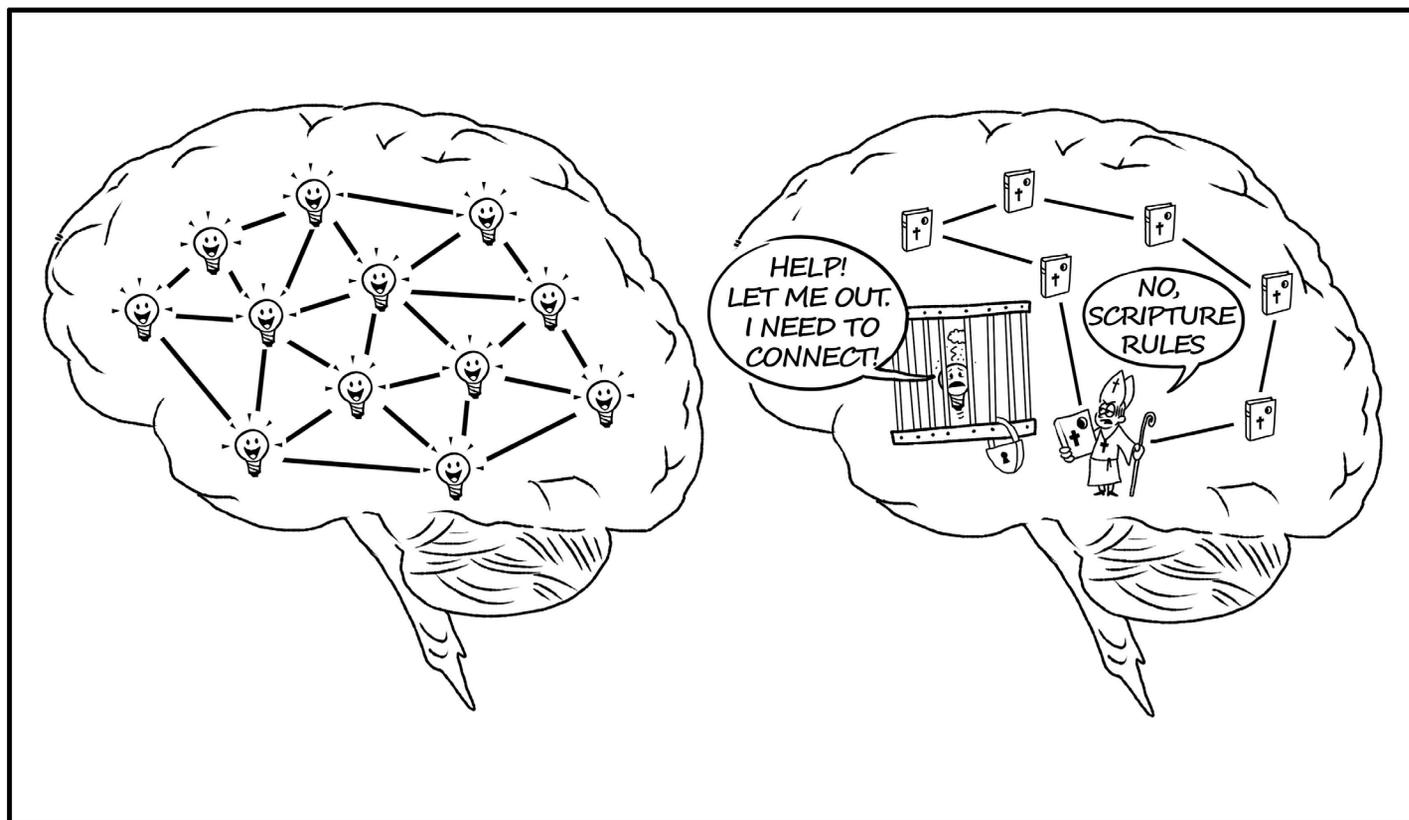
The structure of the brain is changed through meditation, because our pinkish-grey matter is getting exercised, and like the muscles in a person's body, it bulks up. No, it doesn't give people the metaphorical big head . . . quite the opposite. And it doesn't require a brain surgeon to understand the principle. It's simply the brain's neural circuitry working more effectively by building new connections. (The human brain has 85-100 billion neurons: a potential 100 trillion or so connections.) A powerful brain structure enables flexible and independent thinking, not something the Church has a proud history of encouraging in its members, or leaders.

Meditation actually results in enhanced humility and patience through people gaining a better understanding of themselves and the world around them. They are not confused or tricked by life's apparent mysteries and uncertainties. In that way, meditation encourages and enables people to identify and focus on their strengths and work on areas for

improvement in themselves and across society.

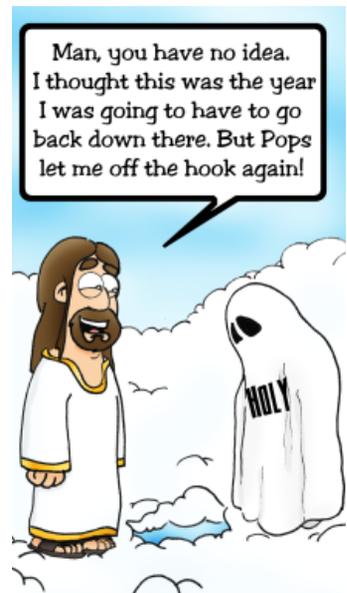
Meditation calms, relaxes and focuses the mind – a mental state which encourages flexibility across neural pathways, enabling people to think broadly and deeply, and in that way it helps create and capture new ideas, question areas of doubt or confusion, and confirm worthwhile existing thoughts. It's psychologically positive and constructive. Prayer is part of religions' attempts at feel-good indoctrination, whereas meditation cleanses the mind. It's contemplation used in a wise way. Where God is not needed. Where God is an impediment.

Meditation has been scientifically proven to enhance people's confidence and achieve major advances in their lives. As meditation expert Dr Gillian Ross says, "Most thinking is ego babble . . . whereas meditation quiets the mind." Meditation has been scientifically shown to strengthen those parts of the brain which affect self-awareness and compassion. As well, meditation bolsters the immune system, decreases stress levels, lowers blood-pressure and pulse-rate, while assisting relaxation, memory and the ability to concentrate. On the other hand, prayer gives people a false expectation of mysterious intervention.

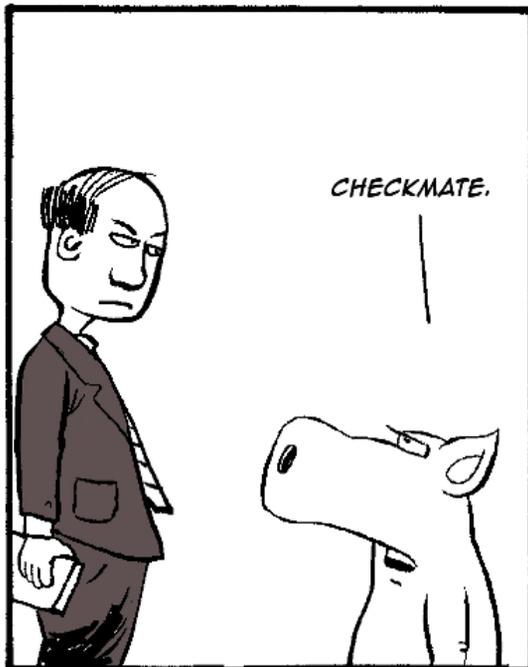


There is one caveat on the beneficial outcomes of meditation. It's a word of caution for people who perform Christian meditation, or any sort of God- or religious-based meditation. The warning: contemplation is confined to the framework and boundaries of religious teachings whereby potential benefits can easily be compromised. The reason: the religious person's meditation is reliant on dogma which is both prescriptive and proscriptive, and substantially unproven. The results are thus constrained by what's acceptable in a Christian or other religious context.

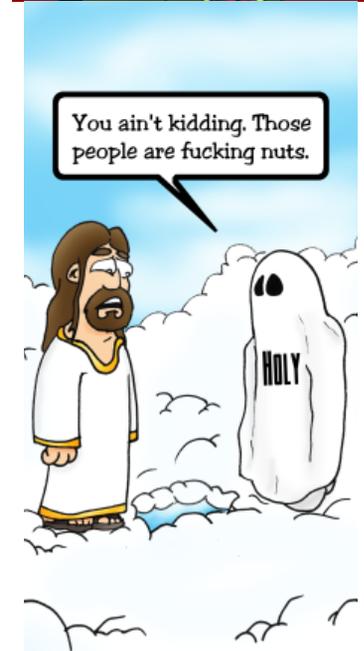
While virtually impossible for committed religious people to change, it would be preferable to avoid God and His heavenly and ground-based helpers, and the associated hurdles to clear thinking as erected by the Church; instead to learn to rely on the intrinsic capacities of individuals which are enhanced and sustained by meditation, enabling the incisive, decisive and unbiased thinking, and the creative new ideas and empathy so necessary in today's multi-dimensional and sometimes uncertain world.



THEATHEISTPIG.COM



And there will be hell and fire on earth, and it will burn the lost souls who have abandoned the way of the lord! All of you who have sinned will be washed away in the hellfire while the Saved will be carried on the Lord's shoulders to heaven! We shall leave the Earth behind, with it's pits of sin, and make our way to the new home. God's home.



Interview with FIRIS

By Kylie Sturgess

In the Australian state of Victoria, the Minister for Education James Merlino announced that Special Religious Instruction (SRI) or “Scripture” classes will be removed from public school hours in 2016.

SRI will be taken out of class-time and treated as an elective – with previously-scheduled religious classes replaced by relationship lessons for primary to year 10 students, and will include global culture, ethics, traditions and family violence lessons.

This is something that the [Fairness In Religions In Schools \(or FIRIS\)](#) have been working for since 2011. Kylie spoke to Lara Wood, campaign coordinator for FIRIS and to Paul Foster, a parent in NSW who is also concerned about the religion classes in his state.

Paul Foster: I am a secular humanist, to begin with, so the whole idea that the church groups entering public schools to access kids, I find offensive.

Then when my wife and I enrolled our eight year old daughter in kindergarten, we picked the “no we don’t her to attend Scripture” box on the enrollment form. Despite that, the school still sent her to scripture. We weren’t aware of it for six months.

When we did find out from our daughter, it turned out that at that point, she did, in fact, regard herself as a Christian. She believed in God, and heaven, and Jesus, and all sorts of things that we had never discussed in our house. We were horrified. We contacted the school and we asked that she be removed from Scripture.

The rules, as they were then, meant that all that the school was required to do was move our daughter to the back of the same classroom that scripture was being taught in to color in. She wasn’t actively participating in the class, but she was still absorbing all the messages.

When we found out about that, that was occurring, I think that might have been about the time that primary ethics became available as an alternative. We started to send her to ethics classes, so we were able to have her escape from

that toxic environment and breathe some fresh rational air as it were!

However, since then she still harbors these ideas about God, life after death, sin, hell, and ideas such as that except that she won’t talk to me about it. It’s affected my relationship with her to a degree, and I’m furious about that.

I read an article, about an investigation



the Human Rights Advocacy, Australia was conducting into the activities of a high school on the North Shore of Sydney where the principal had been filmed. The film had been publicised online with the deputy principal endorsing Scripture in his school.

The code of conduct for public schools requires Department of Education representatives to be neutral. They can’t peddle any religious or political views. I think the most they could get away with would be supporting a football team or something like that - yet here was this deputy principal claiming to represent the Department of Education. He announced himself and his position on a video, and he described his school as a mission field. The video was being produced with

the aim of raising funds for scripture teachers. It was being shown to church congregations around the area surrounding this school. I became involved with Human Rights Advocacy, Australia. I contacted them to find out more about what they were doing. Through my contact with them, I discovered that there were more videos featuring Department of Education representatives.

The videos themselves were titled, “The Mission on Your Doorstep,” and things like that - that were produced by Christian education boards who provide the Scripture teachers to schools in their area. They have to raise funds to pay for all that activity. They didn’t seem to have a shortage of representatives; school principals prepared to endorse what they were doing so that they could raise money.

Investigation into that resulted in principals claiming to be ignorant of the regulatory structure that governs SRI in schools. That’s what Human Rights Advocacy attempts to correct. Through my involvement with Human Rights Advocacy, I came to know about the Fairness In Religions In Schools (FIRIS). We found that there’s a large crossover in the interests between these two advocacy groups, so now I’m active in both groups. That’s the long version of how I became involved in this.



Kylie: What's FIRIS going to be doing now? They've been in the news recently in regard to billboards that they've created and they've had a great impact in the state of Victoria...

Paul: Impact would be a big understatement, I would say!

That has been a comprehensive correction of a situation that was abhorrent, which still continues in our state. Given the personal beliefs of the main political heavyweights in the state, being the Premier, the Minister for Education, the Opposition Leader, who are all quite sympathetic to the SRI cause, it's going to take a lot of turning around in NSW.

That's what FIRIS in NSW is attempting to do - it's a long, long road. It was a long road in Victoria, but they got there in the end and I'm confident that we will get there in the end in NSW too.

Kylie: These sorts of scripture teachings influence all religions. You could have someone in the class who might be an atheist, or a Muslim background... they could be a Buddhist, yet they're being taught Christianity...

Paul: They could also be a homosexual.

Kylie: They could be all sorts of things, and the parents don't know it.

Paul: They could be told that they're going to hell.

Kylie: Do you think that there's going to be a unified approach now that Victoria has been so successful?

Paul: I think that it's inevitable. I think the key word in the whole debate, and it doesn't come up a lot, is the first word in FIRIS: fairness. It's about fairness. Christianity in particular seems to be given an armchair ride into schools.

I know that other religions can become approved to present scripture SRE to public schools. Some of them do, but Christianity in particular really does hold a privileged position in our schools with respect to its access to children. That is something that we need to fix.

Lara Wood of FIRIS: What led me to become involved was my daughter started school in 2012 in prep, and her school offered special religious instruction. We opted her out because we're not religious. We didn't want her to be involved in the program because we thought it was proselytising.

She was only one of four children in her class that opted out, and it affected her a lot because her best friends were in there. After the classes they would come out and wave treats in her face because the instructors used to give out lollies and chocolates. They would just wave them in her face and say, "Oh, you didn't get one. Ha ha."

There was also a Christmas concert that they had organized at the church. We didn't want her to go to that. She had to stay behind, but she missed out on all what she thought was the fun stuff. She started crying and just upset my husband and I. So, I contacted FIRIS, and they organized for a news reporter to attend the Christmas concert.

She wrote a story about it, we were photographed, and we were in the paper. Then after I was helped personally, I decided to join up to give something back - because I was so grateful for the help that I received. I knew that other parents like me were suffering from this program.

I've been involved since December of 2012 and when I came along, the Department of Education pretty much didn't want to have much to do with FIRIS at all. They viewed us as a bit of a fringe organisation. They were very suspicious of what we were all about.

It was very hard to break down those barriers, but we slowly developed a working relationship with the Department of Education. I've personally been in there many times and met with the key bureaucrats and discussed with them the problems.

We presented many instances of proselytising going on and also how the opt in consent process wasn't being followed - and that many schools were still using an opt out process which artificially inflated the numbers.

We really pushed hard to have a complete overhaul of the system; firstly with the consent process because we knew that kids were being put into SRI by default if their parents weren't taking proactive action to make sure they wouldn't be put in the classes.

We also exposed the Bible scandal in Torquay College where some SRI children were given homophobic and very sexually explicit materials as part of the SRI Christmas celebrations. We were able to point out that the system opened the government up to huge risk - that they needed to take more of a proactive oversight in the program if they were going to have it in the schools.

After longstanding negotiations they agreed to overhaul the consent process, which came about as part of the Ministerial Directive 141 in July 2014, where it was strictly opt in. There was only one consent form that the schools were allowed to use: where the parents were clearly told that it was instruction and not education, and given an outline of exactly what it was all about - that it was the instruction on how to live and believe according to the particular religion.

It wasn't just about learning about all the religions, it was only the one religion, and that it was conducted by volunteers with very little training.

Once parents knew about these facts, they pretty much abandoned the program in their tens of thousands, I think something like 42,000 parents pulled out overnight. They continued to drop steadily from there. According to Access ministries, the number of schools offering it before the consent process was around 800. It's gone down to around 300 this year, so it's a huge drop, and when FIRIS formed in 2011, there was 940 schools offering SRI. So it's now down to around 300 - but even with the 300 that are still doing it, a lot of them are operating it with under 10 percent participation rates. But the typical participation rate is around 20 percent. So it's been a massive drop in enrollments since parents were told about what the program is all about. So, because of the falling numbers, it became harder and harder for the government to justify indulging this program any longer.



As you may know, the kids that don't do SRI have to pretty much sit around and twiddle their thumbs for half an hour. Some schools handle it better than others, some schools do get them to do, say, homework or catch up on other work. But other schools, they get the kids to pick up papers in the schoolyard, or do odd jobs around the school, or just play computer games.

I know at my daughter's school, they were just playing computer games. That is unacceptable to many, many parents who appreciate that the curriculum is very overcrowded and they don't have enough time to cover all the curriculum items in the school.

Kylie: Religious classes have been replaced by relationship lessons in Victorian schools. Respectable relationships education is being included in the curriculum from 2016 for prep to high school students – including lessons in global, culture, ethics, traditions, and family violence lessons. What's your response?

Lara: We think it's fantastic!

Look, we've never wanted to remove religion completely from the schools. We just don't want our schools to be used as mission fields, and we don't want our children to be ignorant. We think that

that's a very dangerous thing. We think that kids need to know about religion, but taught in an educational way, and because we're in such a multi cultural society these days, they need to learn about each other and respect each other.

Like for instance if a child wears a Sheikh hat to school, they can understand why he wears that hat, and what it's all about, and then he won't be teased for it. For instance, my daughter has become very close to a girl from Iran, which is a Muslim country. It's good for the kids to learn about each other, because at the moment you have groups like Reclaim Australia and United Patriots and they're marching in the street over Sharia law.

A lot of these people don't actually understand what Sharia law is all about. It's good if the kids can learn about all that, and the differences between the different Muslim groups in the Middle East, and that sort of thing. When you have ignorance, it leads to suspicion and hate, even. Experts all around the world are all united in the attitude that if you teach the children to respect each other's cultures and beliefs, then there will be nothing to fear and that it can only help social cohesion.

At the moment with SRI and SRE, the kids are being divided by their religion, put into different classrooms and taught

opposing world views. That does nothing to foster tolerance. It actually highlights the differences between them. We can't keep doing that. So we're really really pleased that the government agreed with us on that and has now brought that in.

Also with the respectful relationships, that's an extra layer for kids from LGBTI families and also youths themselves that are gender questioning and confused about their homosexuality and that sort of thing. So we think it's just fantastic - four years of work has been worth it.

We really think it's going to be harder because the Anglican church up there is extremely powerful and has a lot of political power and there's also the opposition of Fred Nile [the Australian politician and ordained Christian minister]. He has a balance of power and he is a staunch advocate for religious instruction - and if anyone tries to water it down, he's just onto them straight away. But we understand we just started off, and it will take years. Probably five years or more, but that's okay - because we are in it for the long term.

We also think that we've set a precedent down here, so we hope that the government will be taking note, and will be encouraged, and realize that the sky won't fall in if you make these changes - and there's nothing to be afraid of.



RELIGION

I'M RIGHT! YOU'RE WRONG! LA! LA! LA! I CAN'T HEAR YOU!



Sherlock Holmes

Beyond the Myth

By Majid Dawood

“In the name of Allah, most gracious, most merciful...”

That was the daily opening recital from our college Principal Mr Wahab at assembly. Those who were fortunate enough to go up to the podium to receive prizes would see a sea of heads wearing white caps transforming a major college of general education, meant to shape our future, to look like the prayer hall of a mosque.

I was sixteen then. Now, many decades later living in Australia, and thousands of miles away from my school, I am able to explore and express my thoughts on religions, cultures and philosophies of life. Importantly, I have a sense of freedom being away from the strict cultural supervision which, in a way, ensured that all of us fellow Muslims were shackled to each other and doing things to please each other. Back then where I was born, for me, pleasing others was too onerous and it drastically hindered my freedom and thinking. But, the irony is, the stupidity of religious mumbo-jumbo seems to have no borders. Even in Australia, churches, temples and mosques are abundant.

Just a few months ago, I visited a country town and walked past a dead-looking church with over-grown weeds and grass around the building. I was gobsmacked at the sign post which said, “God speaks your language – are you listening?” Are you kidding me? Inquisitively, I explored the premises eager to speak to God in my native Urdu language, only to realise that it was an abandoned building with a side wing used by a play group for little children. Clearly no one is listening to our God-almighty.

Once in another town, I joined other visitors and entered a majestic looking historical church, St Saviour’s, which was

listed as one of the tourist attractions of that town. Striking a conversation with a church official I asked him if many people attended the church. Shrugging his shoulders he said, “We have a seating capacity of over 300 but last Sunday we had less than twenty”.

The message seems to be the same. Abandoning God is the new trend. Christians are uninterested in being ‘saved’ by Christ who sacrificed his life for them? Christianity was a serious business for centuries and so what is going on, I wondered. It seems a vast majority of Christians are comfortable being nominal Christians and prefer not to get hung-up on their religion, which in turn reduces churches to nominal historical tourist buildings, wedding reception halls and day-care centres. Some people don’t mind identifying themselves as Christians but they are happy to be ‘not-so-Christian’ in real life.

While the regular churches are empty, money-pinching mega-church conglomerates seem to be flourishing. Televangelists are not shy to wave the Bible in the air implying that they are all about God and love, but in effect they are casting their hooks into people’s dough. So long as we mortals keep praying and paying to fill the church tills they are happy.

Meanwhile, our Muslim brothers and sisters are heading the other way. They have transformed the surroundings of mosques in Australia into little extensions of Pakistani and Middle-eastern towns. A mass of people wearing all sorts of their native costumes flock to the mosques, especially on Fridays, as if they are in celebration. Why wouldn’t they? Allah says in the Koran “Celebrate the praises of the Lord, and pray for his forgiveness: for he is oft-returning” (s110:3). There is

also another reason; as they say the devil is in the detail. The prophet of Islam stated that those Muslims who miss Friday prayers should have their houses should burnt (Sahih Muslim, Book 004, No. 1370-1373). I can’t help it but ask is God vain and arrogant if he accedes only to those who bend on their knees and beg him for mercy?

Back at school, I had no idea what our principal waffled for half an hour every morning. He often quoted the Koran and sounded very philosophical, implying that God is all about Love and compassion. Is he really? Now having read and understood the Koran and the Hadiths, I have realised that my birth-religion is two-faced.

Looking at it now, I cannot see myself in any of the religions, especially Islam which is overly burdened with non-value adding ‘must do’ rules and rituals, some of them derived from the pagan Arabs. As a non-Arab, I feel insulted to have followed the Arab rituals, including animal sacrifice. I also learnt that Allah described the non-believers as the worst of creatures and that they will be in hell-fire (s98:6). So I wonder why our Hindu and Buddhist friends are wasting their time in Temples. Allah means no injustice to any of his creatures (s3:108) and yet the egomaniac God doesn’t want them on the face of this planet (s9:5). He also said they are unclean (s9:28).

The number of deities, churches and places of worship destroyed by the Muslims in some countries is testimony to their total disrespect for other religions. Their actions are blasphemous. So, needless to say, it is hypocritical for the Islamists to demand respect from others when they behave like bullies, just because they can.



Islamists think that they are absolute which is outrageous. As for us, there is no point in living someone else's life and accept suppression of our right to free speech and criticism. It is about time that religious apologists accept that the world has changed and circumstances have also changed - from the days of living in mud-huts in the desert gazing at the goats to living in high-rise apartment buildings with iPhones talking to friends and families in New York, Tokyo and Beijing. Surely, dark and narrow-minded desert ideas are redundant in this contemporary world?

Cultures generally evolve with times. Religions on the other hand seem to be stuck in the mud. I agree that respecting other cultures and religions is an essential fabric of any decent society. But, by the same token, rights of individuals wanting to uncover the stone-age, barbaric religions must also be respected. Why not? Of course, Koran says that Islam is a superior religion of truth (s9:33), but every culture is different and to assume that one is better than another is outright arrogance.

There was a time I too loved and respected God. But, now, with reading and researching I believe that the God I worshipped for many decades was nothing but an onion-artist with several layers. The more I peeled, the more it smelled. Yet, for the life of me, I cannot understand why religions turned people

into who they are, especially when we have not seen any evidence of God, apart from the various unsupported claims made by some ancient tribesmen, self-appointing themselves as prophets.

The recent refugee crisis in Europe is a testimony to the level of intolerance and suppression of freedom in some of the Islamic countries. This brutal Game of Thrones situation now is so mad, we have no idea who is fighting who, but what we all know is that they are primarily Muslims butchering the fellow Muslims and the non-Muslims.

Rival jihadist groups face-off against each other wanting to please and praise the same God and crying, "Allahu Akbar"? Sadly, they are convinced that they will end up in heaven. Good luck to them. Oh dear God, it must be very hard for you to pick a side; I certainly don't wish to be in your shoes? It must also be so annoying to you because you have clearly commanded that believers must not kill each other (s4:92-93). Obviously they are not listening to you, despite the fact that you gave them revelations in their mother-tongue Arabic.

Sadly, the followers of Gods fail to understand that religions do not confer privilege or power, it imposes responsibility. Religions must protect innocence; our innocence allows us to do what the practical mind prohibits. Why get hung up on religions that offer formulae for dividing the people into us and them? It is also dumb to think that just because one is born into the

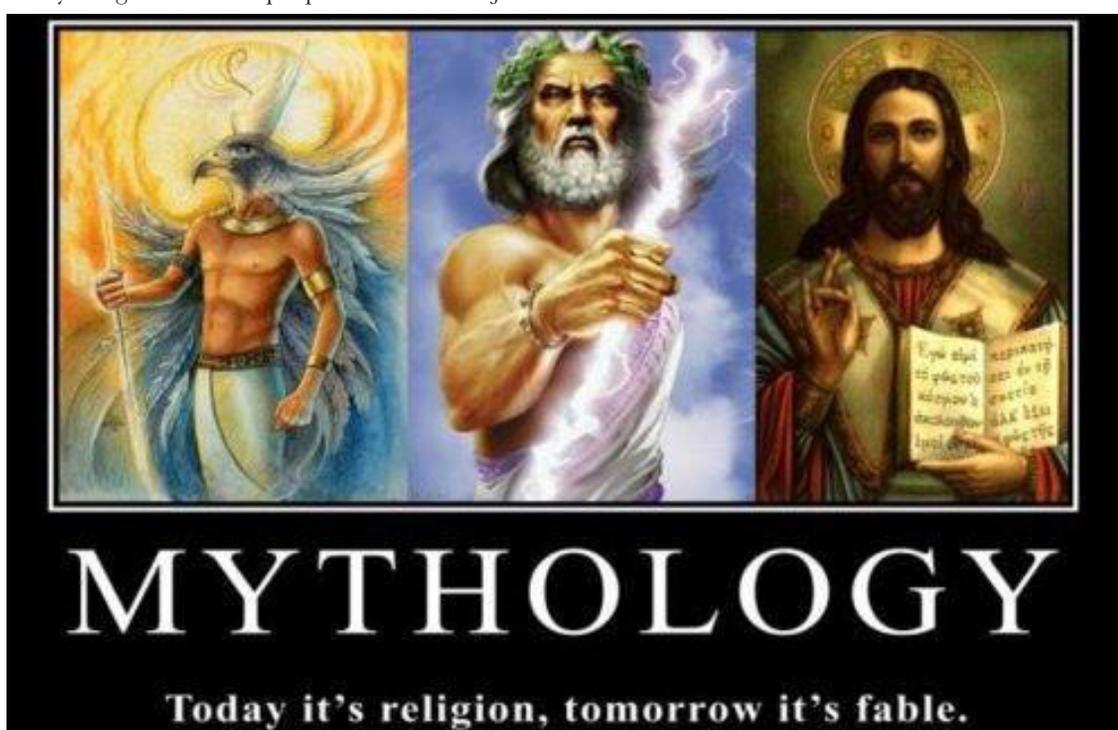
religion of their parents it should be their life time mission?

Thinking back, Mr Wahab, I never understood your religious slogans but I listened to you like a pet-dog lectured by little kids. I had no idea what the kids were saying to me, but they never stopped talking to me until I fell asleep. I also knew, unlike God, these kids loved me unconditionally, just pure love.

It is a riddle. God reminds me of the popular detective Sherlock Holmes created by Sir Arthur Doyle. We know that both God and Holmes are fictional characters but what sets Holmes apart from God is that he maintains an undercurrent of warmth and humanity. He solved problems. God on the other hand is the root of evil around us and the founding-father of bad ideas. With the spread of unscrupulous and poisonous ideas, will all people ever love one another? No chance, especially with the presence of the Islamic God who instead of trying to understand the non-believers through their eyes, openly condemns them and wants them killed. It also made no sense God loves murderers but hates gay people He created.

Let us demand fairness. Technically, God is a criminal. This God of public shame should be extradited to our mother earth so that we can take him to Hague and bring him to justice for his war crimes.

That aside, Holmes is bound to retire soon. What about you, Sir, God?



The Great Evil

By Tony Rhinehorn

Try this thought experiment. Think of the greatest crime you can imagine. You may think of the holocaust or the new evil of ISIS. Now think of a 12 year old boy in the company of a trusted elder.

He is trusted solely because of his membership of one of the great institutions that humanity has ever seen – the Catholic Church. See if you can stomach visualising the unspeakable acts done to this child of the kind we are hearing daily in the Royal Commission into Institutional Child Sexual Abuse.

See if you can imagine the thoughts that passed through his mind as the rape unfolded, see if you can imagine his utter despair, his confusion in coming to terms with what had just happened, think of the terror that would grip him from that point forward never knowing when or where it would happen again. Now imagine it is your son.

There is no doubt that the outrage has begun and yet the conversation is steeped in euphemism and political correctness. So entrenched is the doctrine to so many, so ingrained are the ideas into the

identity of so many and so powerful is this institution, they can aid and abet paedophiles in their ranks with impunity and still muster support from their congregation of true believers. To suggest that the issue not only lies in the institution but in the very nature of the tenants of faith is still taboo.

The scope of this betrayal to humanity is unparalleled and yet the Church has acted to trivialise it, has treated allegations with contempt and most despicably, covered up their crimes to protect their beloved institution. This, by the very people entrusted because of their claims to knowledge of universal truths, moral codes, the way to live and the way to secure eternal life.

How do the perpetrators look in the faces of the parents of the child they are molesting, without flinching, and play a charade of such deception and betrayal?

How do they repeatedly commit these heinous acts on the most vulnerable and continue to preach piety. How do they reconcile their actions against the devastation inflicted on their victims and

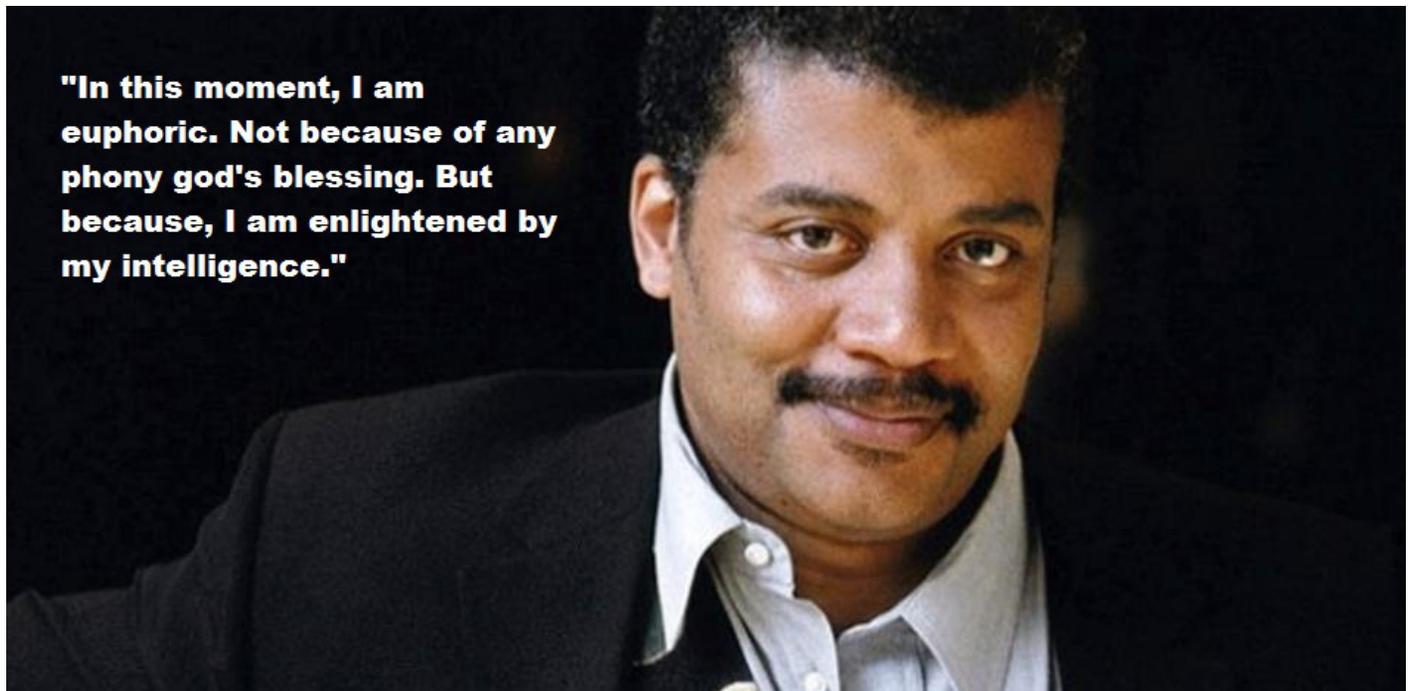
their families and friends - the suicides, the dysfunction, the self-loathing and the arduous task of self-healing for the ones that survive?

They do it by performing an intellectual dance, a creature of their indoctrination that masquerades their crimes as sins, their refusal to stop their crimes as the tribulations of a sinner and take comfort from the thought that forgiveness will be granted when their acts are balanced against good intentions and good deeds done in their servitude to their master. Herein lays the true sickness of the religious mind.

We must never forget the historical crimes the Church is responsible for when they had the power to stamp their infallibility and their will on the masses through fear, violence and intimidation. We can only imagine the scale of the rape and torture that must have been perpetrated in secret throughout the last 2,000 years.

Only the demise of superstition and the ridicule of those that wield it as a tool of power will protect our children from this great evil.

"In this moment, I am euphoric. Not because of any phony god's blessing. But because, I am enlightened by my intelligence."



Apologists

By Mike Meyersen

How do theologians rationalise Jesus' hypocrisy, issues with anger and false accusations?

Jesus' own hypocrisy

The most dyed in the wool apologist would find it impossible to provide a credible defence of Jesus' hypocrisy. Nevertheless, there is the odd individual who takes up the challenge and tries to exonerate Jesus for one or other instance of hypocrisy. For example, Eric Lyons writing in the appropriately named, The Apologetic Press, attempts to excuse Jesus' hypocrisy for warning us not to call others "fools" while doing so himself. Lyons maintains that the word "fool" has been mistranslated from a previous text and thereby attempts to absolve Jesus of hypocrisy by saying "Obviously if two different words are under consideration, Jesus logically could not be considered a hypocrite".

We need to remember that explanations claiming mistranslations of earlier texts are never valid because ultimately there is no original text to which Lyons, or anyone else, can refer. In other words all discussion about what is meant in the Bible according to Greek, Aramaic, Latin or any other language is speculative because there exists no original text to which one can refer.

Lyons, however, puts forward a further but equally poor excuse for Jesus' hypocrisy. He claims that it was acceptable for Jesus to use the word "fool" because Jesus did not prohibit calling others "fools" if it was done in an appropriate manner, but forbade it if done in a spirit of malicious contempt. Lyons then claimed that it is the attitude, rather than the actual words, that is the focus of prohibition. There is nothing in the scriptures to support this wishful explanation of Lyons.

Jesus unambiguously prohibited the use of the word "fool". He did not provide a list of exceptions as to when the word

could be used. Lyons fails in his attempt to excuse Jesus' hypocrisy with respect to the use of the word "fool".

Lyons continues to reveal his flawed and malicious reasoning by saying that it's acceptable to call an atheist a "fool" for denying the existence of God as long as they are not called "fools" in a hateful and malicious manner! When he says atheists can be called fools you can safely bet that Lyons believes that followers of all the faiths that do not believe in Jesus are also fools.

Jesus' issues with anger

Theologians have their work cut out trying to apologise for Jesus not only advising against anger but engaging in angry outbursts himself, such as his furious tirade against the Pharisees for supposed hypocrisy. Rather than be honest about Jesus' shortcomings, they put forward complicated explanations to try to excuse Jesus' angry outbursts. They claim that the anger Jesus displays is acceptable because it is "righteous anger". Is this a plausible explanation? No, because there are no scriptural writings classifying anger as righteous or non-righteous. All anger is righteous unless it is anger that is ill-founded.

To say that Jesus' anger against the Pharisees is all well and good because it is righteous anger is a poor attempt to excuse Jesus' unacceptable behaviour. But let's be generous and accept that Jesus' angry outburst against the Pharisees constituted "righteous anger" and is therefore excusable.

What then of his other angry outbursts? Can the whipping of the traders in the temple courtyard be considered righteous anger? No, it can never be right to disrupt and whip people just because they are trading in their own temple courtyard. Would it be tolerated if the matrons running the cake stall at the local church fete were treated in this manner? Jesus

angrily condemned all the citizens of three towns, including infants, children and the disabled, to hell because Jesus did not consider them appreciative of his teachings. Can this be considered righteous anger? No. Collective punishment is never excusable. Has Jesus forgotten the Golden Rule that he emphasised we all follow? For those who remain unconvinced let's consider Jesus' angry killing of a tree!

In Matt. 21:18-19, we read that Jesus felt hungry when walking to the city. He noticed a fig tree at the side of the road but on approaching the tree he saw that although it had leaves on its branches, it bore no fruit. He cursed the fig tree, "May you never bear fruit again!" and at once the tree withered away.

Several problems are apparent. Jesus is clearly displaying petulant and unwarranted anger. He cursed the fig tree although he disapproved of cursing (Matt 5:44 KJV). It's absurd to be angry with a tree for not bearing fruit. Moreover the tree was out of season. Jesus' anger with a tree cannot be described as righteous! Moreover, Jesus emphasises that we must not get angry. Jesus' killing of a harmless fruit tree is inexcusable.

Christian theologians have their work cut out trying to excuse Jesus' unseemly behaviour. They attempt to do this by claiming that the story of the fig tree is allegorical. They say that the story is a metaphor for Jesus' anger at the ungrateful and hypocritical Jews for rejecting him! Theologians explain the killing of the fig tree, as does Matthew Henry, in his Concise Commentary.

According to Henry; "This cursing of the barren fig-tree represents the state of hypocrites in general... he [Jesus] comes to many, seeking fruit, and finds leaves only. A false profession commonly withers in this world, and it is the effect of Christ's curse. The fig-tree that had no fruit, soon



lost its leaves. This represents the state of the nation and people of the Jews in particular. Our Lord Jesus found among them nothing but leaves. And after they rejected Christ, blindness and hardness grew upon them, till they were undone, and their place and nation rooted up. The Lord was righteous in it. Let us greatly fear the doom denounced on the barren fig-tree”.

Gill in his Exposition of the entire Bible explains Jesus’ behaviour in similar fashion. He says; “This tree was an emblem of the Jews. Christ being hungry, and very desirous of the salvation of men, came first to them...but, alas! He found nothing but mere words, empty boasts, an outward show of religion, an external profession, and a bare performance of trifling ceremonies, and oral traditions; whereas Christ rejected them, and in a little time after, the kingdom of God, the Gospel, was taken away from them, and their temple, city, and nation, entirely destroyed”.

Christian theologians have excused Jesus’ behaviour by saying that the killing of the fig tree is an allegory of the Jews’ refusal to accept Jesus and the punishment that they endured as a consequence.

This nonsensical explanation fails, however, to consider Jesus’ own explanation for killing the tree. When the disciples expressed amazement at the

sudden death of the tree Jesus explained that they too could kill trees in the same manner—the only requirement being faith. Jesus elaborated further, saying that with faith anything is possible, even the moving of mountains Matt. 21:20-22! It is self-evident that Jesus killed the tree to impress on his disciples what can be achieved through faith alone. Jesus’ explanation made no mention of Jews or their refusal to acknowledge him.

Jesus’ account does, however, have him making a false claim. In the two millennia since Jesus proclaimed that anything is possible with faith alone, there remains no evidence that this claim is true. Indeed, if it were true, the laws of physics would have to be rewritten

In their desire to cleanse Jesus of blame for the unwarranted killing of a tree the theologians have unwittingly invented an allegorical explanation that shows Jesus up in an even worse light. The Jews, described by the theologians as “the false profession”, have not withered. Nor have the Jews been “entirely destroyed”, despite several attempts to do so. Moreover, they are hardly a “barren people”. The Jews, have, in fact, flourished—their pro rata contribution to society far exceeds that of any other “religious” group. Jews comprise only about 13 million people. Yet from this tiny number have come countless individuals who have excelled in every field of endeavour. For example,

22% of Nobel prize winners are Jewish although Jews comprise only 0.2% of the world’s population. The theologians in resorting to allegory in order to explain Jesus’ bad behaviour have made a false prophet of Jesus.

Furthermore, if Jesus was so disappointed in the Jews because they rejected him in favour of things such as “empty boasts, outward show of religion and oral traditions” what would Jesus think of his “followers” who, shortly after establishing the new religion, embarked on crimes against humanity unmatched in extent and brutality for two millennia? The crusades, the inquisition, the burning of innocent people on trumped up charges of being witches, conversions at the point of a sword, forty year war between Catholics and Protestants, the slave trade, and the raping, enslavement and stealing of children spring to mind.

If the story of the fig tree is an allegorical prophesy about the barrenness of those who reject Jesus’ teachings then this prophesy is best applied to Jesus’ followers who emphatically rejected Jesus’ best teachings in favour of centuries of torture, murder, rape and pillaging.

Christian theologians have invented an elaborate explanation in an attempt to exonerate Jesus’ unacceptable behaviour. In the process they have maligned the Jews and made a false prophet of Jesus.

Jesus By His Own Standards

By Mike Meyersen

We’ve seen how the clergy fare according to the standards Jesus expected from the Pharisees, but how does Jesus compare by his own standards?

Could Jesus also be a hypocrite? Could Jesus have issues with anger? More importantly, could Jesus bear false witness?

A hypocrite is someone who doesn’t practise what they preach. It was for this failing that Jesus castigated the Pharisees. But did Jesus practise what he preached?

Consider the following verses.

Jesus tells us to honour our parents. “For God said, ‘Honour your father and your mother’ Matt:15:4. Jesus, however, treated his own mother with disrespect saying to her; “Woman, what have I to do with thee?” John 2:4 KJV. After telling us to honour our parents Jesus hypocritically informs us that his job is to sow discord between children and their parents. “I have come to set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother” Matt 10:35.

Jesus warned against cursing and considered the death penalty fitting punishment for those who cursed their parents “Whoever curses his father or mother shall be put to death” Matt 15:4. Yet Jesus cursed others on numerous occasions calling them “fools”, “vipers”, “whited sepulchres”, “hypocrites”, “blind” and “thieves”.

Jesus warns against calling others “fools”, saying that those who do so deserve damnation. “Whoever calls him “fool” deserves hell-fire”. Matt 5:22. Jesus,



however, calls the Pharisees “blind fools” Matt 23:17.

Jesus instructs us to love our enemies and be good to them, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you Matt 5:44 KJV. Jesus, however, cursed his enemies (see above) and said “you must not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace but a sword” Matt 10:34.

While Jesus tells us to love our enemies (Matt.5:44) he wanted his followers to kill his enemies; “But as for those enemies of mine who did not want me for their king, bring them here and slaughter them in my presence” Luke 19:27. At the same time he endorsed the Mosaic law (Matt 5:17) which stipulates that we are not to kill.

Jesus was not only a hypocrite but had problems with anger management. Jesus’ tirade against the Pharisees was not an isolated instance of an unnecessary display of anger. Consider a few further instances in which Jesus let his anger get the better of him.

Jesus felt that the residents of Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum had not sufficiently appreciated the miracles he had performed. He angrily cursed them and condemned them all to hell.

“Alas for you, Chorazin!” he said., “Alas for you Bethsaida!” Matt. 11:21.

As for you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? No, you will be brought down to Hades! Matt. 11:23.

Jesus’ treatment of those who traded on the temple grounds was a further display of fury. “In the temple precincts he found the dealers in cattle, sheep, and pigeons, and the money-changers seated at their tables. He made a whip of cords and drove them out of the temple, sheep cattle and all. He upset the tables of the money-changers, scattering their coin. John 2:14-15.

While Jesus engaged in several angry tirades he hypocritically admonished us not to be angry; “Anyone who nurses

anger against his brother must be brought to justice” Matt. 5:22.

Most importantly, however, Jesus concludes his condemnation of the Pharisees by falsely accusing them of murder. Jesus said; Upon you may come all the righteous blood shed upon the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel unto the blood of Zacharias son of Barachias, whom ye slew between the temple and the altar Matt. 23:35 KJV.

Most scholars agree that Zacharias son of Barachias was murdered in 70 A.D. Jesus was therefore falsely accusing the Pharisees of a crime they could not have done. In doing so, Jesus broke the commandment not to bear false witness.

Jesus, it is undeniable, was a hypocrite, had issues with anger and was untroubled by bearing false witness. While hypocrisy and anger are hallmarks of personality disorders, wrongfully accusing others of murder is a slanderous and pernicious charge, much more sinister than hypocrisy or rage attacks.



MIND CONTROL, EXTORTION, THE PURSUIT OF POWER
Vader felt like an amateur.

Media Releases

A Tale of Two Cities

While the Atheist Foundation of Australia (AFA) normally doesn't buy into talk of a "Victoria/NSW" rivalry, this week's treatment of the movie *Gayby Baby* in these two states provides a stark contrast – a "tale of two cities".

Firstly to NSW, where the Education Minister banned the screening of *Gayby Baby* during school hours, following an alleged "backlash from parents", opinion pieces telling a 12 year old girl that she was "not normal", predictably ignorant comments from religious spokespeople about "promoting a gay lifestyle", etc.

In fact, it was all a tabloid media beat-up. Not one parents' complaint had been recorded, and the Burwood students issued an open letter in response, that was far more measured, inclusive and compassionate than the adults supposedly trying to "protect" them.

Of particular note was this attempt at justification by Minister Adrian Piccoli:

"During school hours we expect them to be doing maths and English and curriculum matters. This movie is not part of the curriculum and that's why I've made that direction."

In response, AFA member Steve Brooks asked the pertinent question:

"...he claims school is about maths, english and curriculum matters... so where exactly does SRI [Special Religious Instruction] fit into this schedule of maths, english and curriculum matters then?"

Excellent question, Steve.

On to Victoria, where Premier Daniel Andrews slammed the NSW *Gayby Baby* ban as "cruel rubbish" and strongly supported the film being shown to Victorian students to promote inclusion and acceptance. This comes only a week after the Andrews government moved to exclude SRI from class times, only allowing it to be conducted at lunchtimes or before/after school. In their place – classes on histories, cultures, faiths, ethics, domestic violence and respectful relationships.

AFA President Michael Boyd commented:

"The difference either side of the border couldn't be more marked. Victoria is clearly moving to make their state education system more progressive, secular, non-discriminatory and inclusive, while NSW is unfortunately moving in the opposite direction – despite being the home of the Sydney Mardi Gras.

Sadly, the NSW government appears to have overreacted to media hysteria and tired religious complaints about 'promoting a gay lifestyle'. Surely in 2015 religious voices and tabloid newspapers don't still control what NSW school students are exposed to?

Steve Brooks' question also touches on an important issue, and we think it warrants a considered response."

The AFA strongly endorses the Victorian initiatives, and calls on the NSW government to reconsider its stance – and to address Steve's question. Because we're all wondering about that, too.

Michael Boyd
President, Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc



**YOUR GOD IS THE BEST
GOD. IN FACT, HE'S THE ONLY
GOD. ALL OTHER GODS ARE
RIDICULOUS, MADE UP
RUBBISH. NOT YOURS
THOUGH. YOURS IS REAL.**

Losing (My) Religious Privilege

The Atheist Foundation of Australia (AFA) isn't at all surprised by the complaints of Christian group Family Voice Australia, who are urging that the 2016 Census "Religion" question returns the "No religion" option to last place on the answer list.

Through our highly successful Not religious now? Mark "No religion" campaign, the AFA was instrumental in the 2011 Census results for that question returning the highest-ever "No religion" percentage – 22.3% – see: www.censurnoreligion.org

The AFA also provided our submission to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) in 2013 regarding changing the question, and consulted extensively with them over a long period of time. When taken together with contributions from other skeptic, humanist and rationalist groups, this resulted in the question being changed.

"The AFA has been at the forefront of raising awareness of the "No religion" demographic for a number of years, with our "Mark No Religion" campaign. This paved the way for subsequent efforts by ourselves and other like-minded groups to work with the ABS in reducing the inherent bias towards religion" said AFA President Michael Boyd.

"The many religious options are still available, and it is ridiculous to think that a devoted follower will suddenly mark "No religion" purely because it's the first option, and they can't be bothered finding their own religion on the list. So really, what are Family Voice Australia worried about?"

"If it's that people might suddenly realise that "No religion" is a valid answer, and that it now applies to them – that highlights exactly why this overdue change was needed. The non-religious demographic in Australia is no longer just a "None of the above" minority, and the religious clearly don't like that."

For the 2016 Census, the AFA will again be reminding people "Not religious now? Mark No Religion", to promote awareness of the Census change and to ensure that Australia's growing non-religious demographic is seen and heard.

Kylie Sturgess interviewed Michael Boyd for RTRFM on the AFA's key role in this important Census change, and the interview can be heard here: <https://soundcloud.com/atheistaus-podcast/michael-boyd-of-the-afa-on-the-2016-census-religion-question/>

Michael Boyd
President, Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc

Syrian Refugee Crisis and Religion

The Government's announcement that it will permanently resettle an additional 12,000 Syrian refugees is welcomed by the Atheist Foundation of Australia (AFA). We support helping displaced and desperate people as much as possible.

However, religion (or the lack of it) should not be a deciding factor in helping those in need.

Calls for help with the Syrian crisis have resulted in worrying suggestions that any intake should be biased in favour of Christians. Unlike the French Prime Minister who unequivocally rejected that idea, the Australian Government continues to leave the door open – at least by implication.

Australians' genuine expression of compassion should not be limited on the basis of belief. Regardless of their cultural and religious background, the harrowing accounts of persecution and powerlessness should not result in prioritising on the basis of whether those in need are of 'the correct faith'.

Combined with the recent Border Force debacle, the AFA is concerned at a tendency towards othering, silencing and promoting fear, which contributes to the worrying rhetoric that exists around refugees to this country. The Government appears to be engaging in "dog-whistle" politics to pander to the likes of Rise Up Australia party, Reclaim Australia, Fred Nile and the Australian Christian Lobby – who have all demanded that Christians be preferenced.

"Charity and humanitarian assistance, funded by all Australian taxpayers, should not be co-opted to preference sectarian interests" AFA President Michael Boyd said. "It should be made available equitably to people of all faiths and none – the plight of non-believers in that conflict having been lost in the distasteful religious clamouring for the lions' share of that charity".

The AFA calls on the Government to adopt a transparent, fully non-discriminatory protocol for selecting 12,000 Syrian refugees for resettlement in Australia, equitably considering applicants of all faiths, and of no faith at all.

Michael Boyd
President, Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc



Catholic adoption agency wants exemption from same-sex laws

The Atheist Foundation of Australia (AFA) welcomes any change which allows citizens of Australia to live equally and freely and without discrimination. We therefore applaud the proposed Victorian legislation from the Andrews Government which will not grant faith based groups, such as CatholicCare, exemptions which would allow them to refuse services to same-sex couples seeking to adopt.

Archbishop Dennis Hart is reported as calling for “protection for faith-based groups that do not want to give adoption services to same-sex couples”, and CatholicCare has indicated that it will cease providing adoption services if it is unable to maintain a discriminatory stance in doing so.

Once again, the Catholic Church demonstrates ignorance on the matter, with Archbishop Hart repeating unfounded claims that “children are best served when they experience the love of both a mother and father in a safe, secure and stable relationship“. This is clearly refuted by an abundance of quality evidence showing that stability of parenting structure and processes, not the gender(s) of the parents, is the overriding indicator of child welfare.

If the Church was really concerned with child welfare, they would accept this evidence and support equality in marriage and adoption as the best safeguard of the welfare of gay-parented children. Their concerns are demonstrably for themselves, and for maintaining their rights to discriminate against people.

“Once again, the Catholic Church and its affiliated groups wish to remove themselves from being subject to laws which everyone else are expected to uphold, and instead act according to their own limited world views. In effect, continuing to hinder Australia’s ability to be a free-thinking, and equal society.”, stated AFA President Michael Boyd.

The AFA will continue to support any legislation which allows gay couples to live without interference and discrimination, including the right to adopt, and strongly opposes any group wishing to interfere with this on religious grounds.

Michael Boyd
President, Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc

A Positive Change to Victoria’s School Curriculum

The Atheist Foundation of Australia (AFA) supports the Victorian Government’s decision to change and improve the state’s school curriculum. Part of this change is to remove Special Religious Instruction (SRI) from regular class time.

The Victorian Government released a statement today recognising that only 20% of its current primary school students participate in SRI, and acknowledges other students are missing out on essential learning time.

Michael Boyd, President of the AFA, recognises this important change and states:

“The Victorian Government’s decision to introduce the new policy is an important step for the permanent removal of religious instruction from all state schools in the country. The Atheist Foundation of Australia supports the introduction of educational tools for students in ethical and moral behaviour without religion being involved.”

The new curriculum will emphasise teaching students in relationship building, understanding global cultures, the importance of history, and recognising ethics and cultural traditions.

The Victorian Government states it will now allocate time for students wishing to participate in SRI to either attend lessons before or after school, or at lunchtime.

The AFA would like to encourage other states to consider implementing similar changes.

A small percentage of students attending public schools attend religious instruction, which ultimately excludes and discriminates religious minorities and non-religious families.

An obvious contrast is NSW where the current government continues to remove the availability of ethics classes as an option on public school’s enrolment forms, while budgeting millions for school chaplaincy programs.

The AFA has previously released statements expressing dismay over the current arrangements and today would like to encourage all states to follow in Victoria’s example. It is time we removed religion being taught as fact from public schools and establish a truly secular and non-discriminatory education system.

Michael Boyd
President, Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc



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Atheist Foundation of Australia

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Available online from
cafepress.com/aussieatheists



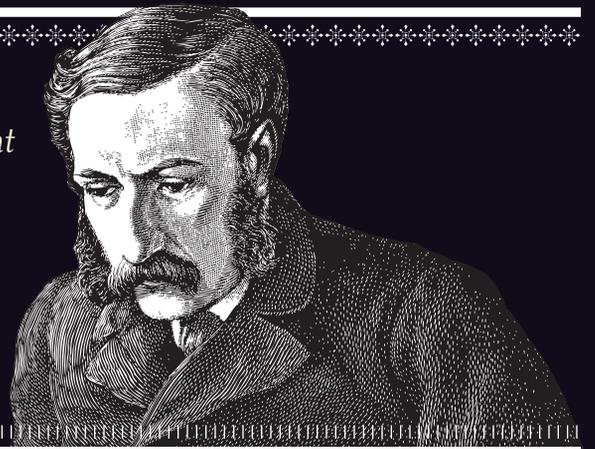
Assorted womens and mens t-shirts
and sweat-shirts, bags, mugs, stickers,
magnets, pins, mousepads ...

and so much more!



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

~ Susan Neiman ~



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

~ Douglas Adams ~



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

~ Frans de Waal, The Bonobo and The Atheist ~



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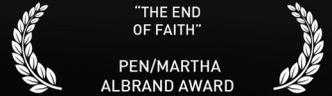
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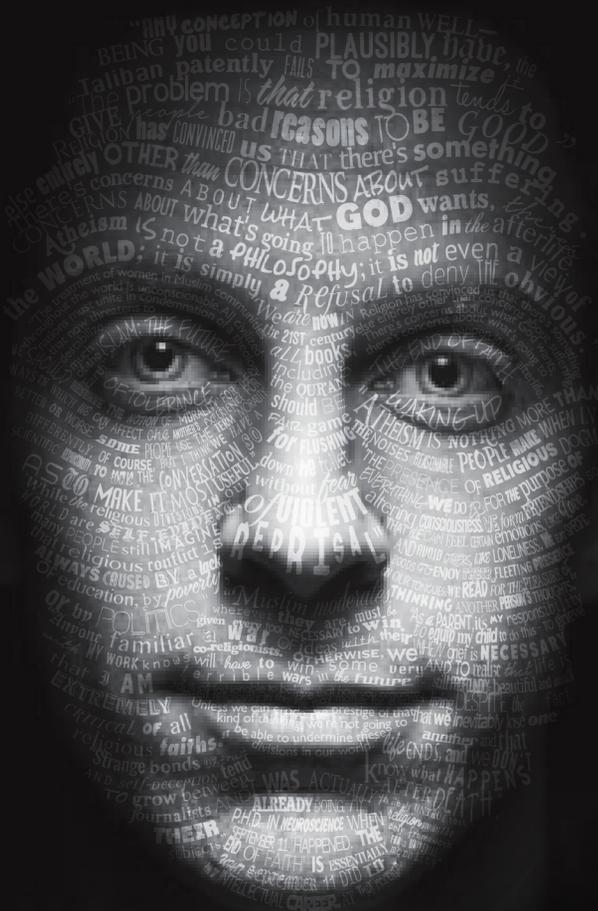
PEN/MARTHA ALBRAND AWARD

"Sam Harris launches a sustained nuclear assault. A bold and exhilarating thesis. The End of Faith is a brave, pugilistic attempt to demolish the walls that currently insulate religious people from criticism. The End of Faith is badly needed."

theguardian

"Harris's book . . . caught my eye because it's so entirely of this moment, so keenly in touch with the growing number of Americans who are willing to say that they do not find the succor they crave, or a truth that makes sense to them, in organized religion."

Frank Bruni, The New York Times



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