



**Atheist Foundation
of Australia Inc** Established
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Promoting scientifically credible & factually reliable evidence

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Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc

Established 1970

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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 lateness of this issue. I was on holidays and then various administrative obstacles managed to push it further and further out. It's an incredibly busy time at the AFA. Thanks for your patience.

On the cover we have Lyle Shelton of the Australian Christian Lobby (ACL). The influence of the ACL on the Australian political landscape seems to be increasing significantly. We had the Treasurer, Scott Morrison as a VIP presenter at the ACL conference in Sydney in the past few weeks. This after incursions of the ACL into significant public policies. Not the least of which was the Safe Schools program. The ACL sneezed and the Prime Minister inoculated us all. It's completely inappropriate for public policy to be made on the fly in response to fundamental religious lobbying. The ACL have also been very vocal about marriage equality and how it would impact their Christian beliefs. I don't know about the rest of you, but I'm over the ACL and their influence on this government. It's time to call foul.

The first action that AFA members can take is in the coming election. It's more important than ever to really consider your vote. The increasing influence of the religious right needs to be addressed by the electorate. I ask everyone to seriously look at the candidates in your electorate and what they stand for. From my reading, in my electorate certainly, the only parties with a truly secular agenda are The Greens and The Australian Sex Party. Both of those parties have a focus on not just secular ideals and policy, but the active removal of religion from the public policy areas. Individuals can vote for who they want to, but they are my suggestions to consider.

The other action involves the coming Census. In the previous Census, the AFA was very active in getting the Australian public to think carefully about how they answered the religion question. This time, the question has been

changed and we have the best opportunity possible to get a realistic response. We need to advertise and promote the need for people to answer this question honestly. The AFA will be running a public campaign on this issue. For this, some funding will be required. We are setting up a webpage for donations to be made to the campaign. Look for further information coming out soon for this.

In this issue of the magazine you will notice that I have not included copies of all media releases put out in the last quarter. I have decided to stop doing this. There are too many of them to reproduce and it would take up half the magazine. They can be accessed via the AFA website. You can also contact me and I will provide you with copies, if you would like them.

Finally, I would like to welcome the new members for the Committee of Management; Baharak Mohabattalab, Michael Beecham and Adam Reakes. All very welcome additions. I also wanted to thank Michael Boyd for his time as president and the assistance he gave me and welcome Kylie Sturgess into the role.

Until next issue, take care.
Tracy



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President's Message

After the AGM in March, the AFA Committee of Management ran elections for Executive positions. Kylie Sturgess was elected as the new President. Michael Boyd was happy to step down and remains in the Executive team as Vice-President. On behalf of all members we thank Michael for stepping in when he did as president and for the new and exciting directions he has taken the foundation during his tenure. We welcome Kylie as the new president and look forward to her potential for growth in the role.

Hello everyone,

I don't know if the curse of 'living in interesting times' is a true one, but it's been a time that has certainly raised the profile of the faithless in this country, in both positive and negative ways.

Since becoming president (only a few months now!), I've been thrown into becoming hyper-aware of the Australian political scene and the efforts of a number of people to keep checks and balances when it comes to the separation of church and state.

When attending a rally on Safe Schools as a radio reporter, there were a number of parents complaining that they felt that religious pressure was being brought to bear on schools, leading to prejudice against young LGBTI people. They feared for the future of their and other's children in the light of aggressive campaigning and misunderstanding.

Earlier that month, I was researching the current developments for resettling Syrian refugees, and discovered claims by the Refugee Council that Australian immigration officials were weighing strongly towards Iraqi Christians. Also Shane Hendrickson in the [Murray Valley Standard](#) questioned whether the Dawn Service he attended was emphasising religious content to the general detriment of secular Australians who may have felt similar.

April was topped off with a visit to the Q and A taping at the ABC studios in Ultimo, Sydney - and at the start of the event, the organisers took a poll as to whether attendees believed in god or not.

With about 70% of the audience reporting as religious, it was a dismaying experience to be one of a small group of people who collectively face-palmed at the confident proclamation of a studio question which compared the 'marginalisation of Christians' (particularly ironic considering the composition of the entirely Christian panel on the stage) to the purgings of Stalinist Russia.



At least it was an opportunity to meet a few atheists, mostly from Sydney, who are highly active on social media and keen to contribute to a secular future. And many of them wanted to know 'what can we do about these attitudes that are being shown nationwide'.

It's all brought one thing into sharp relief - we need to be sure where we stand.

And that's where the Census comes into it.

Over the next few months, the Atheist Foundation of Australia are going to be

producing a hard-hitting campaign (and not just leaflets, fans of Red Dwarf!) that urges people who may not and may never identify as atheists - to mark No Religion on the census. Many of us who are reading this are members who are happy to identify as non-believers. However, there's a significant number of people out there... that we don't know about, that Australia doesn't know about.

They may have attended church when younger, gone to a religious school for various reasons (including quality of education, boarding school opportunities, academic or scholarship benefit) - and over time, they find themselves no longer part of the faith they once thought they belonged to. We are reaching out to people who are very much within a faith community - and have to be circumspect or even silent about it.

But the Census is now giving people a chance to privately and personally indicate what they believe in - and what they don't. They may never identify as atheists, or agnostics, or even secular, as many of us do. But their views are as important as anyone's, and it's vital that we learn about the demographic that may very well influence spending, taxes, budget allocations and more.

Interesting times are ahead of us too - and I urge supporters of the faithless in Australia to support the campaign that the Atheist Foundation of Australia is running, and be a part of the team that will make a measurable difference for the future.

Kylie Sturgess
AFA President

Taking the High Ground

Bob Irwin

The Chosen Ones

Heads of religious institutions and some of their high-profile flock imagine that their God has personally selected them to carry out His work. Those who adopt such a self-important stance are prone to taking the high ground when delivering proclamations and making big decisions, some of which have disastrous consequences.

We would expect clerics to feel and act this way . . . deferring to their infallible God in everything is what they do. It's entrenched in their thinking habits. The central part of their (internally-developed) job description if you like. It's what their devoted and obedient followers expect of them. Spurred on by fervent adoration of them as God's spiritual brokers, some leaders even take on a measure of infallibility themselves.

Religious political leaders, also, can easily and automatically defer to God in decision-making, especially if their assumed superiority is based on an ingrained belief that their religion, or branch of it, is the best one, even the chosen one – just like they have been. And they won't even consider there is anything odd or wrong in thinking this way such is their indoctrinated belief and determination to be seen to be right, and better, and important; and virtually unaccountable.

These religious or political bosses may be cradle Christians or recent converts, or were religiously captured somewhere in between those epochal extremes – at which time they experienced or were induced into a religious/God-based epiphany which inspired them to take up religious orders or seek political power. Three scenarios follow.

God bless you!

The elevated positions reached by these high-ranking clerics and politicians seemingly entitling them to beseech their God to bless a group of people, the

military, the country, the whole world. Even the dead.

The concept of “God bless” is embedded in Christian culture. During the span of their religion, Christians have sought God's blessing for everything from natural phenomena and crop production, to men-at-arms (even by opposing sides), to congregations of believers and nations of believers.

How many times did the world hear the staunchly-Christian born-again US President George W Bush cry out “God bless America” for success against “the enemy” during the lead up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and during the ongoing occupation of that country? It seemed like the invasion was, in Mr Bush's mind anyway, God's will . . . he was quoted as seeking guidance from “a Higher Father”. While President Bush was speaking to God, Pope John Paul II made an appeal for world prayer to God in the hope that the proposed US-led invasion would not proceed. Apparently God preferred to answer Mr Bush's prayers.

Along with his frequent “God blesses”, who could ever forget his indefinite “axis of evil”, the non-existent WMD, the non-existent uranium from Niger, the imprudent “mission accomplished”? The Washington machine was spinning out of control, with the President, Vice-President Dick Cheney and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld pushing the buttons and agitating for war.

To the hundreds of thousands of innocent victims (dead, maimed, dispossessed), and those covering the cost of the war, it was an act of expensive aggression based on spurious statements coming from the heavily-Christian administration and Bush's Christian allies at the time – notably the long-serving Prime Ministers, Tony Blair of Britain and Australia's John Howard. It was as though these three sacrificed what morality and honesty there is in waging war on the altar of their God and His Christian soldiers. While Bush prayed to God for guidance, Blair said that “God will be my judge on Iraq”. Howard went along with them. Invading Iraq led to terrible ongoing circumstances.



The elimination of Saddam Hussein was some compensation, while those who benefited by enhancing their own power-bases or incomes may have thought their God was helping them with His blessing. But getting the “bad guy” came more than 25 years too late for the Iraqi people – the US’s, indeed the world’s, procrastination in ridding Iraq of the Iraqi dictator enabled his brutal regime to do what it wanted over that period. (The US even supported the ruthless tyrant during the 1980s when Iraq took up arms against Iran, a country the US could not forgive for deposing the US-supported monarch for Iran, the ineffective, corrupt and unpopular Shah.) If God was supposed to be helping, He sure waited a long time – and then got it wrong.

In February 2013 Tony Blair conceded that life in Iraq had not turned out as he hoped when he committed British personnel to the 2003 invasion. Was this admission part of God’s judgement of Mr Blair, as he said He would? (Might a more down-to-earth appraisal of the former prime minister appear in the long-awaited Iraq War Inquiry Report by Sir John Chilcot? – when Prime Minister Cameron allows it to be released, and in what form.)

The infighting, killing (targeted and indiscriminate), car bombings, suicide bombings, and forced abandonment of civilians from their homes add up to massive destruction and waste. And now there is the wanton terror of the brutal, and criminally disposed and inhabited, so-called Islamic state and its cohorts whose tactics can be compared with the thug-like and nasty Nazis.

In taking the religious cum political high ground over Iraq George W Bush’s requests for God’s blessings failed; miserably.

Something Versus Nothing

Christian leaders, lobbyists and commentators who have superior perceptions of themselves because of their religious beliefs and related feelings of self-importance, are inclined to put down those who do not agree with their beliefs. As well, they seem to broadly categorise three types of people: Christian believers, believers in other religions, and non-believers.

It’s not uncommon for the more-bigoted ones, including some politicians, to decry non-belief by invoking a position of “belief in something” (their God and religion) versus “belief in nothing” (not anything), as if belief in God is the benchmark for having a belief system. In assuming this religious high ground, they display a lack of both insight and respect. Even using the term “non-believer” implies ostracism or omission: something negative. It is neither rational nor logical to insinuate that a “non-believer” (secular person, atheist, humanist, someone who is not religious but interested in all religions) doesn’t believe in anything. Regarding Christianity, they simply don’t believe the ignorance-based, unverifiable and mysterious stories about Jesus’ divinity, his mother being a virgin made pregnant by God from above the sky, and sundry other Christian convictions first developed around two thousand and more years ago – and used as foundations to build a belief system and religious establishment, to be perpetuated by those with a vested interest in doing so, to this very day.

In other words, “something” over “nothing” is a haughty posture taken to bolster the case for religious belief – as if belief in God and Christianity is everything and non-belief means those people’s lives are empty. Such a blinkered and arrogant position is misleading and mischievous. And detrimental to societal cohesion and harmony.

So-called “non-believers” are perfectly capable of having a belief system . . . it’s just not a church-owned-and-controlled kind. It could be more like a life-force. Some might call it Nature: being in awe and respectful of everything around them – that’s what inspires and sustains them. Non-believers may also reason that institutionalised religion has taken advantage of, indeed at times abused, the natural life-force and ingenuity of humans. Think Copernicus, Kepler, Kepler’s mother Katharina, Galileo, Bruno, Darwin, amongst many; and women – demeaned for centuries.

Non-believers often share beliefs with some of the positive and constructive elements of Christian and other religions’ teachings, but not with the obviously absurd and superstitious components. They are not locked into blind dogma.

They abhor institutional waste, hypocrisy and unwarranted privileges, and the grandiosity and posturing of senior clerics.

Attempts by believers in God to present the position as “belief in something” versus “belief in nothing” is a sure sign of insecurity and/or conceit on their part. As well, taking the moral and spiritual high ground highlights the effect of religious mental manipulation. The indoctrination often begins with innocent and unsuspecting young people who are told and taught to believe the unbelievable and think of it as true or factual . . . which produces a psychological need for religion in those who are neurologically programmed in this way. And so it continues from generation to generation as roles move from indoctrinated to indoctrinator, while in the process they reinforce the ridiculous with each successive iteration embellishing, reinforcing and further entrenching ancient notions and nonsensical concepts in believers’ habitual thinking patterns.

Think of it as “personality possession” . . . children and adults being made or coerced to conform to be like “them”: believing parents, grandparents, other family members, other congregation members, peers, neighbours, work colleagues, friends, the government, and so on.

The actual and genuine position – the one Christian diehards try to avoid – is “belief in God” or “belief there is no God”, and not the God/nothing dichotomy which they prefer.

Belief in God should only be a measure for being called a believer in God, and not extend to other aspects of human existence. There is even a pretty good argument for those who express no attachment to the Christian religion to be called “believers” – based on logical, rational and supportable viewpoints they believe there is no God.

Left Right, Black or White

Right from the beginning of Christianity, its leaders taught that salvation – as they imagined such a thing two thousand years ago – was only possible through the Christian faith, and that earlier religious beliefs had become obsolete because of



Jesus' death and presumed resurrection and ascension.

As the early Church was becoming established and its belief system developed and documented, its ruling hierarchies applied a "believe it or else" approach. In taking the religious high ground, they were forcing compliance. Everything was left or right, black or white: with God or against God. After all, none other than the apostle Paul (supposedly) had written that "Jesus was the Son of God". Paul declared a "black and white", "with us or against us" attitude to 1st-century Jews by stating that without renunciation of their religion and baptism into the Christian movement they'd be off to hell after death. (Even if, decades or centuries later, others wrote or embellished Paul's letters and the outcomes of his proclamations, a similar consequence applies with regard to the early Christian movement's followers and outsiders.)

Paul, it seems, displayed behaviour typical of the religious convert in his quest to convert others: zealous, proselytising, demanding and uncompromising. Little has changed over two millennia: "believe it or else" remains.

The Bible tells us that God made the whole universe while people were made, by Him, in His image. (Two, of many, fundamental elements of the evolving Christian religion.) There was no compromise. Everything was either right – as prescribed by the early Church's own rules and regulations, or wrong – the views of sceptics or unbelievers. Anyone who desired salvation had to believe in Jesus. Through the centuries the Christian Church maintained a rigid black or white mind-set: belief, no belief; God, the Devil; heaven, hell.

Despite what some branches of the Christian establishment might claim today about the Devil's demise, even that it/he is non-existent, the leader of 1.3 billion Christians, Pope Francis, says the Devil – and presumably by consequence hell – are still around. In his first homily, on 14 March 2013 the day after being elected, Francis counselled his cardinals in the Sistine Chapel: "He who does not pray to the Lord prays to the devil. When we don't proclaim Jesus Christ, we proclaim the worldliness of the devil."

The devil, of course, is the enemy the Vatican needs.

"All or nothing" became well established within the organisational culture of the overall Christian Church, and can still be seen in the 21st-century with the operations and behaviour of various Christian denominations and their adherents – some of whom occupy high office. A prime example was President George W Bush (him again!) when he took the military and pseudo moral high ground with his statement: "Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists" after the horrendous events of September 11, 2001.

Mr Bush's declaration was consistent with the "God or the Devil" penchant of the conservative, right-wing fundamental Christian tradition: acceptance and reward for believers; rejection and punishment for non-believers. It was convenient "black or white" rhetoric with a Christian underlay for the president to use at the time, allowing him to do what he wanted. It appeared as though he thought he had special privileges and responsibilities because of his strong Christian faith, close connection with God and belief in the power of his prayer. And because of his religious conviction, might he have even considered himself beyond criticism? – untouchable; a sacred cow, much like the religion itself.

In defence of his stance, and ignoring the possible illegality of the proposed war against Iraq, Mr Bush said he liked to act on his "gut" feelings – the problem was he'd been feeding on a diet of Christian absolutes. In effect, Bush's response to September 11 was

gutless. He didn't perceive, or refused to take, other options. He saw himself as the winning "war president". He talked about the need for war against Iraq; repeating it over and over again, parrot fashion. Alternative options would have taken real guts and broad-minded thinking, analysis, questioning, judgement, creativity and vision; as well as having a good look at himself in the mirror. Now that may have got him off his lofty perch!

Mr Bush's statement on terror (Iraq and 9/11) and reassurance (he was looking after America) was akin to hell and heaven, and never the twain shall meet. His Christian-centric approach fed the prejudices entrenched in his Christian born-again psyche. In taking responsibility for ordering the invasion of and war against Iraq, Mr Bush expressed blinkered, dualistic thinking. It was a model for polarisation. He got his way when most of a divided America rallied behind his bluster and swagger, enabling him to command the US military to march "left right, left right" into Iraq. He said it was a "crusade".



Was Mr Bush inferring Iraq should be Christianised while being democratised? (One should not be surprised at the invasion cum crusade... he'd invoked guns and God in winning the governorship of Texas in 1994.)

President Bush was wrong to infer that "they [the "enemy"] hate our way of life; our freedom." "They" may be envious of the USA's power and wealth, and dislike the self-important claims of American superiority in the world (from fire-power to freedom), but most of all the "hate" (rightly or wrongly) was for some aspects of US foreign policy, including in Muslim countries.

The majority of Americans came to realise Mr Bush's mistake of taking the high ground over Iraq. They saw the error of their president getting the US into another war where, fatefully, there was no black or white because there was no satisfactory end in sight. Instead, the colour was red, the colour of war . . . the blood-red of countless thousands of (mostly innocent) dead and injured Iraqis, as well as the occupiers' casualties. Not to mention the dilution of military resources

for the war in Afghanistan – a source of terror training pre-9/11 – and the enormous opportunity cost, measured in a staggering trillions of dollars.

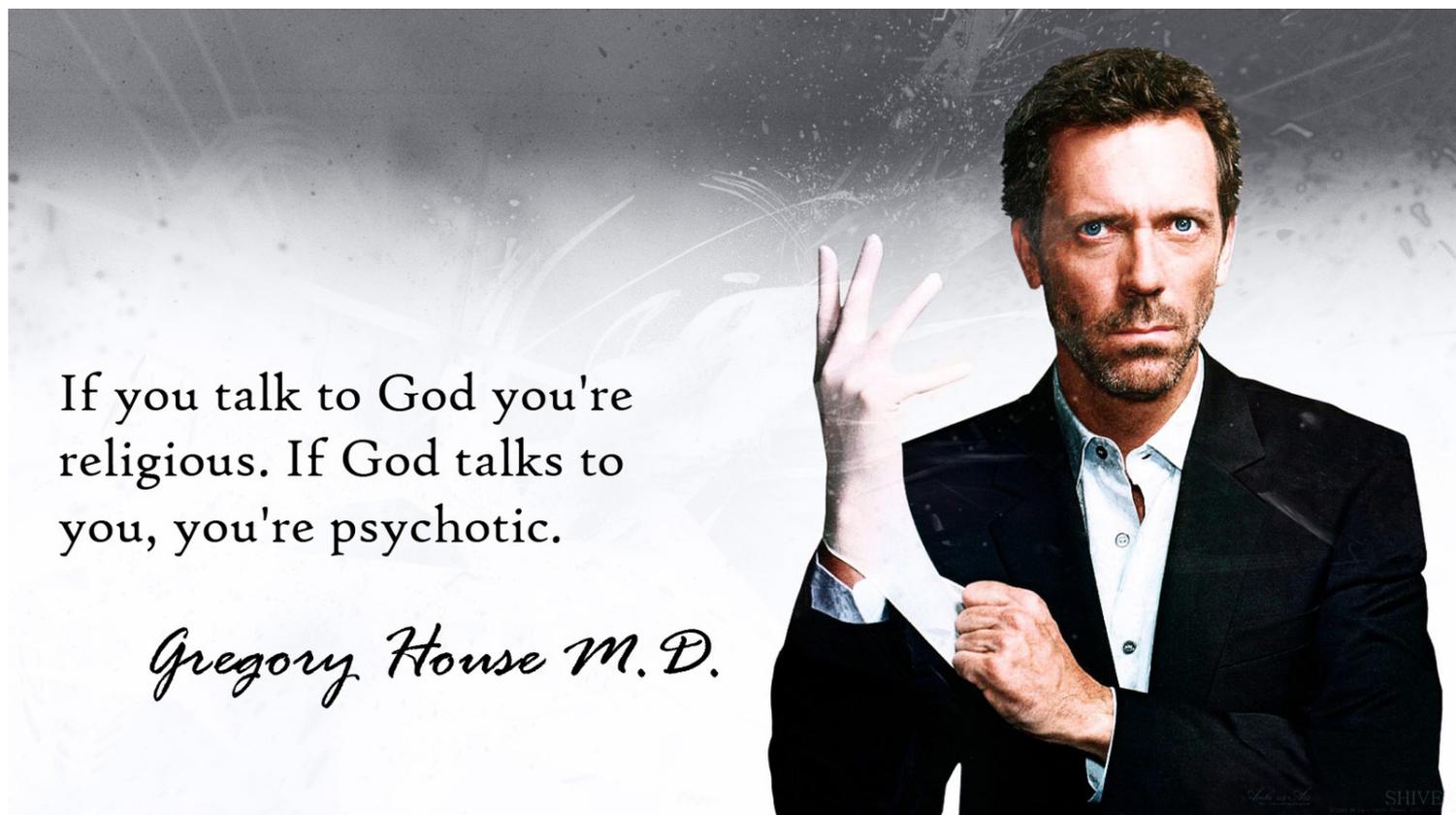
Asad irony is that Iraqi Christian numbers have declined by 80% or more of the pre-war numbers, due to death, persecution, ethnic cleansing, church bombings, attacks from the various insurgent groups operating inside Iraq after the invasion, and escape to other countries. The sweeping sectarian violence of Iraq and the massive number of deaths and extent of destruction have been widely reported, but the suffering of its once million-strong Christian community has been given less prominence. Iraqi Christians are far worse off after Mr Bush's crusade.

By December 2008, just ahead of his departure from the White House, Mr Bush admitted that deciding to go to war against Saddam was the biggest regret of his presidency. When asked, at the time of his book launch in 2011, how he felt when he learnt there were no WMD, Bush said he had a "sickening feeling" and "felt terrible". And regarding the dead American troops: "It weighs heavily

on me". While he was the main person responsible for initiating a war which produced so many negative outcomes, George W Bush has scarcely been held to account – a sure means for ongoing mistake-making.

As humans age or mature, they tend to see things more in shades of grey rather than black or white. Or in multi-colours if they're really switched on: their palette for life having many colours which are used or blended as the occasion demands. The Christian Church forged a "left right, black or white" mould that remains to this day. Regrettably, some of its highly influential leaders and followers march in step and are similarly lacking in colour.

Christianity may have aged, but has never matured as it holds on to the extremes of its youthful beliefs developed when its founders and heads didn't have the knowledge or nous to establish opinions or rules based in reality – their fantasies and guesswork a breeding ground for assuming superiority and taking the high ground.



Why There is Most Certainly No God

Frank Shann

Frank Shann is a new contributor. He is a paediatrician who worked in Papua New Guinea, Kenya, and East Timor for 10 years, then in paediatric intensive care in Melbourne. He now does research on the effects of vaccines in children in low-income countries. Even as a schoolboy, he wondered why an accident of birth should make him a Christian rather than a Hindu or Muslim or atheist.

Evidence and Faith

Strong evidence is available to many people on many occasions under controlled conditions.

Weak (often anecdotal) evidence is available to few people on few occasions or in poorly controlled conditions (eg. one person's observation of a flying saucer, an illusionist bent a spoon, Jesus rose from the dead).

Faith is belief in the absence of strong evidence.

Naturalism/atheism is the belief that the universe is explained by natural laws. Because there is strong evidence for this belief (Stenger 113-68), faith is not required (even though there is no proof). There is only weak evidence for a supernatural power (Stenger 113-68), so we have no reason to suppose that god exists (or that fairies or unicorns exist). Therefore, belief in god (or fairies) does require faith.

Faith is a bridge from weak (or absent) evidence to belief, not a bridge from evidence to proof.

Atheists cannot prove that god is not true: but atheists claim that god is unproved, not disproved. Christians can't prove that Islam, Zeus, fairies and unicorns are not true.

Atheists do not have to prove that god is not true: the burden of providing evidence lies with those who claim the existence of a god (or fairies or unicorns) – and extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence.

Is there a god?

- 1: Certainly,
- 2: Almost certainly,
- 3: Probably,
- 4: Equipoise,
- 5: Probably not,
- 6: Almost certainly not,
- 7: Certainly not.

Many theists are in category 1: they have certainty (not just belief) without strong evidence. The evidence supports category 6 (atheism with a hint of agnosticism), where most atheists reside. Category 7 has few members: reason rarely allows certainty that something does not exist.

Most atheists are agnostic about god in the same way they are agnostic about fairies and unicorns (a tiny bit). "I am agnostic only to the extent that I am agnostic about fairies at the bottom of the garden."

Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence: this is true if we don't look for the evidence; but if I look in my fridge and find no evidence that my dog is in the fridge, this is evidence of absence.

"Unknowable" explains god by saying he cannot be explained. A scoundrelly last resort.

God hides evidence of himself: everyone would benefit greatly from relating to a loving and good god; such a god would not hide himself – especially if disbelief results in eternal suffering in hell.

If god is hiding, why did he (purportedly) come to earth, perform miracles and write the bible?

God will not be tested. Very convenient. Scripture is reclassified as symbolic when it conflicts with science: so Genesis is symbolic (because it is demonstrably false), but the resurrection is literally true (because it is untestable); you reinterpret scripture as you go. "What can be asserted without evidence can also be dismissed without evidence."

Belief in the absence of strong evidence (faith) is not a virtue, despite the claims of religious indoctrination. John 20:29 – it is good to believe what you have no evidence to believe. This is a convenient maxim in a belief system for which there is no strong evidence.

Faith brooks no argument; it demeans us; it condones ignorance. It is better to ask what is really going on.

The fact that so many people, even educated people, still believe in superstitions such as religion, astrology, naturopathy, homeopathy and UFOs illustrates the extent of human gullibility. Faith is dangerous because it makes irrational actions legitimate, even virtuous.

- Muslims who flew into the World Trade Center were well-educated middle-class men who believed that martyrs who kill non-Muslims are virtuous, and go straight to heaven where they have 72 black-eyed virgins
- Christians who murder abortionists are often middle-class educated people



The argument from improbability

A god capable of designing the universe must be even more complex than the universe; such a complex god is even less likely than the universe to have arisen by chance.

If god designed the universe and he did not arise by chance, who designed god? And who designed the designer? And so on ad infinitum – each regress must be more complex, and therefore even more improbable.

It alters nothing to claim that god has existed forever – it is more likely that the universe (or a precursor) has existed forever.

This is the reverse of the cosmic anthropic (Boeing 747) and the teleological (design) arguments for the existence of god (see below). Dawkins sees it as the most powerful argument for atheism.

Physics is investigating explanations for how our universe came into being – without god.

Natural selection is an elegant explanation of how simple life forms evolved into very complex organisms over millions of years via a huge number of tiny cumulative random changes – without design by god. Natural selection illustrates a very important general principle: the use of a crane (building from below by natural processes) rather than dependence on a magical skyhook (design from above by god).

The problem of evil

Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil? (Attributed to Epicurus 341-270 BCE.)

Evil exists, so god cannot be omnipotent, omniscient and all-loving: either god can't stop evil (not omnipotent), or doesn't know about it (not omniscient), or doesn't want to stop it (not all-loving). Of course, this argument allows a god who is not omnipotent, or not omniscient, or not all-loving.

Rebuttals (theodicy) are unsuccessful: evil is a product of human free will (but

why natural disasters, and suffering prior to humans?), suffering is necessary so humans can show courage and charity (but why suffering prior to humans?), evil is needed to define good (but good can exist without evil), suffering is punishment for sin (but why are the innocent made to suffer?).

The existence of evil is not a philosophical problem for naturalism, because evolution does not suggest the absence of evil. Nature is neither kind nor cruel: it is indifferent, it just doesn't care.

Argument to the best explanation

Better explanations are usually simpler, more coherent, more comprehensive, and testable.

Atheism requires us to posit only the existence of the natural world.

The addition of a supernatural world is extravagant, and less testable. Supernaturalists have to explain how that world interacts with the natural world.

Atheism best explains contradictory religious beliefs: conflicts occur because religion is a human invention.

ARGUMENTS USED TO SUPPORT A BELIEF IN GOD

Two types of argument are used. First, reasons why people want god to exist (for life after death, to give meaning to life, or to make people behave better or feel better); these are not evidence that god does exist. Second, arguments for the existence of god.

Believers confuse what is true with what they'd like to be true.

“Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” Hebrews 11:1

Without god, there would be no meaning to life.

Without god, we would be all alone (god, the imaginary friend).

Without god, there would be no life after death.

Without god, people would behave badly.

Without god, there would be no absolute morality. Religions change their moral teachings (so they are not absolute), and the proposition does not prove there is a god, but merely suggests that rulers should try to make people think there is one.

Harris (The Moral Landscape) argues that moral actions are those that maximise the well-being of conscious creatures, and that facts about brains and their interaction with the world could, in principle, enable us to tell what we ought to do to live the best lives possible – without religion.

Without god, there would be no Mystery: nature as revealed by science inspires far more mystery than the religious superstitions invented by man. “The Universe is not only queerer than we suppose, but queerer than we can suppose.” (JBS Haldane). Atheists appreciate art and nature just as deeply as religious believers.

Even if they were true, these “without god” propositions would not provide evidence that god exists. They are demeaning, juvenile, distracting, and encourage dependence.

Naturalism implies that life is worth living for its own sake; it is not just waiting for heaven, or dependent on an imaginary god for meaning. There is no purpose of life; there is purpose in life. There is every incentive for atheists/naturalists to live life to the full: it's all there is!

Most of the arguments that god exists provide no support for the specific claims of Christianity, Islam or Judaism: for example, a god who is omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, righteous, all-loving, wants worship, answers prayers, forgives sins, reads thoughts, wrote a holy book, and runs paradise. So, even if a supernatural power did create the universe, this does not demonstrate that Jesus or Mohammed or whoever was divine.

Very few people are religious because of these arguments – they already believe (usually because of indoctrination in childhood), and these weak arguments are used to justify their belief.



God of gaps

“We don’t know the answer so let’s say Fred did it.”

We cannot explain something; therefore god did it; therefore god exists. For example, the creation of the universe (but see Stenger 113-36), and finely-tuned constants.

This is a dangerous argument: god was previously used to explain many things that science now explains (eg. complex species were not created in 6 days, but evolved over millions of years by natural selection).

The admission of gaps is fundamental to science, and is one of its great strengths. It is much better to admit we don’t know something than to say god did it (which explains nothing).

“Throughout the last 400 years, during which the growth of science had gradually shown men how to acquire knowledge of the ways of nature and mastery over natural forces, the clergy have fought a losing battle against science, in astronomy and geology, in anatomy and physiology, in biology and psychology and sociology. Ousted from one position, they have taken up another... At each stage, they try to make the public forget their earlier obscurantism, in order that their present obscurantism may not be recognised for what it is.”

Cosmic anthropic argument

For life to exist, the laws and constants of physics have to be almost precisely as they are; this is highly unlikely to have occurred by chance; therefore they must have been designed by god.

1. To design the laws and constants, god would have to be even more complex than the universe; such a complex god is even less likely than the universe to have arisen by chance.

2. Fine-tuning may not be required.

3. The universe began in total chaos with no evidence of design, and there is no evidence of later intervention by god.

This is a classic god of gaps argument – we still do not know enough about the laws and constants of physics.

God created the universe to make the existence of humans possible on Earth.

1. This truly a delusion of grandeur. The earth is a miniscule fraction of the universe: 0.00000000135 light years in diameter, compared to 93,000,000,000 light years for just the observable part of our own universe.

2. I would not be typing on this laptop unless computers had been invented, but that does not mean computers were invented so I could type this.

God chose to send his only son to the Earth to reveal his presence in the universe.

1. Humans evolved about 300,000 years ago. Why did god wait 298,000 years to reveal himself?

2. Travelling at the speed of light for 2000 years, news of Jesus has reached only $100 \times (2 \times 10^3)^3 / (4.65 \times 10^{10})^3 = 0.000000000000000000000008\%$ of the observable part of our own universe, and there may be vastly more.

3. There are approximately 30,000 million million million stars in the observable universe – and god just happened to choose Earth.

Teleological (design) argument

Something (life, nature) looks complex and designed, so it must have been designed (by god).

1. To design life, god must have been even more complex – and who designed god?

2. Physics is investigating explanations for how our universe came into being – without god.

3. Natural selection is an elegant explanation of how simple life forms evolved into very complex organisms over millions of years via a huge number of tiny cumulative random steps – without design by god.

Kalam (first cause) argument

Whatever begins to exist has a cause; the universe began to exist; therefore, the universe has a cause (god).

1. In quantum mechanics, many events do not have a cause.

2. The universe may not have had a beginning.

3. What caused god? If god had no beginning and no cause, the universe needs no beginning and no cause.

Ontological (nature of being) argument

Think of a perfect being greater than which nothing can be conceived (god); a being that does not exist would be less than perfect; therefore this being must exist.

The flaw is the assumption that existence is more perfect than non-existence.

Personal experience (or personal incredulity).

“I have experienced god directly” (vision, mystical experience, etc).

Such experiences are very weak evidence: they can be an illusion, or induced by drugs or illness.

If I don’t understand a conjuring trick, this doesn’t mean it was supernatural.

The fact that science can’t explain something doesn’t mean it’s caused by god (see god of gaps).

Miracles, prayer and extrasensory phenomena are very weak evidence.

Many people “know” that they follow the only true religion, but their belief depends on who indoctrinated them.

Human brains use short-cuts that are helpful (e.g. to detect predators or potential mates) but also cause strong tendencies to personification of inanimate objects (spirits in clouds), teleology (inappropriate purpose – clouds are “for raining”), dualism (mind or soul is separate from the body), and to seeing patterns, meaning and causality where they do not exist: hence irrational belief in religion, fate (rather than chance), alternative medicine, and miracles.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

“It ain’t the parts of the Bible that I can’t understand that bother me, it’s the parts I do understand”. Mark Twain.

Characteristics often attributed to god: creator of the universe, omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, perfectly righteous, immortal, supernatural deeds (against the laws of physics), influences events on earth, literal author of bible, observes thoughts, observes actions, answers prayers, bestows life after death. Or is god merely an impersonal force, or nature itself (consistent with naturalism)? It is sensible to define god before discussion.

Many theologians cherry-pick the things they take literally, but simplistic beliefs are taught in many churches, and many ordinary Christians say they believe god became man, was born of a virgin, came back to life, and ascended into heaven.

You can't dismiss Christianity (Islam, etc) unless trained in its theology.

1. This is elitist nonsense – the Emperor's clothes. Theologians often comment on non-theological issues.

2. If true, Christians would need detailed training in thousands of other religions before dismissing them.

3. Most theological literature assumes that god exists, and so is irrelevant to a discussion of whether god exists.

Religious beliefs should be accorded no more respect than other beliefs, and should be openly challenged.

Religious leaders should not be accorded special respect in public discussion. For example, when ministers contradict science, they should be given no more respect than other lay people – just as scientists (quite rightly) are not given special respect when they comment on religion.

Atheists are often accused of being “aggressive” – for example, for writing books critical of religion. Atheists are hung by Muslims in Iran, stoned to death in Saudi Arabia, and beheaded by the Taliban. Heretics were routinely tortured by Christians, and executed for stating that the earth orbits the sun. That's aggression.

Non-overlapping magisteria (NOMA) is the idea that science and religion deal with

completely different things. However, many religions make assertions about the natural world (creation, miracles, prayer), and some putative supernatural phenomena can be tested by science – for example, by randomised controlled trials of intercessory prayer (which show that prayer does not work).

Traps for Elaborate Dogmatists: two examples of the many Omni paradoxes

Omnipotent (almighty): can god create a stone so large he can't lift it? If he can't make it, he's not omnipotent; if he can make it but can't lift it, he's not omnipotent.

Omnipotent and omniscient: if he knows the future, god can't change it (and so is not omniscient). If he does change it, he is not omniscient.

Believers often thank god for good things (recovery from illness, a good harvest, All Things Bright and Beautiful), but rarely blame god for bad things (illness, a poor harvest, All Things Dull and Ugly).

Organised religion diminishes individual responsibility and is demeaning: it encourages belief without evidence, encourages fear (sin, hell), retards progress (evolution, birth control, stem cell research – Harris 165-9), and wastes time and money (on worship and churches) that could be used to reduce suffering. Science is anti-authoritarian, open-minded and creative, and encourages full disclosure and honesty.

All monolithic ideologies are dangerous, whether religious or atheist: infallible leaders, sacred writings, mass rituals, and killing of apostates and outsiders. There is a logical pathway between monolithic ideologies and violence, but no logical pathway between not believing a monolithic ideology and violence.

There are several reasons for tension between theists and atheists.

1: is there a supernatural power;

2: what are the consequences of believing there is a supernatural power (do such people behave better or feel better);

3: why do religious groups have a

privileged place in society (the undue public influence of religion, especially on laws relating to private morality, e.g. sexuality, contraception, abortion and assisted suicide; tax concessions and government subsidies to religion);

4: why is it permissible to indoctrinate children.

Science has limited religion.

1: science has closed many of the gaps “explained” by religion;

2: humans are clearly not central to the universe;

3: the laws of science limit god (seen as a problem by many Muslims).

2000 years ago, humans understood little of the universe: superstition, miracles and magic abounded. Ignorance led people to make up stories about how the universe was created for humans by a supernatural god.

We now know how to systematically accumulate knowledge, using science. Physics has revealed extraordinary information about the structure of the universe, and biology about the evolution of humans from simple life forms by natural selection. We have a much better model of the universe that does not depend on a hypothetical supernatural power – in particular, humans are not the focus of a universe that was created especially for us by an omnipotent supervisor.

One of the greatest threats to human civilisation is that parents continue to indoctrinate children with primitive and divisive superstitions in the name of religion.

There is almost certainly no supernatural supervisor or life after death, or absolute moral principles – but there is honour in facing the universe without wishful thinking. We have to come to terms with our individual mortality, decide our own morality, and try to avoid destruction in the short term (nuclear war, environmental damage) and long term (for example, as the sun heats up then expands over 1 to 5 billion years).

Billionaires, Banks, Bureaucrats and the Bible

Brian Morris

Brian Morris is a former journalist and public relations guru. Brian ran his own PR firm in Sydney for 20 years before retiring recently to the calmer climes of Adelaide. He has written a book called *Sacred to Secular*. World travel shaped Brian's interest in social justice -- wealth, poverty and religion in many countries. His book is critically acclaimed and with cover blurbs from Hugh Mackay and the Richard Dawkins Foundation. It's an analysis of Christianity, its origins and the harm it does. It's a call for Australia to become fully secular.

He is also involved with the Plain Reason, a group set up to promote rational discussion and critical thinking in all matters of public interest, and particularly in those issues which relate to beliefs in the supernatural and pseudo-scientific practices not based on material evidence. www.plainreason.info/

Why is it that with each new financial scandal that breaks there's invariably a grubby link between corporate greed, weak politicians and acquiescent religions?

The Panama Papers exposé has yet to play out, with 800 wealthy Australians being investigated by the Australian Taxation Office for their alleged activities with offshore tax havens.

Internationally, this is just one snowflake on the tip of a very large iceberg. Avarice by the mega-wealthy breaks new global records as the wealth gap becomes a chasm.

Secular charity Oxfam says in 2016 the world's richest 1% will own more than the combined wealth of the other 8 billion people on this planet. And they slam the World Bank for complicity in using tax havens.

Here in Australia a defiant Turnbull government backs the banks and rules out a Royal Commission to investigate how they short-change their customers and tamper with interbank lending.

Meanwhile, the nation's churches stay silent — skulking quietly in the shadows, petrified that this latest financial furor might draw attention to themselves.

We should not forget that religion, too, has vast fortunes squirrelled away; in addition to immeasurable land and property holdings — with only a small fraction in plain sight (including their countless churches). Recall, also, the Vatican Bank scandals, now with the upstanding Cardinal George Pell at the financial helm.

tax on hundreds of their private hospitals, aged care facilities, private schools and other ventures.

But for religious schools they now claim they are “advancing education” — while still proselytising on a daily basis. In 2011 (latest figures) tax-payers gifted church schools \$7.7 billion for “Christian education.”



And religion has a far deeper link with the current financial imbroglio; an historical twist raised shortly.

Public disgust and anger mounts as each new banking and financial scandal erupts — all of which contrive to deprive public coffers of essential revenue to fight inequality, unemployment and disadvantage.

Hospitals, public schools, and low-cost housing are all under-resourced; and national infrastructure would boost the economy and business development — better roads, fast-rail, the full NBN, and green energy!

Money has always been the great ‘lubricant’ — oiling the wheels of big business or greasing palms of the corrupt. But the sheer magnitude of global wealth being hidden and laundered, and the

insatiable greed of the mega-rich — including banks — just beggars belief.

Historically, greed has been a vice — covetousness being one of the Seven Deadly Sins. And today's brazen wealth now faces a groundswell of community wrath.

It has nothing to do with the ridiculous and pejorative Liberal jibe —“this is all about the politics of envy“. The brutal truth is simply that these off-shore havens allow the super-wealthy to pay no tax.

Mossack Fonseca is just one of many firms worldwide who are complicit in hiding vast global fortunes. The massive shortfall in federal revenues is then borne by honest tax-paying workers.

As for the pusillanimous politicians — they have become a weak and self-serving coterie who perpetuate an illusion that “capital” must be free to generate wealth that “trickles down” to the lower levels of society.

In Australia it is both Labor and Liberal who are a bulwark that protects a privileged corporate elite from contributing their fair share of tax to sustain an equitable society.

If parliamentarians — state and federal — don't have off-shore tax havens themselves they certainly have the tax-

limiting advantages of family trusts, negative gearing and a vast array of minimisation schemes.

And the alleged voice of the oppressed — the churches — continue to remain mute, save for the occasional pious pronouncement on poverty in a period of prosperity. They fear their hypocrisy will expose the magnitude of their own wealth; and annual tax-exemptions reliably estimated at over \$20 billion per year.

What is even more remarkable is that it was Protestantism — and Calvinism in particular — that lifted the long-standing Christian embargo on “avarice and usury”.

Through the 18th century this fundamentalist brand of Christianity allowed the mythical story of Jesus and the temple money-lenders to be usurped by global banking and the captains of industry. And capitalism has now mushroomed into a level of corporate and personal greed unprecedented in world history.

In 1905 Max Weber wrote *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* which allowed the public to more broadly question this transition in Christianity, at a time when such commentary was still dangerous.

But it was Richard H. Tawney, in 1926, and his deeply probing *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* that tied the harsh and rapacious manifestations of the industrial revolution to Calvinism. He exposed a brand of strident Christianity that bore little resemblance to the ethics of their supposed founder from Nazareth.

These early works (and many others) point unerringly to the fact that Protestantism and Calvinism lead to the “unplanned and uncoordinated emergence of modern capitalism.” Offshore tax havens, the mega-rich and a wealth gap that has disenfranchised 90% of the planet's population has been the disastrous result.

Whatever their best intentions, the net effect has brought us to the globalisation of leading monopolies in all key industries — where the annual turnover of the biggest corporations now exceed the GDP of every nation on Earth, bar a handful of the world's richest. They financially out-muscle 95% of all countries.

National governments — and far less the United Nations — effectively lack the power to regulate these corporate megaliths. Nor do our local politicians have the political will to rectify the gross social inequities created by the excesses of laissez-faire capitalism — with a little help from John Calvin.

“Sacred to Secular is a call for Australia to adopt the successful secular models of Scandinavia and become fully secular. It's an incisive analysis of Christianity; why it remains embedded in society and how it dominates the socio-political agenda – a politicised Christianity that has sacrificed its core values on the altar of predatory evangelism and corporate Christianity. In today's evidence-based era, it's time Australia became religion-neutral, open-minded, and wholly secular.”

“A crucial, timely read. Replete with thoughtful examples, Morris provides a blueprint for a more rational, more sane Australia.”

Dr Peter Boghossian,
Speaker for the Centre for Inquiry, the Richard Dawkins
Foundation for Reason and Science

“A secular Australia is a timely and extremely relevant issue.”

Hugh Mackay AO

“A compelling account of predatory US-style evangelism and politicised corporate Christianity, together with an urgent call to action. Definitely timely, often challenging and ultimately inspiring, with its vision for a genuinely secular Australia.”

Dr Meredith Doig,
President, Rationalist Society of Australia Inc.

“Challenging and relevant; an important warning of the threats to secular public education.”

Professor Alan Reid AM,
School of Education, University of South Australia

Sacred to

SECULAR

Why a corrupted Christianity
demands a Secular solution

Brian R. Morris

Meeting One's Maker

Why God Needs More New Saints

Eve Jones

“Going to meet your maker” is a common phrase used by the death-deniers of this world. Unlike ‘kicking the bucket’ or ‘popping your clogs’ it lacks finality and promises new adventure.

If my Sunday school lessons from yesteryear still serve me correctly, one's body remains on earth to be recycled by worms or the fires of the crematorium while one's soul goes marching on – the exception being the chosen few who go up in “The Raptures”. (More on Rapturees later.)

There are various sites which concern themselves with world population and death rates such as Wikipedia, CIA, World Bank, indexmundi and Hebrew4christians. The figures vary slightly but in rounded terms they work out to a world population of 7.3 billion people with a death rate of about 8 per thousand, or one person dying somewhere in the world approximately every half a second.

By the time God spends time answering prayers, sitting on the Judgment Day Bench and listening to pleas from the saints, especially newly appointed and popular saints who get many requests for help, there is little time left for any one-on-one meeting with God. Even after sending some new souls off to Hellfire and Brimstone HQ, the one-on-one meeting is unlikely to last longer than half a second – not much reward for a lifetime of devotion.

Before the one-on-one meeting, the newly arrived (or is that recently departed) soul must first encounter “Judgment Day”. I'm not sure if each soul gets their own day shortly after becoming a soul or if all souls are stored up until “The Final Day” and all processed at once. I favour the first option as the backlog of souls would be very great and no one would have arrived in Heaven yet.

Sitting on the Judgment Day Bench would at first appear to be a good job for God to delegate to the saints except for the fact that saints have been appointed over centuries and their ideas of what constitutes a sin may vary eg hundreds of years ago it was believed that people who suffered epileptic fits were possessed by the Devil and condemned to Hell.

A more modern saint may think of epilepsy as bestowed by God and the soul worthy of a place in Heaven. People using mechanical means of birth control have also been condemned to Hell but may yet be seen as heroes in an over populated world. Besides they would only be condemned by Catholic saints, the rest of the married world being free of sin when they copulate using condoms.

In times of very high death rates such as World Wars and earthly disasters, the death rate and therefore ‘new soul’ rate would climb steeply and, I fear cause a serious backlog at the Pearly Gates. I imagine during the horrendous battles on the Western Front in WW1, souls may have been required to queue along the Pearly Fence waiting for admission.

In order to process so many newly arrived souls through Judgment Day and the Pearly Gates the obvious thing is for God to delegate some tasks - and to whom else but the Saints? Who else it up there to do the job?

Not as easy as it seems. Would new souls feel cheated if they got their one-on-one meeting with a saint rather than The One they have devoted their life to? How would they react to meeting their maker in a group session?

After admission the Big Question arises. What do these millions of disembodied souls do the fill in their time for all eternity?

New souls' problems may be different for those who “Go up in the Raptures”. It seems the people most likely to rave about The Raptures, are American Evangelists. They tell about how Rapturees will bodily ascend into Heaven leaving behind puddles of clothes and cars run off the road. It's a great yarn but funnily enough I have never yet heard them tell of what happens to the nude Rapturees when they arrive in Heaven.

Do they stay nude? What sustains them? Is there a Heavenly Food and Drink Supply and Sewerage System? We know there has always been a clothing source for the white robes of angels and probably a musical instrument maintenance shop for their harps and trumpets.

Do Rapturees need shelter or is there no weather in Heaven? Perhaps some theologian can enlighten me.

All this leads to God's Big Purpose: Why does God bother to create souls just to end up storing them ad infinitum in Heaven? Moreover, why does any thinking person want their soul to finish up spending a purposeless eternity corralled in The Great Soul Storage Shed In The Sky?

Is there a learned theologian out there who can truthfully answer these questions? If so, please bring your evidence to the table.



In the Name of God

An Iranian atheist has been in contact with the Atheist Foundation of Australia for support. He was arrested for blasphemy and faced severe penalties. He has managed to escape with the help of friends to Turkey. He is currently writing his harrowing tale into a book and has provided a summary for the magazine to get the word out. His name has not been used for obvious reasons. The pictures are of the rooms he was held in.

A five year old kid whispered to a dandelion "It's a year that my dad has gone to the heavens, grandma said if I miss my dad, dandelions would carry my message to God. Please tell God that I miss my dad. I miss going to the zoo with him and also cinema. Thanks dear God."

I was that 5 year-old kid who lost his dad thirty years ago. Today is the 48th day that I've been imprisoned in this small room. It's called solitary confinement and I can only hear the sound of mice chewing the disposable glass I put on the hole of the squat toilet to prevent them from entering my cell. Over my head there is a 500 watt lamp on 24/7. Sleeping in this condition is torture. Pounding the door is an unforgivable sin in intelligence pod no.209 and the only way to call the warder is by pushing a button on the wall, which turns on a light on for the warder. Some times you have to push the button for hours before the warder, wearing a white procedure mask, opens the chuck hole and he asks in a demeaning tone why you called him.

For the first three days I couldn't eat at all, just a cup of tea in the morning and a cup at night with three sugar cubes until the prison doctor visited. He recommended eating because it could end in intestinal adhesions and with facility shortages in clinic it would turn into intestinal infection. After that, I forced myself to eat a small portion of my food at each meal.

To explain the reason I'm in this lockdown, I should begin with explaining the school conditions in the 1980s. In those days, during the morning regulations, our principal used to read verses of the Quran in arabic on the loudspeaker. Then he used to shout "Repeat after me, kids! Down with USA; Down with Isarel;

Down with Britain; Down with Soviet Union!". He was also our Quran and religion educator and he had lost an arm in Iran-Iraq war.

I was ten when reading the Quran was added to our lessons. We learned to read the Quran and to memorise short suras. A year later, all students in 4th grade and higher would be in the praying room at noon and the principal took attendance and your absence would be reflected in your grades. Attending congregational prayers wasn't desirable at all because we had to take off our shoes and the praying room was filled with a disgusting smell. We were nauseated by the smell.

I can remember vividly that one day our homework was memorising "val'asr" sura. Memorising this was too hard for me because it doesn't have any rhyme or rhythm and worse of all, it's in Arabic. I did my best, but I couldn't. When the teacher called me and asked me to say it by heart, I couldn't, so he took me to the principal and they told me "you should be expelled! " I was crying my eyes out and repeating "I 'm sorry. It won't happen again." But they put all my documents in a folder and they sent me home. I cried all the way home. When I got there, my mum accompanied me back to school and to the principal's office where I promised to do my Quran homework.

The only entertainment that Iranian children had in 1980s was a tv programme running for one hour every day from 5 p.m to 6 p.m. However, even this one hour time of fun was ruined by the airing of the call to prayers, ablution, etc.

In all those years, I was tortured by one thought. Why did God take my dad away

but not my friends' dads. I felt like I was being discriminated against and was a victim of God's injustice.

When I turned 18, I started managing my father's properties and I looked after my small family - my mum and my younger sister, and while working, I studied civil engineering.

For a few years I completely lived like a practicing muslim. For instance, for 40 nights I woke up for night prayers and I believed that someone in the name of God looked after me. I also got married.

But an accident changed everything. I had an car accident with a young boy. He was killed. This incident awakened all my childhood questions of "why me???" Wasn't I a good servant of God ?? Why does all this happen to me??"

After a lot research, I found myself. I took up the Quran and I started reading it carefully. After 6 months I was familiar with the Quran texts. I was surprised when I encountered verses which authorise hitting women, killing atheists, cutting thieves' arms and, the oddest things, the verses which talk about the prophet's sex life with his many wives. At this point, I thought I had found a solution to the problem and I turned from a Shia Muslim to an extremist nationalist who was in love with Iranian culture and religion, zoroastrian religion, the ancient religion of Iran before Islam.

I built a weblog and I named it "Quran critic blog" and I began to criticise the Quran and point out its flaws.

Converting to another religion is a very dangerous matter in Iran. If you are arrested, you would be sentenced



to execution, but I was so determined that I traveled to India in 2007 and I converted to zoroastrianism.

The internet has opened doors of information to people and I had the chance to learn about atheism. By reading so many books written by great philosophers like Nietzsche, Heraclitus etc, and also people like Steven Hawking, Richard Dawkins and the most important one, Freud, I became agnostic and a while after that, an atheist.

One of my favorite sports was car racing and I used to attend Iranian car racing competitions. In the past I didn't win anything because I believed God was in charge, and if was I meant to win I would. However, after becoming an atheist I knew that I should do my best to achieve my goals and that my life wasn't predestined. After changing my mindset I was able to come in the top three places in several competitions.

In 2011, I created a page in FaceBook named "Quran critic weblog". The page became very popular. Unfortunately, the Intelligence ministry also noticed it.

At that time I lived in an apartment in the north of Tehran with my mum and my wife. On 27th april 2011, I woke up and had breakfast with my mum (my wife was at work). There was a knock at the door. I saw our neighbour through the peek hole and asked my mum to open the door. After a while I heard my mom saying "You can't come in without a permit". I went to the door to see what was going on. Three armed persons broke into our house. My mum fell in a corner and they asked me to put my hands on my head and to get on my knees.

After searching everywhere, they took all my stuff (CDs,USBs,family pictures etc) and they left the house with me. There wasn't any answer to my questions "Who are you? Why should I come with you??" There was just the loud sound of their two-way-radio asking them to declare their location.

As I got in the car, they blindfolded me and they kept my head on my knees. One of them asked several times if we had CCTV camera in the lobby and told the other one they had been careless and they

hadn't check the cameras. After a while I heard a large door being opened and after entering, the car stopped.

I got out of the car still blindfolded and I was pulled into a narrow corridor where I kept running into the walls. Then they took off my clothes and they put special clothes on me. They had me visited by doctors and after an hour I was transferred to the lockdown I explained earlier in this article.



نمای داخلی سلول انفرادی بند 209

I was called to an interrogation room every two or three days. Wearing the blindfold, I answered interrogators' questions first orally and then written. The continual electric voice of the interrogator embedded in the back of my head and didn't stop, even a second. I was continually reminded to answer the questions.

Sometimes my interrogations took 6 or 7 hours and always blindfolded. There was no break, not even some water. I just listened to the interrogators standing close behind me. Sometimes it started at sunset and it finished at sunrise.

Usually the sound of the call to prayer (adhan) was heard in every room, but at some sunsets, the voice of muezzin was more familiar than the voice of tv muezzin. It was my interrogator and I knew that I would be soon called for

interrogation.

During all interrogation sessions, they ask me to confess that my wife had helped me in writing the blog. They said I did so, my death warrant would be cancelled. I was always begging them to consider my wife's pregnancy and not to summon her.

It got worse when they could open my emails and they found out about my religious conversion. After this, I was left alone in lockdown for 12 days; alone with absolute silence and a rush of thoughts about the past and future and the fear of being executed for drawing a caricature. Act 513 in the Iranian Penal Code says: "if someone insults one of sacred people (imams), it can be categorised as insulting the prophet and he will be executed."

In such situations you talk to yourself so much that after a while you hear voices. The only sound I heard during those 12 days was the call to prayers and on the last days its sound was in my mind incessantly. It was driving me crazy.

There's no mirror in pod 209 or any thing that an inmate can see his face in. After exiting this pod, I had dejavu for a long time and all the strangers looked familiar to me. After my arrest, my family - my mum who suffers from heart disease, my sister and my pregnant wife - looked for me everywhere for 20 days. They didn't know what had happened to me and where I was kept.

The interrogator pretended to me that my family were also arrested and they were interrogated.

After a month, the first sigh of relief for me was when I could meet my family for 20 minutes. I was very happy that they hadn't been arrested and that they were fine.

Two months later, they sent me to Rajaei Shahr prison in Tehran, the biggest prison in Iran. I was kept in quarantine for 3 days in horrible conditions with all kind of criminals. They kept 300 people in a 50 meters squared area in three rooms. It wasn't hygienic at all and you could feel insects crawling all over your body. The quarantine warder's answer to inmates' demands was insulting. Once he bit an

addict to death and then left him on the floor on his face and he ordered every one in the room walk on him. If you didn't accept the order, you would be bitten too.

After quarantine, I was sent to a pod called "Dar ol Quran" (house of Quran). It was the worst torture for an atheist because every day you had to attend a two hour class of reading the Quran. You had to say your daily prayers and you had to attend the religious rituals and Quran interpretation classes.

I and two hundred other inmates were settled in a big hall called "huseinieh". Each person had less than 2 square meters in area. All your stuff (mattress. Blanket. Hygiene products. cooking essentials) in less than 2 square meters! There was a loud ruckus in this hall and it was like living in the middle of an airport terminal.

Huseinieh had better places for inmates but to live in that part, you had to memorise one thirtieth of Quran. To improve my situation, I started memorising the Quran, what I hated during school. After passing the exam, I moved to an area that was 4 square meters for 3 people. Of course it was better, but my roommates were criminals and murderers and I was so afraid of them that I used to sleep in the hallway in a sitting position. They were really dangerous criminals. The worst one had killed 3 members of a family after raping them. Another one had killed his wife and he had made a meal for his children out of his wife's corpse.

It was at Dar ol Quran that I found out that if an inmate had memorised the Quran completely, he wouldn't be executed because it would be counted as a sin.

Getting a lawyer in cases like mine is a whole other story. Most of them don't want to be your lawyer and the few ones that accept have very high fees (around \$15,000 US).

After 3 months, I was sent to Revolution Court and in less than 20 minutes After a moment of freedom, I had a call from the intelligence ministry to go to one of their

offices to provide some explanations.

When I went there, they interrogated me brutally and they reminded me that I was sentenced to death and my freedom depended on my cooperation with them. The summoning to the interrogation office was repeated many times and it was threatening and humiliating. In our last talk they asked me to continue writing my blog and FaceBook page under their supervision. Despite their severe threats, I refused. Finally, they told me not to mention my arrest on the internet and that they would put someone else under my name to be in charge of my blog.



Meanwhile, I contacted some friends who were in the media and warned them and asked them to do something to avoid others being arrested. It didn't take much time until the media broadcasted the news of my arrest. The Intelligence Ministry declared that they had hacked my Quran critic FaceBook page. Then they made another page with the same name which is still active.

I was summoned to prison to spend the rest of my sentence. Because of our difficult financial situation (lawyer fee and living expenses when I was in prison) and my mother's severe heart disease, they agreed with my conditional freedom with the condition of not undertaking such activities again.

At the same time, Iran encountered the most intensive sanctions and it experienced the most unstable economic conditions. The value of the rial decreased to one third of its previous value and so my financial position was even worse. I needed to find a new job. To work in

Iran they check for a criminal record so I couldn't find a job.

I decided to study law at university to help those who found themselves in the same situation as myself. After being accepted and registering and consulting with my teachers, I found out that to get a permit as an attorney, I also needed a clean criminal record, so I quit.

At last, after consulting with a friend, I decided to travel to China to import goods to Iran and I renewed my passport. A week later, I had a call from the Intelligence Ministry to come to their office. They asked me why I had renewed my passport. I explained that it was for business, but

they informed me that I wasn't allowed to leave the country. I asked them "in these circumstances, how should I work and pay my family expenses?" They replied "your case will be checked but you should be

thankful that you are still alive. It was your interrogator doing you a favour and Islamic kindness! We will contact you." But in further contacts, their only suggestion was working with the Intelligence Ministry. I preferred working as a webmaster of online shopping sites at home but its low income wasn't enough to cover my expenses.

I needed other options.....

Editor: There is obviously more to this story. Our atheist friend has managed, with the assistance of friends, to escape Iran and is currently in Turkey. We'll provide further updates on his tale.



When Did ‘How’ & ‘Why’ Become Dirty Words?

Roxanne Weller

Dear old Richard “Dicky” Dawkins (Blessed be His Fame), early on in his edifying epistle “Unweaving the Rainbow” explains how a rainbow is formed....it being, put simply (and if I understand correctly), a prismatic response to moisture in the air. Richard is a learned chap, who then goes on to enthusiastically break this vibrant phenomenon down even further, with the not inconsiderable help of none other than Sir Isaac Newton. I don’t pretend to fully understand the scientific mechanics behind the “how” of these beautiful yet sporadically occurring heavenly arcs, but for me, the very fact an explanation exists does not rob the rainbow of one iota of its beauty. In fact, I genuinely believe learning how the rainbow (or if you are super lucky, two) is formed enhances the appeal. It is still an impressive thing, and to merely attribute the wonder of a rainbow as “the work of God” is in fact dismissive, and actually cheapens its charm.

Like many others I enjoy a good “whodunnit”, where half the fun is evaluating the facts and eliminating the fallacies, compiling then dismissing theories as the clues mount. I for one would be sorely disappointed if the name of the responsible protagonist was always predictable, always the same. The certain denouement “God dunnit” would remove all mystery, and be, quite frankly, damning evidence of laziness and a lack of imagination on behalf of the writer. Labelling the fabulous fruits of nature and all the world we sail in as the “work of God” is like picking up object after object and seeing “Made in China” inscribed on its base, before absently putting it down again, the repetitive labelling discouraging any further scrutiny.

Imagine if one were to see something as compelling as the Guernica (you will surely have seen an image of this painting, it’s the one depicting the horrors of the Spanish Civil War, with the

agonised horse in the middle), to be told “oh, that’s a Picasso”, as if you should just keep walking and needn’t bother to take the time to stop and admire not only the effect and emotive impact of its powerful story, but the genius of its crafting. Who knows, lingering a little longer might make better artists of us all. We might be inspired, and encouraged to further our appreciation of both our natural and man made surroundings.



The world is a wondrous place, chock-full of paradox and mystery, ripe for the quizzing. So why wouldn’t you? What stops us? In the western world, prevailing lethargy and modern man-made distractions are likely partially to blame, but I think religion must take its fair share of responsibility. It does not suit those in positions of religious authority or power to have their flock cease or pause in its blind herding and bleating. That would never do. The contrived illusion of safety in numbers, and the questionable comfort derived from conformity of outlook, is apparently preferable to that of encouraging or tolerating inquiry.

When an individual asks “how” or “why” of their earthy holy guardians, it is taken as an affront, that is both a personal attack, and a threat to established and accepted inculcated dogma. For example, any request for plausible explanation or (heaven forbid) justification of scriptures and their resultant interpretations is seen as seditious treachery. Far easier to discredit the inquirer than rationalise a canonical stand. Any sheep with the temerity to ask “how” or “why” would soon find itself singled out and hacked into chops (figuratively in some cases, literally in others), after first being ridiculed and held up as an example of what similarly inclined audacious blasphemers (that is, people who think and question) can expect.

Knowledge is power, even when that “knowledge”, though hazy and dubious at best, is never permitted closer inspection. Perhaps especially so. How convenient. One wonders how our race has progressed as far as it has, when religion discourages us from pulling a thing or idea apart to see what makes it tick, to examine and evaluate what comprises its framework, and the very nature of its substance.

One can only imagine how advanced humankind might be this very day if religion didn’t apply those self-serving anchors to true wonder and honest analysis, as it has done so for the last few millennia of our existence.



Do Unto Others:

How To Build Obscene Wealth, Avoid Tax And Still Praise God

Brian Morris

For three long years the Royal Commission into Child Sexual Abuse heard tragic testimony from thousands of victims of abuse perpetrated by prestigious religious institutions. And there seems no end – whether to the depths of child exploitation, to inaction by churches for preventative solutions, or to delays in compensating their victims.

While child abuse has been the criminal underbelly of Christianity – most recently exposed – there is another epidemic on which all churches have remained silent, and equally miasmatic with indifference.

Wealth abuse is a global phenomenon, evident long before globalisation. It's become a crisis in every nation as the rich become even more obscenely rich, while a burgeoning underclass struggle for survival.



A miniscule 0.1 per cent of America's most wealthy own almost as much as the bottom 90 per cent – this from presidential candidate Bernie Sanders. It's an exponential wealth gap that's exploded in all nations since the rich/poor chasm of the Industrial Revolution, and widened further during the Great Depression.

The churches say and do little other than tut-tut and hand-wring at periodic conventions, in obscure reports on social deprivation, or with 30-second news grabs to show that they “care“. They know exactly that behind the illusion and thin veneer of widespread prosperity the non-rich are simply not coping.

True, the pursuit and hoarding of wealth is as old as time. But historically, societies

that became top heavy with wealth – in the hands of too few – fell prey to rebellion.

One of the most spectacular was the Fall of Rome, but France and Russia are two classic examples of popular revolution. It nearly happened in Britain in the depression when unemployment hit 30 per cent, and topping 70 per cent in parts of Wales and Northern England.

But poverty has always been the corner stone for religion. The influence and

domination by which all churches primarily flourish is impoverished societies, where education and social opportunity are minimal. 90 per cent of Catholics are poor. It is the theme of a recent book, ‘Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide’.

It's illustrated, too, by one well-known quote from Christopher Hitchens about Mother Teresa, when he said; “Mother Teresa was not a friend of the poor. She was a friend of poverty. She said that suffering was a gift from God.” And it's in this mindset that retreat into supernatural belief seems to become the only option.

Christians have laid claim to the economically dispossessed from the very outset. Matthew 19:24 makes it clear:

“Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”

So where is the religious muscle-flexing to condemn this shameful wealth gap that exists? Where is the political influence and hard-hitting media campaigns the churches unleashed when calling for Religious Freedom, or their demands for exemptions to anti-discrimination laws to challenge gay marriage, or their frontal assaults on the Safe Schools program?

Instead, Christianity influences the creation of wealth and maintains its symbiotic rapport with governments and the social elite who perpetuate capital inequity. Indeed, it was Calvinism that eased biblical restrictions on avarice and usury, paving the way for the full development and exploitation of laissez-fair capitalism.

Now, while experiencing rapid congregational decline, the numerically small church hierarchies somehow retain a cultural and political dominance. They maintain the presence of being spiritually elitist and eschew all scientific evidence that undermines their biblical foundations.

This, itself, breeds ignorance among their diminishing flock. And they continue to champion and personify Christianity's privileged elite, and reinforce an archaic ‘class structure’ through their penchant for pomp and ceremony.

Religion remains firmly anchored in its social orthodoxy (anti-gay, anti-voluntary euthanasia, et al), it is staunchly conservative on political and economic policy, and it has an overall callous insensitivity. That is typified by an embedded 'Mother Teresa' mindset to poverty, and a Cardinal Pell-like view of child abuse.

Government subsidies, initialed by John Howard, led to church domination of the welfare and employment sectors, as well as lucrative businesses in private education, private health and private aged care. In none of these is there any legal protection for their captive clientele to be shielded from predatory Christianity.

businesses, GST, land taxes, council rates, payroll taxes, car registrations, the list is endless.

The analysis was completed by the Secular Party of Australia in 2008, and it can be safely assumed that over the past seven years that figure has not diminished in any way.



So, where is all this going?

In 2014 Australia's GDP was US\$1.45 trillion – that's US dollars – and was ranked 12th on the IMF table of 189 countries. And despite the GFC, and recent falls in commodity prices, Australia remains one of the wealthiest nations in the world.

And, like the churches (over many centuries), Australia's wealth has expanded exponentially, but primarily in the hands of society's most privileged and already wealthy.

In 2015, the nation's top 20 per cent of wealth-holders increased by 28 per cent, while, by comparison, the wealth of the bottom 20 per cent increased by just 3 per cent. A person in the top 20 per cent wealth-group has a staggering 70 times as much wealth as a person in the bottom 20 per cent; and the wealthiest 10 per cent own 45 per cent of all wealth.

Christianity's coddled leadership continues to defy the march of progress. They are a privileged group of men with miniscule congregational support – just 8 per cent of the public go to church. That includes all religions.

And while 37 per cent of charities are religious, the remaining 63 per cent are primarily secular – doing equally good work on a broad swathe of humanitarian fronts but all without the need to tout supernatural beliefs.

These figures come from ACOSS in their 2015 report, 'Inequality in Australia.'

All these characteristics are well covered in two meticulous works by Professor Marion Maddox which blows the lid off Christianity, in its current incarnation.

But the churches have departed from the alleged teachings of Jesus – to give "succor and comfort" to the needy, without "counting the cost". Throughout history they have indeed counted the staggering wealth pouring into their coffers. Despite all their unchristian denials, churches have immeasurable wealth in property, investments, businesses, gold, art work, precious gems and artifacts, and international currencies.

So, where is the clamour from Christian churches to actually do something about the ever increasing wealth-gap problem? Where is the voice from those religious bodies that endorsed the ACOSS report – the Salvation Army, Anglicare Australia and St Vincent de Paul?

One is, 'God Under Howard; the rise of the religious right in Australia', and the other, 'Taking God to School; the end of Australia's egalitarian education?' A bold expose of Christian politics, economics and education by someone who is a practicing Christian.

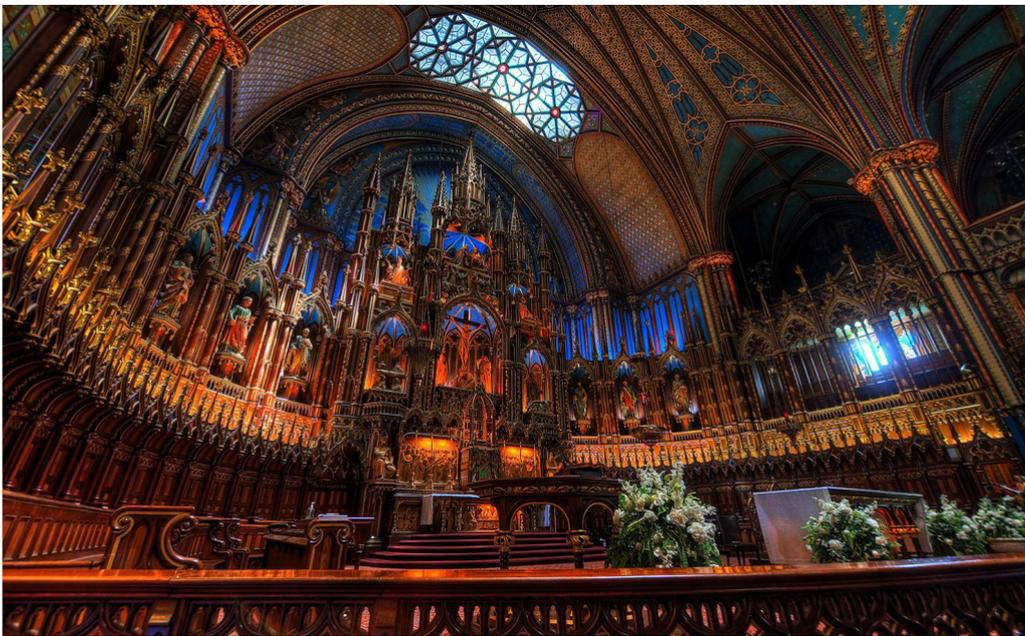
In 2014 faith groups collected a handsome \$104b income, according to government's own Australian Charities and Not-for-Profit Commission. And these religious charities are not required to submit detailed financial reports, so we can assume this is a conservative figure.

When will the Church hierarchies ever do more that offer muted and patronising double-speak? When will they openly challenge the federal government to act through their frequent national media campaigns? Will they ever use all their media connections to influence real change – the very same networks they use to shout down gay marriage, and a raft of contemporary social policy that offends their Christian beliefs?

Historically, this all adds up to Christianity being a major player in the environment of wealth escalation, and by direct association, with social and economic inequality.

Conversely, religions are avoiding an estimated \$31b in taxes across the full gamut of tax exemptions: income tax on

No doubt some of their charities do good work but the very essence of being a religious charity is to actively engage in the "advancement of religion".



Religion's annual \$31 billion in tax exemptions is another ancient contrivance that's long overdue for a major overhaul – to have churches finally make a contribution to the nation's coffers. Or do they just stand and watch as governments slash more from hospitals and public schools?

While Christianity originally preached the ideal, “render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's”, they continue to fight tooth and nail to retain their billion-dollar free ride at the tax-payer's expense. It's unconscionable, in this wholly secular society.

Where is the church voice calling loudly not for cuts to education, health and welfare, but for increases in revenue through equitable taxation of the wealthy in negative gearing, on superannuation rorts for the rich, family trusts, and a swathe of tax loopholes for corporations and their mega-rich patrons?

These are all multi-billion dollar revenue streams which could build infrastructure and create ‘real’ jobs, better opportunities for the chronically under-employed, and genuine training for the army of unemployed youth who need tangible pathways to participate fully in this 12th richest country in the world.

Casual jobs now account for 35 per cent of the workforce, the largest on record, and the majority provide only sufficient hours to allow workers a meager existence. The unemployment rate is close to 13 per cent, including casual workers whose hours fall short of the minimum wage. A true figure is much higher still, when including all unemployed people who have dropped out of the labour market entirely.

To reverse this crisis of casualisation – and the economic insecurity of ‘employment by yearly contract’ – a government with integrity would open new revenue streams. They are the traditional ‘sacred cows’ of the wealthy, mentioned above.

Without these untapped revenue

sources there will be no stabilising of today's wealth inequity, no national infrastructure funds to curb Australia's slide into social and economic decline.

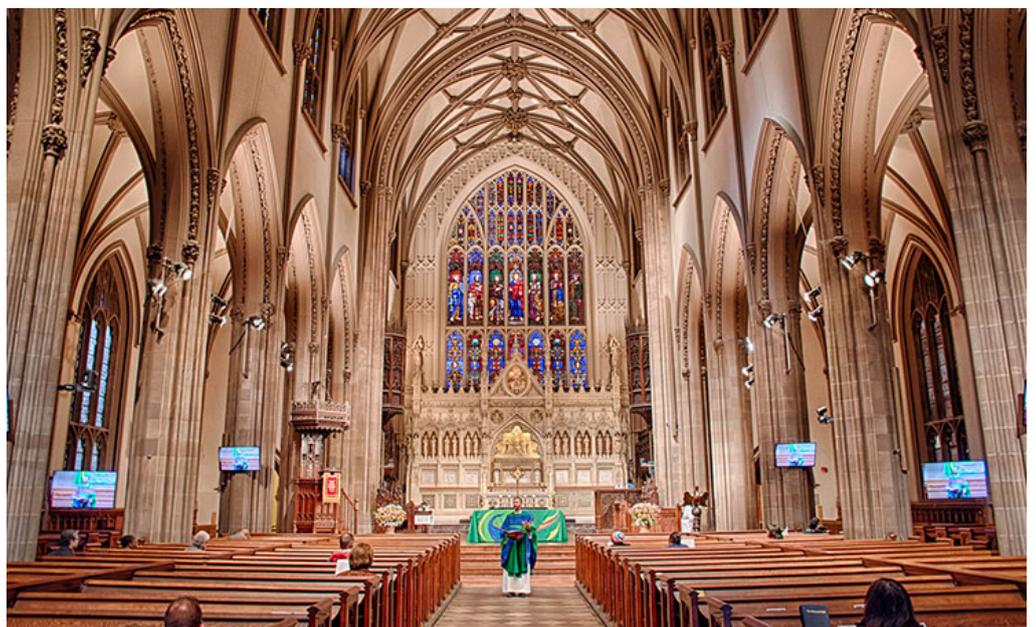
And a Death Tax would be an ideal addition to any plan to finally have the mega-rich make a contribution. It was even suggested last year by Malcolm Turnbull – to re-introduce a scheme abandoned in 1978. It's been long overdue, given that Australia's wealthiest fat-cats are the meanest in the world when it comes to philanthropy, according to the Arton Capital Philanthropy Report of 2015.

Or just pay tax! Put simply, tax minimisation is not only anti-social behavior, it's a contrived rort on the low-paid who pay their full share.

Malcolm Turnbull's government faces a budget crisis in May. Wracked by indecision, they have swept ‘off the table’ a full gamut of taxation measures to offset expenditure and the alarming fall in commodities.

But all the easy options have been discarded. And it's incontrovertible that a Catholic Turnbull would simply run screaming from the remotest mention of “death and religion” paying its fair share of tax to his government.

Editor: Brian Morris authorised reproduction of this article that appeared in New Matilda online at: <https://newmatilda.com/2016/03/08/wealth-abuse-taxation-and-religion-still-praise-god/>



The Catholic Church and Child Abuse

Mike Meyersen

Mike Meyersen is a regular contributor. He has written a lengthy article on various aspects of abuse linked to the Catholic Church. This really is just the tip of the iceberg but provides enough horror for now.

“But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea”

THE INQUISITION

Imagine being strung up on a rack that gradually pulls all four limbs from their sockets or being tied to a giant rotating wheel and beaten with a mallet so that your bones are crushed. Your crime, you are told, is one of heresy—a thought crime against the Church. Your tormentors do not divulge details of your “crime” but torture you until you confess. Once you confess the torture continues until you name others involved in similar “crimes”. Before dying you will have incriminated family, friends and acquaintances. They will now be rounded up and tortured. The Church confiscates the property and money of the victims, allowing popes, cardinals and archbishops to live lives of luxury in palaces and mansions, and dress in fine clothes decorated with gold, silver, gems and ivory.

The Church utilised a wide array of diabolical instruments to torture their victims. The scientist and philosopher, Giordano Bruno, was sent to his death at the stake in 1600 for heresy. His head was caged in a steel cradle with a long spike piercing his tongue and emerging beneath his chin. A further spike penetrated upwards into his palate in order to punish him for his “false” utterings and to prevent further similar utterings or screaming while he was burnt alive.

Another instrument was the pear which broke the flesh and spirit of those accused of thought crimes. Pears were inserted into the mouth, vagina or rectum of the accused and were gradually opened using a screw mechanism—the tissues of the mouth, tongue, vagina, rectum or

large bowel were agonisingly torn apart. Additional pain was often inflicted by adding pointed prongs to the instrument and heating the apparatus before its forced insertion. Few victims survived the torture of the Inquisition.

Children were not excused the attention of the inquisitors. Boys of ten and older and girls of nine and older could be found guilty of heresy. Some authorities found children aged only seven culpable of such a “crime”. Torture could be applied to both sexes from the age of fourteen. In reality the murder of parents meant that children of every age were tortured because not only were these children orphaned but they were left alone to roam the streets. No-one dared help them lest they too be accused of being heretics.

The Inquisition was not a fleeting moment of brutal lunacy but lasted more than six centuries. It was not until 1826 that the Inquisition recorded its last murder.

ENSLAVING CHILDREN

The thought of spending years in jail is a forebidding prospect — imagine then, being sent to jail as an innocent child. You have no legal representation and no one to turn to for help. You are held in appalling conditions and forced to work long hours, six days a week, as a slave. Furthermore, you don’t know if, or when, you will be set free. You may spend your entire life imprisoned and finally be buried in an unmarked mass grave on the prison grounds.

The Church oversaw this exercise in brutality against young girls and women in several countries up until recent times. The “crimes” varied from having a child out of wedlock, being an orphan, or being morally “wayward”.

Those imprisoned for having children out of wedlock had their babies taken from them and given away. Instead of caring for the children and providing love, affection and education, the nuns in charge, made slaves of the inmates.

The women were held in jails called The Magdalene laundries. The irony in naming the laundries after Mary Magdalene—traditionally depicted as a wayward prostitute who repents and is forgiven by Jesus—was lost on the Church. There was no “forgiveness” for women and girls interned in the Magdalene laundries. It is estimated that 10,000 women were made to labour in these laundries between 1922 and 1996, when the last laundry was closed. This number is based on the McAleese Report which only investigated the years after the foundation of the Irish state in 1922. The laundries, however, have a much longer history. The stories of the prisoners held in the laundry system are harrowing. This is the story of one detainee, Maureen Sullivan.

“I was 12 years of age and my father had died, my mother had remarried and my home situation was abusive.

They told me I would have a great education and I went off to New Ross from my primary school, actually in a laundry van. When I arrived there they took my books from me that my mother had bought. That was the last I saw of them; that was the last time I had a decent education. From then on it was laundry every day, where it was horrible, where you were not allowed to talk to anyone. All it was there in the laundry was work, work, work.”

“There was physical abuse where they would dig you in the side with a thick cross off the

rosary beads, where you got a thump on the side of the head and where there would be constant putting you down, shouting, verbal abuse. You got the cross in the side of the ribs if you slowed down on your way around the laundry.”

“[The nuns] ate very well while we were on dripping, tea, bread. I remember another torture – one when we were all hungry – we could smell the likes of roast beef and cooked chicken wafting from where the nuns were eating. That was like another insult.”

“I had no education, no means of applying for a job and for several years I was on the streets. It wasn’t until I tried to take my own life in the 70s that I went for counselling and then it all came back, all the abuse and exploitation I had suffered in those places.”

An enquiry by the Irish government finally occurred in 2011 following a demand from the UN committee against torture. The report resulted in the State setting up a compensation scheme.



The orders which ran the Magdalen laundries were inappropriately named the Sisters of Mercy, Sisters of Charity, Sisters of Our Lady of Charity of Refuge, and the Sisters of the Good Shepherd. These orders were asked by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child and a UN Committee against Torture to contribute to the compensation fund for victims. The request was declined.

A Magdalene survivor, Phyllis Morgan, on hearing this news said, “This is dreadful. I thought they would have done the decent thing” Doing the “decent thing” is, however, not in the nature of those who run slave labour camps for children.

The words of another survivor, Elizabeth Coppin, best sum up the abuses committed against these women and children. She

said, “We used to have to go to confession once a week....But what sins did we have? We were working all the time. They were the sinners, not us. They were torturing us”.

STOLEN CHILDREN

Margaret Humphreys was awarded the Order of Australia for her work in exposing the shameful business of stealing children from their parents in England and their subsequent mal-treatment in Australia, Canada and elsewhere. Humphreys had to deal with not only the lies and deceit of the Church but also death threats against her own children.



Consider some aspects of life told to Humphreys by children sent to “homes” such as Bindoon, run by the Christian Brothers. Many former inmates wanted to know how the British government could have sent them off as children, some as young as four or five, to be used as slave labourers.

A survivor described his time in Bindoon, stressing that he was not talking about the nineteenth century but the Forties, Fifties and Sixties in the 20th century. When the children arrived at Bindoon the clothes they had been given on departing England were taken from them and they were left without underwear. They were forced to build Bindoon which was like a building site with rubble and rock everywhere.

The children had no shoes and worked barefooted every day-winter and summer. They mixed so much cement that the dust burned their feet and the sores that developed on their hands and knees. After they completed the building they had to build the Stations of the Cross out of stone. Many of the children wet their beds every night.

The mattresses on which they slept were stained and soaked with urine. They were constantly hungry. Breakfast consisted

of thin porridge, mixed with bran from the chicken feed. Hunger drove them to forage for food. At times they would forage through the bins of a neighbouring school and eat what they could find.

They were beaten regularly with buckles, fan belts and axe handles and lived in fear of being noticed or singled out. The beatings were carried out in the most humiliating way possible. They had their trousers pulled down and were beaten in front of the other boys.

While the sadists got their pleasure beating the children a paedophile brother would come in the night and wake a boy who would be carried from the dormitory to the brother’s room. Humphreys was spared the details of what happened in the brother’s room.

Another victim was more forthcoming and described how at the age of five a brother put him on the back of his horse and took him into the country where he tied him to a tree and raped him multiple times. He then rode off leaving the child crying, bleeding and tied to the tree. He managed to get free and ran to a convent where the nuns put him to bed.

The men that had been kept at Bindoon frequently referred to a particular brother, Francis Paul Keaney, with great bitterness. This man was described as an uncaring, brutal, sadist obsessed with building projects. One migrant described Keaney as follows: “he had this thick nobby stick and he would crack it over our heads. If a skull was split and bleeding he didn’t care. He just kept hitting. He was the cruellest bastard God ever put on this earth”.

The Christian Brothers, however, saw nothing wrong with Keaney and memorialised him by renaming the institution Keaney College in his honour.

Brutality against children was not confined to Bindoon. Humphreys was also told about brutality by those sent to Clondarf, Castledare and Tardun—all run by the Catholic Church.

The victims of Bindoon and other institutions run by the Catholic Church suffered anxieties and mental health issues for life.

STOLEN GENERATION

AUSTRALIA

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were forcibly removed from their families from the mid 19th century until 1970. It is estimated that 10 to 30% of such children were removed on the basis of their race alone. Proof of neglect was not a requirement. Furthermore, only one of the parents had to be Aboriginal or of Torres Strait Island descent. Many of the stolen generation were held in institutions run by the Church. One in six witnesses at the Bringing Them Home Inquiry who were sent to institutions reported physical abuse and one in ten reported sexual abuse.

It was not until 1997 that Church authorities apologised for their role in the abuse of indigenous children in Australia. This apology from the Catholic Church was published in the Social Justice Report 1998: Chapter 3: Church Responses.

The Australian Catholic Social Justice Council feels great sorrow for the pain and anguish of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families affected by the former government policy of forcibly removing indigenous children from their families. Many Catholics didn't know much about this practice until the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission conducted its National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families. We now understand that many indigenous Australians have been deeply hurt by this experience. The brave telling of personal stories at the Inquiry's hearings tore at the hearts of mothers and fathers. We are all someone's children.

Today the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council acknowledges our Church's part in these events and offers the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and especially the 'stolen generation', our sincere regret. We hope through this acknowledgement of the truth of the past to take another step together on the path to healing.

Apologies for the brutal treatment of children are, of course, welcome, even if decades after the crime. Apologies can, however, not be regarded as sincere unless backed up by appropriate financial compensation for the suffering of the victims and their families.

KIDNAPPING

The Catholic Church was responsible for the kidnapping in 1858 of a Jewish boy, Edgardo Levi Mortara, from his family in Bologna, then a papal state. The child fell seriously ill when he was one year old. The family's Catholic maid fearing that he would die unbaptised and be excluded from heaven took it on herself to baptise the child in secret.

Edgardo recovered from his illness but when he was six the Church found out about his unauthorised baptism and decreed that since the boy was baptised as a Catholic he could not be permitted to grow up in a Jewish family according to canon law.

On 23 June 1858, police officers of the Papal States took the child from his family and he became a ward of the state in Rome. Pleas for his return from his family were to no avail. Church authorities informed the parents that they could only get their child back if they converted to Catholicism. They turned down this offer. Pope Pius IX was himself involved, in that he not only authorized the kidnapping but took a personal interest in the case helping to raise the boy and referring to him as his son. Given the history of the Catholic Church one can be excused for wondering whether sexual gratification motivated this Pope's behavior. The distress the Jewish family must have felt at having their child stolen is unquantifiable.

TRADING IN BABIES

This was the headline of an article published in the Daily Mail Australia on the 16 Oct. 2011: 300,000 babies stolen from their parents and sold for adoption. These 300,000 babies were stolen from their parents in just one country, Spain, over a period of fifty years, ending in the 1990s. The mothers were frequently told that their first-born child had died in childbirth or soon after.



The women who were often young and unmarried were then told that they could not see their dead child or attend their funeral. In fact the babies had been sold to childless couples. Mothers who insisted on seeing their dead baby were shown a baby's corpse that was freezing cold. It appears that a dead baby was kept in the freezer for such occasions. Doctors, nurses, priests and nuns cooperated in the scheme.

Katya Adler who investigated the scandal said: "There are men and women across Spain whose lives have been turned upside-down by discovering the people they thought were their parents actually bought them for cash. There are also many mothers who have maintained for years that their babies did not die. These women were labelled "hysterical". They are now discovering that their child has probably been alive and brought up by somebody else all this time".

A similar arrangement was in place in Ireland where it is estimated that 60,000 babies were stolen and sold to rich American families. Take the case of Cathy Deasy described by Martin Sixsmith. Deasy was born in 1955 in "the catholic mother and baby home" at Bessboro in County Cork. Her unmarried mother cared for her in the home while working in the laundry for the first four years of her life. Photos were taken of Cathy dressed in nice clothes and with toys in photos called "prop" shots. The children were never allowed to play with the toys and were told to wave at the camera. The nuns then showed these photos to prospective adopters from the United States. One such couple adopted Cathy.

The entire adoptive process was conducted through the mail. The selling of babies was illegal but the adoptions were followed by sizeable "donations". The trauma of separation for children in this situation is incalculable.

Cathy wrote to the nuns at the convent where she was born, and her mother worked, asking for help in reconnecting with her birth mother. The sister in charge of the records in the home run by the Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary replied: "Your mother's probably dead.

Why are you continuing the search?” Cathy suspected the sister was not being truthful and wrote repeatedly to her over fourteen years in an attempt to gain further information.

By 2002 she contacted a group of Irish adoptees who within a few months were able to finally reunite her with her mother. A search which could have been over in a short time had taken several years. The valuable time which Cathy could have shared with her elderly mother had also been stolen from her. Cathy described the reunion as the happiest day in her life.

She also discovered that she was never unwanted and never abandoned and her mother did not give her away. Cathy’s mother had been kept for a further 35 years in an institution run by the Catholic church because she committed the sin of being an unmarried mother. Sixsmith makes the point that Cathy’s experience is far from unique and that the shameful history of forced adoptions means that thousands of other mothers and children are still searching for each other.

SUMMARY

[We] must not try excuse things for which there is no real excuse...To ignore the question of human responsibility would make all history meaningless. G.G. Coulton, *The Inquisition*.

The Inquisition may have formally ended in the 19 century but this did not stop the Catholic Church continuing to torture the most defenseless people—children. Racks, screws, knives and pears were replaced by beatings, rape, food deprivation, and enslavement.

Apologists use several arguments in an attempt to diminish the responsibility of the church for its crimes against children.

They argue that only 3-5% of Church employees engaged in sex abuse of children and the scale of the crimes has been grossly exaggerated. The exact number of child abusers can, however, not be accurately estimated because such individuals are not in the habit of admitting to their crimes. This argument also makes no mention of those who cover up for the crimes of their colleagues or those who know about such crimes but keep quiet.

Protection of sex abusers in the Catholic Church has been standard Church policy. It could therefore be argued that the entire hierarchy of the Church is party to the raping and sexual abuse of children. The number of children who were raped and sexually abused will never be known but it is certainly several times greater than the highest estimate.

The assertion that Church leaders were unaware of crimes committed by the Catholic Church against children is not true. The Jesuit Father, Russell Pollitt, spoke about his anger and deep shame after seeing the film, *Spotlight*, in which child abuse in the Catholic Church was investigated by journalists of *The Boston Globe*. Pollitt pointed out that decades before *The Boston Globe* journalists investigated the claims of sexual abuse, people such as Dr. Richard Sipe had warned that there were a number of psychosexual issues amongst the clergy that needed attention. Sipe was not only a psychotherapist but also an ordained priest who worked as a therapist with clergy and taught in major seminaries in the U.S.A.

Who could be better qualified to issue such a warning? Sipe published his observations in books in 1990 and 1995. He claimed that 2% of priests were involved with pre-pubescent minors and 4% with adolescents and suggested that the Church face up to these problems and others, to do with its

teaching and practice on sexuality. Sipe had the interests of not only the Church but also the abused children at heart. For this he was denigrated by many clergy.

Pollitt did not mince words and described Cardinal George Pell’s handling of sex abuse cases in Australia as “dishonest”. He maintains that the way the Church authorities dealt with and continue to deal with the abuse of children is disgraceful. He says that the problem is further magnified because many of those in authority, who either turned a blind eye or failed to act on allegations of abuse, are still in power.

People such as Fr. Pollitt are to be admired for discussing their shame and anger with regard to child abuse and its handling by the Catholic Church. Pollitt’s candour, however, prompts the question, why has there not been a deluge of letters by priests and nuns admitting their shame with regard to the abuse of children by the Catholic Church?

Finally, in the foreword to Margaret Humphreys’ book “*Oranges and Sunshine*”, Humphreys quotes a British MP who said the abuse of the stolen children was “like war crimes without the war”.

“Rape, sexual abuse, physical and mental torture, deprivation of liberty, imprisonment in harsh conditions, mass burials in unmarked graves are all hallmarks of war crimes. But in my view there was a war. It was a war by a powerful force of cowardly, heartless and dishonest bullies against the most defenseless of people—children. To the list of crimes committed by the Catholic Church against humanity—crimes such as, the Inquisition, slave trade, burning of witches, persecution of Jews, Crusades, opposition to scientific truths we need add, “wars against children”.



I Don't Worship Anyone But Me!

Roxanne Weller

Organised religion is the root of much, arguably all, evil. It is divisive and hateful, it's proponents selfish, arrogant and sanctimonious. The "god of love" loves to hurt, hate and enslave. Fortunately I was blessed to have been brought up without religion, so there wasn't that much damage to undo.

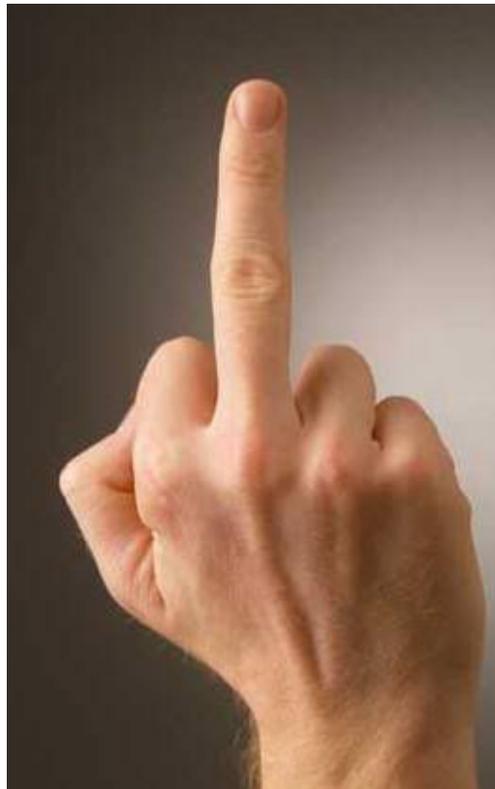
Things that come easily to man, the things that are human by their very nature, are vilified by religion. Perfectly normal emotions are branded as sin, rather than risk being explained or understood, or heaven forbid, celebrated. Under much organised religion everyone is encouraged to feel inadequate, shameful and unworthy. Consequently confusion and guilt abound, used by religion and the religious to create a state of fear, frustration, and a longing for redemption – by means of whatever particular flavour mindgame being peddled at the time. Emotions are used to ensnare and entrap, to keep the sheep flocking. Cults are like parasites; they get in under your skin.

Prayer? Bugger that. I don't need the biased help of an egotistical overseer, especially not one who's a known bigot and bully. Egotistical overseer, especially not one who's a known bigot and bully. The goods and services on offer don't make up for the price of entry to that crazy circus, no sir. Besides, imaginary friends are oh ever so needy.

Morality? The cherry picking happy clappers who read, preach and live by books (books I might add, that have been secretly modified and judiciously edited throughout time) based on the ramblings of desert dwelling illiterates who barely managed to embrace the iron age, should consider that hey, maybe things have changed a little in the last 2000 years or so. Do you think? Yes, yes they have, quite a bit actually. Perhaps you weren't paying attention.

I believe that what is right and what is wrong, what is fair, reasonable and just

are hard-wired in our hearts and brains. These perceptions only get distorted and twisted when someone brainwashes us into thinking it's OK to think otherwise, tells us it is in fact necessary to think otherwise, our duty, our birthright. And those people invariably say their almighty and all powerful God told them this is so. How bloody convenient. What a twisted individual this god of theirs must be. As someone I chatted to online once said, "you shouldn't need to read a book to tell you not to be an asshole". Amen to that, sister!



Faith? The great leap into nothingness. Why people who believe in the unlikely, unprovable and implausible consider themselves more righteous than those who prefer fact over fiction, evidence over imagination, is bewildering. Stupefying. Astonishing. Belief in the improbable doesn't make you holier than me, it makes you an embarrassment - irresponsible, lazy, frivolous and naïve. Take some personal responsibility.

And by the way, if God created everything, just who is responsible for cot death, ebola, tsunami's, miscarriages, breast cancer, depression, rape, famine and torture? I could go on. "God works in mysterious ways", huh? My arse he does. Talk about a celestial get out of jail free card – the ultimate in excuses. By the way, God, if you're real and reading this (omnipotence must be a bitch, right?), man up and fix your bloody mess.

It has taken me many years to gain the wisdom and courage to take responsibility for my own actions, to no longer coast along on a wave of comfortable self-righteousness. I question, and where the truth proves elusive or evasive, I question some more. I learned to love myself, my body, my brain, my emotions. I put myself first, and took pride in doing so. I have two personal mottoes: "Respect and Responsibility", and "No Shame, No Blame".

I accept I will continue to make mistakes, and that making mistakes is OK, in fact mistakes are essential stepping stones on the path to wisdom. I try not to feel contrition, and if I do, I stop and examine why. If I need to apologise or make reparations for my actions, I do so. I endeavour to learn from the experience, then move on.

I try to treat myself like the goddess I am, and grant myself all the pleasure, love, comfort and satisfaction I deserve. And that doesn't make me selfish, far from it. When my house is in order, and only when it is in order, can I then fully and confidently open the doors of my heart and offer shelter and love to others



One God Too Many

by Sten Bjerking

Sten is a regular of the Atheist Foundation of Australia forums. He has written a book on the Christian God which we have been serialising in the magazine. This is the ninth and final installment.

*But still I hear the Wrangling Sects proclaim
Their Paradises and their Seas of Flame,
Their Holy Ghosts and mystic Trinities,
With no degree of Intellectual Shame.*

CHANGING God

Christians tell us that God is perfect and unchanging. A study of the Bible shows that neither is true. Some of the transformations of God could be described as very significant.

God in the beginning of the Old Testament is a hands on warrior, who thinks nothing of wiping out thousands of people and animals on a whim. As we move on further he likes to get others to do these chores for him but his appetite for carnage does not diminish.

Looking after his chosen people (the Hebrews), is his obsession from the time of Abraham on -- even though he neglects them for a while. The rest of humanity are regarded as the enemy and really get the wrong end of the stick for a long time. In the New Testament God seems to have progressed beyond the need to smite so many people and if you believe the Christian interpretation he then makes himself the God for everyone including all the people he has been wiping out for four thousand years.

This point is contentious if you read the New Testament carefully. John the Baptist was not interested in ministering to Saducees and Pharisees (Matthew 3:7). Jesus told all his twelve disciples to "Go not into the way of the Gentiles" but "Go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matthew 10:5-6). He then showed great reluctance in helping a Gentile woman (Matthew 15:22-28), once again saying that he was only about looking after "the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

Jesus was not consistent though. Later he told his disciples "Go ye into all the World, and preach the gospel to every creature. (yes, the wording is "creature"). He that believeth and is baptised shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned." (Mark 16:15-16).

The almost insatiable appetite for burnt offerings God had in the early days disappears in the New Testament, as does his fixation on the subject of circumcision. Hell is introduced in graphic detail in the New Testament, and the Devil brought to the fore as an independent force to be reckoned with, whereas he seems to be under the control of God in the old.

The Church

Not only do Christians believe that that their God is perfect and unchanging, but the beliefs they hold as true, as taught by their Churches, are the same as those taught by Jesus, and held by the original disciples. This is an extraordinary proposition given the changes that have happened to the Church, or Churches, in the intervening years.

The Wikipedia Encyclopaedia, and The World Christian Encyclopaedia, inform us that there are just less than 40,000 different denominations of Christianity in the World today. The fracturing began only a few centuries after Christ but the major explosion of new denominations began in the sixteenth century.

It can be argued that there are many denominations that vary very little but it is also true there are many others who have profoundly different beliefs, about many issues. This is so much so that some groups hate each other with an intense passion, because of these differences.

The obvious conclusion that must be drawn is that the Christian church and faith is changing. Not only are there many new groups with their own interpretations but changes are taking place within the older established denominations.

Struggling to stay abreast of modern attitudes regarding birth control, sex outside marriage, same sex relationships, and many other issues the Christian churches today are constantly under pressure to modify previously held positions. One of the most significant areas where change is happening, centres on the expected role of women in the church.

Women

As a collection of texts that have so many ambiguous contradicting messages and directives on so many issues, the Bible is remarkably consistent on the subject of women.

The Bible clearly shows that God has a problem relating to women. From the very beginning Eve is seen by God as the more guilty party in the Garden of Eden episode. She gets punished more than Adam and is told that he is boss from then on.

God does talk directly to Eve, albeit in anger, which is a little unusual as his preference is just to talk to the men. The men get all the instructions and all the blessings. Women, when they get a mention at all, are generally given their instructions via men or occasionally by an angel.

I could fill pages with quotations from the New Testament such as "Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord." (Ephesians 5:22). Paul, who wrote this, had much more to say on the subject along the same lines, even saying that women were created for men and not the other way around. (1st Corinthians 11:9).



The Old Testament is worse than the New as a guide to the treatment of women. Wives are seen as possessions of the husband and having multiple wives is OK for some as well. Men are even allowed to sell their daughters into slavery provided certain guidelines are observed.

That women today are having limited success in attaining positions of authority in the churches is perfectly understandable given the content of the Bible. Those that oppose the ordination of women clearly have the upper hand when drawing on the authority of the text.

Churches face the problem of being under pressure to make changes to keep abreast of modern attitudes, while at the same time trying to maintain that the ultimate truth they profess to be teaching is constant. This is not a difficult task -- it's an impossible task. No issue brings this more into focus than the ordination of women.

The women who are trying to climb into the pulpit must wrestle with this question also, knowing that if successful they are changing the religion they profess to believe in.

Big Needles and Skinny Camels

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

One of the best examples of radical change in the church, is illustrated by the emergence of the "Prosperity Gospel" movement. This movement, although a relatively recent phenomenon, has gained enormous popularity in a short space of time. With the message that everyone can be wealthy, God wants you to be wealthy, and God will help you become wealthy, there is little wonder the popularity of this gospel is so strong. An extraordinary degree of gullibility is required but there is no shortage of this affliction in many people.

The famous extract from Matthew about the camel and eye of the needle is overcome if you imagine a big needle and skinny camel, or if you assume that Jesus was referring to a narrow gate at the entrance to Jerusalem (that a camel could just get through holding its breath), as some of the followers of the prosperity gospel like to believe. That

Jesus continues after this famous quote and advises his disciples to give up worldly possessions to secure lodgings in heaven is ignored.

Referring to "The Jerome Biblical Commentary" written by Catholic scholars and "The Abingdon Interpreter's Bible" compiled by Protestant scholars we are informed that Jesus was indeed referring to a needle, not a gate, and the meaning of the text is clear. Rich people are going to have a hard time getting past St Peter at the pearly gates.

*There is no Purpose in the Cosmic Scheme:
Worlds sweep and crash in Never-ending Steam,
And out of Nebulae are born again,
To follow still their Vain, Eternal Theme.*

PURPOSE

So what is the purpose that drives God? What is the end goal he is aiming for that has compelled him to create the cosmos as well as man? Christians will often say that their faith gives them a feeling of purpose but do not question God's purpose.

The Bible doesn't spell out a grand plan that God has in mind but it is implied that the end result will be God in heaven, surrounded by saved souls, living in bliss for eternity. We must assume therefore that this is God's purpose -- his final goal. We will look at the method God employs to achieve this.

Firstly from a moral angle: God creates billions of souls that are planted in billions of embryos on planet Earth, which is used as a testing ground to weed out the duds. The ones that make the grade get to join God in Heaven and live happily for eternity. The Devil gets all the left overs (and no matter how you do the maths he gets a lot more than God), and the one's he gets are in for a very rough time for eternity.

Does this seem like a sound strategy? Wouldn't you think an omnipotent god could come up with a better, more humane way, to obtain the result he is after? Why does God have to create all those extra souls just to send them to a place where they will be tortured for eternity? Wouldn't it be better not to create them in the first place? The amount of suffering being inflicted on

the failed souls, far outweighs the amount of bliss to be experienced by the few that make the grade.

Looking at the method used from a practical angle: God creates the entire universe although only Earth is the centre of his attention. This is analogous to saying he created a beach when it was only one grain of sand he was bothered with. This may seem an exaggeration and it is. The Earth is much smaller in relation to the universe than the grain of sand in relation to the beach.

When the universe was "created" Earth wasn't part of it. This didn't happen until 9.5 billion years had passed. The best estimates of geologists and geophysicists puts the age of the universe at about 14 billion years and the age of Earth at 4.54 billion years. The first life did not happen until sometime after this and man that resembles modern man has only been around for 200 thousand years.

Whether the 200 thousand year ago man looked enough like God to be given a soul is not known, but the point is academic as the Christian church tells us that it is only possible to obtain salvation through Jesus Christ, and he didn't turn up until 2 thousand years ago. The collection of saved souls could not have started until then.

If we divide 2 thousand into 14 billion we get 7 million meaning that since God created the universe only one seven millionth of the time has the recruitment of saved souls been possible. Does this sound just a little out of proportion?

The fundamentalists do not have to deal with this question though, as they believe the World is only a little over 6,000 years old and probably question the scale of the universe as well. They must give some thought to the fate of the souls of those first 4,000 year inhabitants however.

Some more liberal minded Christians may suggest that God has been active in other parts of the universe as well, inhabiting other planets with beings that resembled him and picking up souls there as well. This would help fill in the vast amount of time that nothing was happening until Earth came on line.

Given this possibility it's interesting to speculate on the method God may have used in other locations before Earth. Is original creation, a flood and start again, a chosen people, rejection of the chosen people idea and then sending the son down to straighten things out his standard approach? Surely what was done here could not have been a refinement on what has been done somewhere before? It's hard to imagine something even worse than this clumsy blundering effort.

*So join with me and let us Laugh to Scorn
The Black-robed Goul who seeks to make us
mourn.*

*Why, twere as logical to Wail about
The Vast Eternity ere we were Born.*

THE END

Many extracts from biblical texts are used to predict the return of Jesus and the end of the World. Many charismatic would be prophets who have managed to calculate a precise date for this advent, have led processions to the top of mountains to await his arrival. (The mountain top presumably to give a better view of Christ's approach in his golden chariot, or a better vantage point to observe the distress of the unsaved, as judgement is administered.) Returning sheepishly to lower levels after a day or two, the hopefuls sometimes find the prophet has made off with a considerable sum of money, that once belonged to them.

Considered by many to be the most reliable biblical extract to predict the end can be found in Matthew 24:14 : "And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations: and then shall the end come." Which means that the end will come when everybody in the world has heard the Christian gospel.

In the West the Christian Church is shrinking. As education levels increase Church attendances decrease. Even in the USA where religiosity is higher

than in European countries, it is clear that belief in God is much less common among the better educated, than the less so. The results of a new poll taken by the Pew Research Centre, in collaboration with the American Association for the Advancement of Science, were released in July 09. The results show belief in God in the general American public is still and extraordinary 83% although only 33% of scientists share this belief.

A survey taken by Pitzer College and published in April 2008 examined the degree of religiosity of 50 countries in the world. Sweden topped the list with a percentage of up to 85% classified as non-religious and 46% of the number classified themselves as atheist. Other Scandinavian countries Denmark and Norway are in the top four as well. Apart from their geographical proximity, these countries share high levels of educational achievement, as well as many other desirable social traits.

Contrary to this other surveys show a growth in Christianity. In May 2007 an article in the magazine "Foreign Policy" showed an annual growth rate for Christianity of 1.38%, most of the growth happening in Latin America, Africa, China, and India.

There is no comfort in this figure for Christians though as five other religions are reported as having higher growth rates - Islam topping the list at 1.84%. A good part of the growth in Islam moreover is happening in European countries where Christianity is shrinking. The figure of 1.38% growth for Christianity may be a little optimistic also as I doubt the shrinkage that is happening in the rear is taken into account in the computation.

In the light of the above, it seems increasingly unlikely, that the "gospel of kingdom" is going to reach everybody in the World in the foreseeable future. This milestone appears to be receding in the distance rather than getting closer.

There are other prophecies given in many of the testaments, detailing signs heralding the return of Jesus. Many of these describe catastrophic events preceding Christ's arrival. Here is one example - "I will show wonders in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and billows of smoke. The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood." Acts 2:19-21

Is it any wonder that many of the faithful welcome cataclysmic events with optimism given a description like this? As a significant number of Christians in the USA think that the second coming will happen within the next 50 years, it is also disturbing that decisions may be made by them with this clearly in focus. It is disconcerting enough that someone may cast a vote having this conviction but if politicians believe this and factor it in as they make decisions, we are really in trouble. What possible interest would they have in conserving resources and maintaining the health of the planet?

I am looking forward to the end too. The end of Christianity in all its 40,000 miserable sin obsessed denominations. It is my hope for mankind that we will progress beyond the need to create gods to give our lives meaning and direction. I hope that in the future mankind will be able to say "I don't know" in answer to questions that science cannot give an explanation for until now, instead of conjuring up some supernatural explanation.

It is my hope that soon the Christian God will disappear the same as: Aphrodite, Apollo, Ares, Artemis, Athena, Demeter, Dionysus, Hades, Helios, Hephaestus, Hera, Hermes, Hestia, Persephone, Poseidon, Selene, Zeus, Bacchus, Bellona, Ceres, Cupid, Diana, Faunus, Flora, Janus, Juno, Jupiter, Lares, Libintia, Maia, Mars, Mercury, Minerva, Mithras, Neptune, Ops, Pales, Pluto, Pomona, Proserpine, Saturn, Venus, Vertumnus, Vesta, Vulcan -----

Amen



If I were not an atheist, I would believe in a God who would choose to save people on the basis of the totality of their lives and not the pattern of their words. I think he would prefer an honest and righteous atheist to a TV preacher whose every word is God, God, God, and whose every deed is foul, foul, foul.

(Isaac Asimov)



The bliss of the drunkard is a visible picture of the expectation of the dying atheist, who hopes no more than to lie down in the grave with the beasts that perish.

(Jane Porter)

And On the Eighth Day He Crossbred

And Lo, The Angels Appeared

Eve Jones

Have you ever pondered on the muscular-skeletal structure of Angels with their human body and feathered wings to fly? We know that the Intelligent Designer created humans with collar bones, shoulder blades, arms, elbow, wrists and fingers.

He gave birds a similar structure but with wings, wing coverts, primary, secondary and tertiary feathers, pinions and replaced toe nails with talons.

Were Angels some sort of eighth day Genesis afterthought with the Intelligent Designer having forgotten to make them in week one, then in week two, giving them a double skeleton or superimposing bird bits onto humans? I need an expert angelologist with a degree in physiology to enlighten me.

How do Angels' wings attach to the human skeleton to give lots of up-lift without the lift force breaking spine or ribs?

Or maybe it happened the other way around. Did the Intelligent Designer start with a large bird and attached the man parts? Unlikely because Angels are always

depicted by artists who know these things, with feet not claws. Besides, the Intelligent Designer needed human brains not bird brains to carry out His work of taking messages to earthly humans.

Funny thing. Perhaps it was an oversight in Genesis week 1, but on earth, man-sized birds cannot fly eg emu, ostrich, rhea, cassowary are all flightless birds as their bodies are too heavy for lift off. Even large birds like albatrosses need to take a running jump from a cliff top and swans paddle along the top of the water picking up speed before lift off.

So what is the Angels' lift-off flight secret? Do they need a cliff top or long runway to get airborne?

When the Angel Gabriel flew down to earth did he need a long running jump off a cloud – a bit like a hang glider jumping off a cliff face? Okay once airborne in fine weather. It seems storms and tempests don't appear during angelic forays to earth. Whoever heard of an Angel having to seek help for a broken wing? Or being grounded by fog?

When Angel Gabriel visited Virgin Mary with the news of her pregnancy

(as if she couldn't tell the same way other women do) how did he manage to get his wings through the cottage door? Did their meeting perhaps take place in the farmyard or did the down-draft from his wings blow the ornaments off the mantle piece?

Having so often stressed about these important points of Angel structure and behaviour, I was sooo relieved that a top priest in the Catholic Church, Vatican Angelologist, Father Renzo Lavatori, has now stated that angels do exist but you do not see angels so much as feel their presence. They are a bit like sunlight that refracts on you through a crystal vase, he says.

Well that sorts out the bit about angels' muscular-skeletal structure but poses a new conundrum.

How did Virgin Mary communicate with the shard of light refracting through the glass vase on her mantel piece?

Perhaps another angelology expert from the Vatican can shed some light on this new conundrum.



Book Review

Submission - Michel Houellebecq

Peter Ellett

English edition published by Farrar, Straus & Giroux, New York. 2015

Michel Houellebecq's controversial bestseller *Submission* was first published in France on 7 January 2015, the very day that Islamic terrorists burst into the offices of the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* and murdered 12 people. Coincidentally, the cover of the magazine that week featured an unflattering depiction of the author himself promising to observe Ramadan in 2022. This was a reference to the central theme of the book in which a new Islamic party ends up winning the French general elections in 2022.

His book has had a major impact in Europe, praised by some as a modern masterpiece, condemned by others as either misogynist, xenophobic or Islamophobic.

Houellebecq is no stranger to controversy. He seems to specialise in getting everyone off-side while refusing to be labelled himself. He has dismissed atheism and secularism as dead and was once taken to court for deriding Islam as a stupid religion.

When I bought this book, I was expecting a political thriller but it's not. The political scenario only serves as a backdrop to a rather bleak dissection of the decay of modern western civilisation as represented by the book's main character, an odious intellectual called Francois who teaches French literature at the Sorbonne.

The unfolding political scenario is this. The French electorate is fed up with both the conservative Union for a Popular Movement led by Nicholas Sarkozy and their traditional rivals, the Socialist Party of Francois Hollande. In the lead-up to the 2022 elections, the party with the most support is the far-right National Front of Marine Le Pen. These are all real life players in contemporary French politics. Into the mix comes a new political force,

this time fictional, a French version of the Muslim Brotherhood. The Brotherhood is blessed with a charming and charismatic leader who skilfully taps into the despair of the disillusioned mainstream while distancing himself from the local Muslim extremists. They soon become serious contenders, leaving both traditional parties languishing in the polls.

Fearing a National Front victory, the UPM and Socialists form a coalition and throw their weight behind the Brotherhood. The party sweeps to victory and France has a Muslim led government. Overnight France becomes a very different place. For many, things are looking up. Investment floods in from the Middle East, regional alliances are forged with North Africa, unemployment falls with the disappearance of women from the workforce, as does the crime rate.

But the biggest impact is in education. The Sorbonne becomes an Islamic university and our hero Francois loses his job where he had worked as an academic specialising in the nineteenth century French writer Joris Karl Huysmans. After all, Francois is hardly an ideal role model for Muslim youth. In fact he is a vulgar hedonistic slob whose main interests in life are eating, drinking, smoking and having grubby sexual encounters with his students. In this sense, his life echoes that of Huysmans whose earlier work was representative of the 'decadent' school of French literature until his conversion to Roman Catholicism in later life.

Francois is in crisis and even contemplates suicide. "The mere will to live was clearly no match for the pains and aggravations that punctuate the life of the average Western man," he laments. "I was incapable of living for myself, and who else did I have to live for? Humanity

didn't interest me – it disgusted me actually. I didn't think of human beings as my brothers, especially not when I looked at some particular subset of human beings such as the French." He tries to retrace the steps of Huysmans, visiting the monastery where his religious epiphany took place, but he finds the prohibition on smoking in his cloister more than he could endure.

Eventually, Francois is lured back to the university with an offer to edit a collection of Huysmans' work for the prestigious Bibliotheque de la Pleiade. But what seemed to clinch the deal for Francois was seeing how his former male colleagues, all middle-aged and older, had each been fixed up with a couple of compliant young Muslim wives. Of course that meant converting to Islam but what the heck. He might have sold his soul to Allah but one is left wondering which one got the better deal.

Submission is a well written book which beguiles the reader into thinking that the plot is not really that far-fetched, especially given the serious social problems in France and the rise of the far-right there and elsewhere across Europe. By presenting the main character as a dissolute hedonist, Houellebecq holds up a mirror to the emptiness and moral bankruptcy of the modern capitalist state, including I daresay Australia. It is the deeply embedded defects of these societies that prompt their victims and underdogs to seek alternatives in the neo-fascism of the far-right and the vicious certainties of Islamic fundamentalism. Are there better choices we can make? I'd like to think so. But this book offers no glimpse as to what they might possibly be. It offers no comfort to those it sets out to discomfort. But it does leave us with some serious questions which we would all do well to contemplate.



Book Review

Fighting God - David Silverman

Peter Ellett

Thomas Dunne books December 2015

David Silverman is President of American Atheists. This is his first book and his message is loud and clear. He is not simply about exposing the fallacy of religion. Others have already done that convincingly; Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens and Michel Onfray to name a few. No, this is a book targeted specifically at his fellow atheists.

What Silverman is trying to do is to raise the atheist agenda to a whole new level. He wants atheists to become more outspoken, less passive and more effective in challenging religious privilege in America. As a self-described firebrand, Silverman is critical of atheists who are reluctant to own their own atheism, who defer to religious bigots out of a misplaced fear of offending them and who abstain from the many struggles that are necessary to defend the foundations of America's constitutional secularism.

Of course, Silverman is talking about America where the power of the Religious Right is much stronger than it is here. But most of his observations are strikingly relevant to the situation in Australia where religious hegemony is heavily promoted at every level.

A recent example is the comment by

Malcolm Turnbull in response to the terrorist outrage that killed 130 people in Paris last November. He was quick to denounce the terrorists as "godless murderers". As AFA's then President Michael Boyd pointed out, the murderers were patently not godless, they were religious fanatics who openly stated that they were acting in the name of religion.

The Prime Minister's choice of language conveys the impression that only the godless, atheists in other words, would be so evil as to perpetrate such a heinous crime. This is a gross insult to the millions of atheists who manage to live morally ethical lives without needing of any kind of religion.

It is affronts of this nature that Silverman urges his fellow atheists to tackle head-on. Speaking out fearlessly against anti-atheist prejudice elevates the level of public discourse and challenges the ridiculous notion, often shared by atheists themselves, that religion deserves unquestioning respect simply for being religion.

"We chip away at privilege," he says, "disrespect the unrespectable, and refuse to obey someone else's religious rules. We laugh at threats of hell, literally and

loudly, while demanding total equality. We attract everyone's attention to atheists' existence and issues. Firebrands are the movement's awareness generator".

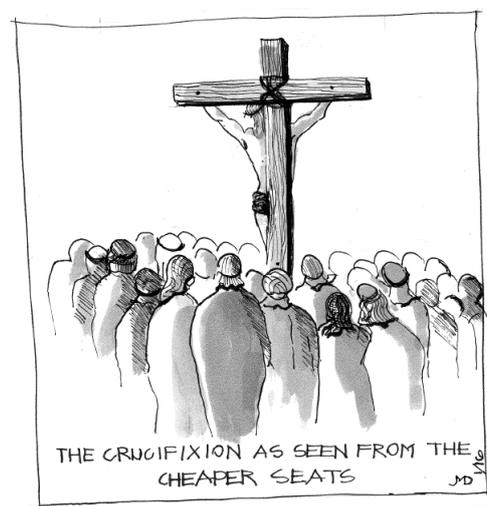
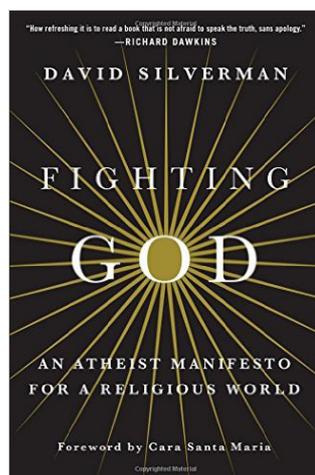
Silverman will not win a Pulitzer prize for this book which is rather folksy in style. But there is much to admire in his fresh approach and fearless conviction. The book contains a wealth of statistical information which reveals that religious belief is in decline in America while atheism is growing rapidly, especially among the young. So the future for truth and reason looks bright.

His comments on Islamic terrorism are particularly perceptive and challenge many on the left who have cravenly capitulated to Islamic religious censorship. "Fighting God is fighting a war for freedom of thought, which is the most important freedom of all."

This is an important book for all atheists. It challenges us to be more open, more assertive and more up-front about making a difference to the society we live in. Atheism is not just about personal choice, it's about challenging the power of the privileged and creating a society that cares more about social equality than obsolete religious dogma.

SUBMISSION
A NOVEL
Michel
HOUELLEBECQ

AUTHOR OF
THE ELEMENTARY PARTICLES



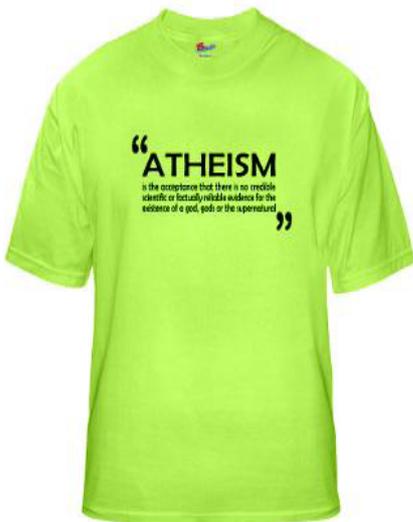
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However long Jewish, Christian and Muslim theologians struggle to find multiple meanings in this text, the dominant seems to be this: Abraham's unquestioning willingness to heed gods command to sacrifice the thing he loved most is what qualified him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

~ Susan Neiman ~



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

~ Douglas Adams ~



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

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