



**Atheist Foundation
of Australia Inc** Established
1970

Promoting scientifically credible & factually reliable evidence

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Free for AFA Members

The Australian Atheist

Not religious any more?



Mark **'No religion'**
on the 2016 census

Accurate census data helps policy makers & political leaders make all sorts of planning and funding decisions. So if you're not religious any more, mark the new 'No religion' box on the 2016 Census.

Find out more at
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'No Religion'

It's Time To Be Counted

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July to September 2016



Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc

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PO Box 3582
Parramatta NSW 2124



(02) 8007 4503



info@atheistfoundation.org.au



atheistfoundation.org.au



/atheistfoundation



@atheistaus



/atheistfoundation



/atheistfoundation

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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Web Sites

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Hello readers,

The take home message this edition is Cenus 2016. It's an important event. We know from other countries that when the religion question is framed to have 'No Religion' as an option at the top, a better reflection of the actual community is the outcome. There are a number of articles in this edition that focus on why this is important. Basically, from my perspective, it means a more representative approach to public policy definition. The likes of Lyle Shelton from the Australian Christian Lobby need to be put back in their box and stop influencing public policy with a claimed representation of the community which is untrue.

The AFA ran an extensive advertising campaign to promote the change in question format and the need for people to be honest in answering the question on the census form. I'd like to thank all the people that contributed to that campaign. The response was amazing.

The AFA Facebook page has been very active with a variety of responses to the campaign. My favourite ones are reproduced here:

[Redacted] "I'm answering "Dudeism" on my census form.
Like · Reply · Message · 37 mins

Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc Even though the Coen brothers' movies ARE AWESOME (INCLUDING films they wrote but not directed like Bridge of Spies), we have to acknowledge that Jeff Bridges never writes, never calls and won't be up for running a Vatican any time soon. So, maybe save the nihilists costumes for the next bowling alley party and consider no religion if it suits you.

and

[Redacted] "I'm a Christian. Practicing. I go to church most Sundays.
I STRONGLY agree with this. What you tick should be what you are.
The data collected is important for a whole host of reasons
Unlike · Reply · Message · 1 · 3 mins

Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc Thanks Clem Burkel That's exactly what we're on about and we hope for an accurate demographic for the good of all of the country.
Like · Reply · Commented on by Kylie Sturgess (?) · Just now

Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc "this is the best post all day, by the way"
Like · Reply · Commented on by Kylie Sturgess (?) · Just now

In previous censuses we have had a number of people mark Jedi as their religion. While funny, I ask that people NOT o that this

time. When you mark something like that, it gets recorded as 'not defined'. It is VERY important this time that we get an accurate reflection of how many people actually have no religion in their lives.

In other news, George Pell is back on the radar. He's under investigation by Victorian Police for alleged sexual abuse of children decades ago. We have no further information at this point, but we'll be watching for that story. My only concern is that if it is found not to be true, the media will leave him alone. Whether he abused children himself or not, he managed the church's response to systemic child abuse abysmally. He bullied and denigrated victims and their families. The man needs to be called to account for his monstrous abuse in that process alone.

Finally, as always, I would like to thank everyone who contributed to this edition; the regulars and the new contributors. I'd also like to thank the AFA committee for their support of me in this role and Kylie Sturgess as president who is doing a fantastic job. Not to forget you, the members and readers. I first stepped into this role two years ago in an emergency. I have grown to love it and I really appreciate the lovely letters and emails I get praising the magazine from you.

Until next issue, take care.
Tracy



All articles, cartoons, graphics, book reviews, comments are encouraged. Please send to: taa@atheistfoundation.org.au

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President's Message

Hello everyone,

The recent election has brought with it an interesting question - "what does it mean to be an Australian now?" We've got politicians challenging certain beliefs and immigration to this country, questioning what rights women have, and what education could mean for the younger generation.

It is in the aftermath of the election that we launched the Census No Religion campaign, where we encourage interrogating one's own beliefs and why considering "no religion" is a valid option on the August 9th census.

As I briefly mentioned at the conclusion of the last magazine entry I made, the "No religion" campaign has now launched across the country - gathering a lot of interest, debate, and even resulted in a few groups who can't handle the message at all!

First I'd have to thank the donors and groups who have made the campaign a reality - we've frankly been astonished by how many people are getting on board with having our country stand up for what they believe - and don't believe - in!

The campaign is not only live, but gathering attention in shops and carparks, with billboards up everywhere. There's more social media promotion on the way, and we're putting up links on the Census No Religion site for every interview and appearance we can - including a most-

supportive bible publication! You can check them out for yourself at <http://censusnoreligion.org.au/media-coverage>.

While many have embraced the positive message, there's been a few setbacks. Caltex, Sydney Busses and Sydney Lightrail along with Stockland and Westfield rejected the campaign because



it was 'religious in nature', which is ironic considering it's encouraging the non-religious in Australia!

#Censusnoreligion is telling people that if you're not religious then there's a spot for you to record that on the census. We don't understand why anyone would have a problem with that, because being honest and open on the 2016 census results in accurate data portraying a modern-day

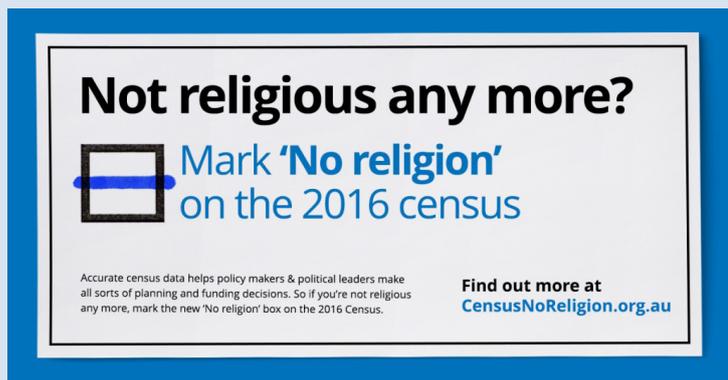
Australia. We're greatly encouraged by sponsors like The Rationalist Society of Australia, Sydney Atheists and the Humanist Society of Victoria, who have aided advertising across the country - and there's only more to come.

I would also like to strongly encourage people to debunk the heinous fear campaign about how 'writing Christian will stop Mosques being built'. As featured on the FAQ on the censusnoreligion.org.au site, it's not only complete rubbish, but encourages inaccuracies and division within our multicultural society.

I am so very pleased to hear the voices of atheists like Sami Shah on Radio National investigating faith and non-faith in a podcast series called "The Islamic Republic of Australia". John Safran also provided much food for thought by interrogating the political parties of the religious right and their absurdities in his recent documentary "The Goddam Election" on SBS. We can all be inspired by such efforts to communicate with 'the other', because we too are very much 'othered' as the not-religious in Australia.

The supportive comments on social media and email, challenges to misinformation about 'joke' responses and rebuttal of fear campaigns are very appreciated. We have noticed the positive power of this campaign inspiring discussion and interest, which is exactly what we hoped. Please do use the hashtag #censusnoreligion on social media and pass on the URL of the site to keep the ball rolling. And don't ever stop encouraging yourself and others to question what it means to be Australian now - and the right we all have to have to take part.

Kylie Sturgess
President
Atheist Foundation of Australia



Thank God For The Atheists

Bob Irwin

Everyone Says It

“Thank god for _____” is an everyday saying, often used without a religious inference. Even some readers of *The Australian Atheist* may not be immune from a “thank god” occasionally slipping into conversation or thought.

We hear people (friends, colleagues, media) say “thank god” for this and that: from sport (a catch taken, a dropped pass by the opposition, a goal scored to win a game), to driving on our busy roads (a car just avoids a collision), to social activities/behaviour (someone not doing or saying something), and so on. These are small “g” statements and don’t have a religious context. They are more like a “great!” or “phew” . . . “glad that did/didn’t happen”.

There are claims made by fundamental Christians such as: “We thank God for the promise of heaven to come.” “I thank God because He is in control of all things and answers my prayers.” These are big “G”, spoken from a religious mindset.

“Thank god for the atheists” though is hardly a common expression. But it has resonance. Atheism has helped Christianity survive. Without the strong, fact-based stances taken by atheists, the Christian Church may have already fantasised itself to death. In other words, atheists have aided the Church because by holding it to account for the outcomes of its wishful guesswork it has caused the Church to “get with it”, at least to some extent – for its own benefit and that of humanity.

No Thanks

Through the centuries the Christian Church treated people appallingly for questioning or speaking out against the Church’s long-held, well-entrenched and internally-developed dogma. Atheists and the similarly minded (so-called heretics and non-believers who could not be fooled or forced to “believe” as demanded by the religious authorities) suffered terribly for their own beliefs which countered scripture; being ridiculed and persecuted,

banished from their homes and land (the Church seizing possession), gaoled, tortured and murdered, at times along with their families.

The Church even persecuted, tortured and murdered those of its own who dared to disagree with or present alternative opinions to the Church’s versions of “truth”. Well it would. After all, Christianity’s religious leaders and scribes wrote, amended and embellished the Bible so could not be expected to back down on their (misleadingly described) “word of God” and the rules and regulations that are the very basis of their lives, indeed in many cases livelihoods. For example: we all know about Galileo – threatened, and forced to recant his (correct) observations and findings; Bruno was brutally tortured and murdered – so chillingly described by Mike Meyersen in Issue 52, page 21, “The Catholic Church and Child Abuse”. These are but two of many examples which saw the Christian Church, in its own self-interest, thwart the study of science and hold back human progress.

Atheists have presented new observations, theories and discoveries across fields of human endeavour which counter the Biblical “truth” clung on to by Church hierarchies with a mix of paranoia and a fear at being shown to have been wrong over so many issues across so many centuries.

So out-of-touch were successive Church leaderships that they railed against anything which contravened their ancient-history-based superstitions and ignorance, and their error-ridden views. By rights, the Church should have been embracing fact and reality wherever possible, and thanking those who offered the new and correct ideas, observations and theories. But, locked into their constrained mindsets such concessions would be far too much to expect religious hierarchies to concede, let alone offer any sort of gratitude. In recent times, however, there has been, “thank god”,

some backing down (albeit pragmatic) by a number of Christian denominations thanks in no small part to the efforts of atheists.

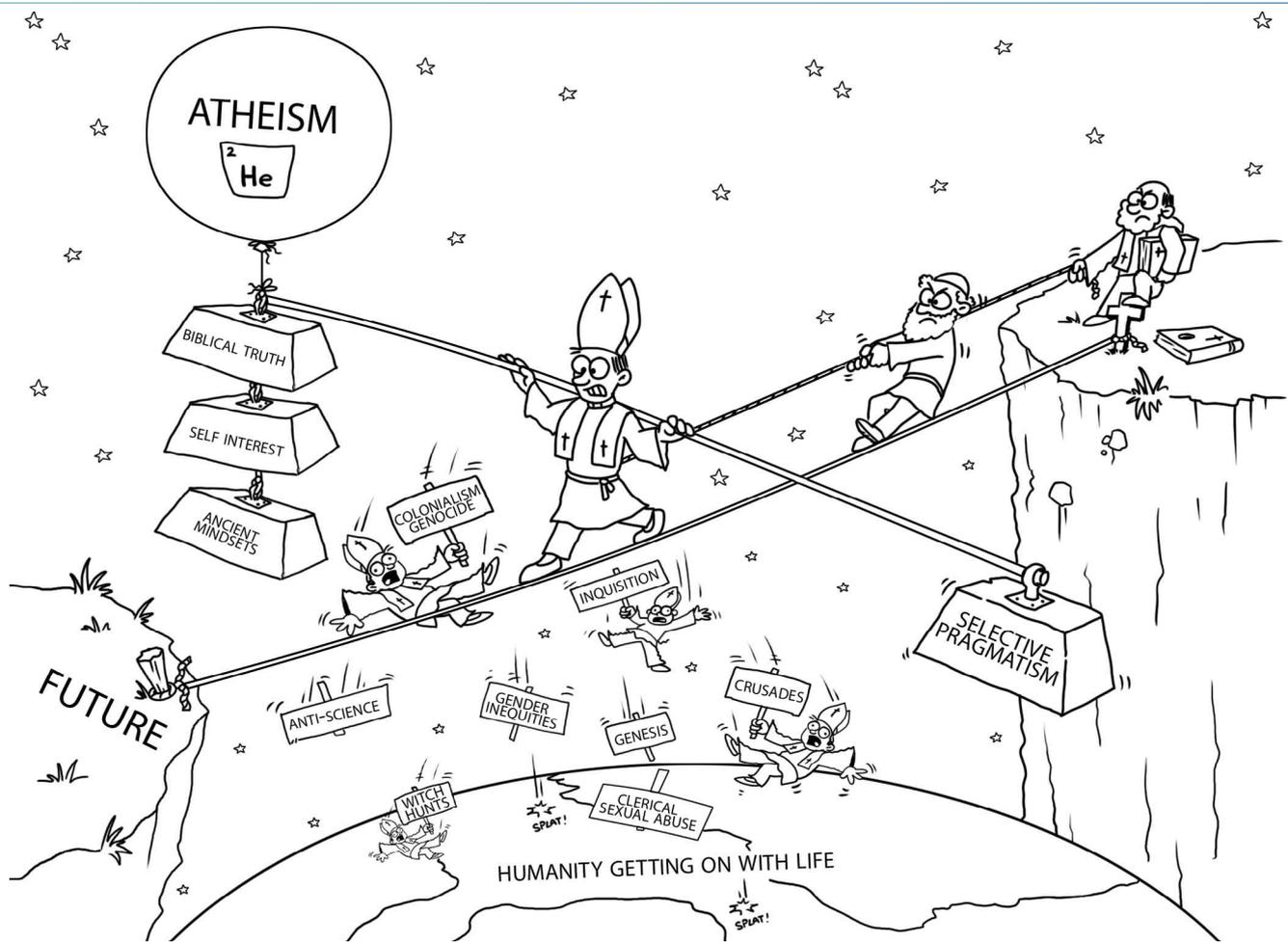
If Only the Church had Listened

Whether ordinary Christians, and even some clergy, believe everything or just some parts of Christian dogma, in toeing the Christian line, they are part of the ongoing religious culture which continues to nurture the acceptance of and belief in the fanciful stories, while providing ongoing support, indeed comfort, to the powerful institution of the Christian Church and its leaders across its many branches.

These days, very largely, Christian dogma still must not be questioned . . . unless for opportunistic reasons as chosen by religious heads to get themselves out of a quandary over something now seen as past defending in the 21st century. Much of the Christian Church knows it must abandon or downplay some prior beliefs, or at least try to meld anything overly embarrassing within Christian teachings. While the religious authorities may not want to openly acknowledge the fact, they would at least have a sense that scientific and other discoveries have debunked many of the original “truths” upon which the religion was built.

Various branches of Christianity have, by necessity, modified some of the incomprehensible aspects about God’s absolute powers that stemmed from 1st-century thinking in order to provide religiously-expedient explanations for phenomena previously accredited to their God. However, with no sense of embarrassment or shame, the more fanatical or conservative elements have not changed a thing – they cling steadfastly to their fundamental beliefs of an all-powerful, ever-present God in control of all things, as if locked in a two-thousand-year-old time capsule; their stances only confirming and further entrenching erroneous convictions.





Any backing down by the various denominations has been made with great reluctance. It's not been easy to move away from or modify teachings which for centuries had been fundamental Christian dogma held dear by religious leaders and followers alike. But move some have; to varying degrees and extents, while walking the proverbial tightrope. Without going into detail about the concessions, examples include: Genesis and the origins of the universe; the geometry of our solar system and movements of the sun and planets; who wrote the four main Gospels, and when; limbo; God's will; original sin; biological evolution; tectonic forces; medicine; psychology; gender inequities; genetics.

Today, atheists worldwide, including the Atheist Foundation of Australia, continue to challenge the nonsensical and out-of-date beliefs of the Christian Church which stultify human thoughts and action. They do so for the betterment of humankind. Atheists realise that knowledge and understanding are so readily available not to have to guess at reality, but to move objectively towards it. To do otherwise, as the Christian establishment has, only creates faulty and unbalanced thinking

patterns which can lead to detrimental outcomes for humanity. And there is nothing to "thank God" about for that.

Stop Press

"Ark Encounter" opens

The Answers in Genesis organisation's Ark Encounter theme park in Williamstown Kentucky opened for business on Thursday 7 July 2016.

The centrepiece of this US\$100 million project is a life-sized replica of the fabled Noah's ark. CEO of the biblical-absolutist Answers in Genesis, Ken Ham, a former Australian, was quoted as saying the Ark Encounter will be "a world-class attraction . . . one of the greatest Christian outreaches of our era."

Readers of The Australian Atheist may recall the report in Issue 31 on my visit to Mr Ham's creation museum: "Ham on a roll - or just a lot of old porkies", which included his plans for the Ark Encounter. And in Issue 45, the film review: "Noah - from bunnies to butterflies to humping heffalumps" which dealt with the historical invalidity of the biblical tale of Noah.

Mr Ham believes the Ark Encounter will help sceptics realise that "fitting the animals on the ark could have been feasible", because seeing this structure "will make them realize just how big it was". Answers in Genesis officials expect two million visitors in the first year of operation, with hopes for ongoing growth, including a walled city, a Tower of Babel and a Middle Eastern village. It is expected to more than match the 300,000 people a year who visit the creation museum in nearby Petersburg Kentucky. Of course, the more who visit, the greater the income.

In a delicious touch of irony the region was lashed by storms and flooding rains . . . perhaps heralding the flood of people expected to pour into the biblical theme park, or even an omen from the God the Answers in Genesis people believe in?

The Ark project has drawn inspiration from the Disney entertainment parks. (Fantasyland comes immediately to mind.)

Expect further reports on this venture.

Bob Irwin

The Rich Man and Lazarus

Michael Meyerson

“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man’s table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.

“The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. So he called to him, ‘Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.’”

“But Abraham replied, ‘Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been set in place, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.’”

“He answered, ‘Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my family, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.’”

“Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.’ “‘No, father Abraham,’ he said, ‘but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’”

“He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’” Luke 16:19-31 New International Version (NIV)

Ministers of Christianity explain this parable by having the rich man represent Jews, Judaism or Pharisees and the beggar, Lazarus, whose name indicates that he’s

Jewish, represents good and righteous gentiles [Christians]. John Clowes (*The Parables of Jesus Christ Explained*) claims that the rich man represents the Jewish nation in possession of the truth but unpurified due to criminal neglect of application of that truth. The rich man [the Jews] knew about love and charity but did not apply that knowledge. The beggar, according to Clowes, denotes gentiles not yet in possession of the truth but desirous of such knowledge.

Other commentators have the rich man representing the Pharisees. According to Joseph Benson (*Benson Commentary*) the parable unveils for the Pharisees the consequences of their being odious and wicked especially in terms of their hypocrisy, love of pleasure, voluptuousness and their worldly spirit. According to John Gill (*Gill’s Exposition of the Entire Bible*) the general design of the parable is to expose the wickedness and unbelief of the Jews, and to show their danger and misery, for their contempt and rejection of the Messiah; and particularly the Pharisees, who being covetous, had derided Christ and though high in esteem of men were an abomination to God.

Albert Barnes (*Barnes’ Notes on the Bible*) stresses that Jesus did not name the rich man so as not to fix suspicion on anyone, and not drag the wicked before the public. Barnes must have forgotten that Jesus was not reticent in naming the Pharisees for hypocrisy or falsely accusing them of murder. At any rate Barnes and others are comfortable labelling the rich man as representing Pharisees on Jesus’s behalf.

The death of both men results in a foreseeable reversal of fortunes. The rich man is condemned to eternity in hell whereas Lazarus is transported to rest in the bosom of Abraham (heaven). Many commentators are disturbed that the parable may indicate that wealth alone may be equated with sin and poverty be equated with good. This is a

particularly troublesome interpretation for the immensely wealthy Church. Most commentators therefore stress that it is not the acquisition of wealth by the rich man that is sinful but the heartless manner in which he ignored the plight of a beggar.

The rich man begs Abraham to allow Lazarus to wet his tongue with a finger dipped in water. Abraham refuses this request. The tormented man then asks that his five brothers be warned of their fate should they not live more charitable lives. This request is also refused, the explanation being that they know the teachings of Moses and the prophets and should therefore live accordingly.

Ministers side with Abraham although the Church has scorned the Mosaic teachings. Clowes for example said that if men are not persuaded by the truth, [Moses’ teachings], they will not be persuaded by any other evidence.

McLaren says that Abraham’s answer teaches the “impossibility of compelling men to listen to a divine message to which they do not want to listen” (MacLaren’s *Expositions*). The rich man i.e. the Jews according to Dennis Crews (*The Rich Man and Lazarus*) had “enjoyed the good life while on earth but had done nothing to bless or enrich their neighbours. No further reward was due”.

We learn several lessons from this parable:

We need to live a charitable life. Good deeds are essential if we are to receive our eternal reward. What then must we make of Sunday sermons assuring us that all that is required of us to enter heaven is belief in Jesus?

While the ministers agree with Abraham that the rich man (Jews, Pharisees) deserves eternal punishment for not following the teachings of Moses, the Church has turned their back on the Mosaic law.

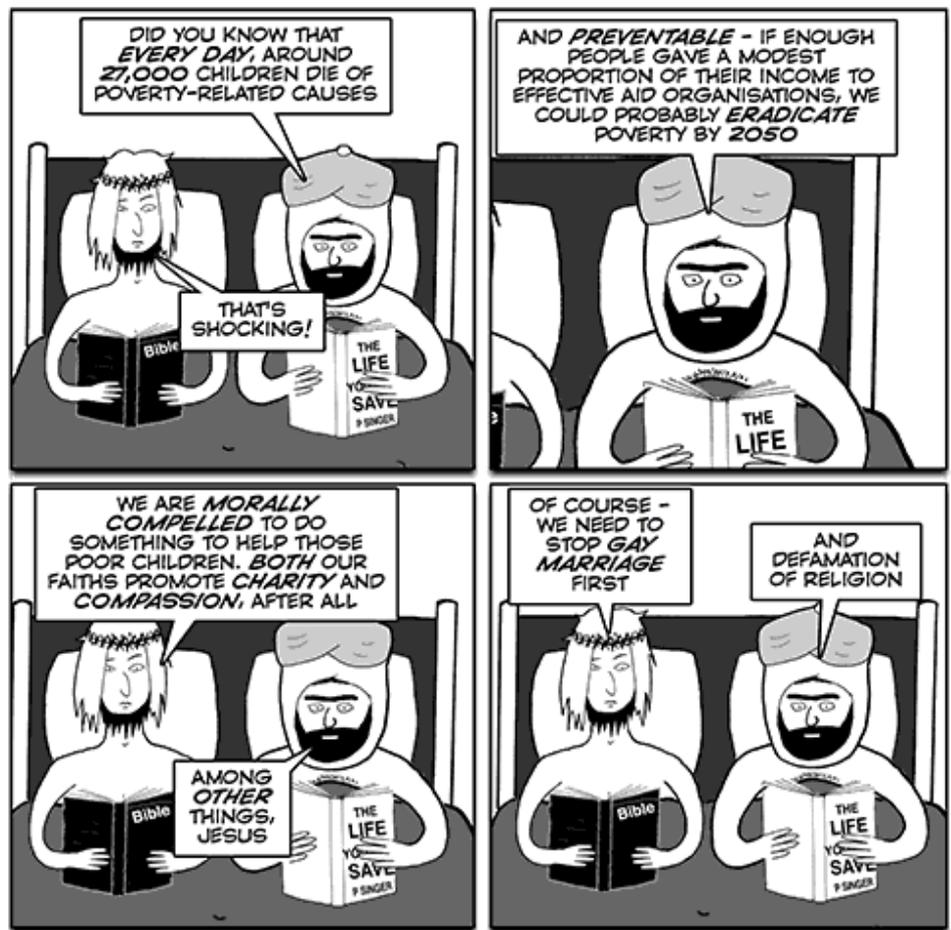
The rich man's appeal to Abraham for help raises a problem for those who claim that this parable is factual. This is because Jesus told us, "no man has ascended to heaven other than he [Jesus] that came down from heaven" John 3:13. So if both Lazarus and Abraham are in heaven at the time Jesus taught this parable then Jesus was lying when he said no one else had yet gone to heaven. Furthermore, should Abraham and Lazarus as well as others (Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Enoch and Elijah) be in heaven prior to Jesus' sacrifice then the claim that the crucifixion of Jesus was necessary to free us of Adam's sin and so qualify for heaven cannot be true.

Christianity is not a religion of justice, mercy and forgiveness. It is not only wealthy people who refuse to assist the needy who will burn for eternity. The identical sentence is given to those who live a good life but do not believe in Jesus. Rapists, mass murderers, thieves and child abusers who do believe in Jesus are, however, rewarded by eternity in heaven.

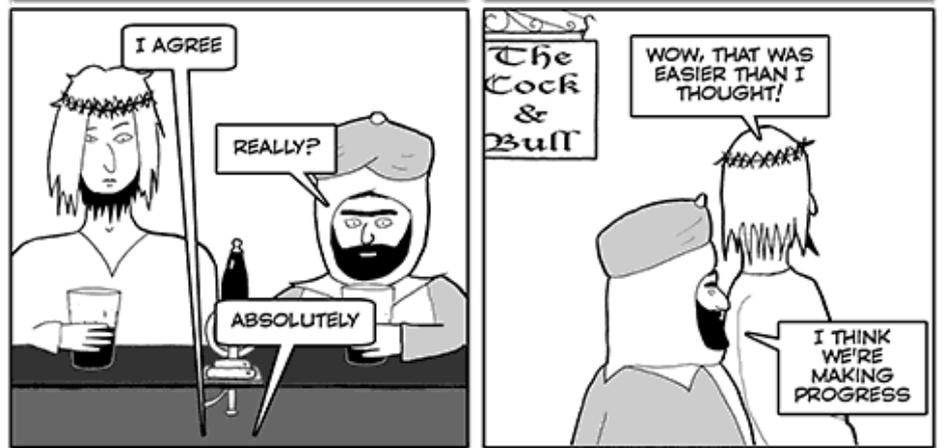
Perhaps the most important lesson is that the righteous gentiles, who, once in possession of the truth became Christians, started the new Church and almost immediately discarded Jesus's teachings. Jesus abhorred the accumulation of wealth. His words, however, fell on deaf ears. Jesus said, "A rich man will find it hard to enter the kingdom of Heaven" Matt.19:23, and "How hard it will be for the wealthy to enter the kingdom of God" Mark 10:23.

The Church leaders dressed in fine clothes, crimson, purple, scarlet, and violet and set about acquiring an obscene amount of wealth by waging war, pillaging, enslaving, torturing and burning innocents. The Church not only ignored the Lazaruses on every corner they created countless Lazaruses begging in vain for their freedom or their lives.

The odd soup kitchen and shabby hostel provided by the Church cannot compensate for its greed and covetous behaviour. All the while ministers of the Church hypocritically preach the parable of Lazarus and the rich man. Had the Church understood the parable the world have been spared 2000 years of crimes against humanity. Its eternal torment awaits.



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Public Schools, Politics, and a Religious Divide

Brian Morris

Australia is creating a new socio-religious divide — inadvertently, or perhaps intentionally — based squarely on education. And it is reflected in the growing imbalance between an increasingly secular public and what can be described as an endemic piety that percolates through parliaments, the bureaucracy and judiciary.

After more than a century the education system has regressed from a uniform and nationally accepted principle — of being “Free, Compulsory and Secular” — to a divisive two-tier system. While public schools labour under funding cuts a burgeoning private system has flourished, with generous governments grants.

With high fees that exclude many bright students, private religious schools have become elite enclaves for the affluent. They cocoon a privileged demographic that creates an economic, cultural and Christian divide. It defies the original egalitarian principles of education that were already in place at the time of Federation.

This recent Christianisation of education — mainly in private schools — has a political connotation. It serves the interests on both churches and conservative politicians to perpetuate a mutually beneficial alliance.

This close relationship between religious schools, neo-liberalism and a more Christianised parliament has been evident for decades. But before focusing

on more detailed educational aspects — and how that manifests in wider society — we should first consider the conservative political environment.

Neo-liberalism, private schools and religion are inseparable.

lobbyists, it's Bob Day and the Family First Party and a full sweep of charismatic churches with views akin to Sheikh Alsuleiman.

Tasmania's Family First candidate, Peter Madden, made brazen comments connecting Orlando with same-sex marriage. And we can expect more of the same when angry Christians begin to vilify gays, once the upcoming \$160 million plebiscite gets into full swing — should a Turnbull government be returned in July.

Since Orlando the internet is once again alive with Christians raving about “God's punishment of gays.” Governments have for

decades remained silent on this bigotry — due primarily to the symbiotic relationship between Churches and politics. As such, Australia can literally be termed a “Soft Christian Theocracy”.

But none of this is new; although it's become pernicious since John Howard's term.

It was Professor Marion Maddox who first blew the whistle with her scathing book “God under Howard; the Rise of the Religious Right in Australian Politics.” We have become more ambivalent to the Christianisation of parliament while the population is becoming more secular. It's a yawning gap between our anachronistic political establishment and a progressive general public.

Parliamentary Christianity is on the rise, exposing the religiosity of a string of Liberals that brandish their faith — Cory Bernadi, Scott Morrison, George Brandis,



God in politics

As a perceived ‘moderate’, Malcolm Turnbull continues an extended line of Prime Ministers who appeal to God. After the Paris massacre he declared the terrorists “godless” — though they were not atheists, they were fanatical followers of Radical Islam. He pleaded for “God's love” after the Orlando massacre, and he follows a long line of leaders and dignitaries who regularly “call for prayers” after any disaster. This appeal to the supernatural is not seen in the progressive secular countries of Europe.

It is hypocritical for the Prime Minister to rebuke the hate-speech from Sheikh Shady Alsuleiman while he remains mute on the anti-gay rhetoric from Christian bishops brandishing the Christian Bible.

These are the organisations that support Turnbull's government — the Australian Christian Lobby and a phalanx of similar

Eric Abetz, Tony Abbott and Malcolm Turnbull states, “Love for humanity is when we are closest to God.” The judiciary, too, appeal to God for guidance in their perennial Red Mass.

There is no place for public appeals to God at any level of public office!

It is a mindset that blocks parliamentary process on a raft of contemporary social policy. It’s not just marriage equality; it’s voluntary euthanasia, abortion rights, contraception, prayers in parliament, religious exemptions from anti-discrimination laws, mandatory reporting of child abuse, and tax exemptions for all religious organisations that top \$20 billion per year. The list is endless when including religion in schools.

And mainstream media tends to ignore this broad disparity between citizens and an overtly Christianised government — particularly on education policy. It includes religious instruction, another \$248 million for chaplains in public schools, and the \$11 billion for private religious schools that enroll almost 40 per cent of Australian children. And there’s no concern for the dozen of church schools still teaching creationism!

Next, we explore why this trend continues but the blunt question is how all this can occur in a secular country. No other secular nations have these extreme examples of government-endorsed religiosity and church sanctification.

And it’s all paid by the public that is religion-neutral.

In April the Rationalist Society of Australia commissioned a national poll on religiosity in Australian. A total of 45 per cent said they had “No Religion”, a substantial increase on the 22 per cent from the 2011 Census. And from the upcoming Census in August that tally is predicted to increase closer to 50 per cent.

“Cultural Christians” are not included in this figure. They are people who no longer have a commitment to the religion of their childhood but who “traditionally” continue to mark the “Christian” box — through sheer force of habit. Collectively, the religion-neutral count is now a minimum two-thirds of the population!

It is unequivocal, from historical evidence researched by Professor Helen Irving, that the writers of Australia’s constitution made it abundantly clear that the nation was deemed to be secular. It remains a tragedy that Section 116, the only part relating to religion, was so poorly drafted. Failure to enforce its intent has allowed religion to embed itself firmly into politics, education and general society.

There have been few instances in the recent past where the High Court has had to deal with arguments concerning the meaning of each of the four clauses of s.116. The 1981 challenge to federal funding of religious schools (Defense of Government Schools) was lost 1-6 as the Court majority refused to interpret the first establishment clause as meaning “separation of church and state.”

Two of the judges came right out and said that s.116 did not mean separation. The Chief Justice, Sir Garfield Barwick, endorsed one of them. But the High Court can change its mind. The challenge now is to mount a new case that can prise open the establishment clause and recover the secular intention behind it.

That would make the federal funding of religious schools, the Chaplaincy Program, and teaching religion in public schools unconstitutional. It would end prayers in parliament and a broad sweep of other situations where religion imposes itself — uninvited — into the public space of a constitutionally secular Australia.

But EDUCATION has once again become the Achilles Heel . . . !

We thought the debate was settled almost 150 years ago! The on-going feud between Anglicans and Catholics — dating from King Henry’s split with Rome — was imported along with British colonisation. Inevitably it spilled over into the early schooling of children, requiring strict segregation of the religions.

Finally, by 1870, the churches in each colony believed the struggling and fledgling country would advance more effectively if all education became “free, compulsory and secular”.

Churches and governments came to the conclusion that segregated religious

schools were “damaging” social cohesion by “dividing children on religious lines, and limiting access to good education to only those who could afford to pay”.

Prophetic words from the early colonists — just as relevant today.

That quote, and a wealth of research on the schools crisis today comes from “Taking God to School: The end of Australia’s egalitarian education”, the book published in 2014 by Professor Marion Maddox.

Maddox is a Christian but like the early colonists she believes religion in education is damaging secular equilibrium and creating a social divide.

“Free, Compulsory and Secular” education lasted for almost 100 years, until Prime Minister Robert Menzies reintroduced Commonwealth funding for Catholic schools in the 1960s. In the 60 years since then the economic disparity between state schools and private religious schools has widened to a point where public education is in crisis.

Since John Howard’s tenure as Prime Minister federal funding of private religious schools has exploded to the point where almost 40 per cent of children have a private religious education, an OECD high.

Most of the public system remains on a par with the private sector — scholastically — as it has first rate teachers and good resources to provide a first class education. But some areas in each state have become impoverished due to effective funding cuts, and successive governments favouring religious schools.

A recent Sydney Morning Herald leader says it all; “Private schools get more from the government than public schools, and that’s seriously wrong.” By 2020 Catholic schools will receive more funding than the entire public education system. According to the SMH, government funding for Catholic schools in 2016 exceeds \$11 billion — which doesn’t include parents’ fees, other revenue and corporate sponsorship.

The original Gonski Review, and its 41 recommendations, was a landmark

program to eliminate the funding disadvantage in public education. But the axing of on-going Gonski funding — first established under Labor — indicates this government's political motive (as with Howard to Abbott) to fully privatise education.

A clear warning came with Turnbull's pre-election policy when he stated his plan to off-load public schools to the states, and for the commonwealth only to fund the expansion of private religious schools.

So, what are the long-term implications?

If public education is degraded, fewer public school students will qualify for the prime university degrees. Over time the corporate sector, politics, the bureaucracy, judiciary and media will be the exclusive preserve of affluence and privileged graduates, educated initially in a dominant private religious school system.

That trend was already evident in the 1980s . . .

During that period a neo-liberal shift brought structural changes in government bureaucracy and policy. Senior bureaucrats increasingly came from university, via elite private schools funded by wealthy parents, and straight into the prime departments of Treasury and Finance, which formed the new economic model.

In his revealing book, "Economic Rationalism in Canberra", sociologist Michael Pusey exposed in 1991 a bureaucracy of young conservatives with private school backgrounds that predisposed them to see government policy solutions in terms of more deregulation, more privatisation, smaller government, and less welfare spending. The neo-liberal agenda.

Twenty five years on there is a far greater ratio of students in private religious schools who then move on to university, taking the majority of prime high-cost degrees. No longer is it merely the bureaucracy that reflects the profile of more affluent and privileged graduates. That profile now extends to the corporate sector, the political mainstream, the judiciary, the media and every level

within the establishment.

Public education provides a unique benefit unmatched by religious schools.

Beyond the Gonski Review we have many authoritative research projects to verify the immeasurable advantages of public education. Most recently is the review by Professor Alan Reid in "Building our nation through Public Education".

The critical features of his research attest to the primacy of public school education. Not only does it have an overall delivery of quality, it provides essential links to the local community, an ethic of collaboration, innovation, diversity and cohesion, and the fundamental principles of democracy and — most importantly — of equality among the diverse cultures of students. Vital elements for a cohesive society.

But this will be lost, together with dire social consequences, if public education is not funded to the full extent given to the private school system.

With sound reasoning and critical appraisal we need to recognise three key factors — from the points already outline here — if we are to avert a deeply troubling and most serious division in society.

One: That Australian politics has become increasingly Christianised, with an established policy agenda that favours private religious schools over public education. This political agenda needs to be reversed.

Two: That further expansion of the private school system and monopolisation of university places creates a "graduate class" that is increasingly affluent, and taking prime senior positions in organisations that shape Australia's future. It creates a decline in publicly educated graduates with traits that emphasise not only academic achievement but also the advantages of diversity, community grounding and social inclusiveness.

Three: That a largely mono-dimensional private school elite in a majority of influential management and executive positions is ultimately damaging to the structural fabric of society. It tends to breed a corrosive "us and them" dynamic within

the populace which underpins the type of conflict experienced in Britain.

While it's too easy to ridicule such a thesis there are examples throughout history where mono-dimensional societies either stagnate or degenerate into division and disharmony.

As Marion Maddox graphically explains in "Taking God to School" — we risk losing the bedrock ingredient of a just and egalitarian society if we abandon the unique benefits of public education. But that will require an essential injection of funds and resources, whether through Gonski or a similar model.

A God-fearing parliament and a secular public is evidence of a "Soft Christian Theocracy". It denotes a government that is guided more by the influence of churches and supernatural beliefs than by rational and secular principles. It leads ultimately to an education system that is based — however loosely — on elitism.

The final question is why there is a media taboo on openly discussing this crucial question of religion in politics and education. Honesty and transparency are the first requirements for a healthy society.

We are a nation that was deemed secular from the time of Federation — and we are a population that is majority religion-neutral. To advance successfully, further into the 21st century, we need a parliament, bureaucracy and media to support public education that is once again "Free, Compulsory and Secular."

It's time to de-fund private religious schools and back public education — to the hilt!

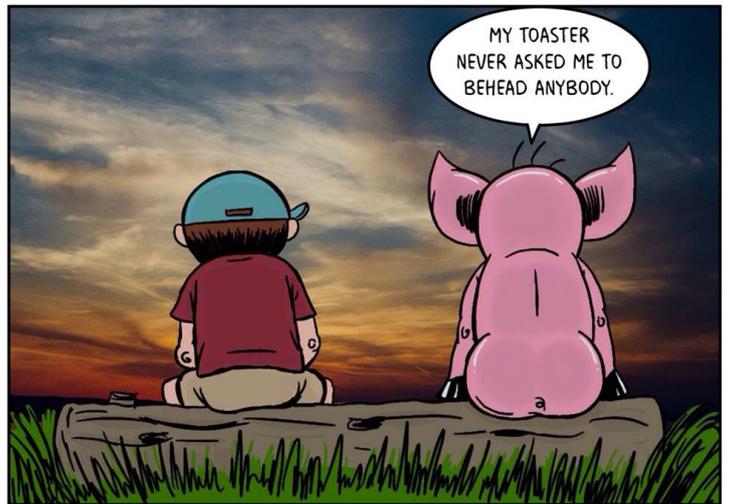
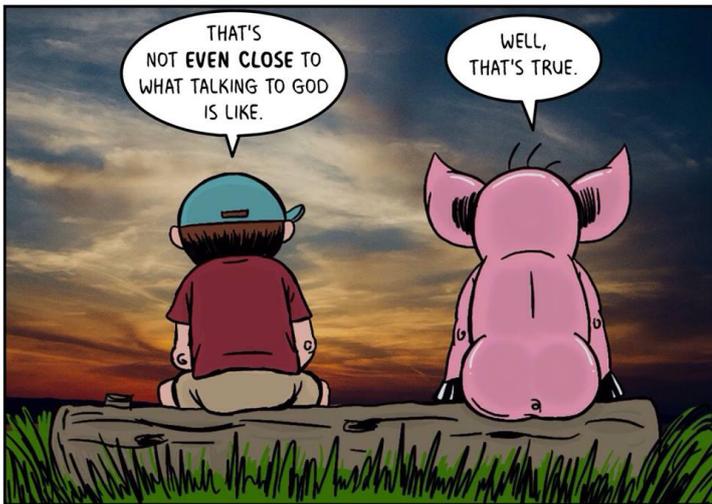
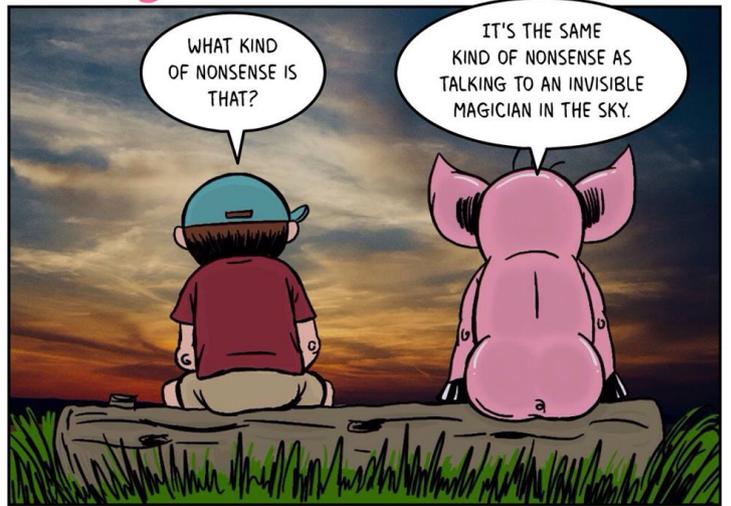
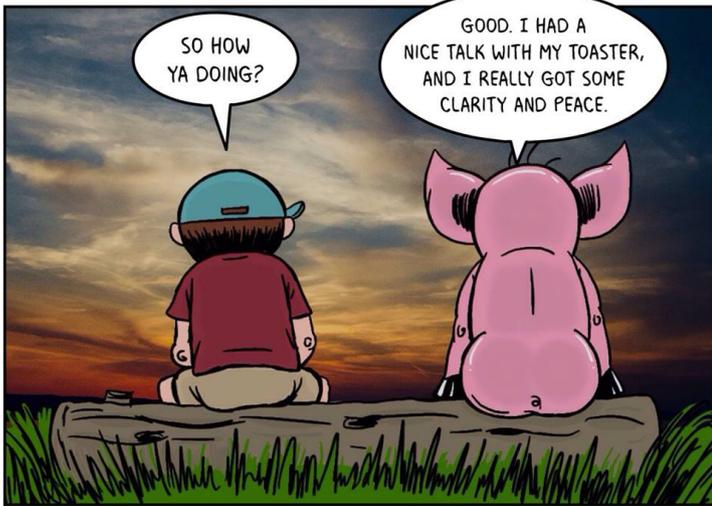


About Brian Morris: World travel shaped Brian's interest in social justice — wealth, poverty and religion in many countries. His book Sacred to Secular is critically acclaimed, including from the Richard Dawkins Foundation. More information about Brian can be found on his website, [Plain Reason](#).

I'll be marking
☐ 'No religion'
on the 2016 census.



The Atheist Pig



theatheistpig.com



'No religion' doesn't mean you're an atheist. It simply means you don't currently practice a religion and have no inclination to do so.



Whose Life Is It Anyway?

Janine Gebert

Thirteen years ago I had to dress my 30 year old daughter for her funeral. She had survived a battle with cancer but not with the subsequent depression. Her trademark porcelain skin looked beautiful. I asked the funeral people not to put makeup on her. The horror I felt when I saw her in the open coffin before the service still haunts me, alongside the guilt and blame of all parents who lose a child to suicide. Her skin was orange brown, and her lips were more orange.

The funeral director explained that people don't like to see dead people looking dead. So they made my child look nothing like herself.

I have since pondered this lobotomized unwillingness to confront death and the resulting societal evasions that continue to inhibit intelligent dialogue about end of life choices in Australia. In earlier times both sex and death were seen as relatively unencumbered. But Christianity bought the need to exert control over people's marital beds, and now their death beds. Not just those who accept that life and death belong to a supernatural deity. Everybodys.

Why do some people feel righteously entitled to tell other people how to die? Most people in Australia now have a say over how they live and whom they love. Death remains the last threshold of permissible interference, largely on the premise that religion trumps reform, and conservative politicians have the right to romanticize unfathomable pain in the name of suffering.

Unhappiness and depression were considered relatively circumstantial in times past. The Greeks elevated the concept of a good death to a worthy goal, and suicide was preferable to shame or pain. But perpetual happiness is the product that affluent societies have to sell. People choosing to die challenge the advertising that all life is good, and

therefore, like everything else, more is better. How dare we affront this lie and take our lives into our own hands!

The voluntary euthanasia 'debate' is a graphic procession of people missing the point. No one is trying to legislate for community murder. This is about the fundamental right of a sane adult person to judge for themselves when they have had enough. And if this is unpalatable to some, maybe they need to examine what gives them the right to move uninvited into someone else's dying and shove their beliefs around.

Because the fact is, that some people are in so much physical or emotional pain, for so long, or their lives so relentlessly bleak, that taking it is both courageous and sensible. But such sentiments are seen as dangerously subversive to the interests of a euphorically optimistic battery of service providers from psychologists to case workers.

I know from shattering personal experience that we need to have a much better holistic approach to mental health. Every young person lost to suicide is a largely preventable tragedy, due in part to meagre health services and abundant ignorance. But just as tragic is the number of men over 80 who hang themselves, the elderly women in nursing homes trying to stockpile drugs, police raiding elderly people late at night to search for the drug Nembutal, or harassing bereaved family members after an elderly person has 'self-exited'.

My dementia anguished mother sagely said that there is life lived, life remaining, and finally, time on. The medicalisation and extension of the dying process is for some of us an unwelcome and protracted exercise in forced harm. Depression in the elderly seems to be either under diagnosed or wrongly diagnosed. People who experience 'tired of life syndrome' are labelled selfish and told they should

have had children or do more volunteer work. People live their lives in different ways and at different rates, and for some, interest in life is shorter than its duration.

It may well be yet another luxury of developed countries to survive life long enough to feel tired of it, but I doubt it. I think it is a sensible preparation for death even if you are not ill; a self-knowledge that you have done your best and now you are done. Your body gets tired, your friends are mostly dead, conversations are agonizingly familiar and the television sucks.

We need to stop letting the fundamentalists hijack this crucial debate and marinate it in fear. To claim that the elderly and the disabled will be bumped off is ludicrous, and demeans them and their families. We get old, not stupid. Most people are not flanked by grasping offspring and malicious careers. Bad people have always done bad things to vulnerable people and it has nothing to do with voluntary euthanasia.

The slippery slope argument is always the last bastion of the far right, whose ideas are so rusted on they couldn't budge a centimeter let alone glide down anything. Remember when abortion was first decriminalized in some states? The cries of some that women would not only be lining up to have their bodies assaulted and their hearts ripped out, but they would be forced to have abortions against their will. People against abortion strove, and still do, to impose their will on others. The elevation of a personal belief, or unsubstantiated doctrine, to a societal command is the most arrogant sin of all, and has no place in a modern democracy.

Most adversaries change their position on voluntary euthanasia when they see a loved one suffer and are powerless to help. Honest palliative care specialists are upfront about their medical limitations and legal constraints. Suicide is no longer

illegal in Australia, but assisting someone is. It is the only case in law I think where assisting someone to do something legal is a crime. Yet sentencing someone to choke to death on their own faeces is somehow legitimized humanity.

The fact that gets little oxygen is that access to voluntary euthanasia can also extend life. Many people with the means to a peaceful end never access it. Erasing

the fear of pain can help people manage it better. And people with diseases like Motor Neuron sometimes feel compelled to end their lives before they are ready, for to wait until they need help can make a loved one complicit in their death and facing prison.

The Victorian State Government has shown leadership with an Inquiry into End of Life Choices. In the recent election

The Voluntary Euthanasia Party stood candidates in some seats. Hopefully more and more people will come to accept that the death you can control, where you can, is a fundamental human right. For whilst I respect the fact that religious people believe their life is in the hands of their God/s, they need to respect that the safest place for my life is in my own hands.

Mark 'No Religion' Campaign Launched in Lead Up to Census



Not religious any more?

That's the question the Atheist Foundation of Australia is posing as it launches a public awareness campaign ahead of the 2016 Census on August 9.

The campaign invites Australians to mark 'No religion' on their Census form, if that best describes their religious state.

AFA President Kylie Sturgess says the 2016 Census is the first in Australia's history where the 'No religion' option sits at the top of ten possible responses, rather than at the bottom.

Ms Sturgess says: "By positioning the 'No religion' option at the top, this corrects the bias in previous censuses that assumed everyone belonged to some sort of religion. Not everyone does. In fact, many people born into a religion may consider themselves spiritual and moral, but no longer religious. If that's the case, then we invite them to mark the 'No religion' box."

WHY MARK NO RELIGION?

By marking the 'No religion' box, respondents send a compelling message to governments and policy makers about Australia's secular population, which has

grown substantially. From 1911 – 2011 the number of Australians marking 'No religion' rose from 0.4% to 22.3%. Only 'Catholic' had a higher response rate, at 25%.

Ms Sturgess says: "Answering the religion question thoughtfully and honestly matters because it benefits all Australians when decisions on how to spend taxpayer dollars are made on sound data that accurately reflects modern-day Australia. That's why we're making people aware of the No Religion option and inviting them to think about whether it's right for them."

OVERSEAS EXPERIENCE

Globally, the numbers of people reporting 'No religion' is also increasing. When New Zealand's census organisers similarly re-ordered the responses to their religion question in 2013, the number of people marking 'No Religion' rose from 35% to 42%.

In 2014, 48.5% of the population of England and Wales marked 'No religion', compared with 25% in 2011. And in Scotland this year, 52% of the population said they weren't religious, compared with 40% in 1999. Ireland, Canada and the United States report similar trends.

CAMPAIGN DETAILS

The AFA's national public awareness campaign kicked off in July in all capital cities and will run until Census night, August 9. The campaign includes signage at over 500 pharmacies and supermarket carparks, and on various mainstream websites. Closer to August 9, an Australia-wide social media campaign will ramp up the overall reach.

The campaign has been instigated and paid for by the Atheist Foundation of Australia, with help from crowdfunding efforts and other groups such as the Rationalist Society of Australia, Sydney Atheists and the Humanist Society of Victoria.

19 What is the person's religion?

• Answering this question is **OPTIONAL**.

• Examples of 'Other': LUTHERAN, SALVATION ARMY, JUDAISM, TAOISM, HUMANISM.

• Remember to mark the box like this:

- No religion
- Catholic
- Anglican (Church of England)
- Uniting Church
- Presbyterian
- Buddhism
- Islam
- Greek Orthodox
- Baptist
- Hinduism

Other (please specify)

The new layout of the 2016 Census religion question (Previously, the 'No religion' box sat under the 'Other (please specify)' box)

I'M NOT AN ATHEIST – CAN I STILL MARK 'NO RELIGION'?

Yes, you can. Marking the 'No Religion' box simply means you don't currently practice a religion or consider yourself to be religiously observant.

Many people feel spiritual, and lead moral lives encompassing values like charity, peace, love, fairness, respect, humility and honesty without identifying as religious.

WHY CHANGE THE WAY THE RELIGION QUESTION IS ASKED?

In 2015 the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the body running the Census, announced it was changing the order of responses to make the religion question consistent with the way other questions are asked on the form. It points out this approach is also

consistent with a number of other countries.

Census data is used by governments when making planning and policy decisions on issues such as housing, social security, transport, education, industry, shops and hospitals.

WHAT ABOUT WRITING 'JEDI KNIGHT' OR 'PASTAFARIAN'?

If you write things like this in the 'Other (please specify)' box they all get lumped together and counted as 'Not defined'. While it may be funny, it makes no difference and is a wasted answer. You can write 'agnosticism', 'atheism', 'humanism' and 'rationalism' as those are recorded as sub-categories of 'No religion', but it's easier to just mark the 'No religion' box.



Spreading The Message

Hello everyone,

Is There A Substitute For Belief (or Is There Enough Coffee To Get Through Morning Television)? What It's Like Appearing on Sunrise To Talk About Atheism.

4:00am - get up and find everything was going to wear for the telly is covered in orange cat and orange cat fur.

Cat is bemused by early start to the day and proceeds to roll around on everything.

4:25am - manage to roller, pick and pluck every bit of fur off clothing, expel the cat out the catdoor and shower.

Fling on makeup, shoes, bit of hair scrunchy stuff so it doesn't look too lank, and pack bag with notes, copy of Mackay's book "Beyond Belief" and phone.

4:30am - as leaving suburb, it begins pelting down with rain and I spy a kitten fleeing into the undergrowth near a native wildlife area and I vow to return later that day and see if I can find it and get it to safety.

4:40am - still miserable about the fact that some monster has dumped a kitten in the wildlife area and it was near a road and it's raining and what kind of people exist on this planet and how the hell I'm going to talk about good in the world as an atheist when I didn't even pull over to get a kitten. **IN THE RAIN.**

4:45am - discover that phone is running out of charge, but fairly confident that the TV station is going to be where I think it is.

5:02am - discover that place where TV station was supposed to be is now real estate property with "Seven Hills! Buy Your Plot Now!" on placards everywhere.

5:04am - disturb local wildlife with language that is not going to feature on the television.

5:10am - coax phone to give ACCURATE

directions after consulting email that I should have looked at rather than out-of-date stupid bloody unmentionable on the goddamned television buggery sod damn blast - and head towards the right part of the city.

5:15am - pull over to petrol station and buy phone charger for the sodding phone.

5:45am - arrive at station and use last blast of phone battery to call the cameraman to



tell him I've arrived for the 6am callsheet. He tells me he's on his way, but to go to the front desk.

5:46am - head through what appears to be a Jurassic Park of fernery to get to second security door, where fellow apologises for not actually being the person who was meant to be in today.

And that there's no chairs in the waiting room either.

At least there's no velociraptors.

5:50am - go to the bathroom and plug phone into wall to charge it. Refix hair and sort out collar of shirt and general primping and remembering to breathe.

6:02am - cameraman fellow arrives with free newspaper, as the state newspaper is printed in the same building that the studio is in. Thank him very much and we go through a rabbit warren to find the studio, which he nearly breaks the door of because it's a push not a pull door.

6:05am - cameraman puts on the mic on lapel and the earpiece on the back and says that he'll hear me but won't be in the studio.

6:08am - I promptly break the earpiece as I navigate with the two wires to find a powerpoint on the floor and plug in my phone to charge during the recording.

6:10am - cameraman returns when he discovers that I'm not hearing anything at all and I don't tell him that I broke the earpiece, but he doesn't seem to mind that much.

6:14am - the little screen to the left of the big TV camera flicks on and I spy what is going live to air in Sydney at 8:14am in the morning.

They're talking about a charity ride for a cure for cancer; then shots of chasing Belle Gibson around a carpark asking her about how she now owes about a million dollars for not using a charity bike ride to cure cancer.

6:18am - the screen cuts to the team setting up an additional room while a commercial goes to air and I get to see and hear all the backstage stuff where the crew make jokes about Belle Gibson and put microphones on people and push chairs about.

6:20am - the cameraman appears in my earpiece to tell me that they're running late on their schedule, but he'll turn off the little screen so I don't get distracted during the interview.

6:30am - the screen is still on, and I get to see Gretel Killeen, who is fabulous and has

hair that doesn't seem to need hair gel like mine, be scathing about refugees being plonked in unused holiday accommodation on Norfolk Island and I wonder if they could live in Colleen McCullough's place instead.

Or if Australia would just freaking grow up and let them into the country properly instead of doing all this stuff that could only be described by words that you can't say on television.

Inwardly panic that my hair will never be as beautiful and witty as Gretel Killeen and wonder if I should just hope to be gorgeous and intellectual like Colleen McCullough instead.

Or just aim to get through the next twenty minutes by just plain not passing out on camera or saying words that you're not allowed to say on the telly, as I faint and take the desk and screen with me in one giant electrical bang.

6:35am - presenter runs around plaza trying to be enthusiastic about overseas cars while mentioning how all the brands that used to be the best are completely screwed due to the economy.

Screen is still on and I'm still watching all of what they're up to - and then John Hewson is on the couch with the presenters trying to make a news story about how no one can buy a house or a locally made car anymore uplifting.

Feel slightly better that at least I'm not telling everyone in the country that they're completely f'ed because of housing

prices and lack of manufacturing jobs, not that I would do that because you're not allowed to use that kind of language on the telly.

6:44am - screen is still on. I wonder if the cameraman knows this or is even awake. Try not to hyperventilate.

6:45am - hosts are suddenly talking about church attendance and I realise that I'm on the telly with my eyes looking to the screen to my left and I wrench my eyes to looking straight down the barrel of the camera and try desperately to ignore the fact that I can see me and everyone else dancing about on a screen in my peripheral vision.

6:47am - hosts are putting lots of visuals of people going to church and I use that time to sneak my piece of paper with three key points just on the edge of the desk, out of the line of the camera.

6:48am - It suddenly occurs to me that Hugh Mackay's screen must be right in front of him, below the eyeline of the camera, and that's why he's looking down all the time that Justin Moffatt is speaking. It makes him look like he's not listening to Justin?

Make myself COMPLETELY IGNORE the screen to my left and focus on the camera, so I don't give that impression.

6:55am - it's all over. I think I blacked out.

I recall that I made reference to the charity ride for cancer and Belle Gibson at some point.

I remember mentioning the census and No Religion, which was the big main point we wanted to get out - and that I didn't get fired up by anything said and was polite. Earpiece tells me we're done and thanks very much.

I get all the wires untangled off me and discover I have about five missed phonecalls from relatives telling me that I wasn't horrific or embarrassing as much as they thought I would be.

The screen starts going on about how there's a national emergency about Shape biscuits, and that's why we only had that amount of time to talk about religion. I'm certain if there was a god, they'd be really freaking saying words they can't say on television.

7:45am - drive about ten kilometers below the lowest speed limit on the way home through the wildlife area in order to look for kitten but can see nothing.

Decide to head out there later with a tin of food to see if I can coax it out.

8:30am - record the entire thing off the computer with my phone and my best friend emails me to say that they watched the wrong channel and thought I'd be on a cooking program about beetroot cake instead.

8:50am - go to sleep.

Kylie Sturgess
AFA President



Rapture - Education Not Required

Georgia Bristow

In Texas, it's apparently completely fine for parents to not teach their children anything, or send them to school at all, because they are waiting on Jesus to show up.

The Texas Supreme Court ruled in favor of a family that had been accused of not teaching their children anything because they were waiting to be "raptured." The fact that home-schooled kids should be properly educated was never addressed. The all-Republican court decided 6-3 in the family's favor on technical grounds.

In the state of Texas, there is no requirement for parents who choose to home-school their children to register with the state. Of course, there are "basic educational goals" that families must meet, including reading, spelling, grammar, math, and citizenship. However, there are absolutely no procedures taken, such as testing, to actually prove that the children are being taught or making progress. It seems that these educational goals are just friendly suggestions.

According to court filings, Laura and Michael MacIntyre used to educate their nine children at the family's motorcycle dealership in El Paso, Texas in an empty office. Problems for them arose when an uncle told the local school district that he never saw the children do anything educational. The uncle also overheard the children telling one of their cousins that "they did not need to do schoolwork because they were going to be raptured."

The oldest daughter of the McIntyre's, Tori, age 17, ran away in 2006 so that she could return to school. According to ABC News, the school district wasn't sure she could handle any classwork harder than the 9th grade level work, and she was placed in 9th grade as a result.

An attendance officer, Michael Mendoza, attempted to investigate the accusations made against the McIntyre family. In response, the family sued, saying that their equal protection rights under the 14th Amendment were violated and that the school district was being anti-Christian.

Justice John Devine, referring to the state's education commissioner, Mike Morath, said:

'Whether their constitutional rights were violated remains to be decided, but it is a question the courts — not the commissioner — must decide.'

The McIntyre's attorney, Chad Baruch said:

'I think my clients would love for there to be some clarification as to the limits on the school district's power to demand information from home-school families. But they recognize that's down the line.'

Despite their ruling in favor of the family, the Texas Supreme Court did agree with the lower court that Mendoza did not violate 14th amendment protections when he went out to investigate.



The McIntyres claimed that they used Christian curriculum that is similar to that which is offered in Christian schools in El Paso. They also said that the uncle had lied about the "rapture" comments because he was involved in a dispute related to the ownership of the now non-existent motorcycle dealership.

According to the high court, the 14th Amendment claims were not for Texas' educational code to question.



A Classic Palliative Care Filibuster

Neil Francis

Neil is a member of the AFA with strong opinions on end of life choice. In response to an article in [the Age](#) he wrote an article on the issue. We will hopefully hear more from Neil in future issues.

Nurse Peter Hudson, and doctors Mark Boughey and Jennifer Philip of the Centre for Palliative Care argued that instead of assisted dying as recommended by the recent Victorian Parliament committee report, increased funding of palliative care is ‘the answer.’

Key Arguments

Here are the highlights of their opinion piece:

1. They refer to assisted dying, a neutral expression now in common use amongst both lay commentators and scholars, as a euphemism. Instead they laboriously refer to assisted suicide (suicide is universally seen as a pejorative term with all its baggage about mental illness and substance abuse), and euthanasia (consistently omitting the qualifier ‘voluntary’).
2. Dying at home should not be the gold standard (despite the great majority preferring it); instead, dying in hospital can be ‘preferred.’
3. In a profound lack of self-reflection or consistent logic, they say that assisted dying ought to remain outlawed because its outcomes are uncertain. Even assuming the premise of the statement, this would be an identical argument to ban palliative care, whose outcomes are at least equally if not considerably more uncertain.
4. They falsely imply that users of assisted dying not infrequently experience “very unfavourable” reactions to the drugs. This is simply untrue and I challenge them to provide the empirical evidence that they state is so very important.
5. Tellingly, they describe a peaceful assisted death as “sanitised,”

signalling their intrinsic disapproval of other’s choices.

6. They say that focus should remain on increased resourcing of palliative care, failing to mention that the Parliamentary committee’s report indeed recommended increases in palliative care funding and improvement of evidence-based practice. Overseas evidence also reveals improvements in palliative care in jurisdictions with assisted dying legislation. There’s no false dichotomy between palliative care and assisted dying as the authors try to insinuate.
7. They assume that medical interventionism (what they have to offer) is the correct and normative response, ignoring the fact that some people simply don’t want more interventions.

The Filibuster

In a journal article recently published by two of the opinion piece authors, and repeated in principle in the Centre’s submission to and appearance before the Parliamentary inquiry, they say that:

“Increased resources and effort must be directed toward training, research, community engagement, and ensuring adequate resourcing for palliative care to benefit many before further consideration is given to allocating resources into legalising EAS to respond to the requests of a few.”

Notice two things about their recommendation—the filibuster.

Maximising what cannot be done

Firstly, they say we must not just ban assisted dying, but that it is dangerous even to talk about it: palliative care must be improved even “before further consideration is given.” The specific purpose of this part of

the filibuster is to maximise what cannot be done: to position even mere conversation, let alone actual reform, as ‘unsafe.’

Maximising the delay

Secondly, nowhere in their argument do they provide a single quantitative metric (and which they strongly argue is necessary for the legalisation of assisted dying) by which the palliative care reforms they advocate might be judged: not a single dollar amount nor a single performance benchmark amongst their many recommendations.

How much will reforms cost, how long will they take, and what performance measure improvements would need to be achieved for the expenditure to be judged effective? What performance measures would need to be reached before it was then ‘safe’ to even consider assisted dying? The authors are entirely mute on these critical matters, while making precisely these evidential demands of assisted dying.

So, the opinionists’ argument allows them to indefinitely say that “more improvements are needed in palliative care before we even talk about assisted dying,” because further ‘improvements’ are always possible.

But all that was a ruse anyhow

In any case, the authors say in their submission to the Parliamentary inquiry that there are numerous problems (spurious, I argue) with legalising assisted dying; that they doubt they could be overcome; and then finally “it should not be construed that we would support the legalisation of EAS if efforts were made to address [the problems].” (Curiously, they omit the third, critical statement from their more public opinion piece.)

This truly exposes the classic filibuster... an open-ended call with no metrics, which therefore can be deemed never to have been met. How convenient. But, even if they were

met, the authors still wouldn't support reform. This begs the question:

If the authors are as so firmly evidence-based—as they take pains to emphasise—why would they not support a reform if the evidence endorsed it?

There must be something other than evidence that drives their entrenched opposition to assisted dying; something so important that it renders all their previous arguments null and void. What might that be?

Who are these people, anyway?

It's informative to answer the question of who these three from the Centre for Palliative Care are. The Centre sounds like a neutral government body. It isn't. Don't get me wrong, I have no doubt that these three are skilled and compassionate practitioners and that the Centre delivers good services.

In reality the Center is a section of Melbourne's St Vincent's Hospital. That's an organisation that proudly states "as a Catholic healthcare service we bring God's love to those in need through the healing ministry of Jesus."

I believe St V's to be a high-quality healthcare institution, but too bad if the patient just wants evidence-based medical care and not the 'healing ministry' of a religious figure they may not subscribe to.

The reason this is important is this: what the three authors say about assisted dying is entirely consistent with the Vatican's stance. I have no idea if any of the authors are Catholic, but what would be entirely surprising is if they published anything at odds with the views of the Vatican given their Centre is deeply embedded within the largest Catholic health and aged care service provider in the country.

For clarity and fairness, I once again place on the public record that I am agnostic.

The 'Catholic card'

Before Messers Paul Russell, Alex Schadenberg and others leap onto their campaigning steeds to megaphone that I'm 'playing the Catholic card' (just wait

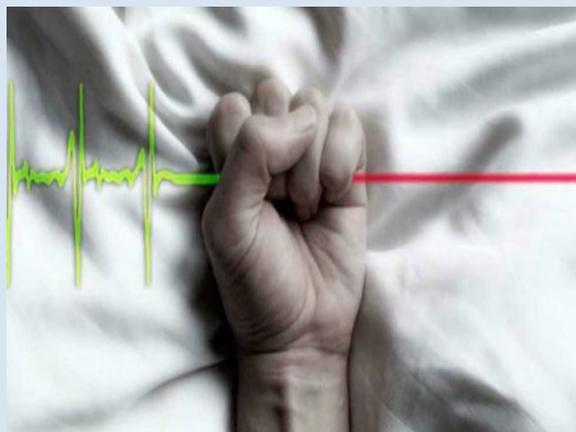
for it!), let me be clear that I specifically am doing precisely that. For sure, The Catholic Church is not the only religious body resolutely opposed to anyone having the choice of assisted dying, but it's the premier one.

And, Messers Russell et al would be absolutely right to point out that the authors didn't raise a single religious argument, so let me save them the bother.

Religious opposition dressed up in secular garb

And that's the point. It's abundantly clear from multiple sources that religious opponents have actively decided that they will absolutely avoid using religious arguments because they know it will lose them the debate.

Media identity Andrew Denton's "Better Off Dead" podcast series makes this



avoidance abundantly clear from the Australian perspective. His insights, having attended a global anti-euthanasia conference in Adelaide, are important and revealing.

From the North American perspective, a study just published by Associate Professor Ari Gandsman of the University of Ottawa in Death Studies reports uncanny North American similarities. Assisted dying opponents have actively decided to cease using religious arguments. Instead, their objective is to create an atmosphere of FUD: fear, uncertainty and doubt. It is only this now, they agree amongst themselves, that will keep assisted dying off the statute books. As Gandsman explains (and I paraphrase), religious opponents have moved from 'it's a sin' to

'but think about all the perceived risks!'

Again, I reiterate that the three opinion piece authors are likely to be fine nurses and doctors (I have never met any of them), but I do say that their incoherent and self-contradictory arguments against assisted dying, remaining opposed even 'if' the evidence for it stacks up, is neither their finest work, nor varies one iota from the religious anchor that the Vatican provides to their Centre's services.

The importance of mutual respect

If a person says to me "I believe assisted dying is wrong," I respect that view and admire their resolution. For themselves. Including if it is underpinned by religious belief. If you believe that assisted dying, or surrogacy, or other contentious issue is wrong, don't participate in it.

But don't expect that your own view of your own God trumps everyone else's God—or lack thereof. In Australia for example, the majority of citizens are not Catholic. And most of those who are—three out of four—disagree with the Vatican's opposition to assisted dying. The Vatican's view then is not particularly relevant to anyone but its most ardent adherents.

Respect in both directions is warranted but is rather lacking from the more religious end. My argument is not against Catholicism itself. There are very fine Catholics on both sides of the debate, doing their best to live a deliberately 'good' life.

Conclusion

We can do without the incoherent and indefensible nonsense advanced in secular garb by the religiously opposed.

Be clear folks: the FUD campaign is on its last legs. I will be further exposing rubbish arguments posed by those with religious connections but couched in non-religious language.

In the meantime you can see the clumsy, failed attempt at a filibuster by these three opinionists for what it is.

The Buffoon and the Zealot

Christis G. Tombazos

Cursory understanding of political theory highlights two features as the most common observable characteristics of inept, and potentially dangerous, world leaders: ignorance and dogmatism. Other things such as, say, intelligence matter less. This should not be surprising. Crudely defining intelligence as the capacity for critical judgment, ignorance as the absence of a premise to exercise judgment, and dogmatism as the suspension of judgment, it follows that ignorance and dogmatism defeat intelligence. They individually defeat a lot of other attributes that might be desirable in a world leader as well, but elaborating further is beyond the scope of this short article.

The coincidence of ignorance and dogmatism can be thought of as an analytical model that may be used to evaluate world leaders and, perhaps more importantly, those who aspire to become world leaders. As in the case of any useful model, its predictions do not always accord with the mainstream views of the wider populace. To illustrate, consider the ongoing contest for the nomination of the American Republican Party. The leading candidates in this contest are the real estate developer Donald Trump and the Senator from Texas Ted Cruz. Who of the two is the average, say, European or Australian most likely to fear the most? It is perhaps not controversial that this particular honor belongs to Trump. Unlike Cruz, Trump is more bombastic and perhaps more easily associated with extreme positions: a proposal to adopt the killing of the families of terrorists as official policy, to introduce torture, to build a wall on the Mexican border, to introduce a 45% tariff against foreign imports, and so on. By contrast, relatively little is widely known about Cruz beyond the fact that he is on the outer fringes of conservatism.

Apply now the model. We first evaluate the leading Republicans on the knowledge scale. For parsimony, we limit this exercise to the field of economics – arguably one of the most critical policy areas for any world leader.

Beginning with Trump, we note that he is famously the author of “The Art of the Deal” and the notion of a “good deal” features prominently in *Trumponomics* (to borrow the term coined by Adam Davidson of NPR’s *Planet Money*). A good dealmaker wins a bigger piece of the pie than the loser. So Trump’s vision



for good economic management does not extend beyond striking better deals across the board: with China (that in his words “...beats the U.S. on trade deals every time”), with Iran, with pharmaceutical companies, and so on. Of course, as any first year student of economics knows, deals are not central to economics. Economics is not the science of getting a bigger piece of the pie. Instead, it is the science of finding ways to expand the size of the pie and having both parties in any transaction walk away from the negotiating table better off than when they arrived. In this light, international trade agreements are not about winners and losers but rather about “gains from trade” that naturally accrue to all trading countries and which arise when nations specialize in those areas in which they have a natural comparative (productivity) advantage. More can be learned about

the world economy by understanding this simple notion, than by mastering the art of the deal. Indeed, more can be learned about the world economy by typing “trade is not a zero-sum game” in the Google search box and pressing “Enter” than Trump has learned in a lifetime of real estate deals.

Ted Cruz’s ignorance is equally appalling. Like many prominent Republicans, his understanding of the world economy is limited to a conflated caricature of the lessons of neoclassical economics. This caricature espouses the absence of government intervention even when markets fail – which is directly incongruous with economic theory and the policy prescriptions of professional economists. Cruz’s vociferous opposition to government action in the area of climate change exemplifies this view.

The examples provided above are narrow, but they are not idiosyncratic. They highlight that the two candidates’ knowledge of how the modern world economy works is limited and, perhaps, severely so. Similar exercises in other relevant areas of governance will lead to a similar conclusion: on the knowledge scale Trump and Cruz perform comparably, and not particularly well.

Turning our attention to dogma, a casual overview of the two candidate’s history reveals a very different picture.

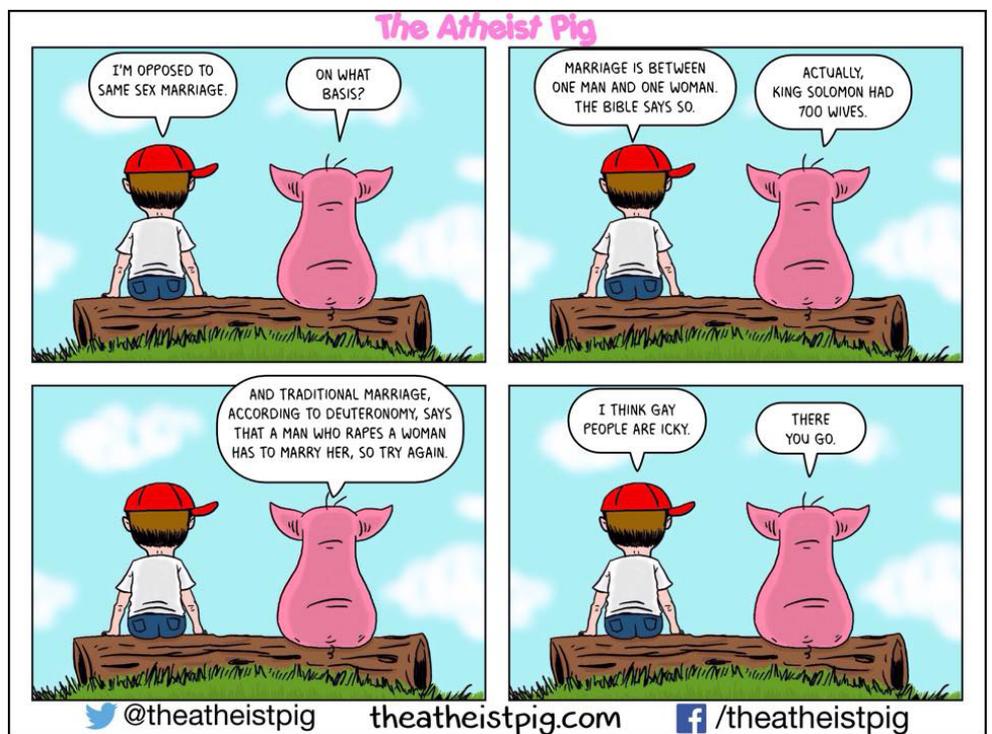
Trump is an insincere, megalomaniac, populist, buffoon; but he is not dogmatic. In press conferences he invariably delivers largely incoherent word salads. He appears to say the first thing that pops into his mind but his actions are always moderated by the desire for self-preservation. Absence of dogmatic preoccupations forces his behavior to comply with rational inclinations. This of

course does not make him a good candidate, but does introduce some degree of sanity, if not in his rhetoric, at least in his actions.

Cruz, on the other hand, is a fanatical zealot. He is dogmatic about conservative principles (a mish-mash or poorly understood economic doctrines and religious fantasies). He has stated publicly that his decision to run for president was the result of a two-hour prayer that was concluded when his wife Heidi received the green light from the heavens. He has repeatedly advocated that the constitution does not guarantee the separation of church and state and, consequently, dogma should guide the decisions of government. This goes beyond things like a rejection of marriage equality. For example, he attended the Freedom 2015 conference where pastor Kevin Swanson (who introduced Cruz to the stage) advocated that the fitting penalty for homosexuality is death (you can examine his hateful rhetoric on Twitter @kevinpswanson). Cruz brings the same fanaticism in areas that go beyond religion. He is dogmatically committed to "carpet bombing" ISIS in Syria despite an unavoidable cost of thousands of innocent lives, bombing Iran's nuclear reactors, abolishing the Internal Revenue Service, ignoring climate change (that may, after all, usher the second coming), abolishing the affordable care act, and so on.

Either Cruz or Trump would, of course, be disastrous for the United States and the world. However, the relevant question is who would be the bigger disaster? It is a sad state of affairs when the choice in a nominating contest is between an ignorant buffoon and an equally ignorant but dogmatic zealot. Given such a choice, I would take the buffoon. Every time.

(Comments and thoughts by readers are more than welcome. Contact me on Twitter @CTombazos).



JT

What is the best way to stop your child becoming an atheist?

I don't want any of my children to be punished by God.

2 years ago

Report Abuse



David M

Best Answer - Chosen by Voters

Do not educate them, or expose them to critical thinking, logic or science.

Lie to them constantly about how the world works. Feed them a steady diet of mumbo jumbo dressed up like real knowledge - the jumbo jet in the whirlwind for example - and pretend that it is deep wisdom.

Make them loathe their own natural bodies and functions. Convince them they are small and weak and worthless and need redemption. Tell them everything enjoyable is grievously wrong to even think about, and that their only fun should be in grovelling to an invisible friend.

Ensure that they resent anyone who is not like them in every way - skin color, nationality, political opinion but especially creed. Make such people out to be evil and vile and give them - impotent minorities all - the fictional power to somehow oppress and persecute the vast majority who do think like you.

Teach them to laugh at and dismiss out of hand any faith but their own. Early - early mind you - make sure they are taught the difference between superstitious deadly error - that one raving lunatic in the desert told the truth about a vicious god who killed people, and divine eternal truth - that another raving lunatic in the desert told the truth about a vicious god who killed people.

Instruct them with all severity and import to never question for themselves - to never think for themselves - to never live for themselves - but to seek answers only in one - just one - particular set of semi-literate bronze age folk tales.

Above all - and this cannot be overemphasized - make sure they cannot spell, use correct grammar, or understand basic English words.

That should do the trick.

2 years ago

Report Abuse

40% 2 Votes

4 people rated this as good



The Greek Orthodox Church, and Our Big, Fat, Greek-Style Economic Funeral?

Max Wallace

Australia has a net foreign debt of about \$950B. It is growing steadily month after month as we borrow to pay for expenditures that are not covered by trade surpluses. While it is relatively low by international standards its continuous upward spiral is a serious concern.

The tax avoidance of corporations, the many distortions of our tax system to favour the wealthy, the developing demographics and inequalities of Australian society requiring increased welfare expenditures, the folly of having so much capital tied up in unproductive property bubbles, are by far the most serious aspects of the related budget deficit problem.

This deficit is thrown into relief, as it is now, when the terms of trade, especially the price Australia receives for its major exports, iron and coal, declines.

At this point in time, the income received from agriculture, tourism, services and manufacturing is not enough to compensate for the decline in the price of iron and coal. Hence the ongoing sale of major pastoral properties, and other high-value assets, to foreign, mainly Chinese investors, by a nation always gasping for revenue.

It is in the context of this slowly worsening situation that religious organisations continue to get a free, tax-exempt ride. So, how much does religion cost Australia? To what extent would it help if religion, and other alternative life-stances to religion, were taxed?

On 28 and 29 June 2010 a Senate Economics Legislation Committee inquiry, encouraged by Senator Xenophon, took related evidence on these matters. The purpose of the inquiry was to introduce legislation for a 'public benefit' test, used in the UK to deny Scientology tax-exempt status. Senator Xenophon, understandably, wanted to

nail Scientology in Australia and saw this test as a way to get at them.

The evidence given to the inquiry by officers of the Productivity Commission, the Treasury, the Australian Tax Office (ATO) and the Australian Christian Lobby (ACL) on 29 June 2010 was more broadly revealing. Here are some edited highlights from Hansard:

About the cost of religious charities of all kinds:

Senator Cameron: Do you have any idea how much public funding, through tax breaks, goes to those mainstream religions for charity work?

Mr Shelton (ACL): I would not know off the top of my head, but it would be a great deal ...

Senator Cameron: Is it the case that you don't know off the top of your head or you just plain don't know.

Mr Shelton (ACL): I do not know.

Senator Cameron: That is more accurate, because the Productivity Commission, with all their economists, could not tell us ... (further) ... there is a complete lack of transparency in terms of the expenditure of public money ... (further) the Productivity Commission analysis of the cost to the public purse in supporting charities ... ranges anywhere between \$1B to \$8B ...

Ms Roussel (ATO): In the tax expenditure statement, the itemization for charities in unquantifiable ... there is no official number.

About the number and accountability of religions:

Senator Xenophon: ... what quantum, what number, of religions would you say

are out there whereby, unless they become visible to you from some of their activity, you would not know they existed as such?

Mr Hardy (ATO): [religious organisations] ... do not have to lodge an income tax return. If they have no reason to have a dealing with the tax office in any other capacity then they have no dealing with the tax office.

Senator Xenophon: Do they have to advise you of their self-assessment [that they are not taxable]?

Mr Hardy (ATO): No. Self-assessment is that. They self-assess.

Senator Xenophon: In other words, they are left alone. They have self-assessed and you do not have any reason to monitor them whatsoever.

Mr Hardy (ATO): No. The legislation does not provide for that. They are potentially invisible to us as a taxation entity.

So, there it is in black and white. No government official really knows how much religious charities are costing Australia or even how many of them exist. The Productivity Commission, the ATO and the Treasury have chosen not to research this. Why? Nobody knows how many religions are 'self-assessing'. Why? When the Australian Charities Commission (ACNC) was set up later in 2012 religious organisations alone were given an exemption from reporting their wealth. Why?

Interestingly, when the Committee's report came out the cost of religion to Australia roughly calculated by [Perkins & Gomez](#) to be annually \$31B in gross terms, made as a written submission to the inquiry was ignored and the \$1B - \$8B figure was used to apply to religious charities generally.

This was tantamount to a cover-up. In 2012 Ryan Cragun and his associates, with the benefit of better information on the public record, reviewed the cost of religion to the United States: US Loses Over \$71 Billion in Religious Tax ... - [Center for Inquiry](#).

But, in fact, the Xenophon inquiry turned on a furphy. There is no 'public benefit' from religion or any other belief. As has been said many times, the so-called 'benefit' of religion is a 17thC presumption dating from the original charity law of 1601. Four hundred years later, it is irrelevant.

Interestingly, two months before Senator Xenophon's inquiry, the church he personally identifies with, the Greek Orthodox Church, in the face of Greece's major, ongoing financial crisis with the European Union, was obliged to pay taxes.

This extremely wealthy state church, which treats Greece as its own theocratic state, was in 2008-9 the subject a major financial scandal concerning the historic Vatopaidi Monastery.

The monastery was involved a dubious land swap involving Church and government officials benefitting the Church to an estimated tax-free \$1-2B. An abbot was gaoled in 2011.

In the wake of this scandal, maybe as a face-saving operation, on 23 April 2010 many tax exemptions for the Church were repealed. The Greek Orthodox Church now pays

- A tax on their substantial real estate (being, like the Catholic Church in Australia, the largest land holder)
- A 20 per cent rate of tax on rents they receive from their real estate
- A 3 per cent tax on revenues from edifices and leased lands
- An advance payment of tax on their future likely incomes
- A trivial .5 of one per cent on inheritances and donations
- Some stamp duty fees on property sales

So, it seems, Greece has shown what has to happen for a church to concede that it should pay taxes: an economy on the brink of collapse, accompanied by a

major church scandal, which requires at least some taxation penance.

Also, the Greek Orthodox Church has emphasized it is continuing to do genuine relief of poverty work even though it is now being taxed. This is important because Australian churches typically say their welfare work would be affected if they had to pay tax, and besides, the value of the work they do can be reconciled to the missing tax-exempt revenue.

This line is known as the 'cross-subsidy' argument.

This line is used constantly despite the fact that (1) many religions do no charitable work at all because they do not have to, because religion itself is legally a form of charity, and (2) many religions just do a cosmetic amount of charitable work which is (3) difficult to assess if their incomes and expenditures are not made public, especially because (4) they have an exemption from reporting their wealth to the Charities Commission and (5) many religious charities of the good works variety receive significant grants from governments for their activities which they forget to mention when they make claims about the charitable works they do. With those caveats in mind, the Greek decision to pay some taxes and carry on with their genuinely charitable work demonstrates that churches can do both. Having said that, should it have to come to a Greek-style financial crisis before a church pays tax?

To his credit, the fourth president of the United States, James Madison, saw all this religious wealth coming. In his 'Detached Memoranda' written sometime after 1811, he warned the new United States to keep a watch on how much property churches could acquire because they would continue to build wealth indefinitely into the future, to the extent that they would lose their very purposes of the founders of their religions.

The warnings went unheeded and what President Madison predicted has happened. In the June 2015 issue of the French magazine *l'idée libre*, Rob Boston summarized the wealth of the Religious Right in the United States that has evolved alongside the wealth of the mainstream churches from the 19thC:

- The top ten Religious Right groups in the US raise more than \$1B each year;
- This money is used for lobbying Congress and arguing legal cases against secular law;
- Pat Robertson's Christian Broadcasting Network raises \$300M annually and has an endowment of \$2B;
- The Christian 'American Center for Law and Justice' have a budget of \$62M per annum;
- Jerry Falwell's Christian 'Liberty University' in Virginia has an annual budget of \$885M;
- The Christian 'Alliance Defending Freedom' spends \$40M annually in legal actions against secular law;
- The Christian 'Family Research Council' spends \$13M;
- The Christian 'American Family Association' spend \$20M on political actions;
- The Catholic 'League for Religious and Civil Rights' has assets of \$35M.

In the Sydney Morning Herald 12 February 2011 Jessica Irvine ('Tax breaks add up to a big minus') queried fringe benefits for the religious, among others, in Australia. Fringe benefits are mortgage payments, car expenses, children's school fees, and sundry other things, that ministers of religion are able to take in lieu of taxable income. On 20 June 2007, NSW MLC, John Kaye, detailed in the parliament how a Christian sect in Sydney exploited this tax break to its fullest extent.

Irvine's senior economics colleague at the Herald, Ross Gittins, has just published his biography. Turns out he was raised in a Salvation Army family. While he has described himself as a 'backslider', the term Christian sects use to denounce those that have moved away from the faith, he informs us that at census time, sentimentally, he still puts himself down as a member of the Sallies.

I thought it was curious that Gittins has never turned his considerable forensic mind to the tax breaks for religion. Now, all is clear. It seems he is a big fan of the British Christian philosopher, Michael Schluter, who has tried to 'turn the UK back to Christ'.

It seems likely Gittins has bought the 'cross-subsidy' argument described above, for in a 18 April 2014 interview with the ABC he said 'the archbishops of the world should be out there putting in their spoke' about social justice issues. Would that include the Anglican archbishop of Sydney who lives in a \$30M pile with views of Sydney Harbour while there are hundreds of homeless living on Sydney streets?

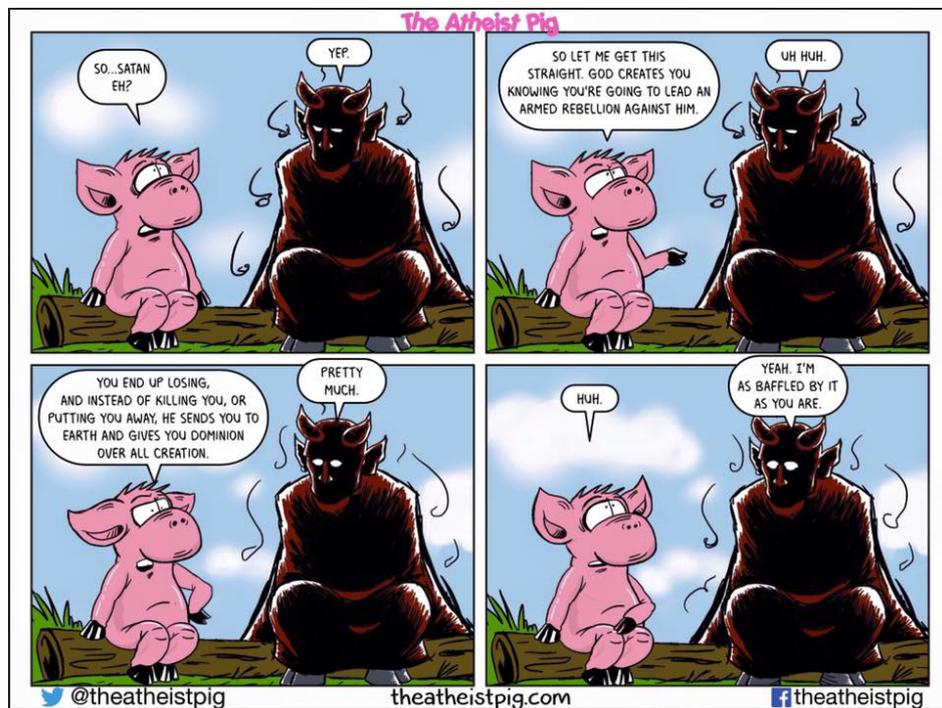
And, there is a problem with the Sallies. In 2012 we (NZARH) were able to research just how wealthy churches are in New Zealand as their Charities Commission, as it was once called, does have a wealth reporting requirement.

We found the Salvation Army had \$425M in equities and \$17M sitting in NZ banks. At the same time, there is good evidence, that despite New Zealand's relatively sound economy, that a quarter of its children are living in poverty. There are many ways some of that \$17M could be spent. Why aren't they spending it? Also, we found the Seventh Day Adventists (owners of Sanitarium) had a whopping \$37M in the bank.

So, to the question of much religion is costing, after discounting the value of the charitable work churches do, significantly funded by government, the likely answer is between the higher figures cited above: somewhere between \$8B and \$31B.

I suggest Australia could do with some of that, as month by month, if the terms of trade do not reverse, we move ever closer to a big, fat, Greek-style economic funeral.

Max Wallace is vice-president of the Rationalists Assn of NSW and a council member of the New Zealand Assn of Rationalists and Humanists. This article is available online at the [On Line Opinion](#) webiste. A not for profit e-journal that aims to provide a forum for public social and political debate about current Australian issues.



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Pious Pollies Paralyse Popular Policy

Brian Morris

A raft of socio-political issues — under the cold hand of winter — have advanced with all the speed of an Antarctic glacier. And these furtive frigid fingers — foiling progress — are those of pious politicians.

But the polarisation of politics and public policy will soon come to a head; determined by two telling factors.

The first will be same-sex marriage — that's if the Turnbull government persists with the socially divisive, religiously vindictive, and utterly wasteful \$160 million-dollar plebiscite.

When Ireland, America and Italy — three of the most culturally Christianised countries — can contemplate and codify laws to validate same-sex unions, then one must stand staggered by Canberra's Christian conservatism to steadfastly strangle progressive change. There will be a backlash.

The second factor will also set into stark relief the religious disconnect between government and the people.

On August 9th, the Census will herald a substantial change on the question of Religious Affiliation. Just five weeks after the election — and under the weight of a record 440 submissions — the Australian Bureau of Statistics has finally moved the 'No Religion' option (up from last place) to the top of the form.

At the 2011 Census the 'No Religion' tally was just 22 per cent — an absurdly low figure given its position, and a 'loaded' question that assumed every person had a designated faith. New Zealand lifted its 'No Religion' option to the top in 2013, almost doubling its score. Australia will undoubtedly follow suit.

Religious neutrality has been rising steadily for decades. A Morgan Research graph from April 2014 showed Christianity was down from 61 per cent (2011 Census) to 52 percent. Conversely,

the No Religion figure was up from 22 per cent (in 2011) to a record 37 per cent. By the August Census it will be closer to 50 per cent.

Similarly, the Catholic tally in 2011 was just 25 per cent, but given the number of scandals over the past five years that figure is expected to fall significantly — primarily due to the Child Abuse Royal Commission.

These two converging graph-lines of religiosity — one falling, one rising — may not have the seismic upheaval of grinding tectonic plates when they meet, but the political tremors will certainly become more severe.

A widening religious disconnect between parliament and the people will inevitably become more volatile.

That the full sweep of social policy has become more religiously-politicised is beyond doubt, with a stark imbalance between the religiously neutral community and politicians who flaunt their faith.

This federal election is an opportune time to lift the taboo — to openly discuss how religion has become an increasingly divisive force in politics.

Voters — and mainstream media — are free question all candidates on how their religious beliefs (or none) impact in the political sphere, and determine their mindset on the full range of contemporary issues.

In a secular democracy we need politicians to be transparent, honest and accountable for their decisions.

We do know that heavily Christianised politicians reject the secular agenda. Last August, Tony Abbott won a two-thirds LNP party-room majority to dump their own 'conscience vote' on same-sex marriage — opting instead for a divisive

and non-binding \$160 million plebiscite.

And John Howard took unilateral action in 1997 to overturn an established law allowing Voluntary Euthanasia in the Northern Territory. The ABC's Vote Compass, just released, shows that from 200,000 votes cast a clear 75 per cent support Voluntary Euthanasia laws. Only politically influential church groups remain opposed.

Both actions by Abbott and Howard were influenced by religion — as are all contemporary secular issues.

They include the Safe Schools Program, the need for 'ethics' classes rather than religious education in all schools, abandoning the Chaplaincy Program, enforcing national pro-abortion laws (still illegal in some states), it means rejecting Malcolm Turnbull's brain-snap to fund only private schools, and instead to fully fund public education (Gonski).

And it also means taking immediate action to legalise same-sex marriage; to abandon the extravagant and vindictive plebiscite; and to legalise voluntary euthanasia.

It includes, too, action on climate change, and scrapping the absurd practice of 'prayers in parliament' — and replacing them with a secular pledge; to uphold all national and international covenants and to work for the benefit all members of society.

Parliamentary 'religionism' is way out of step with a public majority who now reject corporatised Christianity. And if Malcolm Turnbull is returned on 2nd July the nation will have another government that is very little different from the Christian Right government he inherited from Tony Abbott in September last year.

We have high-profile Christians like Cory Bernardi, George Brandis, Scott Morrison, et al talking up religion; the Parliamentary Christian Fellowship is run by MP Louise Markus, one of several parliamentary



members of Hillsong; and PCF organises Canberra's Prayer Breakfasts for the entire political fraternity.

Like no other nation that is constitutionally non-theocratic — federal parliament begins each session with the Lord's Prayer, and it's a sanctuary where politicians can indulge their religious predilections. And while Canberra persists with its Prayer Breakfasts, the legal fraternity gathers — a phalanx of judges, barristers and lawyers — for their annual Red Mass at St Mary's Cathedral in Sydney.

When senior members of the legal profession who administer secular law — not canon law — line up for God's blessing of their work, you have to ask whether they know anything at all about separation of church and state.

All this in a constitutionally 'secular' nation!

Indeed, it can be said that almost since federation Australia is better described as a "Soft Theocracy".

It's a term coined by Dr Max Wallace, author of 'The Purple Economy', which examines the wealth and power of religion and the need for democracies to ensure they have a robust and constitutionally enforceable separation of church and state — equal to the separation of powers

between the executive, legislature and the judiciary.

Secularism is very simple, to quote James Kirk Wall.

"No persecution or privileges (handouts) based on religious beliefs. It's not pro-atheism or anti-atheism. It's not pro-religion, or anti-religion. It's about individual rights and liberties. It's about the law applying equally to everyone."

But as Canberra continues to bask in the warm glow of supernatural indulgence, almost eight in ten members of a long-suffering public clearly and explicitly want secular change.

As evidence, an independent IPSOS poll in January showed that 78 per cent of the population want religion and politics to be separated from the affairs of the nation — both at the state and federal level.

It's time we lifted the taboo to publicly discuss religion in politics and to demand of our politicians — and all the hopeful candidates — that they clearly identify the extent to which their religious faith will dictate their party room vote on the entire secular agenda.

And there is no earthly reason why MPs and Senators should not publish the depth of their God-beliefs in their parliamentary

biographies — or the personal websites of candidates seeking election.

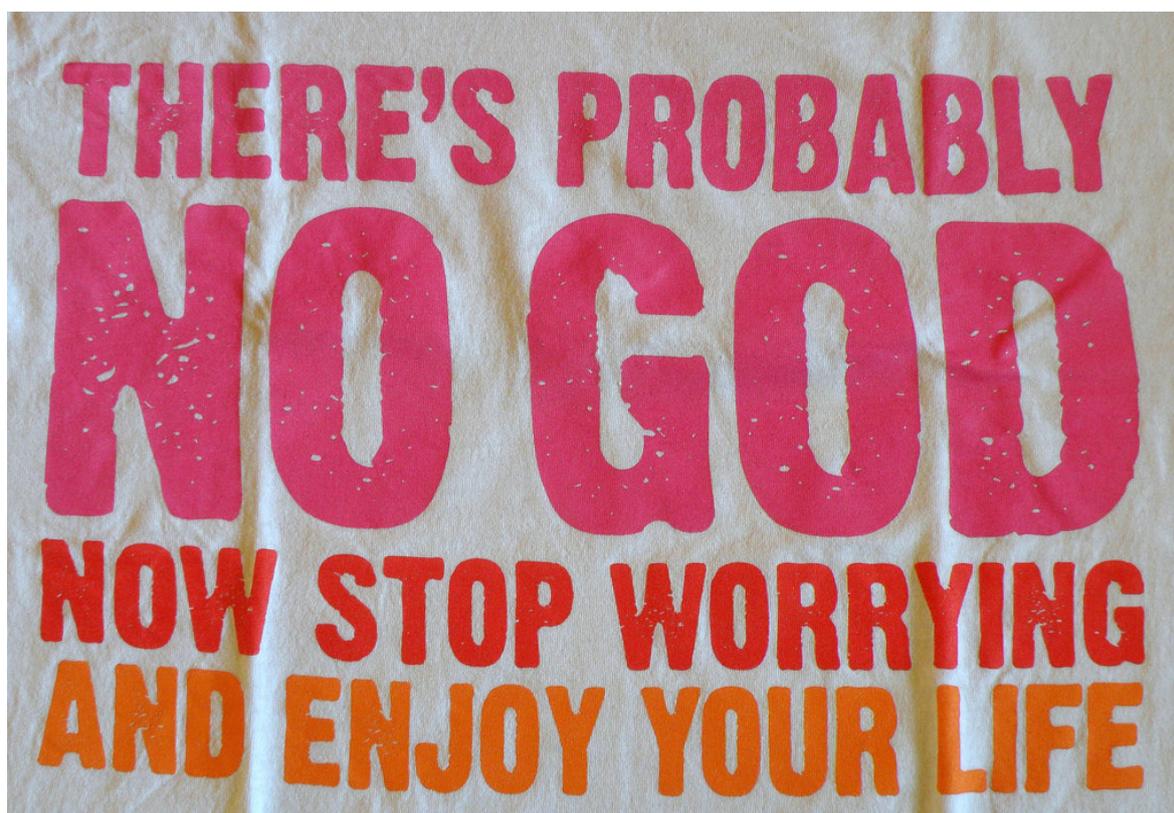
They are required to declare their pecuniary interests — why not their supernatural interests?

What's also alarming is that no politicians are prepared to state they have 'no religion' — when the majority of Australians no longer feel the need for corporatised churches or paranormal beliefs.

Interestingly, the new voting system for the senate makes it much easier for electors to individually select representatives for both houses — candidates who might better reflect their own secular values.



About Brian Morris: World travel shaped Brian's interest in social justice — wealth, poverty and religion in many countries. More information about Brian can be found on his website, [Plain Reason](#).



When Atheists Read the Christian Bible

Jack (@vjack)

Jack has a blog online called The Atheist Revolution. He reviews the impact of religion in every day life, with a focus on every day people. He is a new contributor to the magazine. Hopefully we'll see more of him. You can check his blog at <http://www.atheistrev.com/>

When an atheist reads the Christian bible, he or she can expect to receive praise for doing so from many Christians. They think it is a good book, and some think that reading it might finally bring us around to Jesus belief. Of course, whatever praise we might receive for reading this particular book quickly turns to condemnation when we share our reactions to what we have read. What has always fascinated me about this are the approaches that many Christians take to an atheist who has read this "holy" book and not found it at all persuasive. In this post, I will consider two of the more common approaches I have encountered from Christians. My guess is that both will be familiar to you.

1. You Need Bible Study Materials

In my experience, the most common reaction from Christians when an atheist is less than impressed with their bible is an attempt to convince us that what we read does not really mean what it says. The idea here is quite simple: you are misunderstanding what you read, and you need help to do so. We are told that we are failing to consider the historical context in which the words were written or something similar. What is most interesting about this notion of context is how inconsistently it is applied.

According to many Christians, the bible means what it says when what it says appears to fit contemporary standards of morality. Context is irrelevant. Not only that, but we are told that the bible offers timeless wisdom. For example, consider a passage instructing us to treat others with kindness. This is a positive message, and it should be taken at face value. In fact, this will be pointed to as an example of the positive morality of the bible. We will be told that this is every bit as true today as it was when it was written.

On the other hand, the bible does not mean what it says when what it says conflicts with contemporary standards of morality. For example, it does not mean most of what it says about slavery, the subjugation of women and so on. Context suddenly becomes important, and these passages need to be re-interpreted.

When an atheist encounters a questionable passage, the proper thing to do is consult bible study materials or the local pastor to learn what the passage really means. What the atheist must not do is assume that anything he or she reads in this book necessarily means what it says. Only the positive stuff means what it says. The bad stuff could not possibly mean what it says, and so it must be explained away.

I don't know about you, but I find this to be thoroughly absurd to the point where I have a difficult time believing that anybody could take it seriously. A book is a collection of words, and words have meaning. The words that make up the Christian bible are not presented in random order; they were arranged in a particular order by the authors in order to impart meaning. If we cannot extract this meaning by reading the words for ourselves, then entire thing would appear to be useless. None of us needs any bible study materials or input from pastors. Their role is one of apologetics. They aim to convince us that we should ignore or explain away the many awful parts of their book.

2. You Cannot Understand It Unless You Believe It

I suspect you have encountered many variations on this theme. How can I possibly believe anything a book says until I have read it so that I know what it says? What would it mean for me to claim to believe something I didn't understand

at all? Doesn't understanding have to precede belief rather than the other way around?

I was recently told by a Christian on Twitter that if I wanted to have any hope of comprehending his bible, I would need to pray to his god for "revelation." That is, I needed divine intervention in order to understand what I was reading.

Part of the problem with this reaction is that, like many ex-Christians, I was a believing Christian the first few times I read the bible. I was praying at the time, and I was certainly not looking for inconsistencies or atrocities. And yet, none of that prevented me from finding them.

There is an even more fundamental problem, however. Assuming that the god in which some Christians claim to believe is real and inspired the bible as many claim, this god could have produced a text different from the one that was produced. And if this god has the characteristics many Christians attribute to it, it would have had the foresight to know what sort of text would be most effective. This god could have created a clear, easy-to-read, consistent, morally laudable, and highly influential sort of text. I see little reason to think that such a god would have instead produced a book that was thoroughly indecipherable.

When Christians attempt to explain away, ignore, or re-interpret passages from their book, they reveal an important truth: their book is neither "holy," inerrant, or a paragon of morality. It is unfortunate that so few Christians seem to be aware of this truth. By being more familiar with how they respond to our criticism of their book, perhaps we can help to raise awareness.



Online Activism - Women Without Religion

Kylie Sturgess

Founded in 2012, the Women Without Religion forum began with women without religion, and has since grown to be inclusive of feminists, rationalists, atheists, LGBTQI and cisgendered folk. The page primarily acts as a billboard that advocates for changes to make the world a better place for everyone regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, ableness, and age.

The Women Without Religion page is without religion for a large number of reasons. They understand that without religion, and with more evidence-based reasoning, the world would be a better place for everyone.

I spoke to Annie, the founder and one of the administrators of the page, and you can find it yourself at [Facebook.com/WomenWithoutReligion](https://www.facebook.com/WomenWithoutReligion).

Annie: Probably about three years ago, it dawned on me that a lot of the atheist communities I was a part of actually didn't represent an awful lot of atheists. There seemed to be a huge dearth in the representation of women, of LGBTI people, their voices weren't heard. In many of the groups online that I was part of, we were always just hearing from the guys. They were a particular age range of guys, they were between 20 and 50. The conversations were fine a lot of the time, but a lot of the time they were quite exclusive. There was just a huge dearth of other voices.

That was quite a bit of an epiphany when it dawned on me, and I think that happened because friends of mine who were female atheists as well were discussing the issues we'd had online with being sexually approached, and being derogatory-termed any time we entered a conversation, shut down having whatever thread of discussion we were involved in. We just found that they had all experienced the same thing, and that was guys posting pictures of boobs, sexual invitations, critiques of their profile

picture. It always seemed to be the same story. Good conversation was very often just sabotaged by sexual connotations that weren't part of the dialogue, and they didn't need to be there.

We sort of all felt that there was more going on. It was more like a bit of a turf controlling thing, where people would just shut down if they weren't a particular type of person. That became a reality, and we actually just went out for dinner one day.

Kylie: Good way to start!

Annie: When we got home from the dinner I thought, we know so many fabulous people in the atheist community, and all of them challenge all sorts of bigotries online, and they're active, they're feminists, and they are out there. Why don't we all just get together and move forward, and make a place for all voices to be heard. They joined in, and with them joining in, it just took off. It's still taking off, and the numbers are just going up, and up, and up. We find that the more people we get, the broader range of people we get. We're not just catering to women, we're not catering to LGBTI people, we're not just catering to anybody in particular, we seem to have a whole big pot of everybody.

We've got lots of men who enjoy our stuff, we've got a lot of everybody. That's what we wanted, we just wanted a place where no one drowned out everybody else. It seems to be quite successful, and it seems to be the sort of place that a lot of people are looking for. We've also got a smaller group where it's probably a little bit more intimate, where people can talk a bit more openly. We've got guys in there, and they speak just like us women, and you can't tell who's who. That's the sort of forum that we really wanted to develop, where everybody matters, and no one gets shouted down. We're still working on things, but we're getting there.

Kylie: Are there particular issues where women are targeted by religion that really concern women with that religion?

Annie: Yes, indeed. There are quite a lot of issues, religion and misogyny do go hand in hand. Sexuality is a major target of religions, all aspects from sex education in schools to contraception, the right to engage in consensual sex with a variety of partners, the right to abortion, the right to be in a lesbian relationship.

The entire area of female sexuality is totally under attack by religions all the time. From birth to death, it's an obsession that all religions have. We believe a woman's right to personal autonomy, to determine things like their own career path, whether to marry, to reproduce, to stay home, to go to work, is just pivotal to their very existence. That's one of the major functions that we have as well, it's challenging the misogyny and the sexism that comes hand in hand with religion.

Every aspect of those areas that I've mentioned before are monitored, commented upon, and censored by religion, and we just challenge that whenever we see it. We believe that all women have the right to choose whatever it is they want to choose, bodily autonomy. We actually actively fight that. It's just one of those things that's going to be ongoing. It's never going to be fixed totally in our lifetimes, but someone's got to do it, and hopefully one day the world will be a better place in that area.

Kylie: Are the topics particularly relevant to Australia, or do you often find there's a worldwide appeal with the Women Without Religion, and what they talk about on the Facebook group?

Annie: Specifically Australian initiatives and topics that we would actually just focus on. Mind you, most of this global, but because many of us are from Australia, we tend to throw it out there. The information we have, we use to be

a springboard of conversation comes from Australia, but it's reflected all over the western world, and there are things like the victims of domestic violence, just the sexism inherent in the systems in the societies that we actually live in. Sexism, the abuse and marginalization of race, and racist discrimination against Aboriginal women and girls. Teachings in schools, the targeting of teenaged girls by religious organizations, grooming them, these so-called self-improvement courses in school.

They are a real concern. Those courses really, really need to be challenged, and challenged really strongly. Things like the segregation of Muslim girls in schools. All of these issues, we can't just sit back and accept the status quo. It's discriminating against girls, not only discriminating against them sexually, but it's also discriminating against them religious-wise. Let's not forget their human rights, we all have the right to our own identity as well. We understand that, but at the same time these girls have the right to freedoms. That's an issue we have to throw on the table, and it's an issue that has to be talked about.

Also we deal with the treatment and abuse of women in refugee camps. A hot topic right now, sadly Australia has gone down that path. There are a huge number of issues with that. We had Baby Asha here in Brisbane last week, all of those sorts of abuses. It's ongoing, and it's not just a small focus. This is the sort of conversations we wanted to develop where we actually talk about the broader issues. We aren't just talking about not believing in a god, and we aren't just talking about girls and boys being treated equally. We're talking about the broad range of issues that we all live with from day to day that affect us because of our gender, and our religious backgrounds, religious beliefs. This is how we would like to see atheism going forward, looking at the broad picture. It encapsulates us all.

Kylie: Do you worry about it diluting the message, perhaps? It is possible to go so broad that you're not as effective...

Annie: We do. We don't worry about it, but we always bring it back to, this is what I mean. We have our key people who could go out, we talk about these issues,

but we always can bring it back to how it relates to us as women, why it's an issue for us, or for our members that might be gay, or elderly men. We have representation of everybody. It's relevant to us all, but we're all there because we want to hear the voices of everybody. That includes people that normally don't have a voice. Primarily Women Without Religion is basically we reject all that religion expects us to accept when it actually is harmful for us. Other things develop, but that's the primary focus. As I said, we can talk about the other bits as well, but we always remember who we are.

Kylie: What are some of the future goals of the group for Women Without Religion?

Annie: We've got a readership of around 37,000 now...

Kylie: That's big!

Annie: Yeah, it is big! We are really lucky, we've got admins from all over the world. We have admins from all over the gender spectrum as well, and age spectrum, and ability spectrum. It reflects our group, really, but we do have quite a range of people involved with us now. I think our next step going forward as well, we thought to talk about building a webpage where it could be a bit of a hub, we think. We're also planning on getting together for people who don't want to make what they want to talk about public, because they'll be named.

One of the things about our group is we aren't a closed group. We have a page and a group, but the group in particular, which is more intimate, we aren't a closed group, and we won't be a closed group because if we want to be seen, and if we want to be heard, we want people to know we're there. If we're hidden away, no one will know we're there. That's the reason that we are actually an open group, but that prevents people from actually coming out and naming themselves, because they're on Facebook, they need to name themselves, naming themselves and raising an issue that's important to them.

We want to be able to have a website which people can go to, which they can contact us directly, and we can refer them, or we can get them to think about which

one of these particular forums that we're recommending they might like to talk in, which one's most appropriate for whatever issue it is that they've got. Basically we just want to keep marching forward, doing what we're doing. We're not doing everything perfect, and everything's a learning journey for us, but so far so good.

We are always willing to take on advice, suggestions. I'm not saying we make changes just because people say we should, because we don't. We just want to keep going the way we're going. We're quite happy with that, and we've got a fantastic admin team, can't speak highly enough of. I suppose the internet is wonderful, because what would have ended up being a small, little Australian community group is reaching to places that we would not have been able to get to before. We've got people from the Middle East, we've even got someone from Antarctica. That's pretty cool, too.

Kylie: I imagine you would be pretty cool in Antarctica!!

Annie: He is cool! He's probably a bit cooler than most, though. It's just wonderful. I never thought for one moment that it would go as it has gone. It has. We've had a few challenges on the way. Facebook likes to shut us down when certain religious groups will get their people all together, and get them to report us all at the same time. We might go down for a day, but we'll bounce back the next day. We're quite used to it, and we take it on the chin and just keep marching forward.

A lot of our people in our group, 6000 people, actually come to our group because they want to get away from bigotry and all of that sort of stuff. Both our page and our group have got our rules listed very, very clearly. We do check people in our group before we let them in. We have lots of men pretending to be women. We know that, and that's a bit of a giveaway when Facebook tells us that "Jenny Doyle" would like to join your group, would you like to check "his" profile! Only genuine people, please! We like to keep it a safe place for everybody.

Crucifact or Crucifixion?

Eve Jones

Ever pondered the events of Jesus's crucifixion and resurrection?

Wondered who decided he was dead? What evidence did they have? Just how dead was he?

The story starts with Jesus up on the cross – nailed or tied, depending on your view of ancient customs, when there can be only two possible outcomes.

- a) he was alive when he came down or
- b) he was dead

Outcome a)

This is for people who believe that Jesus was still alive when he came down off the cross. This scenario is favoured by those who like the idea that Judas's 30 pieces of silver was a bribe to the Romans to get Jesus up on the cross and down again by nightfall which was the start of the Sabbath. This wouldn't actually give Jesus time to die – he'd just be in a bad way when he was got down.

It is also favoured by those who believe Jesus was treated differently to the two thieves who were crucified alongside him ie they had their legs broken by a passing Roman peacekeeper while Jesus was only prodded in the side with a spear leaving him well enough to receive a few days TLC and walk off down the road to meet his friends.

All very logical but B-O-R-I-N-G and not theatrical enough for the son of a god.

Compare this to:

Outcome b)

This is favoured by churchy people who want to see Jesus as something special ie THE Son of THE God.

Once anyone was declared dead in those days it meant his/her heart had stopped beating – none of this brain-dead-on-a-life-support system nonsense, as happens nowadays.

And once the heart stopped beating the other signs of death followed shortly after. Let's start with lividity, or livor mortis. Once the heart stops agitating the blood around the body, gravity takes over and the blood pools to the lowest part. In the case of the crucifixion this would be Jesus's feet.

Livor mortis starts about 20 to 30 minutes after death and maxes after about 6 to 12 hours

If Jesus was dead, his feet should have turned a purplish-red as his red blood cells sank through the serum, thanks to good old-fashioned gravity. There is no mention of his having reddish-purple feet in the Bible. Did it happen?

There is also no mention of any rigor mortis setting in.

All of this begs the all important questions. At what stage of Jesus's death did God change his mind and begin reversing the after-death process?

If God had restarted Jesus's heart and blood circulation, did Jesus then lie on the slab in the tomb with his feet in the air so the blood could drain back into the rest of his body?

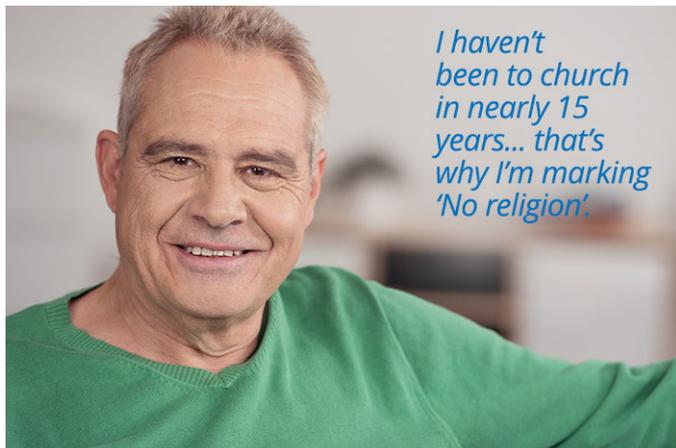
Did he end up with tissue damage or difficulty in walking? OR

Was it convenient for Jesus and his pals to let the Romans think Jesus was dead, so the Romans could go after some other local miscreant?

Of course, if Jesus never started on the after-death process then either he was never dead or God wasn't serious about killing him off in the first place and the whole event was a charade.

Perhaps some expert in the Christian church could enlighten me. I would really like to know how far Jesus got into the after-death process and why God changed his mind.

We are also told Jesus's crucifixion business went on to save us sinners from our sins. Please explain?



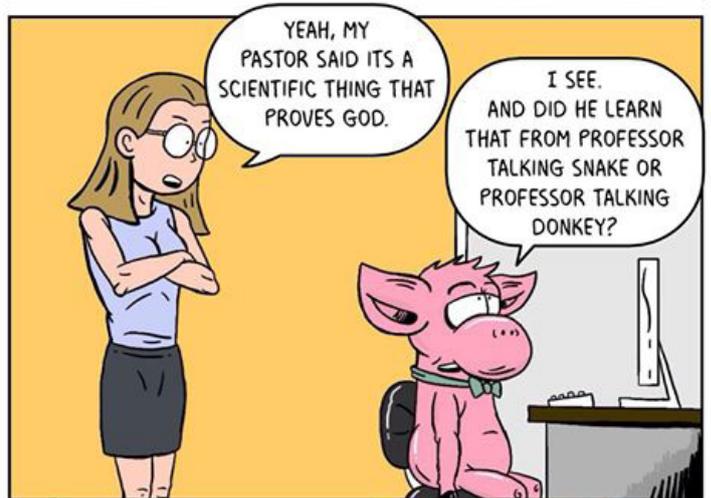
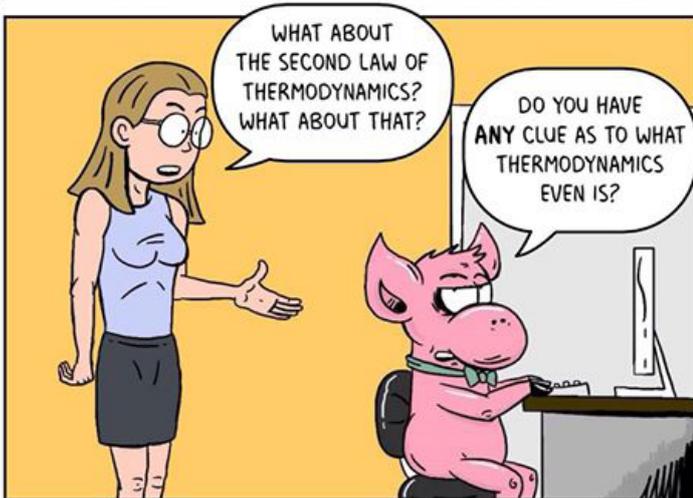
"Hey, wouldn't it be funny if someday people actually BELIEVED this?"

“Abortion is a worse moral scandal than priests sexually abusing young people”

-George Pell addressing World Youth Day delegates



The Atheist Pig



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National Geographic - Activism

The AFA encourages all members to call out the media when they make outrageous claims. The National Geographic has recently been purchased by Murdoch and so we fear for the future credibility of the once great magazine. They recently ran article on people 'coming back from the dead' and possible 'life after death'. AFA member Peter Beahan decided it was too ridiculous and called them on it. Below is a copy of the letter he sent seeking corrections on their story.

Editor
National Geographic

Dear Sir,

I started reading National Geographic as a secondary school student in 1952. I became an enthusiastic subscriber in the late 1960s and have continued as such to the present day. In my adult life, I have chalked up more than 50 years in medicine, as an anaesthesiologist.

With that background, I have to express my disappointment with the Edition of April 2016.

To me, National Geographic has always had the most interesting articles, based principally on such disciplines as Geography, History, Archeology and Science.

Faith and Religion have not been a part of its ambit, other than where they have been an integral part of the stories told. Dogma has not been promulgated, nor has any support been given to pseudo-science such as Astrology or Homeopathy. The April 2016 issue has an article entitled The Crossing. It also has a promo describing a forthcoming six part Story of God With Morgan Freeman.

I reserve my judgment on the latter. However, I take exception to the notions put forward for serious consideration in the former. The term The Crossing to describe death smacks of a faith-based disposition. This theme is followed throughout, and I quote the following:

“After toddler Gardell Martin fell into an icy stream ... he was dead for more than an hour and a half.” No, he was not dead. He was hypothermic, and subsequently had effective resuscitation.

“He had no signs of life, whatsoever.” Under conditions of recent deep hypothermia (25 Celcius) there are no reliable signs of death. This has been well understood for a long time. Heart surgery has often been safely carried out during an hour-long period of complete circulatory arrest following induced deep hypothermia.

“Some patients can be brought back from the dead after hours without a heartbeat.” No, such patients are simply not dead. The absence of a heartbeat is not an absolute criterion of death, as your case reports clearly show.

“These survivors can be thought of as having crossed over to the other side and returned with stories that offer some insight into how it feels to die.” This is an entirely faith-based notion. Neuroscientists have no difficulty explaining the phenomenon of near-death experience (NDE). Books such as Heaven is for real have been roundly debunked.

“If a miracle is defined as bringing someone back from the dead, sometimes that happens in medicine.” No, it does not happen in medicine.

To Sam Parnia, death is potentially reversible. No, it is not. If death of any organ is “reversed” then that organ, by definition, cannot be said to have been

dead!

The fact that different organs have different tolerances to hypoxia or circulatory arrest is well known. Surgery on the lower limb, at normal body temperature, has for years been carried out under tourniquet for periods of two hours or more.

The Angel Pérez case was interesting, but it was not a miracle. There is nothing in it that is not perfectly understandable, without resorting to a supernatural explanation.

In summary, I believe this article is misleading and likely to contribute to an already high level of superstition in relation to death. While the case reports were interesting the storyline should have stuck to facts and not promoted unproven faith-based ideas.

Yours sincerely,
Peter Beahan



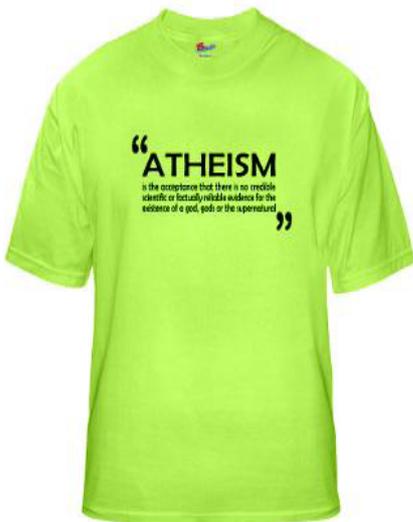
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However long Jewish, Christian and Muslim theologians struggle to find multiple meanings in this text, the dominant seems to be this: Abraham's unquestioning willingness to heed gods command to sacrifice the thing he loved most is what qualified him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