



**Atheist Foundation  
of Australia Inc** Established  
1970

*Promoting scientifically credible & factually reliable evidence*

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Free for AFA Members

# The Australian Atheist



Jeremiah 10:3-4 - For the customs of the peoples are worthless; they cut a tree out of the forest, and a craftsman shapes it with his chisel.  
They adorn it with silver and gold

## Religion

You can Just Make It Up As You Go Along

ISSN 1035-1477



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# Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc

Established 1970

Promoting scientifically credible & factually reliable evidence



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**Our Philosophy** The Atheist Foundation of Australia recognises scientific method as the only rational means toward understanding reality. To question and critically examine all ideas, testing them in the light of experiment, leads to the discovery of facts.

As there is no scientific evidence for supernatural phenomena, atheists reject belief in ‘God’, gods and other supernatural beings. The universe, the world in which we live, and the evolution of life, are entirely natural occurrences.

No personality or mind can exist without the process of living matter to sustain it. We have only one life – here and now. All that remains after a person dies is the memory of their life and deeds in the minds of those who live.

Atheists reject superstition and prejudice along with the irrational fears they cause. We recognise the complexity and interdependence of life on this planet. As rational and ethical beings we accept the challenge of making a creative and responsible contribution to life.

**Our Aims** To encourage and to provide a means of expression for informed free-thought on philosophical and social issues.

To safeguard the rights of all non-religious people.

To serve as a focal point for the community of non-religious people.

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

To promote atheism.

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

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## Hello readers,

Firstly, I have received the following email and am passing it on in the hopes that members can assist:

*My name is Rhys and I am a sociologist representing the Religion and Society Research Cluster at Western Sydney University. For the past few months I have been conducting social research into Australian non-religion, in which I have been investigating the diversity of non-religion in Australia, as well as examining the processes by which individuals become active atheists, humanists, and rationalists.*

*At the moment, I am looking for volunteers who would like the opportunity to discuss their views on atheism and religion as part of this study. If you are interested, I'd be happy to organise a Skype interview with you for whenever is convenient. Volunteers need to be between 18 to 45 years old, be fluent in English, and be members of the Atheist Foundation of Australia.*

*If you would like to participate in an interview, or if you have any further questions in regard to any aspects of the research, please do not hesitate to email me on [r.gower@westernsydney.edu.au](mailto:r.gower@westernsydney.edu.au).*

*Looking forward to hearing from you!*

Secondly, note the inside back cover - Jason Ball has been named Victorian of the Year! It's well deserved and we are all very proud of him.

Thirdly, I know the magazine is late. I have been gallivanting around India seeking enlightenment (not really, seeking handmade rugs, silver teapots and saris if my luggage is anything to go by). Then we had some IT trouble, scourge of the twenty first century. This means that by the time you finish reading this issue, the next one will be out so get reading!

There are some new contributors in this issue and I thank them for their wonderful and insightful pieces. Hopefully we will see more.

We also have some quality articles from some of our regular contributors and a huge thanks (as always) to them for their continued support.

If there are any other members that are creatively minded to write me an article, paint me picture, sketch me a cartoon, write me a poem, etc etc etc, you are very much encouraged to do so.

I also value feedback on how to make this magazine worth your while. If you have suggestions, please drop me a line.

Anyway, we are about to enter the silly season. The season when christians across the world show they have no idea of the contents of their own holy book. One of my favourite contradictions is the bellicose blatherings of many christians of the sanctity of celebrating christmas. A perfect example is complaints that Starbucks decided not to have christmas icons (trees, snowflakes etc). I put the argument against Christians and the christmas tree on the cover as it's one of my favourites.

So happy pagan festival "Dies Natalis Solis Invicti" (The birth of the unconquered sun) to you all. May all your secularist dreams come true.

Until next issue, take care.  
Tracy



**All articles, cartoons, graphics, book reviews, comments are encouraged. Please send to: [taa@atheistfoundation.org.au](mailto:taa@atheistfoundation.org.au)**

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# President's Message

## **Oh My Not God – The GAC Returns (But Not Before We Shamble Cosmically - Internationally! Towards 2017)**

The total number of delegates who attended the 2010 Global Atheist Convention was 2,500. Well over 3,500 people attended the 2012 Convention.

(In addition, there were 750 people attending the Dinner on the Saturday evening in 2010. We had 1,250 attend the Saturday Night Gala Dinner in 2012, with many on a waiting list.)

A Post-Convention survey form was sent to all ticket buyers after both conventions. The feedback on both occasions was astonishing.

About a third of attendees replied after the 2012 convention. Of these, 83.1% thought their overall experience at the Convention was “Excellent” while another 15.6% said it was “Good”. Nobody rated the Convention as below expectations.

It included statistics on levels of satisfaction across a number of factors (venue, schedule, catering, etc.), and allowed for written feedback.

This data became the basis of some of the documentation we used to ascertain if there was any interest in another convention in 2018.

More significantly, the survey results was also used to seek funding for the 2018 GAC – it wasn't likely that the event would be held again unless we could get financial support, so that feedback from attendees was incredibly valuable in that regard too.

It's also useful survey data for the AFA in general in order to look at what could be improved and what people liked and disliked for not just from the GAC, but any other events we might hold.

Since 2012 we've held events for “The Unholy Trinity”, Robin Ince and

Richard Dawkins. These have all been multi-city tours, with often a range of audience demographics, with attendees showing an avid enthusiasm not only for issues involving faith, but also science and comedy.

[Apparently the appearance of my Wheels and Dollbaby shirt with the skulls at both of the GACs had its fair share of haters as well as supporters, but honestly, that was the least of my concerns when on a stage in front of thousands!]



However, we're well aware that surveys from 2010 and 2012 events are not examples of recent data - which is why the AFA made sure that there is a dedicated team of volunteers who keep track of emailed and phoned questions, called the communications team.

When people have emailed or phoned us, we've told them that it was a goal of the AFA to hold a GAC (it was publically announced last AGM in Melbourne) - and that's what we've been doing with a lot of our time since then.

Working on the GAC – as well as working on the Census campaign (which went viral, resulting in hundred of messages, emails, phone calls and media inquiries about not only the campaign, but the state of religious belief in this country - and what we thought about Star Wars!) was one challenge for the AFA over the past two years.

In addition, we've had the challenge of working on another international tour that was announced in October, called Cosmic Shambles LIVE. There is certainly a lot of cross-pollination in our efforts and planning for both events. We've relied upon the expertise of the UK and NZ co-organisers and the core group of volunteers and members who have sent in feedback and ideas – as well as their reassurance that they see this as something worth spending time and money upon.

I've seen events internationally for atheism, rationalism and skepticism rise in audience numbers over the years, and then fall. It's these events that are very much on my mind when we put in late nights and long meetings to cover all the bases with funding, planning and making sure that people are able to attend at all. It takes a lot of our collective energy, health and our enthusiasm and (ironically enough) our faith to ensure that our efforts are worth it and won't risk the GAC being yet another event from the past.

It's also entirely possible what we're seeing now is a growth in secularism and acceptance of people outside of religion, that will make events held by groups like the AFA unnecessary in the not-so-distant future.

And so while we're working on the next event – and the one after that, and all the campaigns, press releases and the fundraisers and the every other thing we can do for the AFA – we appreciate your support.

And we appreciate a reason to have hope as faithless people – that there will be a day when we don't need to hear the voices of atheists at events, because there'll be enough heard and respected outside of them. In the meantime – back to work. See you at the Cosmic Shambles LIVE gigs in 2017 – and at the GAC in 2018.

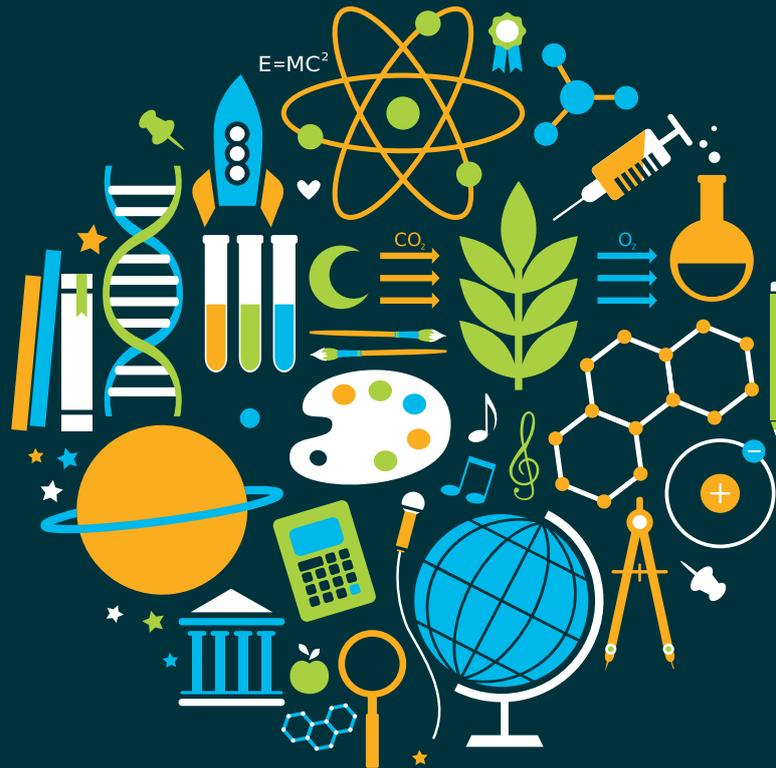
Kylie Sturgess  
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# Dying to Live

*Bob Irwin*

Neural pathways established through being taught or forced to believe in absurd notions – especially life after death – can make certain people inclined to commit atrocities and feel they are right to do so because they are upholding a justifiable cause.

## IN THE VIEW OF VOLTAIRE

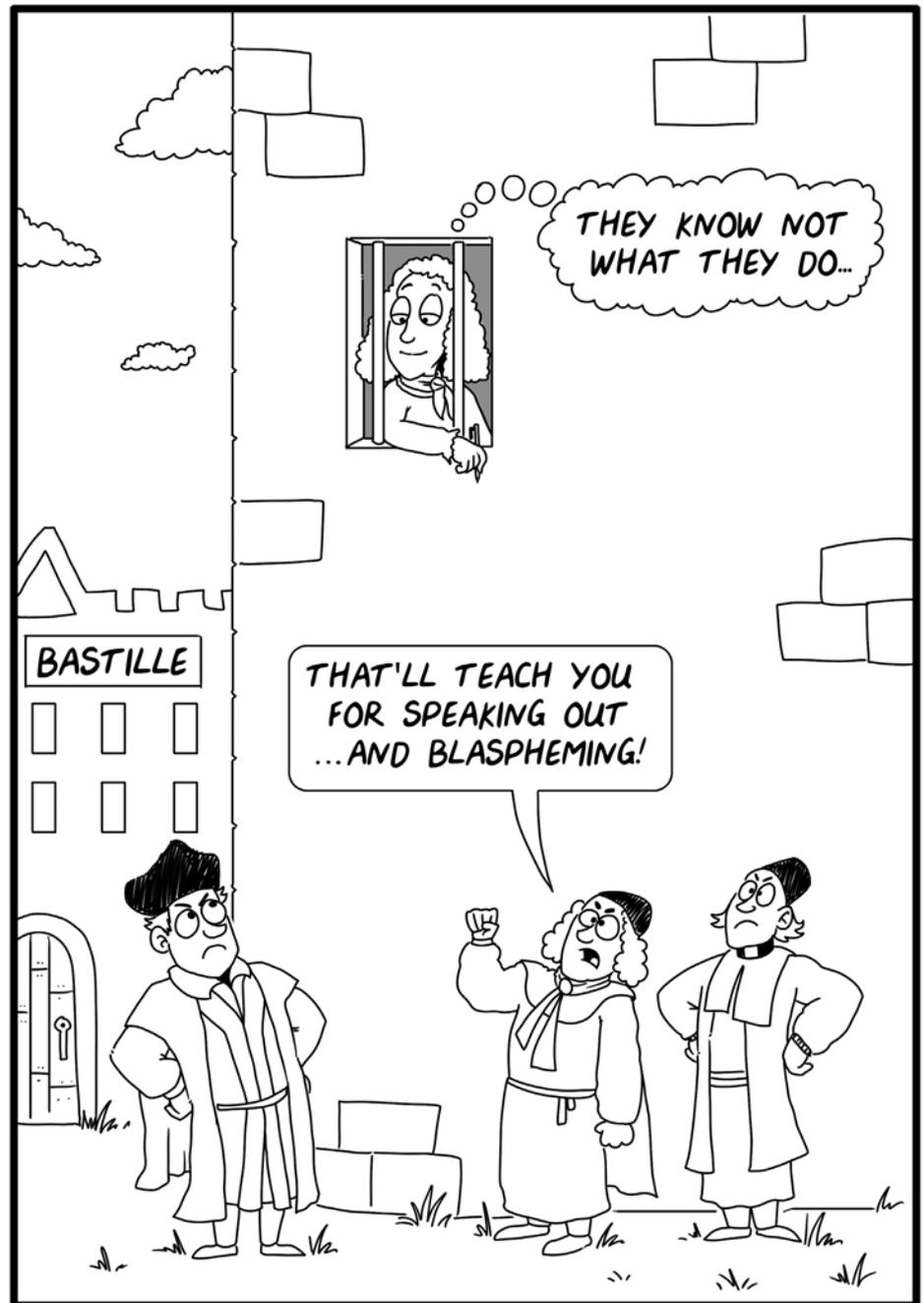
It was the French philosopher, writer, historian and satirical polemicist François-Marie Arouet (1694 – 1778) – better known by his literary name Voltaire – who in the mid-eighteenth century said:

“Those who can make you believe absurdities, can make you commit atrocities.”

My piece presents a small number of many examples in line with Voltaire’s thinking, with particular reference to religious indoctrination and abuse of religion. But first, something on Voltaire.

Voltaire was a prolific writer, producing many works in various literary forms. An outspoken advocate of civil liberties, he challenged the strict censorship laws of the day to criticize intolerance and the French institutions, including the Catholic Church. Voltaire got into trouble with the authorities which resulted in two imprisonments, including an eleven-month incarceration in the dreaded Bastille, and temporary exile to England.

While Voltaire was not expressing his absurdities/atrocities philosophy in today’s scientific or medical terms, he had the insight to realise that when those in authority (religious, military and political leaders, dictators, monarchs – sometimes these were the same people or worked hand-in-glove) pressured people to believe in “absurdities” they could also persuade the same people to obey their orders, and while doing so, if necessary, to commit “atrocities”. And he had the courage to say so.



Absurdities might include untested or unproven religious beliefs based in the ignorance and superstition from ancient times, the primacy of a religion or branch of it, along with the self-proclaimed infallibility of religious leaders and their self-appointed right to rule while claiming to represent their God on Earth. And crucially, the promise of an after-life – as long as one complied with scripture.

Christian leaders (and their proxies) over the centuries have used and abused their elevated status to indoctrinate their followers not just in purely religious dogma but also, and by extension, in an arrogant mix of racial and cultural superiority, and manifest destiny. Today, militant and other extremist groups abuse religious traditions when they spew out irrational arguments about fighting and

dying for their one-and-only God.

Atrocities have covered colonial conquests, slavery, incarceration and deportation (where punishment was overly severe), theft of land and resources, and the conversion-or-else of indigenous populations and others – for the benefit of state and church. Today, atrocities include those carried out by suicide killers and their controllers in attempts to seek their desired objectives.

### IN THE NAME OF GOD

From the original crusaders to today's religious fanatics, inhuman acts have been committed in the name of the deity they believe in.

### Onward Christian soldiers

The main Crusades – the most well-known ones to the Holy Land – were carried out with the imprimatur of the Roman Church from the late 11th century through the 12th century. However, Christians had been waging war against Muslims across Spain from the 8th century, and against European pagans and other “opponents” (including some Christians) from around the mid-12th century until the 14th century.

The Crusades were dreadful undertakings, often poorly organised and carried out by Christian armies comprising men-of-God and their followers, as well as knights, mercenaries, prostitutes, common people, families, and even children – over 50,000 of them, almost all of whom perished in distant lands before their teenage years.

As an incentive to participate, the popes promised freedom from all sin upon judgement day. The crusaders were led to believe that loot and fame could be gained, while cruel and evil acts against the non-believers would be pardoned. And should they die fighting for the cross martyr-hood and an after-life in a Christian heaven would be theirs – such was the persuasive power of the Church. It was a perilous formula based in vainglorious fantasy. But the religious heads could say whatever they wanted and it would be believed and acted upon. Today, however, it is plain to see that their pronouncements were bigoted and wishful guesswork, and selfish – to shore up their own positions.

The Crusades were a blend of holy war against the so-called infidel and a zealous quest for converts, wealth-accumulation, land-grabbing and to make up for past losses. Opportunities for conversion (forced or otherwise) provided a “justification” for

brutality; and bolstered by the premise of returning Jerusalem to the Christian fold.

From the First Crusade in 1095 – which reached its destination of Jerusalem in 1099 – inspired by Pope Urban II, to the Fifth Crusade – the “Children’s crusade” – in 1212 under the reign of (the inappropriately-titled) Pope Innocent III, these wasteful Christian escapades caused untold property damage and destruction, the deaths of hundreds of thousands of their own, and the “enemy”: Muslims and Arabs; and Jews, the “Christ killers”, who were encountered along the way.

The Crusades were anything but noble. They were massacres ordained by those who proudly, but ludicrously, believed they were God’s representatives and were protecting His Christian kingdom on Earth. Sir Steven Runciman wrote in *The Kingdom of Acre* that the Crusades were “a sin against the Holy Ghost.”

### False claims, wasted lives

As with the sham papal promises made to the crusaders, it is the deceitful guarantee of a glorious after-life which spurs on those prepared to die for a fanatical religious-based cause.



Thinking patterns stemming from the brainwashing of susceptible potential militants can result in the willing desire for suicide as a means of fulfilling the warped and disturbed sense of religious calling of the brainwashers and the gullibility of their immature devotees.

For example . . . Of the two “soldiers” who carried out the Normandy church atrocity in July 2016, the so-called Islamic State said it was “An operation in response to the call to target the countries of the crusader coalition.” And for the Paris attacks of late 2015: “A blessed war on crusader France.” (Prime Minister Turnbull claimed it was “The work of the Devil.”)

IS’s foot-soldiers who carry out their deadly ventures are almost exclusively male youths, often angry and disaffected, far from their historical and cultural homelands, poorly educated, ill-informed about the world around them, some with criminal backgrounds and/or undiagnosed mental conditions, and with little to be joyful about or hopeful for in their lives (domestic, social, vocational) – they make easy prey.

Their vulnerability and immaturity provide fertile ground for radicalisation by crazed “mentors”, who, acting from peer pressure or through anger and fear have been drawn into something in all likelihood beyond their comprehension . . . these cowardly types wanting to make an egotistical show of strength or to atone for prior losses or humiliations. They present platitudes masquerading as wisdom to mentally abuse and confuse their followers into the deluded thinking that they are freedom fighters, proud to kill in the name of their religion with the gift of paradise awaiting them.

Such is the blinkered devotion of those so coerced they could scarcely realise that their participation in such inhuman activities is futile and counter-productive. And a waste of precious lives – including their own. (They would benefit instead from psychological counselling, a balanced education and careful assimilation into society. No easy task.)

### **Imagine if . . .**

It is the belief in an after-life which makes

such crusader-like and suicidal behaviour possible. It is a conviction encouraged, indeed demanded, by religious authorities throughout human history . . . the *raison-d’être* of religious institutions and the means of survival for these bodies and their functionaries (one could hardly expect them to change their long-held and entrenched positions); and the grounds for fanatical religious hypocrites and pretenders who, through an imprudent sense of revenge or in a vain lust for power, are happy send others to almost certain death to cause fear and disorder amongst those they call their enemies – enemies they can “need” to justify their own positions.

On the other hand, those fighting for monarch or country are not intentionally wanting to die, but if it happens they may believe there is personal benefit post-death in what they imagine is a heaven, or as a martyr. After all, a proportion of military personnel are killed in active service. This aspect of death might be thought of as chanced or “Russian roulette”-type suicide, because some will die. And it has major implications regarding the armed forces – a topic beyond the scope of this piece.

Imagine if those who might join the military (or a millennia ago, the Crusades) didn’t believe they would have a beneficial after-life if they die fighting courageously in battle (or as often happens, from an accident, illness or “friendly fire”, or when captured) . . . might they want to risk their lives?

And those who are planning to die for what they imagine is a religious/God-based cause, whether by bombs or other weapons, or by law-enforcement officers trying to end their killing sprees – imagine if they, some barely out of childhood, didn’t believe they would go to a wonderful after-life for murdering and maiming others while shredding their own bodies . . . might they want to give up their lives?

### **IN THE NAME OF EMPIRE**

Christian states’ colonial conquests were based on an assumed belief of racial, cultural and religious superiority; encouraged by the church, and driven by greed and power lust.

### **Permission to plunder**

The year 1455 saw the beginnings of the “doctrine of discovery”, an insidious concept formalised and legitimised with the issue of papal bull “*Romanus Pontifex*” by Pope Nicholas V just a few months before he died. The bull – a decree based in absurd notions of religious and racial superiority – gave Europe’s Catholic nations authority over lands they “discovered”. In addition to land seizures, it allowed for the mistreatment of Indigenous peoples, non-Christians and other pagans of the occupied lands. Initially, *Romanus Pontifex* permitted the Christian Portuguese monarchy to occupy and seize western Africa. A later papal bull granted similar permission to Spain following Columbus’s 1492 voyage.

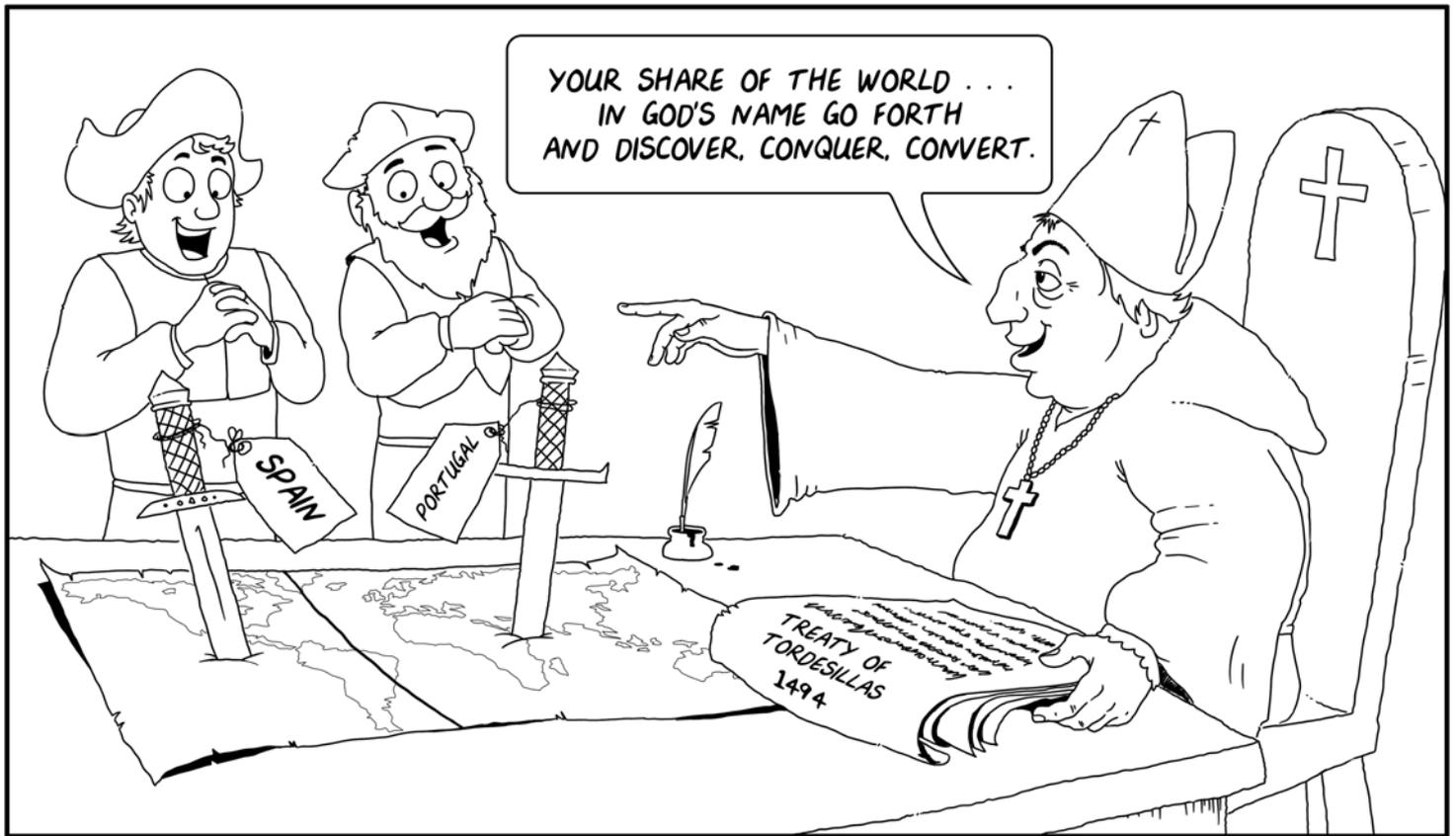
Competition and squabbles between these two Iberian empires led to the Treaty of Tordesillas in 1494 which, with the authority of Pope Alexander VI, divided the globe between Portugal and Spain and, with typical arrogance and intolerance of religious difference, stated that only non-Christian lands were covered under the doctrine of discovery.

In effect, the head of the all-powerful Catholic Church gave exclusive and legal rights under its canon law for these countries to conquer and colonise foreign lands – with all the detrimental effects this had on the inhabitants who had lived there for many centuries.

Other Christian European states followed suit using the precedent created by Portugal and Spain, seizing, occupying and looting lands in their quest for empire and profits; and converts, the pretext which, in their minds, somehow legitimised any associated atrocities. And there were many inflicted upon Indigenous people, often on a massive scale, including stealing or killing of stock, stealing from or burning of fields, removal from their lands, massacres and genocide.

The original Puritan settlers of the east coast of the North American continent imagined they had a covenant with God to appropriate the land they discovered. They, and those who followed, prayed and gave thanks to their God for their conquests which often left the former





occupants destitute and starving – or dead, particularly during the westward expansion of settlers.

The American Declaration of Independence in 1776 espoused that “All men are by nature equally free and

independent”, and as Thomas Jefferson said “. . . they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” Seems the founding fathers’ and God’s views didn’t extend to the Indigenous people.

Jefferson, in 1792, as secretary of state for the newly-founded United States of America (he would become its third president), claimed the doctrine of discovery to be international law applicable to the USA. And use it they did to the effect that exclusive property rights



came with the presence and desire of the occupying settlers who asserted their gains within the call of manifest destiny – as if God had granted their rights, as Christians, to over-run, domineer and control what became the USA . . . a nation bequeathed by God they said. (It’s still said today. It helped define the American character.) With spiteful irony, insult was added to injury when many Indigenous nations had their long-standing religious and cultural ceremonies banned, while treaties were broken one after another.

Only increasing the ignominy was the enslavement, for profit-making, of those also believed to be lesser beings: African slaves. Hardly ever could have Voltaire been more correct than with this form of organised and Christian-state-sanctioned cruelty. The legacy remains.

### Five hundred years on

The doctrine of discovery reared its head in 1982 in the United Nations General Assembly when Spain and the Vatican (a non-voting member) proposed that 1992 be celebrated as an “encounter” between Europe and the peoples of the Americas . . . Europeans having brought the gifts of civilisation and Christianity to the Indigenous peoples. The entire African delegation walked out.

Five years earlier the Indigenous Peoples of the Americas Conference proposed that 1992 be the UN year of mourning for the onset of colonisation, African slavery and genocide against Indigenous peoples of the Americas. Spain led the fight against this proposal.

Spain and the Vatican spent enormous

amount of money preparing for the quincennial celebrations of Columbus. In the end the organised celebrations pretty much flunked, due mainly to Indigenous protests. The USA, under George H. W. Bush, conducted some festivities. (Despite Columbus never having set foot on the North American mainland, his arrival to the Americas in October 1492 is celebrated annually as Columbus Day.)

A compromise was reached in the UN in 1992 when a Decade for the World’s Indigenous Peoples was established, to begin in 1994. Also in 1992 the Nobel Peace Prize went to Guatemalan Mayan leader and activist Rigoberta Menchú for her work on social justice and Indigenous rights. This did not go down well with Spain and the Vatican – seemingly still oblivious to the pain, loss and suffering initiated by Romanus Pontifex.

### ABSURDITIES, ATROCITIES AND THE LAW

A number of countries have severe laws against participating in or encouraging the activities of fanatical and militant terrorist organisations: groups or gangs which in some cases base their control (absurdities) and operations (atrocities) on extreme fundamental religious belief, or their contrived and nasty versions of it.

Might there be a need too for laws regarding those who promulgate foundational concepts without proper supportable evidence? That would keep them focussed on facts! And this wouldn’t just refer to the obvious trouble-makers, but all who present positions which are absurd beyond reasonable doubt –

notwithstanding free speech issues being upheld. The rationale here is not about automatically subduing or banning people or organisations which present apparently bizarre notions, instead for their own areas of responsibility to hold them to account: morally, ethically, truthfully, historically and legally – and if they wish to deviate from these parameters, public disclaimers would apply.

### SAY IT AGAIN

Thinking patterns established by repetitive listening, reading and reciting of unproven claims and wishful thinking from the superstitions of an ancient and ignorant past can lead to the committing of atrocities – Voltaire recognised this 250 years ago. Today, thanks to modern medical and scientific knowledge, we know he was right. Specifically . . . For those with a particular point of view, or having heard something that really grabs them for whatever reason, once they make a statement and repeat it often enough they come to believe it. For example: belief in an after-life, devotion to a fanatical cause, even a football team, the mental machinations of being “born again”, and so on. And, like a double whammy, for those inclined to hearing voices in their heads, these “noises” reflect thoughts, feelings and prejudices, only reinforcing convictions and hardening the positions they adopt.

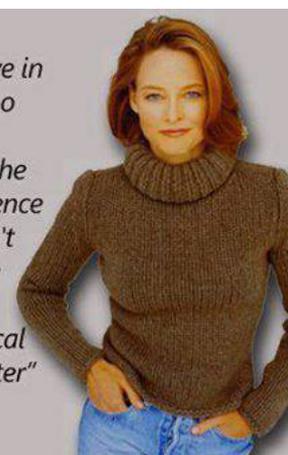
That the presentation of absurdities and the committing of related atrocities continue today is a demonstration of how the power of blind or misguided faith can, under certain circumstances, make people do terrible things.



**I don't find any difference between Islam and Islamic fundamentalists.**

I believe religion is the root, and from the root fundamentalism grows as a poisonous stem. If we remove fundamentalism and keep religion, then one day or other fundamentalism will grow again. I need to say that because some liberals always defend Islam and blame fundamentalists for creating problems. But Islam itself oppresses women. Islam itself doesn't permit democracy, and violates human rights.

*Taslima*  
- Taslima Nasreen



*“How could you ask me to believe in God when there’s absolutely no evidence that I can see? I do believe in the beauty and the awe-inspiring mystery of the science that’s out there that we haven’t discovered yet, that there are scientific explanations for phenomena that we call mystical because we don’t know any better”*

~ Jodie Foster ~



# Of God and Man

*Steve Stretton*

It has been said that God made man in His own image. To me it is clear that man made God in his image, for the God so many worship and have worshipped is clearly a construct of the male ego.

There are rules of personal conduct and relationships that His followers are bound to follow and obey. Some of these have a grounding in centuries of tradition, even millennia of historical experience and a real understanding of human behaviour. Unfortunately so many more seem to be there basically to entrench the power and control enjoyed by the ruling religious elites, the Rabbis, priests and Imams.

True, there are many good things to come out of religion. The primary one is the concept of charity, of giving assistance and succour to our fellow human beings. Also, religion can provide a foundation for the healthy growth of our children, for the development of compassion and empathy for others.

Yet it seems to me that the overwhelming purpose of most religions is one of power and domination. This struggle for control rages across the globe as competing sects battle for the hearts, minds and supposed souls not only of each other's faithful, but of everyone outside their own.

Why do we let these things happen? Why do we, supposedly rational beings, buy into the hype: the promises of Paradise, the dire warnings of Hell and the horrors of Purgatory after we die? Surely death is it? Our bodies decay to a pile of bones. The parts of us that hold our consciousness simply disappear. There's nothing left to conduct any form of existence afterward.

Yet so many want more. They need to believe in some form of life after death. It is a comfort to many that there may be something "out there" that will continue their lives as they have always known them. Most of us fear death; the cessation of existence and the end of all that we

have hoped for and dreamed of. Also for some, death is the ultimate injustice: when a lifetime of struggle and hardship is not rewarded in this existence, we desperately hope it to be in another.

But life is neither fair nor otherwise. It simply is. We exist because our parents came together and made us. Evolution has endowed us with the means and motives to procreate to extend our existence far beyond our simple beginnings. In early life, there were few variations. The evolution of the need, desire and compulsion to procreate has resulted in the diversity we see today.

Here I must distinguish between faith and religion. I see faith as an inner need to find, believe in and experience a form of our existence that is far greater than that which we see around us. Religion to me is the means, the constructs, the largely physical and intellectual support we build to aid us in our quest for that faith. The two are complimentary but not the same. Faith is the core of our need and desire, religion is the external structure we build to contain and even control that faith.

Religion is very much about control. External control of the actions, associations and even relationships of those who adhere to a particular faith, and internal control of the individual's thoughts, desires and behaviour.

What about the Rabbis, priests and Imams? Where do they fit in to the basic structures of their respective religions? How (and more particularly why) do they interact with their followers? What's in it for them? What's in it for their constituents?

On the positive side, they teach and demonstrate the means of living harmoniously with others. They exhort their followers to care for their less fortunate brethren. They encourage harmony and co-operation within the

family, and in the extended community. In other words, they attempt to create a society that is basically conducive to a coherent life, at least for the majority of their faithful.

On the negative side, all too often they can be totally intolerant of competing viewpoints. This intolerance has led to wars and atrocities against those who differ from the sanctioned ideas. Thus the Catholics murdered the Protestants, the Shia the Sunni and both Christians and Muslims set out to destroy the Jews. Lately this has also included attacking other groups such as the LGBTI community, both within and outside the particular religion. All of this has occurred in the name of the "one true God".

So religion can inspire the most heroic and compassionate acts. It can also demand the most cruel, diabolical and vicious ones as well. I contend that religion is the straitjacket of faith, and those who supply this straitjacket do so all too often out of a desire to fix and control the ideas of the religious to fit their own worldly, and other-worldly, views.

Do we need religion? Some would contend that we could not exist without it. That it creates an orderly and well-functioning society. I maintain that we need something more than religion. We need something that ensures that we can not only live in peace and cooperatively with one another, but that we can continue to question our own behaviour and ideas, and review and continuously improve on them. We might call this something a code of ethics, a blueprint for living. The advantage of a code of ethics is that we can examine it in the light of our collective experience and can debate the best way forward in any situation, the way forward that benefits all, or at least the vast majority, without leaving behind those least considered in society. So I contend we need more than religion can deliver. Where and how we might find it is a challenge to us all.

# Money and Religion

*Brian Morris*

The free tax ride for religious institutions in Australia is about 400 years past its use by date, argues Brian Morris.

In 1587, Dr John Bridges coined the phrase “A fool and his money are soon parted”. Just 14 years later Queen Elizabeth the First issued her 1601 Statute on Charities making “the advancement of religion” an act of ‘charity’, and free of all taxes. The church hierarchy were no fools – they and their accumulated church wealth would remain inseparable.

Australia inherited this 400-year-old statue at the time of colonization, and religion remains effectively tax-free – along with many quasi-religious activities which have no clearly defined charitable purpose. It’s an issue of increasing concern given the rising profile of churches in private education, private health, aged care, and a variety of commercial interests.

Churches demand their activities remain “outside the taxable economy” and this is the point of contention. Antiquated tax laws need to be revised – not necessarily overturned but modified in synch with changing attitudes towards religion. Greece has already acted – in 2010 they revoked many tax concessions enjoyed by the Greek Orthodox Church.

The Centre for Public Christianity (CPX), in a recent SMH article, contrived to defend the somewhat archaic tax-free status for all religions. The arguments by CPX are at best disingenuous and at worst dishonest when they boldly claim, “Churches aren’t businesses and they still deserve a tax break”.

Clearly, genuine Australian charities need tax relief, but only 20 per cent of the 54,000 charities actually provide services for people who are disadvantaged. Do we still need to reward churches that merely “advance religion”?

Is it not time for government, the public and media to think seriously about religious organisations that don’t provide any authentic charitable services – those

aged care, wineries, and all the other enterprises that operate virtually tax-free.

For whose benefit do all these religious publicists and promoters exist? Do they gain tax dispensation simply for recruitment, where congregations are in sharp decline? Only 8 per cent of Australians now attend church regularly.

But the crux of this whole taxation problem is accountability.



What are the churches of every denomination really worth, together with their quasi-religious ventures? What is the value of all their vast holdings in property, land, assets, investments, and collective incomes? And should some small part of their operations now contribute to the much wider community in some form of taxation?

evidently operating as a business, or who only promote religion?

Does CPX truly advocate tax havens for the Church of Scientology, or a host of cults like Agape, and all the evangelical groups whose primary role is to make schoolchildren “disciples of Christ”? Does the Centre for Public Christianity itself – along with the Australian Christian Lobby, and all other religio-political lobbyists – believe they should be tax-exempt?

For CPX to equate these powerful organisations with scout groups, historical societies or art galleries – that serve a far broader community – is quite unjust and dishonest. Nor do they compare with the countless church businesses in food, commercial services, health, education,

We simply don’t know these precise figures, although estimates run into many billions. The truth is that religious organisations are not required to submit annual reports to the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC). Some churches may well pay selected state or local taxes but we don’t know! It’s time we did!

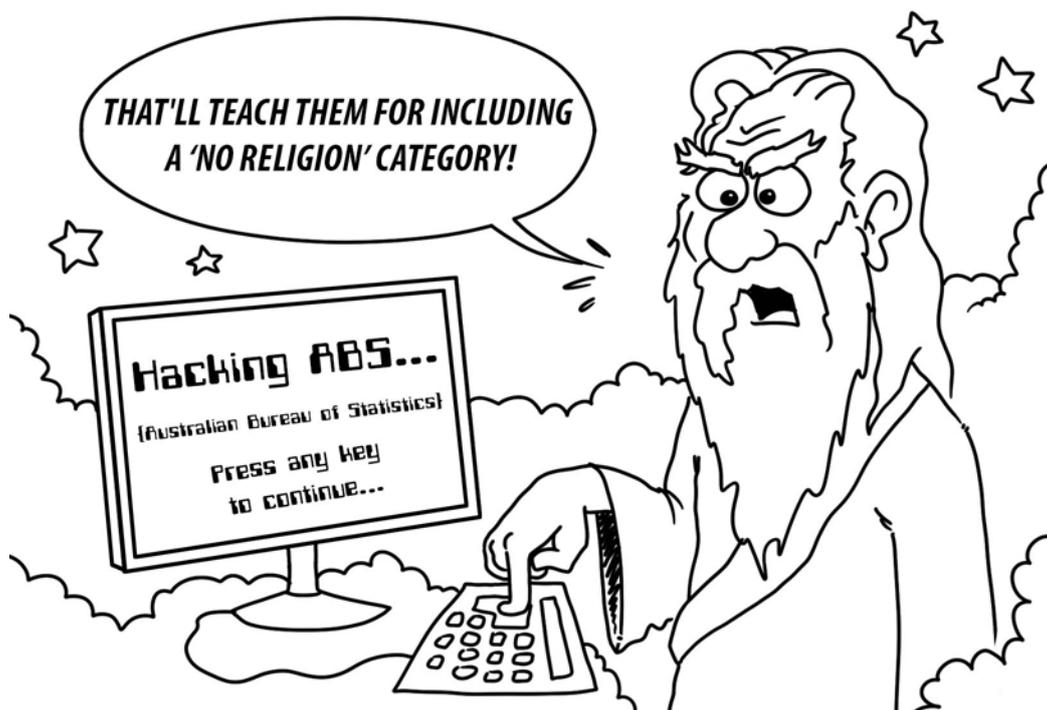
Public debate on the whole question of religious tax exemptions and changes to the Charities Act are long overdue. Four centuries on from the Statute of Elizabeth, citizens should know the wealth and income of all Australian churches, their affiliates, and the organisations promoting religion. The ‘religious industry’ needs to become fully accountable.

Certainly, a tax exemption for merely “advancing religion” is an anachronism in today’s secular society – and particularly when other countries have already moved to make churches more financially and socially liable. Most noticeably this happened in Scandinavia where each country is more than 80 per cent secular and the last vestige of their Lutheran churches are audited each year and pay all national taxes.

In Greece, the Greek Orthodox Church is now required to pay taxes. These include a tax on their substantial real estate; a 20 per cent tax on rents they receive from their real estate; a 3 per cent tax on leased lands; a meagre 0.5 per cent on donations bequests and inheritances; and the church now pays stamp duty fees on the sale of its properties.

Arguments from vested religious interests, to keep Australian churches tax-free, have become tiresome. Churches no longer have a vast rank and file, only a privileged hierarchy intent on defending the indefensible. There is inescapable logic why entrepreneurial religion – that which is not self-evidently charitable – should pay a fair tax. All churches must be required to report annually their total assets and full income from all sources.

From there, rational decisions can be made on the amount that churches must contribute by way of taxation. The Greek model may well be a good place to start.



# Islam and the Rise of Barbarism

*Neil Godfrey*

The shocking injustices and brutality in the Muslim world that we hear about far too often are not isolated acts of a few troubled psychopaths. They are systemic and carried out with considerable (though fortunately not always unanimous) popular support.

## **Boiling the frog**

Each act of barbarism becomes a historical precedent for further similar acts and for increasingly easier public acceptance. (As for indoctrination, we are also looking at how that works first hand.) Each act becomes another topic of community discussion; explanations and interpretations that emerge become part of the social group's identity and moral foundations. Theological perspectives of these same events are meanwhile being transmitted through generations of families, communities and institutions. The point is that community interpretations and practices adapt, evolve, change emphases and focus over time and that's true of most societies throughout history. So the question that arises is, What historical changes have been emerging in "recent" history in the Muslim world? And when we say "recent" we are reaching back to the eighteenth century when European powers made their first takeovers of large numbers of Muslim populations (e.g. India, Egypt).

## **Three responses to Western colonialism**

Saudi Arabia used its windfall from rising oil prices in the 1970s to propagate its vicious brand of wahhabist Islam. In addition to wahhabism Fadl points his finger at two other strands of Islamic thought, the first being apologetics. Let's take them in order.

### *Response 1: Apologetics*

Conquered peoples typically find ways to resist their conquerors even if only by symbolic means. Recall the way some Jewish leaders responded to the conquest of Judea by the Greco-Romans who justifiably took great pride in their cultural achievements. "Plato is so wonderful?" some Jews (and subsequently some Christians) challenged.

"Ha! Plato filched all of his ideas from Moses!"

Among the conquered and humiliated Muslims were those who responded in a similar way to their Western overlords. Anything of value that the Europeans had produced was thought by Muslim apologists to have owed its origins to Islamic science or philosophy or political ideas.

So it was that Western orientalist (those who looked down upon oriental culture, ways and beliefs with a certain contempt) found themselves mirrored by Muslim apologists who in turn looked down upon Westerners with the same disdain. That's one time-honoured way of a defeated people holding on to their self-worth and dignity.

But that kind of response has a serious down-side: it ossifies one's religion.

Religion is no longer an evolving and adapting system that is constantly being critically studied and subject to adaptation in the face of new circumstances. An idealized construct is created, and this is sanctified and set in stone as a foundational golden age. Anything that falls short of that ideal is the fault of the enemy. Trying to cope with the humiliation that came with European conquest and hegemony some Muslims found refuge in a conviction that their ancient texts, ways, beliefs had from the beginning of time been superior and well in advance of anything associated with their new rulers.

So for Muslim apologists the superiority of Islam became a mirror reaction to their European masters' presumptions of superiority. As cultural arrogance made it impossible for Europeans to bend and adapt so the same arrogance of apologists made it impossible for them to analyse and adapt their own traditions and belief systems.

And if there is nothing to reflect upon except to bask in the superiority of one's beliefs then anyone can become an

authority. The true Muslim intellectuals are marginalized into irrelevancy. The door is open to anyone becoming "the voice" of "truth". The solutions become easy. If the Muslim peoples are under the boot of the aliens, unable to match the Westerners in political and military might and so liberate themselves, it is because Muslims are not faithful and devout enough.

The way to liberation and self-respect, apologists believed, was to become more fervently dedicated to the myth of the old ways. And those old ways proved to have even preceded the best the West had to offer such as democracies and human rights.

Islamic apologists were ultimately motivated by nationalistic aspirations for political, social and cultural independence from the West.

### *Response 2: Salafism*

Whereas apologetics was a direct response to colonial rule, salafism emerged out of apologetics but in the post-colonial era. When independent nations experienced the failure of their ruling elites to bring about the reforms and better life — "jobs, economic development, welfare for citizens and equality of citizenship" — that they had promised.

Building on apologetic thought the salafists concluded that this failure was the consequence of using secular laws instead of the laws of God.

Like the apologists these early salafists believed that the Islamic religion was entirely compatible with modernism. Recall that the apologists argued that modern western ideals like democracy, constitutional governments, socialism etc were all to be found in early Islam. What was required of modern Muslims was to interpret their sacred texts in the context and according to the needs of adapting to the modern world. Moreover, there was no single interpretation that could demand a monopoly on "the correct interpretation".



Salafism as it originally developed maintained that, on all issues, Muslims ought to return to the original textual sources of the Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet and interpret them in the light of modern needs and demands without being slavishly bound by the interpretive precedents of earlier Muslim generations. In this respect, it was a distinctive intellectual project. Salafism advocated a kind of interpretive community in which anyone was qualified to return to the divine texts and interpret their messages. It was not hostile to competing Islamic juristic traditions, Sufism or mysticism.

Further, Salafi ideology concerned itself with making Islam into a political force that might transform the ummah (the universal community of Muslims) and with providing a solid basis for Islamic identity in the Muslim struggle against neo-colonialism and the underdevelopment of Islamic lands. As a result, it essentially became a part of Muslim identity politics.

Maududi (from the region that is now Pakistan) went a step further by setting out detailed rules and practices that he believed all Muslims should follow to clearly mark them as identifiably different from other peoples. One such requirement was a new "economic system" that banned usury, although in reality there was nothing particularly valid about it as an "economic system" as such.

Seeking new ways to define one's own identity is a natural response when any people's identity takes a battering from losing clashes with foreign cultures.

In its original form salafism may have had some potential to work in a positive direction for Muslim communities, but it came under the influence of (and eventually became identified with) a third response to colonialism, wahhabism.

### **Response 3: Wahhabism**

Wahhabism was the most vicious and intolerant of the three responses to colonialism and at first appeared to be the least likely ever to spread its influence beyond a single group of Arab tribes.

Ironically it was not Western colonialism that was the initial target but the rule of Ottoman Turkey over Arabia.

Wahhabi theology was founded by the eighteenth-century Arabian evangelist Abd al-Wahhab (d. 1792) as a response to the Ottoman rule of Arabia. With puritanical zeal, al-Wahhab sought to rid Islam of all 'corruptions' and 'aberrations', such as mysticism, intercession, intellectualism, sectarianism and rationalism, in order to restore its pristine purity. He proclaimed that Islamic purity was reclaimable with a literal implementation of Islamic texts and the commands and precedents of the Prophet and through a strict adherence to correct ritual practice.

Wahhabism resisted the indeterminacy of the modern age by retreating to a strict literalism in which the sacred texts became the sole source of legitimacy. Any form of moral thought and ideas not completely dependent on these texts were treated as a form of idolatry. Wahhabism viewed rational inquiry with deep suspicion and hostility. It rejected any attempt to interpret Islamic law that would accommodate modern conditions and exigencies and treated classical jurisprudential tradition as a corruption of the true and authentic Islam. Religiously puritanical, it rejected all interpretations of the sacred texts except those of wahhabism.

Followers were confined to the tribes of Najd who became notorious for several brutal rebellions in the nineteenth century. Other Muslims despised wahhabism as a fanatical sect and it seemed destined to remain confined to the Najd tribes until those warriors became a useful ally to assist a certain Abd al Aziz ibn Saud to become the ruler of Arabia and establish the Saudi dynasty. Even then there was little prospect of wahhabism ever attracting any following outside Saudi Arabia until 1972 when the price of oil skyrocketed. We have covered the way Arabia used its financial windfall to spread wahhabist ideology throughout much of the Muslim world .

But wahhabism could was a difficult sell. It began by riding on the back of salafism. Salafism was open to alternative interpretations of Islam and their texts, and appeared to support very similar goals of a restored and respected Islamic identity, so wahhabism was given free cover for its propaganda. Eventually salafism and wahhabism became virtually indistinguishable.

### **Putting all of this together**

Apologists in response to western colonialism asserted the superiority of a mythical original Islam and closed their minds to modernity;

Salafists grew out of apologists as a response to the failure of post-colonial societies to deliver on the promises of democracy, equal rights and social welfare, and sought to establish idealistic Islamic states that came to terms with these values;

Wahhabism originated as an Arabian tribal response to Turkish rule and was the most intolerant of any of the responses. It rode the back of a political revolution in Arabia and then the financial resources from increased oil prices to spread its influence throughout much of the Muslim world, at first under the more benign guise of salafism.

### **Salafabism**

Salafabism is a term coined by Abou El Fadl to describe the ideology prevailing today that is a blend of salafism and wahhabism. According to Abou El Fadl, characteristic features of salafabism (combination of salafism and wahhabism) include the following:

- a profound alienation from institutions of power in the modern world and from Islamic heritage and tradition
- a supremacist puritanism that compensates for feelings of defeatism, disempowerment and alienation
- a belief in the self-sufficiency of Islamic doctrines and a sense of self-righteous arrogance vis-a-vis the 'other'
- the prevalence of patriarchal, misogynist and exclusionary orientations, and an abnormal obsession with the seductive power of women
- the rejection of critical appraisals of Islamic traditions and Muslim discourses
- the denial of universal moral values and rejection of the indeterminacy of the modern world
- use of Islamic texts as the supreme regulator of social life and society
- literalist, anti-rational and anti-interpretive approaches to religious texts.

Today Islamism/Salafabism has come to dominate large sections of various Muslim nations and that's why we are hearing the horror stories coming out of certain regions in countries like Pakistan.

# Eat, Pray, Kill

*Majid Darwood*

It was a busy Monday morning rush hour in Melbourne. I was driving to the airport in the cold and gloomy winter. With me was my 16-year old daughter, Soraya. Being school holidays, she wanted to catch up with her inter-state cousins. As I was driving, I couldn't help but think of the plight of those who were at the airport in Istanbul, Turkey recently. The carnage left 41 innocent people dead, over 200 injured, and many hundreds emotionally damaged. This was not caused by human error or some mechanical fault of some piece of equipment or in the building, but a calculated act of terror executed by three men.

It is not okay to lie, but people do lie. From time to time don't we lie to our bosses claiming to be unwell just to avoid going to work? What about George Bush Snr's, "Read my lips" or John Howard's, "never, never, GST"? My problem is not about people lying, but God and his religions' haphazard claims and their calculated lies. I guess, that's what religions do, or shall we say, they have to do in order to survive? God has been systematically deceiving people, with one religion after another, not like the genuine Windows updates, but using a divide and rule strategy armed along with big fat lies. God is the father of all lies, not a role-model for any of us. Let's not get fooled by claims such as, God of truth, the one who cannot lie (Titus 1:2; 2 Timothy 3:16). Because God lies to control the suckers like us, parents also lie to control their children.

And of course, armed with false claims and arrogance, some religions also drive hate, suspicion and terrorism, even though they claim to be peaceful.

"Dad, do you have a favourite tree?"

I wasn't expecting such a random question from Soraya. Was I supposed to have a favourite tree? Who does? Perhaps, it was a new 'cool thing' amongst the contemporary teenagers? Of course,

during my younger days I had a favourite dog, the Alsatian, but my parents said I could not have dogs as pets because they were not clean and hindered our daily prayers. They also believed that the angels don't like to visit homes where there are dogs.

Being the young rebel of the house, I often sneaked out to a non-Muslim school friend's home to play with their two dogs. God had barred Muslims from making friends with the Christians and the Jews but, how was I supposed to know this at that young age? For me, experiencing the unconditional love of the dogs was a wonderful feeling. My parents often got angry with me when I disagreed with them, but not the dogs.

Thank you God for not messing up the brain of this friendly animal. Sometimes I wonder whether we got the spelling wrong way around for DOG and GOD, but then would that offend the truly loving dogs?

"No darling, I don't have any. Do you have one?" I asked, glancing towards Soraya without losing focus on the wet road.

"Yep," she paused for a moment and continued, "During my younger days, my favourite tree was the willow, but now it is the big, old, oak tree. But I also have a soft spot for the magnolias."

"Of course darling, I like the oak trees too," I agreed.

I decided not to bore Soraya talking about her school. Instead, we discussed her proposed visit to Africa. She was very excited about it, particularly joining her two friends, Nadia and Amanda. But I was worried about the safety of the girls.

The domestic terminal was busy. However, I waited till Soraya checked in to bid goodbye to her before I drove off to work. I had a busy day ahead.

## **HONOUR KILLING**

Life for all of us comes with humps and bumps. Some people go with the flow, while others like to challenge. That's the way life goes, but not when someone is dictating how you should live your life? Why on earth, I wonder, some people force the ancient cultural and religious rules and rituals on others who simply want to move on?

One would assume that families that eat together and pray together would stay together. Apparently not so for some families. This is probably because they listen to too much of nonsensical religious talks. There is a lot of that sort of silly preaching going on out there. For instance, Moses divided the sea to help him and his followers escape, Jesus died at the cross and came alive three days later, that birds dropped stones on the marching elephants to defeat the army that came to capture the sacred temple, Ka'ba, in Mecca. Mohamed took an extra-terrestrial expedition on a Pegasus to the heaven to meet God, and so on. Fascinating stories, but they are good only for the little kids!

If God was so powerful and able to direct some birds to carry tiny stones to scare huge animals like the elephants, why didn't he stop the recent earthquake in Italy that killed almost 300 innocent people? How did he divide the sea to save a few people, but he couldn't or wouldn't stop the rising sea that killed many thousands of children and adults in December 2004?

I begin to wonder, who the hell is God, and why don't his followers get it?

The so-called honour killing, for instance. 'Honour' is dictated by the local cultures and the 'norms' of the communities, and over the years, it has also been influenced by religions. The 'honour situation' changes those who would otherwise be noble people to become beasts. Ironically, they end up carrying out the most treacherous acts on their own family members to please the community and the God they worship.



Take the recent honour-killing in Pakistan, where a young woman, Qandeel Baloch, was strangled to death by her own brother, Waseem. He said his motivation was the taunting and embarrassment his sister brought upon their family. So, he slipped her a sedative and strangled her. How cruel was that? No consideration was given to the fact that when she was 17, she was forced by her parents to marry a much older man and she had a son who is now motherless. Yes, there was culture, religion and God somewhere in his reasoning and justification. In June, a father in Pakistan set his daughter on fire because she eloped. In July Samia Shahid, a 28 year old woman from Bradford, UK, is suspected of being a victim of honour killing during her visit to Pakistan. Her father, uncle and ex-husband connives to execute the murder. Even a Punjab policeman was involved in this sick game.

It is believed, an estimated 1,000 Pakistani women are killed this way every year. But, this is not a problem for Pakistan alone. In 2010, a Turkish father helped by the grandfather buried his 16 year old daughter alive in their backyard because she was talking to the boys in the neighbourhood? They had to eliminate this young girl to 'preserve their honour'. Voilà, that simple, just kill her? I don't think anyone would want to see this sick behaviour even in a movie.

Let's be honest and not stereotype that all honour killings happen only amongst the Muslim families. It happens in other cultures too, for example, in India amongst the Hindu families.

But, I can't understand why girls suffer more deaths than the boys in such 'dishonour' situations? One of the definitions of 'honour killing' (noun) I came across was as follows: the killing of a relative, especially a girl or woman, who is perceived to have brought dishonour on the family. This definition was probably influenced by the honour killings taking place largely in countries where there is no liberal society for women.

Of course, it happens in the US too but if you look through the names, they are migrants from countries where there is no such liberal society and the offenders are predominantly of Muslim background. Is that any surprise, considering the high

level of rules and rituals imposed by Islam? Ironically, these families eat, pray, and kill

### **BOLLYWOOD DRAMA**

Sometimes, we all have some experiences in our lives that mirror dramatic fictional Hollywood and Bollywood dramas. Unfortunately, some personal dramas are distressing.

It is with a heavy heart that I narrate the following story. About two decades ago, my own aunt, a staunch Muslim, went psycho when she found out that her only son was going to the movies with a non-Muslim girl. So, she picked up a knife from the kitchen, and in a dramatic fashion, marched to her son's bedroom, held the knife against her own throat and threatened to slit it and bleed to death. She demanded that he stopped seeing his girlfriend, 'unless, you don't wish to see your mother alive'. Holy Moses!

This pathetic behaviour was a perfect storyline for a blockbuster Bollywood movie, but the guy knew his mother's hysterical behaviour was real. His father was equally a religious nut-bag. For sensible parents family is first, but not for him. Allah came first, Koran second, prophet third, mosque fourth, and his own family very low in the pecking order. There is an Islamic scholar well known for debating against Christianity who openly claimed that he loved the prophet Mohamed (passed away about 1,500 years ago) more than his own parents. I was not surprised his audience applauded him with loud claps, but I question, what sort of inspiration is that?

My cousin's misery started during his teenage years. He was gradually and deeply affected by his parents constantly monitoring his religious activities, or lack of it, but his mother's outrageous suicide threat was the final nail in his coffin. Eventually, to satisfy his parents, he married a Muslim girl of Arab descent but that marriage lasted only a few months. While his crazy mother succeeded, her poor son ended up mentally wrecked. Subsequently, my aunt died from brain cancer leaving behind my cousin, who locks himself up in a rabbit-hole and lives in seclusion from the rest of the world. He doesn't talk to anyone at home, not even to his beautiful little nephews and nieces. Thanks to his mother, his life has now shrunk to almost nothing. This was a family that ate together and prayed together.

Once I met a Muslim visitor from overseas who was an international test-cricketer in the 1970s. I learnt that since retiring from cricket he became a successful businessman. He bragged about his wonderful life of being a ladies-man (even after his marriage) and so, I thought his world-views would be liberal, but I was wrong. At one point during our coffee, we talked about mixed marriages. I was surprised when he said, with pride, how he threatened his son, and also confronted his non-Muslim girlfriend. He had demanded that his son end his relationship or face serious consequences including being cut off from the family and losing his share of the family wealth. He portrayed his son as a talented individual who was managing one of his businesses. A good son but not good enough because he was seeing a non-Muslim girl? This hypocritical and morally corrupt father who admitted to me cheating on his wife found it necessary to reject his own son indiscriminately, unless he agreed to dump his non-Muslim sweetheart? That was outrageous!

How can anyone justify this type of thoughtless family behaviour, influenced by religion, culture and above all, ignorance? They turn the ideal into stupidity, and tend to turn the ordinary good people into monsters to commit atrocities, including honour killings.

The two stories described above are minuscule in the outrageous world of harassment, intimidation and murder of hundreds of thousands of people by their own family members.

Sadly, the stories are similar amongst so many of the so-called 'educated' migrants who have come to Australia from third world countries looking for better life, and yet, they continue to cling on to their old dust.

Spare a thought too for all those gay men and women - what they have to put up with in over 70 countries - discrimination, harassment, jail and even death, simply because they were born having sexual preferences different to others. In fact, almost all the countries that enforce the death penalty for homosexuality are Islamic countries. Dear God, what have you done to your servants?

It seems Indonesia is also flirting with the idea of criminalising same-sex relationships. This is what happens when governments surrender to the Islamic groups and scriptures created by some medieval illiterate folks. That's not progressive thinking, just going sideways like some little beach crabs, "Yes, we like to be a progressive country but we also like to latch on to the ancient dark messages".

The Australian Federation of Islamic Council runs six schools across the country. A report in *The Australian* (8-8-16) stated that students have been strictly reminded, as 'clearly spelt out in the Koran and Hadiths', that sex is only between a husband and a wife who are of the opposite gender and we have absolutely no mandate to change the grace of God. With people born as gay (beyond their control) now coming to the open and seeking rights, shouldn't there be a fatwa accepting such same sex relationships?

While the Rights Groups were able to successfully challenge the Burkini ban in the West, in the oppressed Muslim countries you will end up in jail just for speaking up against the discriminatory laws. You can even be executed. The French Council of the Muslim Faith hailed the recent court ruling as a "victory for common sense". Wouldn't it be nice if the Arabs reciprocate and respected the rights of those local and tourist non-Muslims and atheists in their countries - to dress the way they are used to and to choose a God other than Allah? That will also be a huge victory for common sense. I cannot see this happening in a million years.

### LINE OF CONTROL

Churches around the world often claim that Christianity is a symbol of hope and Jesus is the only hope because they know very well that this mantra is very effective for control and the manipulation of people. Preachers often emphasise, "Draw close to God, and he will draw close to you" (James 4:8). That's not wisdom, that's manipulation.

Religions don't inspire us to do greater things in life. They don't offer advice to live a happy and healthy life. They simply

make rules for us and don't explain whether it is good for us to fast, or pray or whatever. It simply orders us to do it without questioning the rationale.

Islam is no exception. It relies heavily on its rules and rituals to manipulate and control people. It uses the Koran, hadiths, sharia laws, fatwas and so many other ancillary rulings and decisions made-on-the-go to dictate to people how they should live their lives. Compared to other religions, Islam is a religion that demands 'give more' for God, even though there is nothing in return from God apart from dubious promises such as, "I will look after you after your death". No evidence, but works well in faith-based arguments. Unlike other religions, Islam has far more rules and rituals and most are quite rigid. As such, it is not unusual for parents to use the rules of their (default) birth religion as a template to define the future directions of their own children.

Remember, dreams can come true, and that is what we aim for. Dreams can also generate motivation. Unfortunately, for some children, their dreams are dictated by their parents. Some parents don't let their children to be the best at something they are best at. You can see this happening even in the First-world Australia amongst some migrant communities. Despite setting foot in Australia, they are still looking at the mirage in the desert. With religion in their own superiority complex and righteousness, they launch strong lines of control over their children.

These parents willingly plot to deceive their own children. They conduct their family environment in a manner that is oppressive and unfairly prejudicial. When their children cross the line, they take drastic measures, including, but not limited to, shipping their teenage children, under some pretext, back to their native countries and leave them there until they are 'reformed' under the strict 'guidance' of grandparents, uncles and aunts.

An idea is one thing but deception is another.

Essentially, these young seekers get trapped in the dark layers of ignorance that bind the community tightly like cement and end up with uncertainties and confusions in their otherwise promising paths. This is

because their migrant parents don't want to give-up their expired belief systems and their cultural fringes. As a result, they live in fears and insecurities that don't really exist. They don't realise that just because their stone-aged culture and religion said that something is good, it isn't necessarily so. Instead of learning and understanding their new modern environment and liberating themselves, these parents are focussing on building concrete blocks around their children. This is no wisdom, just a very wrong idea, confusing their children expected to live in two colliding worlds at the same time. It's them saying, "We are righteously entitled to abuse our own children".

Such is the absurdity religions and some cultures do to otherwise intelligent migrants in Australia. Ironically, these abusive parents eat and pray together with their children!

### PRACTICALITY

Islam is a continuously simmering religion, from the day it was proclaimed by Mohamed about 1,500 years ago, to the present day.

As a rule, if religions are perfect and practical then there should be no room for misinterpretation by the ordinary people and terrorists alike. And so, there should be less room for conflicts. But religions are neither perfect, nor practical, especially Islam.

The Koran is not short of verses that are confusing, unnecessary and ungodly leaving room for diverse interpretations. This explains why Muslims in Pakistan, practised Islam different to Indians, Arabs or an Africans. Even within the same country there are different kinds of Islam. If all of the Muslims across the world are following the same Koran and the teachings of the same prophet then why should there be any difference at all?

So, is it any surprise Muslims are killing Muslims, for instance, in the continuing bloodbaths amongst the Shia and Sunni Muslims? These two groups began their conflict soon after their prophet died, and they are still killing each other for survival and dominance. They are so divided, there is no chance of them reconciling, leaving the rest of the community to laugh for ever



Rigid rules, for example, prohibiting interest on loans, makes it so hard for the Muslims to manage their finances in Australia. I know a few friends, very religious in all other ways, but are into commerce have said, "How are we to survive without borrowing from the commercial banks?" The Koranic ban also left the Muslim migrants in the lurch unable to buy houses. But now, I believe, there is some fatwa (decisions made by some bearded mullahs – who reinterpret scriptures as you go) allowing them to borrow from commercial banks to buy houses. These fatwas are nothing but complete breach of the laws of the Lord, but who cares? Rules are there to break any way, if you have the guts. Once, I heard a conversation at a dinner party that this fatwa sanctions the purchase of only one house per family. So, if you bought two, you have not only gone against God but also against the mullahs. You are in serious trouble mate!

Every time I pull out two eggs from the fridge and cook them to feed my 15 month old boy, my thoughts are with all those poor and hungry Muslims God expects to fast for 30 days every year. Yep, they have to fast just like the rich Bollywood stars. Didn't God know that hunger is the world's number one health risk? So, it is needless to say, the compulsory fasting imposed on the poor people is an insensitive and unkind decree made by God. This is unforgivable.

Yet, we are led to believe that God is the most loving and compassionate being. The Bible assures us that no person is beyond God's help – "The God of all comfort, who comforts us is all our trials," (2 Corinthians 1:3, 4). Is he really?

The compulsory daily prayers are another area God has failed to be crystal clear. God has used gobbledegook language to demand that Muslims must pray several times, every day. So, while some people pray when convenient to them, others stop all their activities for prayers. They pray on the streets, airports, office buildings, at other people's homes during dinner parties, and so on. Once, I was with a friend at the SCG watching cricket. A guy came up to us and asked if we knew where the prayer room was?

During a cricket match at another stadium I saw two men praying on filthy ground. People also stop their cars on the interstate highways and pray on the roadside. How desperate is this God, I wonder?

### **WANTING TO KNOW**

Human intelligence is sparking now like never before. People think for themselves, and instead of looking upwards for guidance and solutions, the modern society look sideways. Whilst the older generation is happy to listen to the nonsense delivered at the Churches and mosques, their children listened only to what made sense to them. For the younger generation, it does not matter from what authority they came from; authority is not the truth, rather truth is authority.

They like to ask questions and are not afraid to ask questions. They want answers that make sense. Once, I was filled with shame listening to a preacher at a small migrant gathering. He stated, amongst other rubbish, that "by performing certain prayers, God will ensure that there will be light inside our graves, whilst other dead bodies will be in blinding darkness." Wow, and what is 'blinding darkness' anyway? Why do we need light in our grave?

My point is simple. We know that human brain is the most advanced gadget on this planet. It is beyond limitations, and so why should we allow it to retard by listening to such crap?

To want to know is a fundamental need within the human being, a gift of the human nature and should be cherished. What is useful today may not be useful tomorrow. Young children in modern times, unlike their parents and grandparents, have access to a variety of information and other materials. The internet has opened the world for people to acquire information previously not accessible. Young people are eager to find logically correct and scientifically verifiable answers.

When I questioned my religion during my school days I was told, "This is a gift from Allah that you were born a Muslim. Fear Allah and obey Allah." I was told that God is everywhere, but

our eyes cannot see him. Needless to say, this type of stupid claims leave the young seekers' predicament pathetic. The more searching questions I asked, the more I was in the bad books of my elders. But for me, as long as the teenage blood was flowing through my veins, I did not give up on seeking answers.

Luckily, I was helped by leaving my country at an early stage thereby moving away from the shackles of my controlling family and the influence of the local community. Had I migrated along with my parents, I would still be a robot like them. Thankfully, I realised that allowing my mind to think freely was the biggest freedom I have achieved in my life. Thank you Australia.

Why say, "I am a believer and so I don't ask questions"? This would have been an acceptable life for thousands of years since the advent of Adam, but not anymore. If this is the way you still want to function in the 21st century, especially after moving to a First-world country like Australia, wouldn't it be better for you to find a mountain, climb to the top and do nothing else except to worship God? But, don't expect God to come down to feed you? He is a terrible liar and wouldn't care if you are dead or alive.

If you are in ignorance you must suffer. Religions are at the receiving end of so much flak these days because they are still in ignorance. Wake up and break your karma! Dear God, please help your faithful followers.

Here is the deal.

Let's eat together, let's pray together but let's not quash the seekers. Importantly, let's not kill fellow human beings in the name of culture or religion, either as an act of honour or as an act of terror.

And, of course, let's not sacrifice animals to God. He is not going to eat them, so why waste an animal's life?

Today and always, *Insha Allah* - God willing.

# Mixing Sense With Nonsense

*Christis G. Tombazos*

*Associate Professor of Economics, Monash University  
Melbourne, Australia*

Despite the mainstream view that, on balance, the Bible promotes good morals the scientific and historical evidence is to the contrary. The problem is not, of course, the golden rule (Matthew 7:12) or the message of loving thy neighbor (Mark 12:31). The problem is that the Bible makes no distinction between sense and nonsense. The golden rule falls in the sense category. The imaginary “sins” of pre-marital sex (e.g., Corinthians 7:2), working on the Sabbath (Exodus 31:15), homosexuality (e.g., Leviticus 18:22) and wearing clothes of mixed fabrics (e.g., Leviticus 19:19), to name a few examples, are, of course, nonsense. By conflating sense with nonsense the Bible reduces the importance of the former and elevates the significance of the latter creating a moral compass that is anything but moral. In other words, the lessons of the Bible do not center on minimizing suffering and advancing welfare. They instead concentrate on a collection of dogmatic preoccupations that have nothing to do with what, in any meaningful sense, can make a positive contribution to the world.

The purpose of this article is not to list and elaborate on the many well known deleterious effects of religion in general and the Bible in particular. Instead, its objective is to tell the story of a relatively recent contribution to history that, while celebrated in academia, is largely unknown to the general public. The author is Professor Kathy Stuart of the University of California at Davis.

Stuart’s (2008) research concentrates on suicide in the devoutly Catholic 18th century Germany. It is motivated by the particular circumstances of Agnes Catherina Schickin, a thirty year old woman from Schorndorf.

In May 24, 1704 Agnes arrived at the village of Krumhard. She encountered four little boys whom she asked for directions to Krumhard. Seven year old

Hans Michael Furch offered to show her the way. Agnes and Hans walked deep into the forest where, after a long struggle, Agnes slit his throat and left him to die. She returned to Schorndorf where she readily confessed to the first person she encountered. She was tried, found guilty, and hanged.

What is one to make of such a gruesome and dramatic event? Perhaps not much, if this were an isolated occurrence. It was not. In fact, such incidents were so common at the time that they were given the name “indirect suicide” (mittelbarer Selbstmord) by jurists. More appropriately, Stuart (2008) refers to them as a form of “suicide by proxy” where the perpetrator commits murder with the intention of having the authorities execute him or her. The difference between this and direct suicide is simple. Catholics consider suicide a mortal sin that cannot be absolved through confession. However, if the perpetrator commits a murder, confesses, is absolved, and is subsequently executed by the authorities, then the final objective of ending one’s life is achieved while avoiding eternal damnation.

A problem remains. What if the victim committed sins which he or she never had the opportunity to confess? Would it not be un-Christian-like to subject them to eternal damnation? Recognition of this led many perpetrators of “suicide by proxy” to select children as their victims given that children would have not yet sinned which would spare them from damnation. Indeed, their death would only hasten their delivery to the loving arms of God and the joy of paradise. In some sense, “suicide by proxy” exploits an escape clause in the arbitrary ethical code of the Bible.

The narrative presented above is neither a hypothesis nor an unsubstantiated theory. It is scientifically unimpeachable. It represents a recurrent theme in the

confessions of those undertaking “suicide by proxy”. Such perpetrators had no incentive to lie (which would nullify the value of the confession).

Suicides by proxy in the 17th and 18th centuries plagued Sweden, Northern Germany, and France. According to Stuart (2008), there were 8 such cases in Nuremberg, 5 in Augsburg, 12 in Berlin, 9 in Vienna, 7 in Hamburg, 23 in Vera Lind, 7 in Württemberg, and so on. Stuart identifies a total of 116 cases out of which the confession of the perpetrators is known in 111 cases.

Government responses were varied. The city-state of Nuremberg was the first to react. It committed to effectively torture “suicide by proxy” perpetrators in a manner that “...was more painful and shameful than death itself” (Stuart 2008, p. 441). However this had little effect. By contrast Schleswig and Holstein and later Prussia eliminated capital punishment in such cases while instituting other punitive measures. Paragraphs 831 and 832 of the Prussian legal code institutes that

*If it is established that someone who is otherwise of sound mind commits a murder ... with the intent of being executed, he should not achieve his goal. Instead he should be imprisoned for life in the narrowest confinement under close supervision and be whipped in public at regular intervals.*

By the mid 19th century, suicide by proxy slowly disappeared. Its legacy transcends the gruesome murders of innocent children. It includes an important lesson about the Bible itself.

Mixing sense with nonsense does not create a moral compass that may be imperfect. It creates a compass that is anything but moral.

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



# Interview with A.C. Grayling

*Daniel Midgley*

**Daniel Midgley:** I'm getting stuck into your new book, *The Age of Genius: The Seventeenth Century and the Birth of the Modern Mind*, in which you argue this is where the modern mind began; the mental make-up that makes us today. What was it that made you want to write about this time?

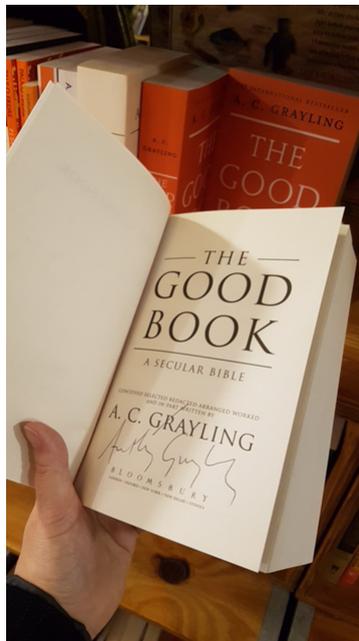
**A.C. Grayling:** Well, I'd written some other things, which involved as you were passing through the seventeenth century. Writing a book about concept of liberty — a very, very important concept for modern thinking, given that for many, many centuries beforehand there had been a kind of hegemony exercised over mind, by what people were permitted to think, what they were allowed to think and believe. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, largely because of the reformation of the first of those centuries, broke the grip of that dominance, that orthodoxy.

There were a number of other factors that come together which I tried to have a look at in the book to explain how this great change in perspective took place. What's distinctive about what I call the modern mind is the way it views the universe and the way it views human nature, because before the seventeenth century, and for a very, very long time in human history, people thought that we were at the center of things. By the end of that century we realized we weren't, and that has lots of implications.

**Daniel:** Of course there are people who think that we still are in the center of the universe and that the earth is flat, and so on. There are lots of marginal views that are still with us. What's the difference?

**Grayling:** Oh, indeed. Well, the great difference is that the flat earth, center of the universe kind of view, was functionally the dominant view. If you disagreed with it, you might very well find yourself being burned at the stake. Now it is a functionally marginal view. Admittedly,

it still causes a huge amount of difficulty. We see in the United States of America, creationism, trying to get anti-Darwinian textbooks into schools, and much, much worse of course is the terrible internecine struggle in the Middle East between Sunnis and Shiism, between a particular outlook on the world, the Muslim outlook. Which in the minds of some anyway, in that part of the world, feels threatened by globalising secularism. So you're dead right, there's a great deal of it, but it's functionally marginal, and the functionally dominant view is the one



that was born in the seventeenth century.

**Daniel:** We're living in the age of Brexitump, as I call it, and I feel like we're really sliding backwards. Is there any insight that we can take from the seventeenth century? Or are we living in a time that's really sui generis? Is this its own thing that we've never seen before?

**Grayling:** I think societies in their evolution develop a kind of sclerosis, in some respects. The kinds of institutions that we construct to deal with and manage ourselves get out of kilter a little bit with the way things are moving on. The Brexitump phenomenon, which I think is a very good label for it, I

think is an example of this because what's happened is, the more complex societies become, the more difficult the task of government and indeed of politics becomes. More, there is a disconnect between politics and governance on the one hand and people on the other hand. It becomes a little bit too easy for some of the problems, some of the themes that are emerging from the ground-up, to be missed by the people who ought to be keeping an eye on it.

So for example, populism, both in Europe — everywhere in Europe by the way, not just in the UK, because if you had a referendum in almost any European country, you'd probably get a majority for leaving the EU. France, for example, would almost certainly do that. I say this, by the way, as a very passionate, pro-EU person myself. The populism of the left is a populism about inequality and deprivation, and the resentment that people feel about those who have, on the part of those who don't have.

**Daniel:** I'm thinking about Bernie Sanders...

**Grayling:** Indeed, indeed! The populism of the right of course, is anxious about immigration, and it's predicated on xenophobia and anxiety about change in your own culture, the impact on your family, on your job, of people coming into the country. Now when you mix those two populisms together, and demagogues, like Nigel Farage in the UK and Donald Trump in the US do this. They blame the one on the other, they blame the inequality and the economic problems on mass immigration. It's actually false, but they can do it because they are playing on people's fears and perceptions.

**Daniel:** My seventeen-year-old son who helps me understand a lot of things, we were talking about this sort of thing and he asked "Why are people so terrible now?" It used to be — because people have always been terrible! — but it seems like the terrible

people used to have to keep their voice down a little bit. But now they're scrambling into the mainstream. He asked me, "What's the remedy? Would education help them?"

**Grayling:** This is a very interesting question, this! Yes, it would, if only we really, really educated. This is an important point.

Perhaps we can come back to it in just a moment, but the real nub of an answer to the question you've asked there, must have something to do with social media, internet, email, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram. The fact that anybody can now publish their views, get their views out there into the public domain, even if it's just by commenting on what other people had said in the public domain. But it used to be the case that it was very difficult to be heard, very difficult to publicise your views. There's just one way of doing it, and that was to scribble graffiti on the wall. Now you can scribble graffiti in cyberspace. And a lot of people do it, a lot of the time. Here's the problem with that, which is that trolling, as it's called — this is people being really nasty on Twitter, really nasty on Facebook — will probably have the effect of shutting down this anarchy out there in cyberspace, this great democracy of the internet, because people will eventually get fed up of it, and they'll start wanting policing of the internet because of this kind of phenomenon.

**Daniel:** What do you think about that? Surely it's a good idea for people not to be harassed online. Online harassment is a problem.

**Grayling:** Indeed, well this brings us back on the point of education, because if you were able successfully to educate people not to be like that on the internet, but to recognise that they have a precious instrument in their hands, and that the responsible use of it would be a good thing. This would be, I think, part of a more general desideratum in education which is this: To get people to be as reflective and good at criticising and evaluating what they hear, what other people say, to do it in a constructive way, to explore ideas, to be open minded.

Not to the point — you know what they say, you got to be open minded, but not so much that your brains fall out! You've got to have

standards and so on. If you could educate people to become good thinkers like that, then I think you would be addressing some of the difficulties that you've identified.

**Daniel:** It seems to me like the internet has been wonderful for spreading views and getting ideas out there very, very quickly, good and bad. But the other thing, that it seems to me, is that it seems to contribute to what I like to call "communities of unreason", where they seem to not accept facts or disagree on what the ground rules for establishing a fact even is, where they seem to buy into this bizarro-world narrative.

**Grayling:** I love the phrase you used there



— the communities of unreason — because that's exactly right! These self-created bubbles in which everybody is massaging everybody else's prejudices, and they all feel good about it because they feel supported, as if they were in a little minority in their field, that's very true. The answer to it, in one way, is the answer you give to the whole free speech issue, where you say if you tolerate free speech, people are going to say bad things. The answer is to say, "Well, meet it with better speech." Counter it, don't shut them up, but try to counter it.

Yes, you're right, if there is this propensity on the internet for people to carry one another away in completely the wrong direction on something. As a function, by the way, the fact that we want to valorise everybody's opinion. Everybody's got to have their say, everybody's got to have a voice, and then opinion becomes more important than fact, and what I think about things, and what I feel, and whether I'm offended, and my

view about things becomes something that has to have its place in the sun.

**Daniel:** I do have this discussion, a few times, with my friend Ben Ainsley on our show Talk the Talk. He argues that the internet makes it easy for us to form these intellectual walled gardens, where we only get exposed to opinions that we agree with. But I like to argue that, first of all, this has always been the case, we've always had that chance. You could buy the conservative newspaper or the liberal newspaper. But second of all, I think that we actually have more opportunities to be exposed to people we disagree with than we ever did before.

**Grayling:** Yes, I'm inclined to agree with you on this one I think, because...

**Daniel:** Yess...!

**Grayling:** ...however high you build those walls, the fact is that cyberspace is all the way out into space, so you're never going to be able to keep everybody and every opinion out. However, there is the difficulty which we have to be alert to, and that is that the people who provide the service, like for example, Google — a very familiar example — they have these very powerful programs that monitor what we do out there in cyberspace so that they can target advertising at us, for one thing.

But another thing that this profiling does is to direct to us the kind of information that the program thinks we might like to have if we ask it a question or if we're looking for certain sorts of information. I think that's pretty dangerous actually, because what you want is for the internet to be as much like a library as possible so you can browse, and the library is not making decisions about which books and things you might like to read.

**Daniel:** We talked a little bit about the internet and communication and ideas and how sometimes bad ideas can supplant good ones. I am a big believer in getting outside of that intellectual walled garden. I grew up in one, I'm afraid of them now. I try to seek out opinions that are different from my own, but sometimes I feel like it's just a waste of time. Like there isn't anything there sometimes.

**Grayling:** It may very well be that as time goes by, so we become more entrenched in and more certain of our own take on things.

**Daniel:** How can I avoid that?

**Grayling:** Well, I think you're doing the right thing. It's very admirable actually if you go out and seek alternatives.

**Daniel:** Pshaw.

**Grayling:** That's really good! We should certainly do that, there's no question about it. That's the way to keep the life of the mind going. Walter Pater said a long time ago that our worst possibility is to form habits. That was what he warned us against, and habits of mind are, of course, the worst kind. That's what makes people who in a small C sense, maybe even in a large C sense, conservative. Because they want to keep the way they think about things and want to keep seeing the world in the same way. It becomes very dissonant indeed when things change and people move on. Even words shift their meanings. You are very familiar with that.

**Daniel:** Very much!

**Grayling:** I think it's absolutely right to challenge oneself by allowing oneself to be challenged by others.

**Daniel:** Let's talk about education for a second. You've established the New College of the Humanities in London. How did that get started?

**Grayling:** Well, as you can see I wasn't a mathematician, so I've had a career in three halves. The first half was teaching at Oxford University. The second, teaching at London University as professor at Birkbeck College. At both places, I tried to persuade my colleagues to think a little bit differently about how we do undergraduate education and what a higher education is for.

When I went up as an undergraduate back in the late 60s — and I still have the hairstyle to prove it! — only about 8% of school leavers went to university and therefore the dons were cloning themselves and they were looking for people who could perhaps fill their shoes when they moved on. Now of course, very large proportions of our school leaving population go on to higher

education or tertiary education of some kind. When it's vocational or technical, when it's in the STEMs subjects — when it's science, mathematics, engineering, IT especially because we live in the IT age — then that's fine. I think that's a very good preparation and tremendously important.

But it is also important for people to take opportunities to work, for example, in journalism or law or the creative industries, publishing, civil service. Maybe go into politics, to rights, to be thought leaders and to take on roles as a kind of social entrepreneur field. For that, you do need a background in the humanities. The reason is this: that the humanities, and we're talking here about history, literature, philosophy and other pursuits, constitute what you might call the great conversation of humankind. About the things that matter to us.

Exploring questions of values. Exploring questions of human relationship. Trying to get our best, our most sympathetic, our most generous, our most insightful view of human nature and the human condition. Both of those things being very difficult, but to be an auditor of that conversation, by reading, studying, discussing and then to become a contributor to it. That is something of great importance. All the greater importance in a world like the one we occupy now which is very complex, where things change very rapidly, and where there are lots of different constituencies pulling at one another and in conflict with one another. And so to be able to think with some calmness and rationality about the great landscape of human affairs. That's what the humanities offer us.

**Daniel:** Yet at this very same time the arts are often devalued as, "Oh, can't get a job with that", or something like that, and it's too bad.

**Grayling:** It's too, too bad really, yes. It's a big mistake to think in that way. So what I wanted to do was to found an institution. A New College of the Humanities, as the name implies, is a place devoted to the study of this great conversation, as I call it. The aim behind it is to keep the very best of how to educate in the humanities. This is by intensive discussion, by writing, by really taking the literature of the world in all these different spheres. historically and philosophically as well as in the straightforward sense of literature. Taking it

very seriously in exploring them. Learning from one another, sharpening our ideas against the ideas of other people.

This means, by the way, against the background of a rather unfortunate movement in higher education, especially in the US, but at other places too, the sort of safe spaces kind of movement, the trigger warnings movement, where people are a little bit afraid of ideas that really do subvert their assumptions about things. What a university has to be, especially if you are dealing with the humanities, it has to be a safe space for free speech.

**Daniel:** I like the idea of trigger warnings, because it gives students a chance to get themselves ready in case there's a concept that's — not difficult, I don't see people trying to avoid difficult ideas — but ideas that have such a personal element to their experience or something bad that happened to them, that it could derail their learning. What do you think about that?

**Grayling:** Well, I think there should be a kind of one-trigger-warning-one-time point made about going to university. If you are going to go to university, you are going to hear things, you're going to learn things, you're going to find out things. You're going to be told things, you're going to be challenged about things that may be very unfamiliar, very uncomfortable to begin with and may make a big demand of you really, to step up and address things that at first might seem uncomfortable.

I think that's the premise on which further education and certainly higher education rests. Because — and this is an important point this, it's really good to iterate at every opportunity — we can get data, we can get information at the press of a button, at the speed of light from the internet. Information is not knowledge until you've organized it, until you've put it into patterns. When you put it into patterns you get a much clearer picture of it and what it means.

That enables you to take the next, and as it were, most important step in the process of education, which is achieving understanding of what you know, and which bits of knowledge are really important and how to apply it. The whole enterprise of a higher education, why it's called a higher education is that it should be a reflective and evaluatory enterprise where

we're looking at what has been said and thought

**Daniel:** So we sometimes have trouble figuring out what the facts are, but we need to even go a step beyond that and assemble the facts into a workable system that will help us to achieve understanding. How do we do this in a confusing world?

**Grayling:** Well, that's the challenge. The thing is that we can be very self-conscious about the enterprise. We use the word facts as you just did then. Of course, facts are themselves very often highly interpretative. Your facts and somebody else's facts might look as if they are in conflict with one another. That is fed in to this whole postmodern idea of relativism, that we have irreconcilable and un-interpenetratable viewpoints on the world and we just have to leave it at that.

The answer is no, absolutely not. No, we keep on exploring, be very rigorous and vigorous about matters of ideas because ideas are the cogs that drive history. Ideas are extremely powerful. When you think of the things that happen in our world, it's all because people are taking a view about something. It's therefore of the first importance that we should be always on the qui vive about those ideas, really digging into them and finding

out what people really mean by them and putting the question to them.

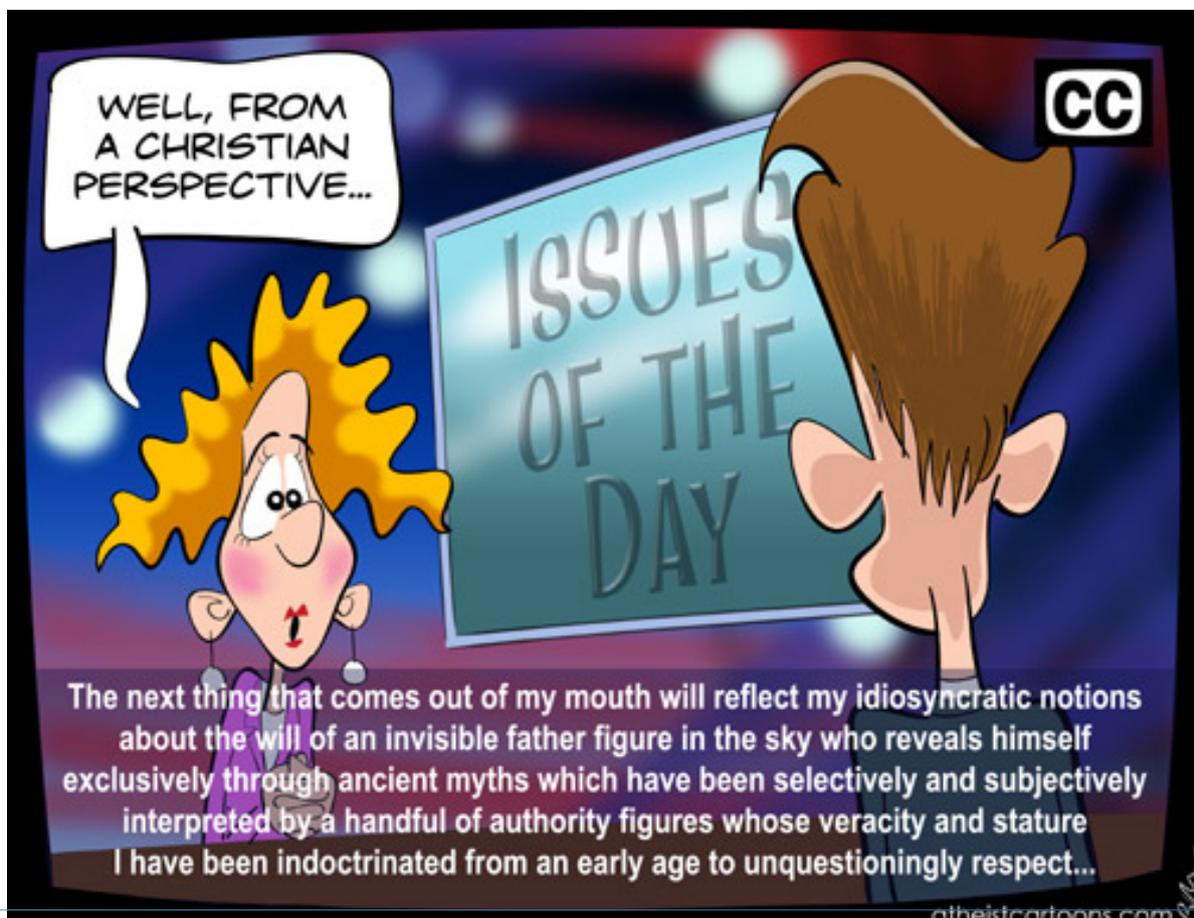
**Daniel:** Professor Grayling, I would just like to ask one question before we finish. What can be our responsibility as good humans who want to make the world less terrible? What can we be doing vis-à-vis the life of the mind?



**Grayling:** Of course there are many things. I would say that one of these things is that people have got to keep reading and discussing with one another and listening; doing what you're doing, looking for the things that challenge your conceptions and misconceptions about things.

Also there is an important thing that we are losing their view of, and that is: human beings are essentially social animals. We need our relationships with one another. We need to be loved and to give love and to have friends and to be parts of communities. These are important facts about us, which we lose sight of, because the babel of voices out there, the news media, broadcasting, newspapers will tell us about conflict all the time, about mayhem, about differences. The reason why they do is because they're news. They are not the majority interaction of human beings with one another.

If we can remind ourselves of the fact that actually, we are a very collegial species. All we have to do is look around the city. To put up a building takes up a lot of cooperation, a lot of trust, a lot of working together. That is the majority story, and if we could remind ourselves of that, and of the benefit of it, the importance of it, then for example... well, you never know, the UK might stay in the EU!



# Parable - Two Sons

*Mike Meyersen*

Jesus asked this question of the chief priests and elders:

*‘What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, “Son, go and work today in the vineyard.” “I will not”, he answered, but later he changed his mind and went. Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, “I will, sir” but he did not go. “Which of the two did what the father wanted?” “The first,” they answered. Jesus said to them; “I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and prostitutes did” (Matthew 21:28-32).*

A thinking person would agree that the priests and elders had given the most reasonable answer to the question. The first man did his father’s wishes after first refusing to work, while the second man was a liar and did not work in the vineyard. Jesus nevertheless berated the priests and elders and said that prostitutes and tax collectors would be selected for heaven ahead of them, the unrelated reason being that they did not believe in John.

You have to feel for the priests. They did not believe that John was the messenger. They had good reason not to believe John was Elijah because they took the trouble to ask John if he was Elijah. John flatly denied that he was (John 1:21). John’s denial is important. There is no reason to believe in someone who denies he is the person in whom you are meant to believe. Furthermore, there is no reason to think that John was lying.

What then do ministers of Christianity make of this parable? Instead of discussing the nonsensical nature of Jesus’ question and answer session, the reasonable reply given by the listeners, and the disconnected angry response of Jesus, they resort to the vilification of Jews.

John Clowes claims that the first son — the son who subsequently worked in the fields— represents gentiles not yet in possession of the truth but by reason of their simplicity and sincerity disposed to admit the Eternal Truth. The second son knew his duty (the Truth) but chose to oppose the dictates of truth and equity.

He represents the Jewish nation who profess one thing but pursue another. They are defiled and misled by the love of evil. Clowes says that the publicans and prostitutes represent gentiles and says that the word “you” in the phrase “...ahead of you” refers to all Jews, not just the priests and elders. In other words, in the queue for heaven, the publicans and harlots will be towards the front, ahead of all Jews, because according to Clowes they are gentiles principled in simplicity and sincerity of will and disposed to do their duty uprightly and in fear of god although their knowledge of that duty is incorrect.

Benson says that the first son represents the disobedient, profligate, and wicked Jews as well as other sinners who later repented for their sins and embraced the gospel. The second son exactly corresponds to the temper and behaviour of the Pharisees (also Jews) because their prayers and praises of God were contradicted by their actions. Benson does not assign a religion to the publicans and harlots. Gentiles are not represented according to Benson.

J.S. Exile and H.D.M Spence-Jones claim that the first son represents the Pharisees who profess to keep the law strictly and divorce religion from morality. This son typifies the evil and immoral among the Jewish people. The second son represents the publicans and harlots, whom he claims are also Jewish, and are careless and profane persons.

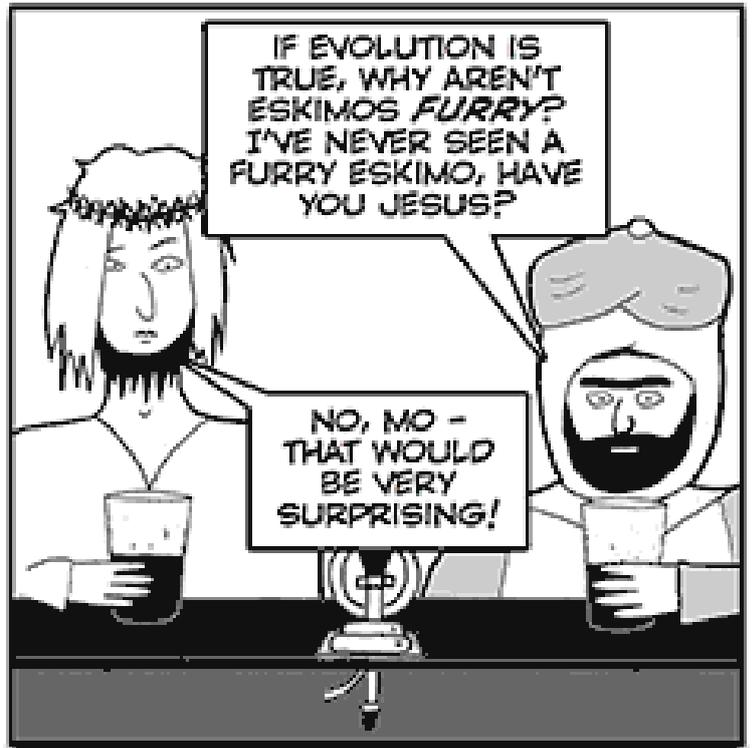
So while the ministers disagree about whether the first son represents gentiles (Clowes), all Jews (Benson), or Pharisees

(Exile and Spence-Jones) and whether the second son represents all Jews (Clowes), Pharisees (Benson) or publicans/harlots (Exile and Spence-Jones), or whether the publicans and harlots are gentiles (Clowes) or Jews (Exile and Spence-Jones), they all teach that the Jews/Pharisees are evil.

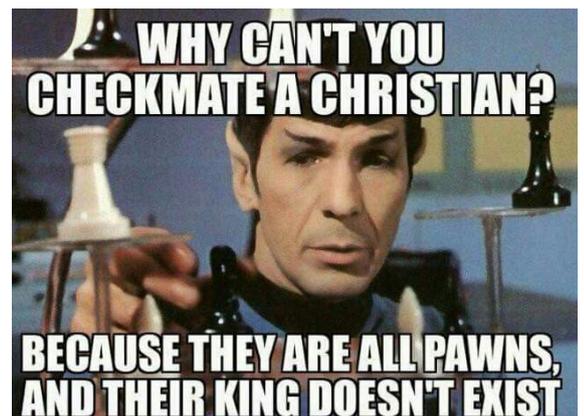
That ministers and theologians provide differing explanations for any parable is troubling because Jesus claimed that his parables are readily understood by those who believe in him —those with eyes to see and ears to hear (Matt. 13:10-16). Matthew Henry, for example, claims that Christ taught in parables so that the things of God were made plain and easy to those willing to learn but at the same time more difficult and obscure to those who were willingly ignorant.

If Jesus, and ministers of Christianity, are correct then all believers would understand the meanings of the parables and would agree on a single interpretation for each parable. This, however, as demonstrated, is not the case and must mean that all, or at the least, all but one, of the ministers who give us differing interpretations for the same parable do not have eyes to see or ears to hear, or are willingly ignorant.

Ministers of Christianity have “interpreted” Jesus’s fictional and nonsensical question and answer session in order to teach bigotry. We would do well to heed the words of Bertrand Russell. “If you think that your belief is based upon reason, you will support it by argument, rather than by persecution. But if your belief is based on faith, you will realise that argument is useless, and will therefore resort to force either in the form of persecution or by stunting and distorting the minds of the young in what is called “education”. Russell’s words are more pertinent than ever.



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# Politicians Should Declare Their Religion

*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 the furtive fingers slowing 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 – the Turnbull government was returned in July and they persisted 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 heralded 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 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 per cent. Conversely, the No Religion figure was up from 22 per cent (in 2011) to a record 37 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 Royal Commission into institutional responses to child abuse.

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.

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. With Malcolm Turnbull 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 for their annual Red Mass at St Mary’s Cathedral in Sydney.

When senior members of the legal profession who administer secular 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.

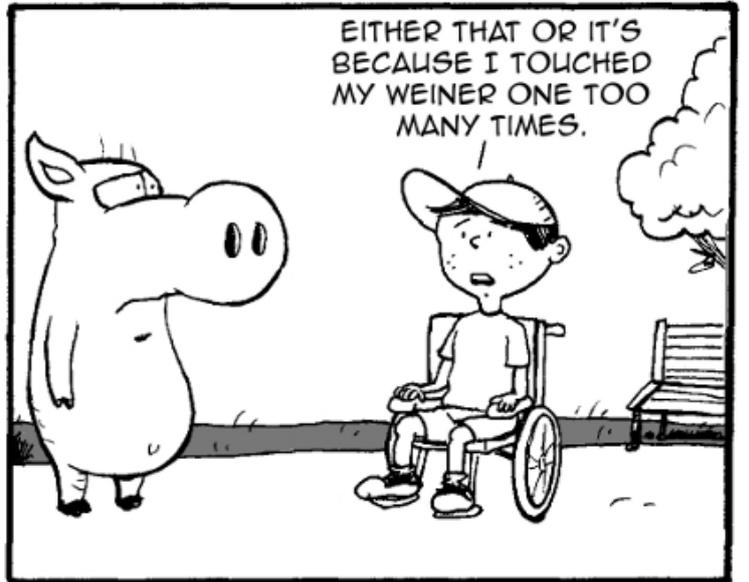
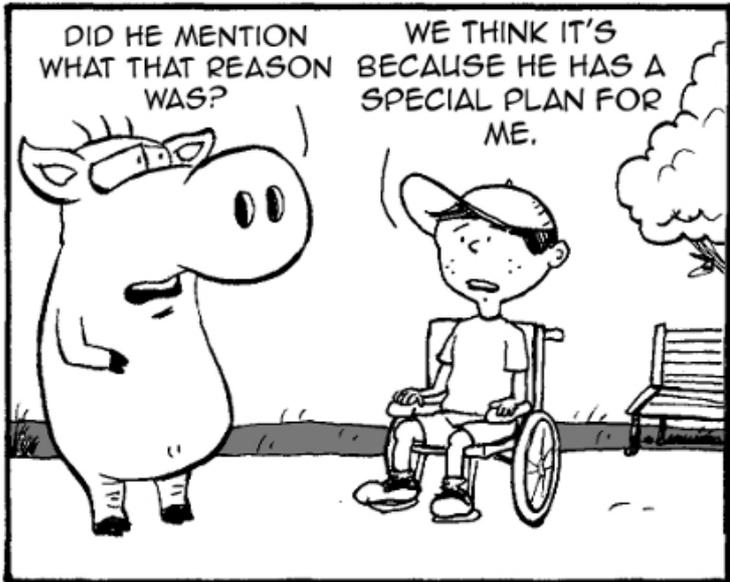
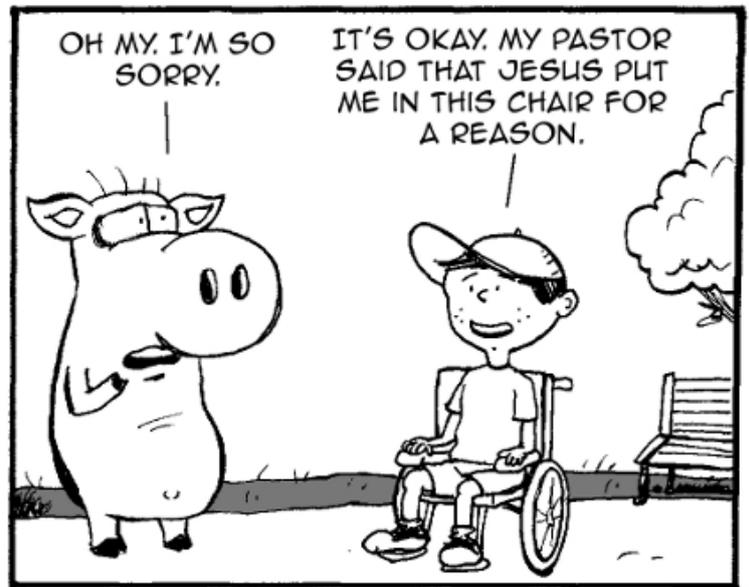
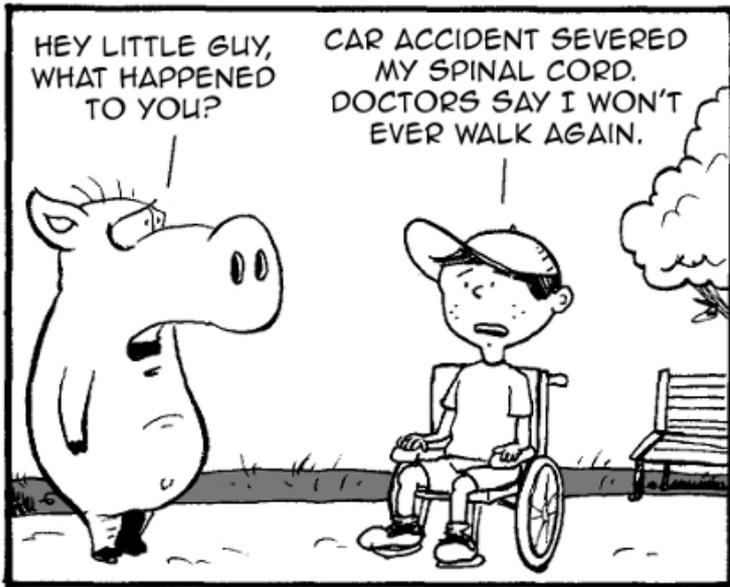
It’s time we lifted the taboo to publicly discuss religion in politics and to demand of our politicians that they clearly identify the extent to which their religious faith will dictate their party room vote on the entire secular agenda.

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

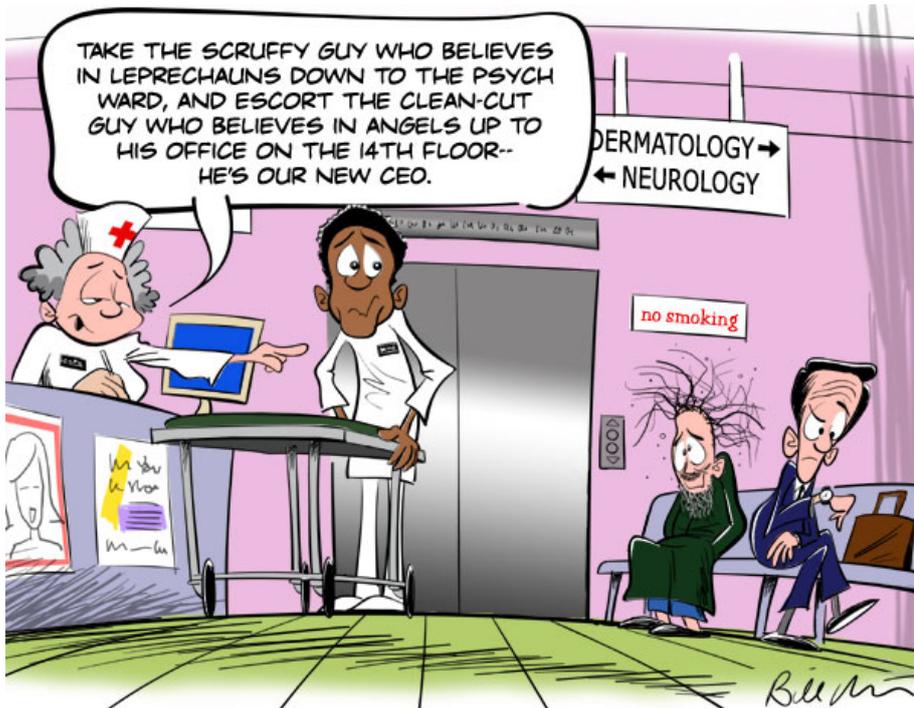
They are required to declare their pecuniary interests, why not their supernatural interests?

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.





theadtheistpig.com



# Pentateuch's Debt to Greek Laws

*Neil Godfrey*

Ancient Greeks of the Classical and Hellenistic eras loved a good foundation story. Such a story typically began with severe troubles leading to a hopeful solution or escape by sending out a group of people under a divinely blessed leader who became their founder-figure for their new settlement. This founding figure would lead the conquest of the new land, divide up the territory for the new arrivals, set up religious altars and appropriate worship rituals, and write down the new laws to govern the new nation.

You recognize the story type from the opening books of the Bible. The Israelites were suffering in Egypt; the solution was for them to leave under their own leader, Moses; through their new leader God gave them their new religious rites and other laws by which they were to live when they entered their new land; the successor to Moses, Joshua, conquered their new territory and allocated the land according to divine plan to the various tribes. Other versions of this story were known among Jews and gentiles alike.

The story of the Exodus and Conquest under Moses and Joshua is in essence a typical Greek foundation story. Especially Greek about it is the way that the laws of the new land are embedded in this founding narrative. The narrative establishes both their divine origin and antiquity.

Rabbi Joshua Berman (Created Equal: How the Bible broke with ancient political thought) has argued that the Pentateuchal laws, especially those of Deuteronomy, were far ahead of their time.

Scholars have discussed some of the similarities between Pentateuchal laws [Pentateuch: first five books of the Hebrew Bible] and those found in the Greco-Roman world as well as among Near Eastern states and proposed that the explanation lies in Israel/Judea having been part of a

wider world of cultural interconnections spanning the Eastern Mediterranean and Near East (e.g. Levinson, 2006. *The First Constitution*; Knoppers & Harvey, 2007. "The Pentateuch in Ancient Mediterranean Context" in *The Pentateuch as Torah*).

There is the problem that the material evidence of contacts between pre-Hellenistic Greeks (pre Alexander the Great's conquests) and the Judeans does not support the likelihood of meaningful philosophical



and literary exchanges among those strata of society who would be responsible for the writing of legislation and literature.

But what if on closer inspection we see that much in the Pentateuch is closer in both broad outline and specific details to the writings about Greek constitutions and laws (especially as found in Aristotle and Plato) than anything we find on the Syrian-Mesopotamian side of Palestine? And what if the earliest external evidence for the Pentateuch places it no earlier than the third century BCE (ca 270 BCE), by which time Judeans were known to be in Alexandria's Great Library and exposed to the best of Classical Greek writings, including Aristotle's history and description of the Athenian Constitution and Plato's discussion of ideal laws?

In the second chapter of *Plato and the Creation of the Hebrew Bible* Russell

Gmirkin undertakes a systematic comparison of Greek and Judean constitutions or legal and governing institutions primarily as documented in their respective literature. Comparisons (more often contrasts) are periodically made with Near Eastern counterparts (or their absence). Afterwards he covers the law collections themselves, then the narratives surrounding the origins of the laws, and finally surveys the broader question of the origin of the Hebrew Bible as a whole.

So let's back up and start at the beginning. How important among the Greeks was their literature about how a state should be governed?

The genre of constitutional law, which described the various offices of government, their qualifications, responsibilities and means of selection, was well represented in literature and inscriptions throughout the Greek world, but was entirely unknown in the Ancient Near East.

For Isocrates the constitution was the soul of the state; for Aristotle it was the state. Writings and speeches about the various forms of government were major topics: Aristotle and Plato produced two works each on constitutional questions; works on the same by Xenophon and a "pseudo-Xenophon" also survive; we have many references in the literature and inscriptions to the writings and speeches of other significant ancient persons addressing questions of how governments should be designed and function.

Gmirkin compares the interests of this distinctive Greek form of literature with the topics of interest in the Pentateuchal law codes and related narratives and I set out his points in table format for easy reference:

## Greek constitutions and the Pentateuch

Greek philosophers and politicians often raised **the question of the best form of government.**

**Asian barbarians**, being of a slavish mind, were fit only for monarchical rule, forever destined to pay heavy tribute to their kings, according to Aristotle.

Greeks, on the other hand, sought freedom in the rule of the wise and good, with checks on the powers of both the elites and the potentially unruly "demos" — as we see in such writings as:

- Aristotle's Politics and Athenian Constitution,
- Plato's Republic and Laws (Nomoi),
- Xenophon's Lacedemonian Constitution
- Pseudo-Xenophon's Athenian Constitution
- fragments of other ancient books on constitutions that have survived in later quotations
- excerpts from various Greek constitutions quoted by Athenian orators or preserved on surviving inscriptions

**Popular assemblies in Athens selected magistrates and judges; all citizens were expected to participate.**

**Topics addressed in their constitutional literature** and speeches embraced the following (In addition to discussions of the best form of government itself):

- The geographical boundaries of the nation.
- Requirements for citizenship, procedures for the enrollment of citizens and the legal status of foreigners, slaves and other non-citizens.
- Citizen rights and responsibilities, including military service and participation in judicial and democratic assemblies.
- Definition of special deliberative bodies entrusted with legislative, judicial and executive functions.
- Magistrates: their qualifications, procedures for appointment, administrative duties and mechanisms for their oversight and review.
- Judicial structures and procedures.
- Military organization, education and military training
- Religious matters, including the appointment of religious personnel, the supervision of temple precincts, and oversight of religious festivals

**Unlike the literature found among other Near Eastern peoples** biblical writings demonstrate a keen interest in the question of the best form of government for Israel.

**Other nations** around them were said to be ruled by kings but Israel/Judea was warned not to be like them or they would likewise experience heavy servitude.

Deuteronomy 17 advised that if a king were to be chosen he ought to be selected by the people from among the people, and his powers ought to be strictly regulated. Other offices of administration, including judges, were to be selected by popular assemblies.

- Deuteronomy 16:18-18-22; Exodus 19-24 (constitutional content)
- 1 Samuel 8, 10 (warning that desiring a king like the nations around them would be a revolt against their freedom under God and a submission to harsh servitude)
- 1 Kings 12 (the warning fulfilled under Solomon)

Deuteronomy and Judges depicts **a people ruling themselves through national assemblies and councils of elders;** magistrates were appointed to civil and military powers as required.

**Topics addressed in their constitutional literature** and speeches embraced the following:

- National and tribal geographical boundaries.
- Requirements for citizenship, procedures for the enrollment of citizens and the legal status of foreigners, slaves and other non-citizens.
- Citizen rights and responsibilities, including military service and participation in judicial and democratic assemblies.
- Definition of special deliberative bodies entrusted with legislative, judicial and executive functions.
- Magistrates: their qualifications, procedures for appointment, administrative duties and mechanisms for their oversight and review.
- Judicial structures and procedures.
- Military organization, including conscription and command structure.
- Religious matters, including the appointment of religious personnel, the supervision of temple precincts and oversight of religious festivals.



# Joe Zamecki

## Author Profile

Joe Zamecki has dedicated his life to countering the negative consequences of theism, with eight years as a full time employee of American Atheists, Inc and a stint as Texas State Director. His pioneering work includes helping to found Atheist Helping the Homeless, The Atheist Experience television show, and countless hours campaigning for the rights of atheists and the freedom of those shackled by religion. He's a dedicated, compassionate (small 'l') liberal with a focus on atheism, secularism and the vulnerable.

Joe is the author of two books, both a great read and both with a focus on atheism.

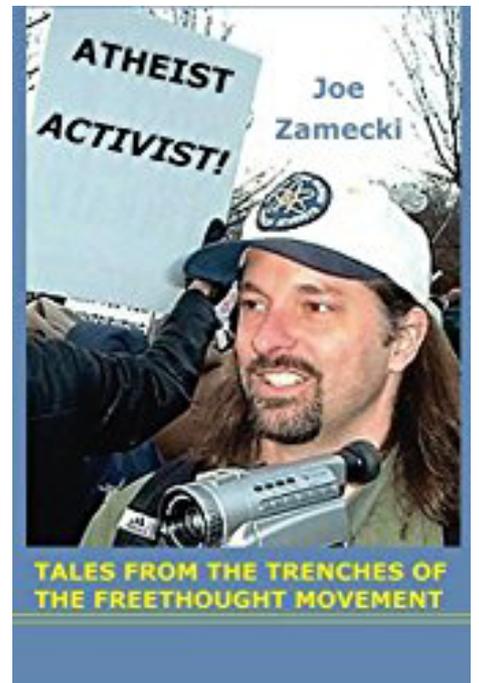
### Leaving the Quiet Room: My Rise from Religious Slavery to Atheism

This book chronicles his formative years at a Catholic primary school. Insightful and often humorous, the memoir is a unique glimpse into the making of a champion for freedom of conscience. Having endured the abuse and absurdity of a religious education, Joe evolved from true believer to self-described "loudmouth for the Freethought movement."



### Atheist Activist!: Tales From the Trenches of the Freethought Movement

This book is an in-depth, behind-the-scenes look at the Freethought movement from Joe's perspective. Experiences with Tadpole Cannibals, ambush debates, cross-country voyages, picketing the president, averting stalkers, water-logged libraries, self-induced religious fits, marches on Washington, and solstice parties merely scratch the surface.



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Are you a member of the AFA forums?

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I agree with the Aims and Philosophy of the Atheist Foundation of Australia (AFA)  
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Young Victorian of the Year



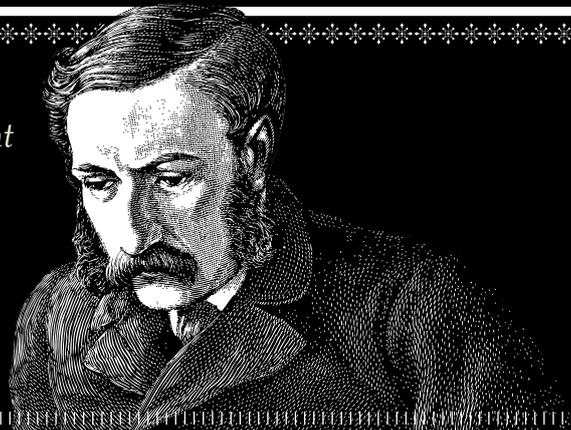
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of Australia Inc** Established  
1970

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

*~ Susan Neiman ~*



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

*~ Douglas Adams ~*



\*\*\*\*\*

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

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

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