



# VICTORIAN HUMANIST

Monthly newsletter of the Humanist Society of Victoria Inc.

Volume 47 No. 1

February 2008

## The humanist way

**A**s a life stance rooted in rational thinking, modern Humanism provides a way of understanding our universe in naturalistic rather than in supernatural terms. It offers men and women, both as individuals and as members of society, a secular ethics grounded in human values.

Drawing inspiration from their rationalist and freethinking heritage, Humanists reject absolute authorities and revealed wisdom. Humanists consider human experience to be the only source of knowledge and ethics. Humanists believe in intellectual integrity, and do not allow custom to replace conscience. Humanists promote free inquiry, which is the basis of the scientific spirit. As a living philosophy, Humanism constantly enriches itself with the progress of knowledge

Guided by the spirit of human solidarity, Humanists are committed to tolerant pluralism and human rights. As Humanism is also a philosophy of human freedom, Humanists aim for a social order in which individual freedom and dignity, social justice, fundamental rights and the rule of civilised law are protected. Humanists continuously explore ways of extending responsible freedom and happiness in our increasingly complex world.

The social ideal of Humanism is the spread of democratic values resulting in comprehensive social, political and economic democracy. Humanists believe that this can be achieved only with the strength of humanity's own moral and intellectual resources.

Humanism seeks to be a modern, cosmopolitan and democratic alternative to traditional religion and to authoritarian and other oppressive social attitudes.

Historically, the Humanist tradition has its intellectual roots in ancient China, India, Greece, Rome and Renaissance and Enlightenment Europe. Humanist (humanist, ethical culture, rationalist, secularist or atheist) organizations, however, are a relatively recent phenomenon. Humanist groups are cultural organizations working on an educational or non-party political basis to translate Humanist aspirations into practical actions. In modern society, these organizations also provide a community for those who find meaning and value in life without the aid of traditional religions or gods.

There are nearly a hundred Humanist groups flourishing in nearly forty countries. All are engaged in fulfilling their primary task of keeping the human-centred scientific outlook alive. Humanist groups provide criticism of dogmatic religious claims, reject authoritarianism in all aspects of life, cultivate the use of critical intelligence, develop ethical values appropriate to the present human condition, encourage the ideals of tolerance and dissent, and the negotiation of differences by rational means.

To achieve their goals, Humanist groups publish literature, contribute articles to newspapers, organize seminars, workshops, conferences, produce broadcasting material for TV and radio, participate in debates, maintain internet websites, lobby governments and the media, and respond to official consultative documents. **[Continued on page 7.]**

Print Post Approved PP 335708/0019

## Monthly HSV Public Lecture

**TUESDAY  
26 February  
8.00pm**

Balwyn Library Meeting Room  
336 Whitehorse Road, Balwyn

**Topic and speaker  
yet to be finalized.  
Inquiry via 9857 8318**

### Inside

The Humanist Way	1
Babu Gogineni	
Diary Dates	2
Humanist News	3
Humanist ethical educ. No. 14a	4
Harry Gardner	
'Religion' question in census	4
Report on Panel Discussion:	5
Harry Gardner, Halina Strnad, Nigel Sinnott and Gideon Polya,	
'What Humanism means to me,'	
by Jennie Stuart	
Why god never received a PhD	6
Essential message of christmas	6
David Milan	
Letters	7
On Education & Training	8
Reform Act 2006 with regard to Religious Instruction in Government Schools	
Michael Bauer	

# HSV DIARY DATES

HSV Public Lectures 8.00pm 4th Tuesday of the month  
HSV Discussions 11.00am 2nd Sunday of the month

## FEBRUARY

- 5 Tuesday 8.00pm Existentialist Society. Unitarian Peace Memorial Church, 110 Grey St., East Melbourne.  
Howard Dossor: *'The Existential Act.'*
- 10 Sunday 9.15am **HSV committee meeting**  
11am **Discussion** on Census submission. All members welcome. William Tresise Centre, NE corner of Munro & Bowler Sts, Hawthorn East (*Melway* map 45 G12); enter on Bowler St. Bring finger food to share.
- 12 Tuesday 5.30–7.30pm Charles Darwin's Birthday. **HSV commemorative picnic.** Alexandra Ave., Melbourne. Melway map 2G D11, just west from the Morell Bridge and Anderson St., next to the Botanic Gardens. BYO provisions and friends.
- 12 Tuesday 8pm Atheist Society. Unitarian Peace Memorial Church, 110 Grey St., East Melbourne.  
Dr John Perkins: *'Charles Darwin's Relevance Today.'*
- 13 Wednesday Knox U3A. 2.45– 4.30pm. Enquiries: Tel 9752 2737.
- 26 Tuesday 8.00pm **HSV Public Lecture**  
Balwyn Library, 336 Whitehorse Rd, Balwyn.  
T. b. a. Inquiry via 9857 8318

## MARCH

- 4 Tuesday 8.00pm Existentialist Society. Unitarian Peace Memorial Church, 110 Grey St., East Melbourne.  
Dr Rod Foster: *'Existentialism and Human Nature.'*
- 9 Sunday 9.15am **HSV committee meeting**  
11am **Discussion** on latest submission. All members welcome. William Tresise Centre, NE corner of Munro & Bowler Sts, Hawthorn East (*Melway* map 45 G12); enter on Bowler St.
- 11 Tuesday 8pm Atheist Society. Unitarian Church, 110 Grey St, East Melbourne. Paul Murchison: *'Are the Atheists too Evangelistic?'*
- 25 Tuesday 8.00pm **HSV Public Lecture**  
Balwyn Library, 336 Whitehorse Rd, Balwyn.  
Dr Tamas Pataki: *'Humanism, psychology and religion.'*

For Humanist news and updates

HSV website  
<http://home.vicnet.net.au/~humanist>

## Humanist Society of Victoria

**Inc.** (Reg. No. A0020272M)

A non-profit educational organisation.

The **Humanist Society of Victoria** works to build a more civilised society fostering ethics based on human values. It considers that reason, free inquiry and a scientific approach enable us to understand our universe and our place in it. It defends freedom and democracy and provides a positive alternative to religious and dogmatic creeds. It supports separation of church and state, and secular education.

### DIRECTORY

President	phone
Stephen Stuart	9857 8318
Email <snstuart@msn.com>	
Vice-President	
Alan McPhate	5974 4096
Secretary	
Mary Bergin	9852 1023
Email <mlberg@optusnet.com.au>	
Treasurer	
David Fotheringham	04 1958 3624
Membership	
Marie Hodgens	9833 4732
Email <hmhodge@optusnet.com.au>	
Submissions	
Halina Strnad	9808 8024
Committee members	
Howard Hodgens, Rosslyn Ives, Maureen McPhate, John Russell, and Peter Turner.	
Education Spokesperson	
Harry Gardner	9870 8998

**All contributions to VH** Editor  
Email [rosslyn@netspace.net.au](mailto:rosslyn@netspace.net.au) or  
Mail c/o The Secretary  
**Humanist Society of Victoria Inc.**  
GPO Box 1555  
Melbourne, Vic. 3001  
Deadline 20th of the month.

**Victorian Humanist (VH)**  
Monthly newsletter of the  
**Humanist Society of Victoria Inc.**

Editor	Rosslyn Ives
Ass. Editor	Howard Hodgens
Reader	Stephen Stuart
Mailout	HSV Volunteers

Views expressed in this newsletter are those of the contributors and do not necessarily represent the views of the Society.

## Annual HSV membership Renewals due 1 October 2007

Those who haven't yet renewed, please use  
YELLOW renewal form enclosed.

\* **NB** Renewal not required if you have joined in last  
three months.

Many thanks to those who have already renewed.

## Annual Report

The Annual Report of the activities of the HSV was  
presented at the 46th AGM on Thursday 22  
November, by Stephen Stuart (president), is included  
in this *VH*.

## Sunday 10 February Discussion

11am Topic: Submission on 2011 Census and projects  
for 2008. All members welcome.

William Tresise Centre, NE corner of Munro &  
Bowler Sts, Hawthorn East (*Melway* map 45 G12);  
enter on Bowler St. Bring food to share for lunch.

## Transport to meetings

The venue for Sunday meetings, the William Tresise  
Centre, is a 700 m walk from Auburn railway station.  
Members resident in the following suburbs have  
declared their willingness to share their car to attend  
HSV meetings.

Alphington 3078: Rudi Anders.

Bundoora 3083: David Miller.

Mount Waverley 3149: Valerie Yule.

If you want transport or can reciprocate, tell them. If  
you can offer transport and want to be added to this  
list, contact secretary, Mary Bergin.

## Darwin Day Barbecue

Tuesday, 12 February 2008

5:30 pm till 7:30 pm

Joint activity involving Victorian Atheists,  
Humanists, Rationalists and Skeptics.

Alexandra Ave., Melbourne

*Melway*, 2G D11

Just west from the Morell Bridge and Anderson St.  
On Yarra River bank, alongside the Botanic Gardens.  
BYO your own food, drink & chairs. BBQ facilities  
available.

## **NB:** Change of day for public lectures

For 2008 HSV public lectures will be on the fourth  
**TUESDAY** of each month February to November at  
8.00pm in Balwyn library meeting room.

## Members in print

[Letters to *The Age*, 26 Dec 2007]

## Pouring cold water on privatization

Older garden-lovers strain to lift buckets of grey water;  
pensioners scrimp to buy water tanks. The water  
companies sell the water saved for sports-grounds; sell  
our aquifers; plan to build desalination plants on  
beautiful areas of coastline.

Greed leads to trees being cut down in water catch-  
ment areas; megalitres of water allocated to service  
pulp mills and coal-fired power stations. Pensioners  
become crippled, gardens die; shareholders grow fat.  
Isn't privatization wonderful?

**Jean Menere, Albury NSW**

## Environment

A little fish told me that, on the Whale Wide Web,  
they are now considering research on the Japanese.

**Meg Henderson, Lower Templestowe**

More rain this year, tighter restrictions – yet no  
improvement in our damned dam levels. Who pulled  
the plug?

**Paul Murchison, Kingbury**

## Can you help us?

The viability of any organisation rests on the activity  
of its members. The HSV needs people willing to

- manage the HSV webpage,
- keep the HSV library in order'
- place public meeting posters in local libraries  
and community centres,
- help with *VH* & *AH* mailouts.
- write letters to media on behalf of HSV.

Phone (03) 9857 8318 or E-mail [snstuart@msn.com](mailto:snstuart@msn.com) to  
register your interest.

## *VH* contributions welcome

Send to editor by 20th of the month.

E-mail [rosslyn@netspace.net.au](mailto:rosslyn@netspace.net.au)

or post to GPO Box 1555, Melbourne VIC 3001.

## HSV public lecture program

Suggestions for invited speakers and topics are most  
welcome. Contact Stephen Stuart, lecture program co-  
ordinator, phone 9857 8318 or E-mail  
[SNStuart@msn.com](mailto:SNStuart@msn.com).

## Website update

The committee is currently discussing re-modelling  
the HSV website. Member input is invited, both in  
form of suggestions and hands-on involvement.  
Contact President, Stephen Stuart.

# Humanist Ethical Education, No. 14a

## Why do I have to eat off the floor? \*

(Personal report of a lesson)

(Lesson No. 14 of the above title appeared in *VH*, Nov. 07. It was the first identifiable philosophy lesson to be included in this series. As presented in *VH* the text was a little complex because of my own inexperience in writing lessons in philosophy. However, I was invited to deliver the lesson to eight children between the ages of 7 and 10, at the Quaker Australia yearly meeting, held in Mannix College, Monash University, 6–13 January 2008. The heat wave on Friday 11 January was not propitious for concentration, but, in the event, the lesson was a wow, and well worth reporting here as a model for such a course in primary schools.)

Firstly the book, *Why do I have to eat off the floor?* was read aloud to a larger group of children, with two holding puppets of the dog, Murphy, asking his mistress, whom the children named Tina (possibly after one of their carers), questions such as:

	Green	Red	Yellow
Why can't I drive the car?			
– Because you're too small!	2	3	3
Why can't I dig in the garden?			
– Because we want flowers!	3	0	5
Why must I have a bath after playing in the mud?			
– Because you should be clean for inside!	0	3	5
Why can't I sleep in your bed?			
– Because you have your own bed!	1	3	4
Why can't we play ALL the time?			
– Because there are other things to do.	0	8	0
Why can't I have a pet duck or elephant?			
– Because you couldn't look after them properly!	0	8	0
Why do I have to be good when we have visitors?			
– Because we want them to see how good you are!	0	5	3
But why do I have to eat off the floor?			
– Because you're a dog, Murphy!	0	6	2

Then the eight children were seated at a table and invited to give their opinions of whether the reasons were good, poor, or the child didn't know/care by holding up 'traffic light' discs of green, red and yellow, respectively. The scores above show how support for Murphy increased as the questions proceeded. The occasion was hilarious.

The children were then divided into groups of two and three and given more questions printed on A4 in pairs, green and red, respectively, and they were asked to write their own answers with both good and poor reasons. Examples are:

- The dog can't dig in the garden because  
 (good reason) nature's got to grow up to the sky!  
 (poor reason) he might water the cactuses!
- I want to play with my friends at midnight because:  
 (good reason) it's a lot more fun when it's late!  
 (poor reason) sleep sucks and playing is fun!
- You can't have ice cream, because  
 (good reason) it's unhealthy!  
 (poor reason) people don't like us having yummy things!

The children insisted on presenting their answers to the Friday evening concert attended by 200–300 people. Once

again there was great hilarity and a show stopper came when a 7-year-old lad yelled out at the top of his voice his poor reason:

“Mum makes me go to bed, because she wants to watch TV!”

Afterwards I overheard an approving comment. “This is good. Harry's teaching the children to recognise good and bad argument!”

**Harry Gardner**

*\*Why do I have to eat off the floor?* by Chris Hornsey and Gwyn Perkins, published by Little Hare Books, Sydney, NSW, 2005, which was chosen for study in *Philosophy with young children—A classroom handbook*, by Philip Cam et al, published by the Australian Curriculum Studies Association, Deakin West, ACT, 2007.

## Submission Discussion, 10 Feb.

### ‘The ‘religion’ question in Census2011

Here is the current ‘religion’ question and answer section, which we will discuss.

*‘What is the person’s religion?’*

- Answering this question is *OPTIONAL*
- Examples of ‘Other’ – please specify’ are *SALVATION ARMY, HINDUISM, JUDAISM, HUMANISM.*
- If no religion, mark the ‘No religion’ box.
- Remember to mark like this:

- Catholic
- Anglican (Church of England)
- Uniting Church
- Presbyterian
- Greek Orthodox
- Buddhism
- Baptist
- Islam
- Lutheran

*Other – please specify*

- 
- 
- 
- No religion

The Census will have around 50 questions that generate data used mostly by government and businesses for planning purposes.

Answers to the religion question are requested because,

- religious organisations are the largest providers of services to the community outside those provided by governments;
- information on religious affiliation is widely used in the religious community, and by government agencies that provide services complementary to those of religious organisations.

The closing date for submissions is 31 March 2008.

**Rosslyn Ives**

# *What humanism means to me*

Panel discussion by Harry Gardner, Halina Strnad, Nigel Sinnott and Gideon Polya  
at Balwyn Library, 22 November 2007

## **Report by Jennie Stuart**

**Harry Gardner**, a retired chemist, is enthusiastically energetic about humanistic education. Professor Brian Ellis, a Melbourne utilitarian philosopher, said that the basis of humanism was equality of dignity in everyone, and Harry subscribes to this, adding, with Protagoras, that human experience is the measure of all things.

In recent years he has worked hard to develop, and trial, a humanist program of ethics for schoolchildren. To be formally accredited the course must cover 7 different age levels, each with 27 lessons, that is, 189 lessons in all. The topics canvass the art of living and ethical behaviour, incorporate material from philosophy, science and environmental studies and address the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, both locally and for the world. The course aims to use the notions of 'care, share, wonder and play' to strive for the goal of 'equality of dignity in everyone'.

**Halina Strnad** said that growing up in a family of agnostic Jews, in the 1930s, in the harsh and punitive atmosphere of Catholic-dominated Poland, helped nurture a passion for secularism. A later career in science reinforced her preference for facts which were evidence-based.

When the Second World War reached Poland the precepts valued by her family took a violent about-turn. To tell the truth became dangerous, in fact, lying was necessary for survival; trust and co-operation became tantamount to collaboration with the enemy, and sabotage became a virtue. As she was only nine when the Germans invaded, Halina was unaware of situational ethics and became distressed and confused.

She outlined the legacy of those years in the development of her humanist values. The Nazi abuses of human rights led to an untiring involvement in the statutory protection of human rights; the experience of living in the police states of Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia taught her the value of democratic governance, and the feudal stratification of pre-war Poland spurred on her striving for equity and social justice.

She has translated those lessons into action in many ways, most notably her active lobbying about education and law reform. In particular, she says it is vital that a secular voice be heard in issues concerning life, death and bio-ethics – as often the Church appears to have a monopoly in the public arena on these matters.

For Halina the 'habitat' of humanism is attractive and comfortable, a place where altruism is fostered,

where goodness does not come with the reward of heaven attached, nor with the threat of hell. Within humanism she embraces the inherent honesty of taking responsibility for one's own actions.

**Nigel Sinnott** told us that he first joined a humanist group 45 years ago. Within humanism, freethought, rationalism and secularism, he said, there is the opportunity to examine, question and criticise ideas and established customs. It requires dogged dissent and the asking of awkward questions about comforting illusions and hallowed hogwash. It necessitates the courage to avoid fashionable platitudes and the temerity to spurn what G. K. Chesterton described as 'the easy speeches of cruel men'. Above all, it means *not acceding* to those who claim that they have a divine, hereditary or arbitrary right to tell others what to do.

Life is not a rehearsal for the hereafter: life is about living and learning to cope along the way. For some people the decline in religious belief leads to angst; for others, it is refreshing and liberating. The Promethean wing of freethinkers belongs to the latter group. Some zealous Prometheans might advocate, jestingly, that God had better not exist; otherwise he will need to be abolished. As a rusted-on Promethean Nigel prefers to see their philosophical position as more akin to Theodore Roosevelt's dictum, 'Speak softly and carry a big stick: you will go far.'

Having emphasised the protest of freedom, reason and scepticism – the order is important – Nigel added that patience, vigilance and a sense of proportion are needed for the fight. Not to mention a sense of humour, including an appreciation of the absurd.

As a 'cantankerous Promethean humanist' he has learned to value stoicism. Life is frequently unfair and change for the better neither guaranteed, nor speedy. Finally, change is seldom achieved single-handedly. Therefore, joining others in the fight is essential.

**Gideon Polya**, scientist, academic, writer and artist, also quoted Brian Ellis's injunction to 'respect equality in the dignity of everyone.' In deconstructing this statement he referred to man as a sentient social primate, or metazoan animal which, has evolved by natural selection. Memetic selection, or the social transmission of ideas and behaviour (memes) has also contributed to man's behavioural evolution. Richard Dawkins in his book, *The Selfish Gene* (1976) stated that 'we have the power to defy the selfish genes of our birth and, if necessary, the selfish memes of our indoctrination.' That is, it is possible for us to rebel

against this legacy and cultivate pure, disinterested altruism.

Despite the general perception that the humanist position is aligned with science, many questions raised by humanists cannot be addressed scientifically by using the standard critical testing of a potentially falsifiable hypothesis. Poetry, music, art, theatre and literature may help provide an avenue for understanding 'the meaning of life'. Keats summed it up well in his *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty – that is all ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.'

When pondering the question of equality, it is hard to improve on the American Declaration of Independence, with its postulate that 'all men are created equal and have an unalienable right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.'

Finally the 'dignity of everyone' remains to be discussed. Embodied in this aspect are the perceptions of beauty, order, goodness in ourselves and others, as well as the respect that these perceptions call for.

But, how will we survive in the future after man has created robotic 'Supermen' of such complexity that they are, to all intents and purposes, sentient? We may hope that such arrangements of silicon, steel, organic semiconductors and carbon nanotubes will be 'conscious' of their inheritance and also aim 'to respect equality in the dignity of everyone'. Or, at least, be able to obey Isaac Asimov's First Law of Robotics: *A robot may not injure a human being, or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm.*

Gideon, being a chemist, uses the Laws of Thermodynamics as his paradigm. However, the first law, which states that the energy in a closed system remains constant, has been grossly violated by man in the 21st century. Each year 16 million people die from diseases and deprivation which could be prevented. Not to mention the carnage of the Asian wars being waged by President Bush, where already 8 million people have died.<sup>1</sup>

As an agnostic humanist he urged us to 'respect equality in the dignity of everyone', by bearing witness and advocating truth, science and rational system change for the betterment of all humanity.0

---

**Editor's note.** More detailed accounts of some of the above talks will be published in *Australian Humanist* at a later date. Extracts from Harry Gardner's Humanist Ethical Education program have already been printed in recent editions of *Victorian Humanist*.

## Why God never received a PhD

1. He had only one major publication.
2. It was in Hebrew.
3. It had no references.
4. It wasn't published in a refereed journal.
5. Some doubt he wrote it by himself.
6. It may be true that he created the world, but what has he done since then?
7. His co-operative efforts have been quite limited.
8. The scientific community has had a hard time replicating his results.
9. He never applied to the Ethics Board for permission to use human subjects.
10. When subjects didn't behave as predicted, he deleted them from the sample.
11. Some say he had his son teach the class.
12. His office hours were infrequent and usually held on a mountain top.

## The essential message of christmas

[Letter in, *The Border Mail*, 19 Dec. 2007].

Over the years, the *Border Mail* has generously printed my yuletide messages and, in one such I recall pondering the question as to how Jesus might react to the frenetic spending-spree, all the rush and scramble of shopping and feasting in which we indulge annually, supposedly in his name. Blank astonishment, I suppose.

Jesus was born, raised and died a devout Jew, thus, *a priori* he himself could not have been a Christian. Furthermore, I sense he would quickly distance himself from the crass commercialisation and glitzy hard-sell into which christmas today has degenerated. Obviously, Jesus and rampant materialism don't mix!

Whilst many will make their annual visit to an unfamiliar church on christmas day, Australia is an increasingly secular nation, so it's relevant to tease out what the christmas story has to offer everyone, believer and non-believer alike.

Leaving to one side the scholarly disagreement over issues of doctrine, dogma, faith and worship, it is the social ethic of Jesus that has made this humble Jewish preacher and healer the most influential figure in human history. An ethic which calls us to love and compassion, not selfish indifference; an ethic which rejoices in understanding and forgiveness as the antidote to enmity; an ethic which requires tolerance and acceptance of other's differences instead of cruel marginalisation.

If there is one word to encapsulate the teaching of Jesus it is *kindness*, which is the Holy Grail, the key to open the door to a better, fairer, more generous world. Too big an ask? Not at all! Just begin with your family and loved ones, then extend your 'kindness border' to include everyone with whom you come into contact. A small step anyone can take, but it can make a world of difference!

**David Milan, Wodonga**

---

<sup>1</sup> G. Polya, *Body Count: Global Avoidable Mortality Since 1950*. (G. M. Polya, Melbourne, 2007).

# Letter

---

## Freedom to choose death

I ask David Milan and others not to use the title, “Medically-assisted Suicide”.

We of the movement who have supported Philip Nitschke, over many years, do not consider our wish to time our death at the time of our choosing, to be an evil thing, which the word ‘suicide’ implies – as formerly it was associated with such issues as police investigations or nasty-minded religious denials of ceremonies.

As democrats in this society we should have rights over our bodies, just as much as we do in choosing books to read for our minds. If healthy, we just expect to live on happily, but if illness or weariness with failing senses or body functions becomes insupportable, there is no reason to prolong our existence. Family members are usually well able to take care of themselves but not so often of us as well. Community care is well-meaning but likely to be spasmodic. Nursing homes eat away capital which is irreplaceable. I have done my part in the world of work and war for 70 years and now, at 87, I wish to make my own democratic choice, as governments make laws for us to have choices in every other part of living.

No-one can tell me I am depressed in wishing to choose my exit. I have surmounted so many traumas of disappointment, unhappiness, cancerous illness, and more, that I think I can overcome temporary depression. Having done much with life, if there is nothing more I wish to experience, or endure, why be forced to continue?

I envision settling all financial matters, writing letters to distant valued people (the rest, like politicians or religious busy-bodies, I gladly leave behind), then giving away as much as possible, leaving instructions with a funeral company all paid for, and if family are involved taking care of their needs, before asking a doctor for a quiet end. This is rational living for a humanist dying.

Why should governments get involved? My accountant will pay my taxes. I have no known spiritual life to save, so why should churches interfere? I don't bother them. If people want a religion, I have always respected that, but for me, no thanks. If I have lived well – keeping out of prison all my life – my philosophy has served me well. Ending my life my way should not be called suicide but ‘sensitivity’ – being concerned to leave no problems behind and like doctors, doing no harm to anyone. The doctor who might help me exit quietly would be doing me a favour, and paid for it by my estate, not doing something wrong as foolish interfering people would have it. LET US GO, sensibly and sensitively.

**C. G. Burgoyne**, Briar Hill

## Atheist stance

The Pope claims that modern atheism had led to some of the “greatest forms of cruelty and violations of justice” ever known and pointed to the revolution in France and the Russian revolution and what followed it to support that claim (*Sunday Age*, 2/12). Surely, the Pope must realize that excesses associated with those events are not indicative of the values and ways of atheists generally.

On the question of whether or not there is a god, atheists can say there is no evidence of the existence of one and there is not a requirement for one to explain all that exists. My view, as an atheist, is that we are in a continuum which had no beginning and which proceeds by the movement of objects along the line of least resistance. Obviously, the further back in the process the sparser the ‘objects’ would have been. Changes would have been brought about by friction and the collision of objects, with the process eventuating in the Big Bang.

I would say that the atheist stance, based on natural phenomena, is more reflective of reality than that of the god-believers, based on a belief in a supernatural. And that atheists are in a better theoretical position to bring about a future which would be most agreeable for everyone.

**Len Bergin**, Lower Templestowe

---

### [Continued from page 1.]

Practical activities in the community by organized Humanists as diverse as the defense of democracy, protection of civil rights, provision of sheltered housing for the elderly and helping victims of religious and sexual intolerance and persecution. Humanist organizations in countries such as Belgium and the Netherlands provide social and personal support through education, counseling and community care where hundreds of Humanist professional moral educators and counselors are employed in schools, hospitals, prisons and the armed forces. Humanist groups in Asia work for democracy, women's emancipation and the eradication of superstition, while Humanists in Canada and Europe have fought for contraception and abortion rights. In Norway and in the United Kingdom, Humanist groups offer non-religious rites of passage (naming ceremonies, weddings and funerals) as a service to the Humanist community. Still other Humanist groups fight for the separation of religion and state, promote the scientific attitude, come to the rescue of religious prostitutes in India, or campaign against the genital mutilation of female children in Islamic societies.

**Babu Gogineni**, ‘Humanism for the World’, *International Humanist and Ethical Union 1952–2002: Past, present and future*, ed. B. Gasenbeek & B. Gogineni. De Tijdstroom uitgeverij, Utrecht, 2002

## Comment on the Victorian Education & Training Reform Act 2006, with regard to religious instruction in government Schools

By any rational analysis, the Act is farcical. Section 2.2.11 'special religious instruction' blatantly contradicts and negates the general stipulation of sections 1.2.2(2) (a) and 2.2.10 that 'education in Government schools is to be secular'.

In summary, these sections of the Act combine to make the following statement.

*Government schools will provide a secular education and not promote any particular religious practice, except that special religious instruction based on distinctive religious tenets and beliefs may be given.*

The Oxford Dictionary of English defines *secular* as 'not connected with religious or spiritual matters'. Here's what we get when this definition is substituted into the above statement.

*Government schools will provide an education not connected with religious or spiritual matters and will not promote any particular religious practice, except that special religious instruction based on distinctive religious tenets and beliefs may be given.*

You don't need a high IQ to see the absurdity of this statement. It is obvious that pressure has been applied to the Government by powerful religious groups, for example the *Council for Christian Education in Schools* (CCES), to have section 2.2.11 'special religious instruction' included in the Act, thereby creating the contradiction.

Further, section 2.2.11 clause (2) (c) implies that, although 'special religious instruction' is not to be made compulsory, parents need to 'excuse' a student from attending (if so desired). Given that section 2.2.11 is an *exception* to the general stipulation that 'education in Government schools is to be secular...', parents should not need to take deliberate action, such as signing a form, to exempt a student from religious instruction classes. Non-attendance should be the default (assumed) option. Further, the word 'excuse' is emotive – it implies wrong-doing if the alternative is chosen.

Non-Christian and other non-religious parents must accept that trying to bring about sensible changes to the Act in this regard is futile. Nevertheless, a rational (secular) interpretation of the Act, ignoring clause 2.2.11 in effect, could be applied in advising school principals of their obligations.

Questions I put to the Department of Education & Training, Office of Learning & Teaching:

1. Has any survey been carried out by the Department (or other body) to determine the majority view of

parents on special religious instruction being taught by default in Government schools?

*The response:* '... it has never been a requirement for the Dept of Education and Training to survey and record the views of parents ... on religious instruction.' (In other words, the Dept considers the views of parents irrelevant. Presumably, the views of aggressive and influential lobby groups are more relevant in forming Government policy.)

2. What checks are in place to ensure that students who do not attend 'special religious instruction' are engaged in an appropriate alternative program, for example a secular ethics-based syllabus?

*The response:* 'There is no obligation on schools to provide (an alternative) ethics-based syllabus ... as part of their curriculum. Rather, schools are considered to be best placed to determine the individual needs of their student population and the programs required to meet these.' (In other words, none.)

3. By what means are school principals advised of their obligations in regard to religious instruction?  
*The response:* 'Principals ... are kept informed and updated on requirements relating to the provision of special religious instruction via the *Victorian Government Schools Reference Guide*.'

While the last response may seem reasonable, on the surface of it, there is no evidence that this *Reference Guide* emphasises the primary directive of the Act (section 1.2.2 clause (2) (a) (i)), which states, 'Government schools will provide a secular education and will not promote any particular religious practice, denomination or sect.' Quite the contrary, the legislation actively encourages the teaching of a biased religious belief system (in most cases it is the CCES program), without requiring schools to provide any viable alternative! 0

### Reference:

Excerpts from the *Education & Training Reform Act 2006* setting out the Victorian State Government's legislation on Religious Instruction in schools.

**Michael J. Bauer**, parent and HSV member.