



Australian Humanist of the Year 2008 Senator Lyn Allison

Senator Lyn Allison has been selected as the 2008 Australian Humanist of the Year (AHOY) for her well articulated views on many issues of importance to humanists. She is currently the parliamentary leader of the Australian Democrats, having been elected to Federal Parliament in 1996 and re-elected in 2001 as a Senator from Victoria. Her term as Senator ends in July this year.

Senator Allison was one of the speakers at the 'Separating church and state: Keeping god out of government' conference, held in Melbourne 17–18 June 2006, which was jointly organised by Council of Australian Humanist Societies, Rationalist Society of Australia and Australian National Secular Association. In her contribution, 'The relationship between religion and politics in modern Australia: An opportunity or a

threat for church and state separation?' Senator Allison comprehensively identified the closeness that has developed between religion and the state, particularly during the years of the Howard government. Her concluding comment summed up an important Humanist attitude:

Improving transparency and moving to a true separation will strengthen our democracy and enable us to better respect the views of all citizens and treat them more equally.

Senator Allison was quoted in *The Australian*, 10 August 2007, as saying, 'There are too many Christians in parliament and they don't reflect the makeup of modern Australia.' She remarked that people with very strong religious views were 'heavily

over-represented', which has led to distinct differences between the politicians and the wider community on issues such as abortion and reproductive health. She further pointed out that the more secular attitude of many Australians had slowed the importation of US-style fundamentalist christian politics. Her strong secular comments were made, on this occasion, in response to an internet address given by John Howard and Kevin Rudd to 770 churches across Australia in the campaign for the federal election.

Senator Allison's most notable achievements include negotiating almost \$1 billion of 'Measures for a Better Environment' programs in 1999, hundreds of amendments to Federal environment and heritage laws and initiating the National Safe Schools Framework to tackle abuse and bullying in schools.

She was Chair of the Democrats-initiated Senate Mental Health Inquiry which handed down its reports in early 2006. She also initiated the debate on RU486 and was one of the four women who co-sponsored the ground breaking, cross-party supported bill that removed the Health Minister's veto and transferred approval to the Therapeutic Goods Administration in February 2006.

As a non-religious secularist and a supporter of the public school system, Senator Allison has spoken against religious instruction and the Howard government's proposed funding of school chaplains. In 2005 she challenged Brendan Nelson's comments that he would not oppose the teaching of intelligent design. Senator Allison is herself a proud product of the public school system and has a Bachelor of Education from Melbourne University. Her interest in education has no doubt been influenced by her experience as a teacher and a councillor on the Port Melbourne Council. She has regularly visited schools around Victoria and continues to lobby the Government for a fairer schools funding framework.

Senator Allison has been vocal on environmental issues, she chaired the Senate Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts References Committee from 1998 to 2003, during which time the Committee conducted ten key environment inquiries and made hundreds of recommendations. She led the Democrats in confronting the government over its lack of performance in reducing the emission of greenhouse gases. The findings of inquiries into uranium mining initiated by Senator Allison played a crucial role in the decision not to proceed with Jabiluka uranium mine in the heart of Kakadu.

Senator Allison was born in 1946 and is proud to be a product of the public school system and has a Bachelor of Education from Melbourne University. Her parliamentary career has been influenced by her experience in Melbourne as a teacher, then as a councillor on the Port Melbourne Council.

Senator Allison's leisure interests include cycling, swimming, indigenous plants and wildlife. She is a member of many groups, including Amnesty International, Australian Conservation Foundation and Australian Republican Movement.

Compiled by **Rosslyn Ives**, using nominator's information and with assistance from Senator Allison's office.



Australian Humanists of the Year 1983 – 2008

1983	Lionel Murphy	jurist
1984	Olive Zakharov	Senator
1985	Theodore Noffs	social theologian
1986	Anne Levy	politician
1987	Phillip Adams	journalist
1988	Ian Lowe	scientist
1989	Victor Lloyd	educationist
1990	Gareth Evans	legislator
1991	Fredrick Hollows	ophthalmologist
1992	John Hirshman	health consultant
1993	Robyn Williams	science broadcaster
1994	Margaret & 'Tup' Baxendell	social activists
1995	Ian Plimer	geologist
1996	Bill Hayden	Governor General
1997	Eva Cox	social policy analyst
1998	Philip Nitschke	medical practitioner
1999	Diana Warnock	journalist
2000	Henry Reynolds	historian
2001	Eric Bogle	songwriter & singer
2002	Donald Horne	social critic
2003	Alan Trounson	medical scientist
2004	Peter Singer	philosopher
2005	Tim Flannery	biologist
2006	Peter Cundall	horticulturalist
2007	Inga Clendinnen	historian & essayist
2008	Lyn Allison	Senator

Happy birthday, 'humanism'

Bill Cooke

[From *New Humanist* (London), 123 (2), March 2008: 15.]

For two centuries one word has symbolised the battle against extremism. Happy birthday, humanism! People have been humanists for millennia, yet it was only 200 years ago that we felt the need for the word 'humanism'. So far as we know, it was first used in 1808 by the Bavarian reformer Friedrich Immanuel Niethammer. There had been occasional references in French periodicals to *humanisme* from the 1760s, but it was Niethammer who first articulated what was meant by the word.

Why 1808? This was an age of new words, and in particular new '-ism' words, as the old vocabulary could no longer keep pace with the changing world of the Enlightenment. And 1808 was pretty much the high point of the Napoleonic domination of Europe, which gave reformers like Niethammer the opportunity to put their ideas into practice. It was the year he became Central Commissioner of Education and Consistory (no less) in Bavaria and was able to give effect to some of his theories on the reform of education. To advance his case he wrote the book which was the birthplace of humanism, *The Dispute between Philanthropinism and Humanism in the Theory of Educational Instruction of Our Time*.

Niethammer was faced with two extreme positions on Bavarian education: on the one hand reactionary Catholics, who were used to having their own way and were not enamoured of change; at the other extreme, largely inspired by Rousseau, were the Philanthropinists. These Utopian visionaries wanted to throw out stuffy curricula and have kids paint, draw and experience things. They were not interested in rote-learning the classics, valuing instead practical and physical education and emphasising self-directed learning at the expense of rigidity, rules and coercion. Most alarming of all, they were freethinking in tone, which to its critics meant being anti-religious.

humanism began life as a guarded response to progressive thinking, and that it sought the middle ground between what it saw as unpalatable extremes

Niethammer sympathised with a lot of this, but thought they went too far in throwing out the advantages of a classical education and appreciation of things spiritual. He accused the Philanthropinists of wanting to raise healthy little animals, at the expense of their sense of civics and civility. Niethammer agreed that a degree of autonomy in learning was valuable, though he was not prepared to go as

far as they were. What was needed was a creative fusion of the best of Philanthropinism with the best of humanism. This is what his book set out to articulate.

Niethammer's humanism reflected the interests of his friend Hegel. He spoke of humanism as a broad-ranging programme of moral education designed to create a new generation of leaders, people imbued with the contemporary zeitgeist. He wanted to instil in students the condition known in German as *Bildung*, a general cultivation, public-spiritedness and inner strength. And neither Niethammer nor Hegel was opposed in principle to the education of women. They believed women were capable of *Bildung*, if only for the purposes of complementing their menfolk.

The end of Napoleon meant the end of the reforms, and Niethammer retired from politics and disappeared into obscurity. His notion of humanism faded from memory, except for the fact that one of his colleagues during the heady days of reform was Paul Anselm Feuerbach, father of Ludwig, who went on to write *The Essence of Christianity*, one of the century's most significant humanist works. An associate of Feuerbach, Arnold Ruge, took up the word 'humanism', and it was probably he who passed it on to George Jacob Holyoake in the 1850s, while they collaborated on a pamphlet.

The word has gone through many adventures since then, and even now, at the beginning of the 21st century, we are still groping for a satisfactory definition.

It's an agreeable irony that humanism began life as a guarded response to progressive thinking, and that it sought the middle ground between what it saw as unpalatable extremes.

Bill Cooke is author of *Dictionary of Atheism, Skepticism, and Humanism*. He is currently working on *A Wealth of Insights*, a history of humanism since 1808.

International Humanist World Congress

*E Pluribus Unum:
Reclaiming Humanist Values*

Washington DC, USA
6–8 June 2008

For more information about this event, visit
www.iheu.org

CAHS Convention 2008

Sydney
2–4 May

Hosted by Humanist Society of New South Wales
All welcome.

Full report in next *AH* No. 91.

Secularism: Forced to be Free

France's ban on head-scarves was hailed as a victory for secularism. But, argues **Joan W. Scott**, its political roots are more sinister.

[From *New Humanist* (London), 123 (2), March 2008: 28 – 30.]

When the Turkish government last month removed the ban on university students wearing head-scarves, there was widespread protest against what was seen as a return to fundamentalism. The reforms of Atatürk were, it seemed, beginning to unravel. But there's a considerable difference between the meaning of this stricture in an Islamic country and in a predominantly Christian one. That difference is even more acute in France, where the separation of church and state is so ingrained in the national consciousness.

The French law of March 2004, banning the wearing of religious symbols in public buildings, was widely approved by secularists. It was trumpeted as a principled stand by a defiantly secular state against the encroachment of religious symbolism into the public sphere. The ban was presented as a necessary protection of 'civilisation', imagined to be under attack from the uncivilised, and though it in theory applied to all religions it very clearly targeted the Muslim community, sending a message about the incompatibility of implicitly modern, rational, egalitarian France and traditional, superstitious, unequal Islam.

In France the problems of diversity and difference have been avoided rather than addressed head-on.

But the representation of such tensions in these Manichean terms obscures the real issues facing contemporary France: what to do about the economic and social discrimination, the poverty and marginality experienced by former colonial subjects who are increasingly present in societies that were once more homogeneous. In France, a country that historically has demanded assimilation – both political and cultural – as the price of becoming fully French, the problems of diversity and difference have been avoided rather than addressed head-on. Instead of seeking genuine policy solutions to the difficult challenges posed by ethnic and religious diversity, French politicians have preferred to reassert the inviolable principles of the Republic, as if principles existed outside time and the contexts in which they are invoked.

The principle most often used to justify the head-scarf ban is *laïcité*, the French version of secularism. It is invoked by its proponents as an absolute value and very little regard is paid to either the historical evolution of the idea or the current context in which it is so widely deployed.

When I spoke at the London School of Economics recently, I traced the essential elements of recent French history which fed into the framing of the law, and the entire

debate, in such narrow terms. These include a long history of French racism tied to colonial domination in North Africa; anti-immigrant pressure from the right-wing National Front party; threats to national sovereignty posed by Europeanisation and globalisation; the decline of the once-vaunted status of schools and school teachers; and the unravelling of the idea of the nation one and indivisible. One irate questioner dismissed my analysis. 'That's all beside the point,' he said. 'It's secularism that's at stake: we have to keep religious proselytising out of education.' This is the same kind of justification the French legislators offered. 'France has raised *laïcité* to the level of a founding value,' wrote Bernard Stasi, the head of the commission that recommended the law banning head-scarves. He added that secularism was 'a meta-human ideal'.

My reply is that secularism, while operating as an abstract principle, is only given meaning in concrete historical contexts. In these contexts, moreover, it doesn't always mean the same thing. In America, home to religious minorities who fled persecution at the hands of European rulers, the separation between church and state was meant to protect religions from unwarranted government intervention.

In France, in contrast, separation was intended to secure the allegiance of individuals to the Republic and so break the political power of the Catholic Church. In France, the state protects individuals from religion. In America, religions are protected from the state and the state from religion. In both cases, the terrain of politics is meant to be free of religious influence; it is considered essential to republican democracy that religion is a private, individual affair. The distinction between private and public, between religious belief and one's obligations to the state, is based in traditions historically associated with Christianity.

The sharp contrast between the religious and the secular, however, doesn't capture the historical reality of either the US or the secular states of Western Europe. In the countries of Western Europe, political leaders found ways to accommodate their religious majorities. So it is probably more accurate to speak of forms of Christian secularism rather than of the erasure of the public presence of religion. Secularism should protect the public sphere from the determining influence of a dominant religion (and its claims to divine truth). But, at the same time, it recognises religion's social and cultural importance – it is not only a private, individual matter. When the French state introduced compulsory public education in the 1880s, it effectively ended church monopoly of teaching. But the laws did not expel children who professed the Catholic faith, went to church on Sunday or wore crosses and other religious medallions to class.

The public schools accommodated the desire of parents (and the pressure of churches) for children's religious education and treated it as a private right. Even after the separation of church and state was mandated by law in 1905, students were not expected to attend classes on Sunday, and

they were given another day off so they could receive religious instruction in their churches. In this way, the importance of religion in their formation was recognised, even as it was defined as an extra-curricular activity, not part of the education they received at school.

Although the constitutions of the Fourth and Fifth Republics (1946, 1958) define France as an ‘indivisible, secular, democratic and social republic’, this has not prevented state support of religious schools. Since 1958 the French government has contributed ten per cent of the budgets of private religious schools, and today more than two million children attend state-supported Catholic schools. (One Muslim school was recently established after eight years of difficult negotiation.) The school calendar still observes only Catholic and state holidays; the proposal of the Stasi Commission to add a Jewish and Muslim holiday was rejected by President Chirac. A former minister of education agreed with this refusal on the grounds that it would encourage religious ‘communalism’ in otherwise secular schools. For him the Christian holidays don’t violate secularism – proof to critics of the policy that *laïcité* is not universal at all, but is, rather, intimately bound up with the dominant Catholic religious culture of the nation.

Applying non-negotiable rules solely to Muslims can only be perceived as discriminatory.

In some areas, historical circumstances have led to even more dramatic compromises with religion, compromises the Stasi Commission was, in the name of ‘history’, loath to touch in 2003. The three departments of Alsace-Moselle, lost at the conclusion of the Franco-Prussian War in 1871 and regained after the First World War, have never been required to conform to the terms of the pact of 1905 (nor were the colonies, where all sorts of bargains were struck with local religious authorities). In Alsace-Moselle religious instruction for Catholics, Lutherans, Calvinists, and Jews is still a mandatory part of the public school curriculum. Rather than require the application of *laïcité* to schools in these departments (and so create a genuinely universal policy), the Stasi Commission recommended, in the name of fairness, only that religious instruction be added for Muslims.

France’s secularism, then, is inconsistent and variable, the result of a process of accommodation between the majority religion and democratic practice. In light of this, applying non-negotiable rules to Muslims can only be perceived as discriminatory.

Here it is important, I think, to avow my own commitment to secularism – to keeping the sphere of politics free of the claims of religious truth. I don’t think this extends, however, to forbidding signs of religious affiliation by students (or adults, for that matter), as long as these don’t compromise the substance of what is taught in the school. In fact, the presence of differently marked students in a classroom can be the basis for important lessons in democracy.

On this question I have found it useful to think about French secularism in terms proposed by Jean Baubérot, a historian of secularism and the only dissenting member of the commission that recommended the law banning headscarves. He distinguishes between democratic and

republican models of *laïcité*: one open to negotiating difference, the other insisting on a single, intractable definition. The democratic model defines *laïcité* as ‘the conscience of democracy’, an effort to ‘contain religion within its limits without denying its immense cultural significance.’ In this vision, the school is a cradle of democracy in which differences are mediated and negotiated, established practices are critically revisited and revised, and debate is allowed to flourish in the absence of dogmatic assertions of immutable truth. In that sense, it is a preparation for citizenship, for participation in the work of a nation conceptualised as a heterogeneous entity, in which the differences of its constituents are understood to be a resource, not a deficiency.

Baubérot says that historically the two models of secularism have long been in tension in France, that the democratic model has already been applied to Christians and Jews and that it ‘would be disastrous if ... we were to apply the republican model only to Islam.’ It is the democratic model, he believes, that ‘constitutes an opportunity for a future in which socio-cultural and socio-religious conflicts have been relatively mastered and contribute to the construction of the future’. For Baubérot it is not religion but the republican model that, by taking the religious and the secular to be absolute opposites, poses the most dangerous obstacle to democracy.

In the French headscarf law, secularism served to consolidate a certain vision of France, a myth of a nation one and indivisible that was at odds with the socio-political reality of the country. Whether as colonial subjects in the 19th and early 20th centuries or as post-colonial immigrants after that, Muslims (Arabs, North Africans) have long been integral to French history. In part, the demand of girls in head-scarves was for a recognition of that history. That is the challenge that was deferred by the law of 2004, but still remains to be met.

Joan W. Scott is Professor of Social Science at the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, New Jersey. Her book *The Politics of the Veil* (Princeton University Press) was published in 2007.

What is history?

History, we understand, reports events perceived by victors, media and trendies. It’s what the living say about the dead, the literate about illiterates, ideologues about ideas. Think up a storyline of progress or decline, saga of dynasties or economics, race or species, genes or climate, saints or scholars, law or anarchy, Darwin *versus* Marx – and find the facts to fit it. Is family history different? Check it out from television profiles or celebs whose friends and family members reminisce. What of ourselves? Are not our memories filters, grates or grilles to trap and dump pollutants of our stream of consciousness and agonising thoughts? Or, put another way, moulding soft tissues on a skeleton of guilt.

David Tribe

The Protest of Freedom, Reason and Scepticism

Nigel Sinnott

(On 22 November 2007 Harry Gardner, Halina Strnad, Nigel Sinnott and Gideon Polya were invited to address the Humanist Society of Victoria on ‘*What Humanism Means to Me.*’)

I first joined a humanist organisation 45 years ago, aged 18; and I originally planned to say what brought me to doing so. I could probably have explained this in 15 or 20 minutes but, on reflection, I decided I could not compress the story into the 12 minutes we were each allotted. So I will now try a more direct approach, listing the features of humanism that are – and have long been – important to me.

For me, humanism, freethought, rationalism and secularism represent the protest of freedom, reason and scepticism. This means insisting on the opportunity to examine, question and criticise ideas and institutions, customs and privileges, particularly those that are often taken for granted. Above all, it means asking awkward questions about comforting illusions, antique abuses, gilded gobbledegook, hallowed hogwash, shallow hype, pious imposture, popular heroes or heroines, and the idols of the arena and marketplace.

It means dogged dissent: having the courage *not* to do, say and think what is fashionable to do and say; being wary of the gurus of growth and the prophets of purity; and having the temerity not to applaud and accept what G. K. Chesterton called ‘the easy speeches that comfort cruel men’. And that, of course, means we should tell the truth, give hard but accurate answers when we can, and not make ‘easy speeches’ ourselves.

Above all, it means *not* doing what we are told by people who claim they have the divine, hereditary or arbitrary right to tell us – and everyone else – what to do. And it means standing up and resisting if such people also claim that they are entitled to enforce their divine or other authority upon the disobedient and dissenting.

I would like to quote one of my favourite verses from my favourite book of the Bible, Ecclesiastes (9: 10):

Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest.

Rather similar views appear in the 1859 English translation of the *Rubáiyát*:

Oh, come with old Khayyám, and leave the Wise
To talk; one thing is certain, that Life flies;
One thing is certain, and the Rest is Lies;
The Flower that once has blown for ever dies. (xxvi)

I regard one of my first duties as being to tell people that my life as a human being is *not* a test or a trial for another, eternal life as something or someone else. Life is not a rehearsal; it is not a dress rehearsal; it is a first night – and second performances are far from guaranteed! Life is not about learning to live: it is about living, and learning more about how to cope as you go along.

Some people feel anxious and threatened by the prospect of declining religious belief. Matthew Arnold captured their angst in his evocative and famous poem, ‘Dover Beach’.

The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth’s shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl’d.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.

Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

On the other hand, there are other people who find the decline of faith refreshing and liberating, and the more strident and vociferous of them can be called the Promethean wing of freethought. It is, of course, easy to lampoon Promethean humanism as the notion that God had better not exist because, if he does, we need to abolish him! As a rusted-on Promethean for half a century myself, I think this joke has a serious level of insight in it; but I prefer to describe the Promethean wing of the movement as embodying the philosophical equivalent of Theodore Roosevelt’s ‘Speak softly and carry a big stick; you will go far.’

Another poet, Algernon Charles Swinburne, was an accomplished purveyor of Promethean verse. As a film about Queen Elizabeth I and the Spaniards (*Elizabeth: The Golden Age*) is doing the rounds at present, I would like to quote some lines from Swinburne’s ‘The Armada’. Here is Algernon closing in on sixteenth-century Spanish Catholicism: at full ramming speed, with jack, ensign and battle ensign flying, and all the cannon double-loaded and blazing away with red-hot round-shot.

Lords of night, who would breathe your blight on April’s
morning and August’s noon,
God your Lord, the condemned, the abhorred, sinks
hellward, smitten with deathlike swoon:
Death’s own dart in his hateful heart now thrills, and
night shall receive him soon.

God the Devil, thy reign of revel is here for ever
eclipsed and fled:
God the Liar, everlasting fire lays hold at last on thee,
hand and head:
God the Accurst, the consuming thirst that burns thee
never shall here be fed.

Swinburne may make your ears ring with the bangs, and disturb your vision with flashes and smoke, but when you have recovered you will be pretty clear that he is not mincing his words with euphemisms or regret.

Now, you can criticise those of us in Swinburne's navy for our tastes in gunpowder, shot, colours and masts. But you would be very rash to suppose that we are confused conscripts in one of Matthew Arnold's ignorant armies of the night. We recall Oliver Cromwell's 'plain russet-coated captain that knows what he fights for and loves what he knows' – the sort of man who ensured that, in 1645, the New Model Army turned England upside down and trampled the Divine Right of Kings into the soil of Naseby.

I have emphasised the protest of freedom, reason and scepticism. (Note the order!) But are these enough? No, to flourish they must be maintained by such faculties as patience, vigilance, and a sense of proportion. Crap detectors are as important as mine detectors! And fewer things illuminate the darkness for an army (or navy) better than a sense of humour, including a sense of the absurd.

What have I learnt from being a cantankerous Promethean humanist? Above all the value of stoicism: life is frequently unfair, and disasters often overtake good people; but it is important to try to cope with disaster, to remain alive afterwards if possible, and to help others do so. Also, in an imperfect world, desired changes rarely happen quickly: they may take a long time, and require much fatigue and effort; *and* the gains may sometimes be lost. Progress and success are not historically inevitable.

Furthermore only very, very rarely can you make important and much-desired changes single-handedly. If you could, why come here tonight? You need to combine with others to change the world for the better, and the benefits may not even be realised in your lifetime. Matthew Arnold, who captured so clearly the ambivalence of mid-nineteenth-century middle-class religious doubt, also – curiously enough – understood the elderly, less respectable Promethean's weary frustration, and offered these lines of comfort in 'The Last Word':

Charge once more, then, and be dumb!
Let the victors, when they come,
When the forts of folly fall,
Find thy body by the wall!

Nigel Sinnott, research historian and author of many freethought publications, and former editor of *Freethinker* (UK).

What Humanism means to me

Halina Strnad

Humanism is my habitat, an abode where I am relaxed and comfortable, just as Mr Howard promised I'd be after the 1996 election. My values, attitudes and passions are understood here and shared by others: therein lies comfort. I also find that the place has features that I find attractive.

I will be more specific in a moment, but as I believe that one's values, attitudes and passions arise mostly from experiences and situations of one's life, I'll briefly run through mine.

I was born in Poland, nine years before the Second World War, to parents who were agnostic and of Jewish

origin. The all-powerful Polish Catholic church pervaded all aspects of personal life, institutions and social structures. It preached a very harsh, divisive and punitive religion. There was much vitriol against other denominations and eternal hell for infidels. Hence my passion for secularism. Years later my training in science reinforced my preference for evidence based facts.

The behavioural codes of my family were – telling the truth, cooperating with the authorities, helping and trusting others. Germany invaded Poland on 1 September 1939, and on that day these codes had to be completely reversed. Co-operation with authorities became collaboration with the enemy, and sabotage became a virtue. Telling the truth was quite dangerous, in fact a lot of elaborate lies were needed in order to escape danger if possible, and trust went out the window, as there were spies policing the laws of sedition by dobbing people in.

This sudden reversal shook me out of my tiny wits. I recall my confusion and distress. Had I known and been able to grasp the theory of situational ethics, expounded so well by an admirable humanist, Dr Joseph Fletcher (his book, *Situational Ethics*, is widely read and often quoted), life would have been a bit easier. Removing the rigidity of behavioural commandments is rational and liberating.

The Nazi abuses of human rights – to coin an understatement – made me passionate about the importance of a statutory protection of human rights, human dignity and autonomy – another Humanist precept.

Having experienced police states, first under Hitler and then under Stalin, I came to value greatly democratic governance – another Humanist value.

Pre-war Poland was an upstairs/downstairs society, a legacy of centuries of feudalism. The glaring inequities in that society made me passionate about equity of access and opportunity, and about social justice – a passion shared by my fellow Humanists.

My need for action is met by our lobbying on education and law reform, the two ways of changing society without spilling blood; on bioethics, where vital decisions on matters of life and death are regarded as a monopoly of religions and where a secular voice must be heard; on environmental sustainability and other important social and ethical issues.

Right now it warms the cockles of my heart to know that our international representative, Roy Brown, spoke at the United Nations sessions on freedom of expression, on the genocide in Darfur, on child marriage, on female genital mutilation and on the rights of the Dalits, India's 'untouchables', an obscenity in its very concept.

Thus the ethos of Humanism meets my needs and passions for secularism, rational, ethical approach to problems, for the protection of human rights and dignity, for democracy, for social justice and equity and for social action through group lobbying.

What I find attractive in this Humanist habitat is its fostering of altruism, of goodness for its own sake without rewards like heaven and sticks like hell, and the taking of total responsibility for one's actions. It is the inherent honesty of these attitudes that brightens this place for me.

Halina Strnad, Outstanding Humanist Achiever 2002, who has held many positions on HSV committee, the lengthiest and most significant being Submissions Coordinator.

Humanism, Altruism and the Global Climate Emergency

Dr Gideon Polya

This essay expands on my contribution to the Panel Discussion on ‘What Humanism means to me’ (November 2007), and specifically addresses the significance of Humanism at this singular point in the history of humans at which we are about to destroy irreversibly much of the biosphere and with it the ability to sustain most of humanity.

Science tells us that we have reached a global tipping point, a ‘climate emergency’ and ‘sustainability emergency’, in which we have only about one decade to act to save the biosphere and most of humanity from the global warming consequences of unrestrained greenhouse-gas pollution. However, this extraordinary collective suicide of a species is proceeding remorselessly and essentially unchecked due to a combination of ignorance, greed, racism and dishonesty – indeed due to the very things that Humanism seeks to eliminate from the human condition.

In short, Humanism involves an attitude to our fellow humans best summarized in essence in human culture by the American Declaration of Independence, composed by Thomas Jefferson,

All men are created equal and have an unalienable right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

However, in practice we may have to qualify this admirable political statement in all kinds of ways. Thus on a post-Holocaust, nuclear-, greenhouse- and poverty-devastated Spaceship Earth, healthy ‘breeding pairs’ may be more acutely valuable to humanity than mentally-deranged mutants. Indeed on Spaceship Earth at present – think *Titanic*, the movie – about 16 million people die avoidably every year from deprivation; but nice, ‘politically correct’, climate criminal and hedonistically Gadarene Australians are doing vastly more than most other humans, in terms of per capita greenhouse-gas pollution, to ensure that most of humanity perishes within the coming century.

Melbourne philosopher Professor Brian Ellis has defined the core ethos of Humanism, i.e. our attitude to our fellow humans, as being ‘to respect equality in the dignity of everyone’. This statement is simultaneously more ‘ethically fluid’ and more ‘inclusive’ than the more dogmatic Jeffersonian American Declaration. Thus at one extreme ‘everyone’ can logically be extended to mean respect for (qualified) equality in the dignity of other sentient creatures – as explored by world-leading bioethicist Professor Peter Singer (Princeton and University of Melbourne) in his seminal book *Animal Liberation*.

Nice, ‘politically correct’, endlessly sentimental, White Australia gives rhetorical support to the Jeffersonian proposition but argues for passive non-involvement and that ‘we can’t solve the world’s problems’ – and thus dishonestly and ignorantly avoids our immense and deadly impositions on the rest of the world, as detailed below.

How does White Australia measure up to Professor Ellis’s injunction, ‘to respect equality in the dignity of

everyone’? ‘Politically correct’ racist (PC racist) White Australia doesn’t even get to first base! It fails to pay the most minimal ‘respect’ for others in resolutely *ignoring* its deadly violations of ‘equality in the dignity of everyone’ in relation to its domestic and overseas subjects. Indeed I have recently made a formal complaint to the International Criminal Court (ICC) over Australian involvement in ongoing Aboriginal genocide, Iraqi genocide, Afghan genocide and climate genocide,’ as set out in Article 2 of the UN Genocide Convention. ‘Genocide’ is defined here as ‘intent – as evidenced by sustained, remorseless action – to destroy a specific ethnic or religious group in whole or in part.

My formal complaint to the International Criminal Court charges White Australia with complicity in ongoing Indigenous genocides (90,000 excess or avoidable Indigenous Australian deaths 1996–2007; 1.5–2 million Indigenous Occupied Iraqi excess deaths in 2003–2007; 3–6 million Indigenous Occupied Afghanistan excess deaths in 2001–2007) and climate genocide (climate change currently impacting 16 million excess deaths annually, the complete loss of some island nations in decades and over 6 billion deaths by the end of the century, due to greenhouse-gas pollution profligacy, with Australia being a major climate criminal country. For details, Google search the phrase ‘Climate Emergency, Sustainability Emergency’ coupled with the word ‘ICC’).

Of course we morally superior Humanists must be concerned about whether we are deluding ourselves with our superior form of altruism. After all, we are only about one million years old as a species; and indeed the Neanderthal sub-species *Homo sapiens neanderthalensis* may still have been present in Southern Europe 24,000 years ago, and the tiny *Homo floresiensis* in Indonesia only about 18,000 years ago. Indeed who is to say that these *Homo* entities did not have nobler moral sensibilities than Adolph Hitler, George Bush or Dr Condoleezza Rice (Dr Death, aka Wicked Witch of the West)? I will attempt to address this problem below.

Outstanding atheist and Humanist, Professor Richard Dawkins, analysed the evolution of altruism in his seminal book *The Selfish Gene*. Altruism has evolved in Man through Darwinian natural selection involving mutation of genes and selection of alleles (variants of a gene) that favour reproductive survival of the species. One can readily see how maternal and paternal altruism (and indeed the child care by relatives or allo-mothering) can increase the chances of survival of offspring to reproductive age. However, in addition to this genetic evolution of altruism hard-wired in DNA-constructed *genes*, Man has also evolved altruism through the non-genetic mechanism of selection of favourable *memes*, or societally selected ideas and behaviours.

Examples of powerful memes include ‘thou shall not kill’, ‘love thy neighbour’, ‘all men are created equal’ and – we hope – ‘respect equality in the dignity of everyone.’

Humanists will no doubt be pleased and amused to discover that the world's number 1 person for saying the universally accepted but formally unwritten meme, 'thou shalt not kill children,' is not the Archbishop of Canterbury nor the Pope but an agnostic Humanist from Melbourne, one Gideon Polya. (You can simply confirm this for yourselves by doing a Google search for the phrase 'thou shalt not kill children.')

In the last chapter of *The Selfish Gene* Dawkins concludes thus:

It is possible that yet another unique quality of man is a capacity for genuine, disinterested, true altruism. I hope so, but I am not going to argue the case one way or another, nor to speculate over its possible memic evolution ... We have the power to defy the selfish genes of our birth and, if necessary, the selfish memes of our indoctrination. We can even discuss ways of deliberately cultivating and nurturing pure, disinterested altruism – something that has no place in nature, something that has never existed before in the whole history of the world. We are built as gene machines and cultured as meme machines, but we have the power to turn against our own creators. We, alone on earth, can rebel against the tyranny of the selfish replicators.

However, Dawkins, while obviously a humanitarian, quite specifically does not address the intrinsic worth or 'goodness' of 'pure, disinterested altruism'. Are we Humanists, including Dawkins, deceiving ourselves? Indeed in Dawkins' outstanding book *The God Delusion* he readily admits the likelihood that 'belief in God' is hard-wired genetically in Man, through natural selection (e.g. a child who does not obediently submit to parental or tribal wisdom about 'bogeymen' outside the cave is unlikely to survive to reproductive age). To address this problem we need some alternative and more objective idea of 'goodness' at a fundamental level.

I am a scientist and more specifically a chemist, biochemist, pharmacologist and thanatologist (one who studies the causes of death). As a physical and biological scientist my core memes are the Laws of Thermodynamics – and indeed one can presume for the purposes of argument that a robotic superman or an extraterrestrial alien superman would accept the validity of these propositions. Thus the First Law of Thermodynamics states that the free energy of a closed system remains constant. It is a book-keeping, energy accountancy statement which is, for example, denied by Big Brother in George Orwell's novel *1984* when he declares that '2 plus 2 does not equal 4' and endlessly denied by Bushite and neo-Bushite mainstream media in the Western Murdochracies in their resolute *ignoring* of huge deaths in the Bush Wars (post-invasion excess deaths now totalling as many as 9 million in the Occupied Iraqi and Afghan Territories).

The Second Law of Thermodynamics states that the disorder or entropy of the world inevitably increases. We

see this everywhere – thus in the immortal words of mathematician-lyricist Tom Lehrer, 'heat doesn't move from a colder to a hotter,' and the great works of Man decay as in the poem *Ozymandias* by Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822).

I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown
And wrinkled lip and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read,
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;
And on the pedestal these words appear:
'My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

Life (self-replicating, self-repairing ordered material) appears to violate the Second Law of Thermodynamics but biochemistry has resolved this apparent paradox. Living things extract free energy (chemically usable energy) from a chaotic life-less universe and use it to create and repair order.

A man has a simple choice in relation to his own life: he can either (a) be an unresponsive vegetable (we can readily dismiss this option after considering it for a few seconds – 'been there, done that') or (b) devote himself to the generation or appreciation of Order, i.e. of Beauty and Truth. As John Keats (1795–1821) said in his poem *Ode on a Grecian Urn*,

O Attic shape! fair attitude! with brede
Of marble men and maidens overwrought,
With forest branches and the trodden weed;
Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought
As doth eternity. Cold Pastoral!
When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,
'Beauty is truth, truth beauty – that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.'

If there is any fundamental moral imperative for Man in this world it is thus to generate, preserve and appreciate Order, Beauty and Truth. This then provides a fundamental, a priori, agnostic or atheist justification for the Humanist injunction, 'respect equality in the dignity of everyone,' and indeed for the generalized extension of this to cover *all* irreplaceable Order, Beauty and Truth (noting that all human beings are unique by nature and nurture).

Indeed 'respect for unique, irreplaceable order' is no better or more importantly illustrated than by the current climate emergency and sustainability emergency. Top US climate scientist Dr James Hansen of NASA (recently awarded the 2007 AAAS Award for Scientific Freedom and Responsibility by the American Association for Advancement of Science, for standing up against Bush censorship and warning the world about the climate crisis) has recently stated that we have reached a climate emergency at a 'tipping point' involving the complete loss of all Arctic summer ice within several years.

Dr Hansen says that 300–350 ppm atmospheric carbon dioxide (CO₂) is the safe, sustainable level for the biosphere and human survival – whereas it is actually 383 ppm *now* and increasing by 2.5 ppm every year. Dr Hansen is

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for *Australian Humanist* are invited.

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effectively calling not for 'zero emissions' but 'negative CO₂ emissions' (see Friends of the Earth's *Climate Code Red – case for a sustainability emergency*, by David Spratt and Philip Sutton and recently launched in Melbourne). These authors demand a Declaration of Climate State of Emergency and cogently argue thus: '*Our goal is a safe-climate future – we have no right to bargain away species or human lives.*' The horrible reality is that the rate of animal extinctions is now 1,000 (one thousand) times the fossil record rate. Dr Hansen calls for a cessation of coal burning, rapid escalation of renewables and *reduction* of atmospheric CO₂ by re-afforestation, sulphur burning and re-introduction of biochar back into carbon-depleted soils. *Climate Code Red* quotes Dr Hansen (p. 9), thus.

There is strong evidence that the Earth is within 1°C of its highest temperature in the past million years. Oxygen isotopes in the deep sea foraminifera reveal that the earth was last 2°C to 3°C warmer [relative to 2000] around 3 million years ago, with carbon dioxide levels of perhaps 350 to 450 parts per million. It was a dramatically different planet then, with no Arctic sea ice in the warm seasons and sea levels about 25 metres higher, give or take 10 metres.

Yet ignorant and morally unresponsive, climate criminal Australia looks the other way. One hopes that island nation states acutely threatened by global warming will act on my *individual* complaint to the ICC and present formal national government complaints.

If the world survives George Bush, Bushite- and neo-Bushite-driven global warming and the nuclear threat, perhaps within a century there will be robots whose connectivities are such that we will have created true superman intelligences vastly superior to our own. Hopefully the silicon-and-steel (or possibly carbon-based buckminsterfullerene-, organic semiconductor- and carbon nanotube-constructed), self-evolving superman of the future, conscious of his ontogeny (the history of his development) will 'respect equality in the dignity of everyone' and obey biochemist 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.*'

However, this First Law of Robotics and the Second Law of Thermodynamics in relation to Order are being grossly violated in the 21st century, 16 million unique people die, avoidably, from deprivation and disease every year (about 10 million being infants) on Spaceship Earth with the First World in charge of the flight deck. The world ignores the horrendous carnage of the racist Bush I plus Bush II Asian wars, an Asian holocaust which is still continuing and which has already consumed about 12 million people since 1990. (See my book *Body Count. Global avoidable mortality since 1950*, G.M. Polya, Melbourne, 2007: <http://mwcnews.net/Gideon-Polya>.)

Having now justified the Humanist ethos of how we deal with our fellow humankind and wild nature to 'respect equality in the dignity of everyone', we must now finally turn to *how we act* to minimize risk to Order, Beauty and Truth.

Put mostly succinctly, we must follow a rational risk management protocol that simply and successively involves (a) getting accurate data, (b) scientific analysis (science involving the critical testing of potentially falsifiable hypotheses) and (c) systemic change to minimize risk.

Unfortunately, this rational risk management protocol is grossly violated in society – most notoriously by the Bush administration and the previous Bushite régime in Australia

– by (a) lies, censorship and intimidation, (b) anti-science spin involving the selective use of asserted facts to support a partisan position and (c) blame and shame (with war the ultimate obscene outcome).

As a socially responsible scientist, Humanist and humanitarian advocate, I have been attempting to inform mainstream media and politicians about reality all my professional life. In recent years I have tried to inform the world and Australia about the horrendous Aboriginal genocide, Palestinian genocide, Iraqi genocide, Afghan genocide and now accelerating climate genocide. Ten years ago I published a book, *Jane Austen and the Black Hole of British History* (G.M. Polya, Melbourne, 1998), about huge famine atrocities that have been white-washed out of British history and the acute threat – through 'history ignored yields history repeated' – of repetition of these disasters on an even greater scale in the 21st century due to global warming. I have been utterly ignored.

In January 2008 I took part in a BBC broadcast – together with Nobel laureate Professor Amartya Sen (Harvard University), medical historian Dr Sanjoy Bhattacharya (Wellcome Institute, University College London) and other scholars – telling of the 1943–1945 'forgotten', man-made Bengal Famine in British-ruled India, which killed 6–7 million people in Bengal and neighbouring provinces. When the price of rice doubled and then doubled again millions who could not buy food simply perished under a merciless, racist British colonial régime.

History ignored yields history repeated. The price of wheat has tripled in the US over the last 3 years and doubled in Pakistan in the last year. The UN is warning that hugely increasing global food prices are threatening the 4 billion of our fellow passengers on Spaceship Earth who are currently malnourished. An enormous catastrophe is looming *right now* – and fundamentally because the world does not appreciate the Humanist injunction, 'to respect equality in the dignity of everyone'.

Silence kills and silence is complicity. We cannot walk by on the other side. We must (a) inform others about wise Humanist and scientific risk management methodology; (b) inform everyone we can about immense active and passive atrocities being currently committed against our fellow human beings by the war-criminal, mass paedocidal Anglo-American Alliance, including Australia; and (c) we must act ethically in all our avoidable dealings with those complicit in such atrocities (e.g. by intra-national and international sanctions and boycotts against complicit individuals, corporations and countries).

Of course science cannot presently address all problems (e.g. questions such as 'why are we here?'), and many things that impress humanity are dealt with by music, poetry and art. My *words* having failed, I have turned to painting *huge* paintings for peace, love and respect for mother, child and humanity. (E.g. simply Google search 'Manhattan Madonna', 'Sydney Madonna' and 'Melbourne Madonna' or for a *big* list of links to my *huge* paintings, simply search for the phrase 'Paintings for Peace' with the word 'digg'.) We must all do our bit as societally active Humanists 'to respect equality in the dignity of everyone' and to promulgate this profound Humanist message in our acutely threatened world.

Gideon Polya, retired biochemistry lecturer, author, painter, and HSV member.

MISSING LINK: Alfred Russel Wallace, Charles Darwin's neglected double

Rosslyn Ives

One hundred and fifty years ago, on 1 July 1858, at a meeting of the Linnean Society in London, three items were read to the gathered members. One was an unpublished sketch by Charles Darwin of his ideas on natural selection, written in 1844; the second a letter Darwin had written to a Harvard biologist in 1857 describing aspects of his theory; the third was Alfred Wallace's paper, 'On the Tendency of Varieties to Depart Indefinitely from the Original Type', which Wallace had sent to Darwin a few months earlier. These readings were arranged by Darwin's scientific friends and supporters, Joseph Hooker and geologist Charles Lyell, as a means of protecting Darwin's 'priority' claim on the scientific idea of natural selection.

In a long review essay, with the above title, on five recent biographies of Wallace, Jonathan Rosen in *The New Yorker*, 12 February 2007, gives a good account of why it is Darwin alone rather than Darwin and Wallace that most people associate with the great idea of biological evolution. Here are Rosen's opening paragraphs.

When he was twenty-four years old, Alfred Russel Wallace, the greatest field biologist of the nineteenth century, had his head examined by a phrenologist who determined that, while his 'organ of wonder' was very big, his 'organ of veneration,' representing his respect for authority, was noticeably small. Wallace was so struck with the accuracy of this report that, sixty years later, he mentioned it in his autobiography. It was wonder that drew him to nature, and an instinctive disregard for authority that made it easy to challenge an entire civilization's religious convictions, as he did when, in 1858, he dashed off a paper proposing a theory of evolution by means of natural selection. Unlike Charles Darwin, who spent twenty years keeping a similar conclusion to himself in private dread, Wallace didn't give a damn what people thought. This utter independence from public opinion is one of several reasons that he has all but vanished from popular consciousness.

Another is simple bad luck. Wallace grew up poor and was always an outsider in the gentleman's club that constituted the scientific world of his day. When, in his youth, he sailed to the Amazon to seek his scientific fortune, his ship caught fire and sank on the way home, taking with it thousands of specimens, a number of live monkeys, and his dream of an easy life. Wallace never found steady work and was instead forced to make a living by his pen – risky for a scientist with a restless imagination in a cautious age – supplementing his income by working as a lowly test examiner. Most unluckily of all, Wallace, having completed his explosive paper on evolution, chose to send it to Darwin himself, who then kicked into high gear and brought out *On the Origin of Species* the following year.

Still another reason for Wallace's obscurity has something to do with that phrenologist. Wallace cracked one of the greatest scientific mysteries of all time but continued to believe throughout his long life that a stranger had read the riddle of his character by feeling the bumps on his head. Phrenology was one of several commitments – like his campaign against vaccination and his credulous defense of spiritualist mediums – that did not endear him to the scientific establishment, or to posterity.

Wallace was born in 1823 to a once prosperous family that had fallen on hard times. Although his education was patchy, he developed a passion for reading. Being packed off as apprentice to his surveyor brother gave him ample time to be outdoors. His avid reading continued, especially on nature and geology, including the widely discussed, controversial and anonymous, *Vestiges of the Natural history of Creation*, Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology*, and Malthus's 'Essay on the Principles of Population,' all influential reading material, read by Darwin as well. After a crash course in flora and fauna Wallace began making local collecting trips, and then ventured overseas, first to the Amazon with its disastrous outcome.

In 1855 while collecting in Sarawak Wallace formulated what became known as 'the Sarawak Law', the idea that 'every species had come into existence coincidental to both space and time with pre-existing closely allied species'. He sent a copy of this paper to Darwin, who wrote in its margin, 'nothing new'.

In his spare time, Wallace kept pondering the problem of how the great diversity of species had arisen. A few years later, in early 1858, while on the now Indonesian island of Ternate, recovering from a malarial fever, Wallace dashed off his paper, 'On the Tendency of Varieties to Depart Indefinitely from the Original Type,' and once again sent a copy to Darwin. This time Darwin's reaction was not so sanguine. He immediately wrote to his friend Lyell expressing how shocked he was, 'I never saw a more striking coincidence... Even his terms now stand as heads of my chapters.' He then added despairingly, 'So all my originality, whatever it may amount to, will be smashed.' Darwin then turned the matter over to Hooker and Lyell with enough hints to help them resolve things favourably for him, which they did on 1 July 1858.

Wallace, still in the tropics, knew nothing of the meeting; and when he found out, as Rosen writes, 'he expressed the humble satisfaction of a servant invited to eat at the master's table.' This is revealed in a letter Wallace wrote to his mother where he tells her about the 1 July reading of joint papers at the Linnean Society meeting. Wallace gives this as evidence of how highly Darwin, Hooker and Lyell thought of his paper. He then concludes, 'This assures me the acquaintance and assistance of these eminent men on my return home.'

Wallace returned home in 1862, but the rest of his life lacked stability as he eked a living as a writer and test examiner. His success was further put in question by a capacity to defend highly questionable practices like phrenology and spiritualism. Introduced to the latter by his sister Fanny, he was initially sceptical but quickly turned into an enthusiastic defender.

Nonetheless, by the end of his long life, he had received many major honours as a scientist, including membership of the Royal Society, and was a well known figure of the time. At his death in 1913 he could have been buried in Westminster Abbey, but his family, knowing his wishes, declined in favour of a local graveyard.

Wallace deserves to be better known, and the 150th anniversary of the reading of his and Darwin papers on natural selection is a timely reminder of this neglected scientist. □

Church-State Separation for the Impoverished Imagination

Shawn Dawson

(Reprinted from *Free Inquiry* NY, Vol. 28 No. 3, April–May 2008.)

Among the many frustrating experiences that face humanists, arguing for church-state separation must be one of the worst. I have personally argued till I was blue in the face trying to overcome the intransigent incomprehension of some of my religious acquaintances who could not seem to grasp that something is wrong when church and state are not separate. Gradually, after several encounters, an idea came to me. What if the problem lies not in their ability to grasp such concepts as ‘the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion’ (*The Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, Article 18), or in their ability to follow a chain of fairly straightforward reasoning, but rather in their stupendous *poverty of imagination*? The hypothesis seems at least worthy of investigation and, thankfully, suggests a readily available cure. So, for the sake of tolerant people everywhere, I propose the following thought-experiment for the improvement of the religiously impoverished imagination.

A familiar situation

Imagine that you are a Christian living in a country in which most of the inhabitants are Muslim. Now, this state is a democracy and has enshrined in its laws the constitutional protections for freedom of thought, freedom of religion, and so forth, as well as a specific prohibition against the establishment of any state religion. However, a number of common practices disturb you. The national anthem refers to Allah and implies that the country is a Muslim nation. In many public speeches, the leaders of the government ask for Allah’s blessing and proclaim that Muhammad is his prophet. Moreover, in some public schools, officials and teachers periodically lead the students in prayer to Allah. Finally, as you drive along the public highways, you see many signs on the outskirts of various towns and cities declare, ‘..... is a Muslim town/city.’

As a Christian, what would you think about the situation? How would you feel? I think you would justifiably believe that the state is privileging Islam over Christianity, that it is not protecting your rights, and that it is in fact failing to uphold its own laws and constitution. You would worry about your children – will they be made to feel uncomfortable and isolated in school because of their minority religious beliefs? You would wonder where it will lead. Will Christians soon become second-class citizens? Are they already?

Imagine further that you and other Christians got organized and took your complaints to the government and the schools. The reply you received, however, was not what you had hoped for. Government officials say, ‘There is no

establishment of a state religion. Our citizens enjoy perfect freedom of religion. Christians are free to pursue their religion in private. The fact that we refer to Allah, Muhammad, and Islamic tradition in our speeches and elsewhere merely reflects the historical fact that we began as a Muslim nation. Moreover, we believe that it would be infringing upon the rights of our Muslim majority to deny them a public voice in government.’

School officials say, ‘We are not denying you the right to raise your children as Christians or trying to inculcate them in Islamic ways. We believe that praying to Allah in school allows children to develop their own spirituality.’ Would you not conclude that there is something seriously wrong with this situation? Add to this the fact, let us suppose, that for many people the term *Christian* is virtually a dirty word and that to be openly Christian and run for office is political suicide. Would you not start to wonder if most people in the nation did not actually value freedom *per se* but only freedom for those who think like they do?

freedom of religion includes freedom from religion, and that the only freedom worthy of the name recognizes and respects the freedom of others.

The moral of the story

Some people may think that my example is arbitrary, sensationalistic, or even opportunistic, given recent events in American history. But it is not. Even though it is something of an amalgam, my scenario closely mirrors the situation in America, Canada, and other countries. If you do not like my example, pick a different religion as the favoured one or as the minority one and vary the specifics accordingly. Or if you want to be really radical – if you dare – imagine that ‘the minority religion’ actually represents the nonreligious and the favoured religion is Christianity. I hope you will then start to appreciate that freedom of religion includes freedom from religion, and that the only freedom worthy of the name recognizes and respects the freedom of others. Now, is church-state separation really so hard to grasp?

Shawn Dawson works in information technology and has taught philosophy at the University of Regina.

Separating Church and State: Keeping God Out of Government

Proceedings of the conference held in Melbourne, June 2006, 60pp. (report, *AH* No. 83, page 22). Now available from CAHS for \$10.00, per copy, including postage within Australia.

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Michael Servetus, proto-unitarian heretic: *Vir Albus et Extinctus N^o MDLIII*

Peter Hughes

Source, 'Michael Servetus,' *Dictionary of Unitarian and Universalist Biography*, www25.uua.org/uuhs/duub/articles/michaelservetus.html (read 17/3/08). Retitled and abridged by S. N. Stuart.

MICHAEL SERVETUS (1509 or 1511–October 27, 1553), a Spaniard martyred in the Reformation for his criticism of the doctrine of the trinity and his opposition to infant baptism, has often been considered an early unitarian. Sharply critical though he was of the orthodox formulation of the trinity, Servetus is better described as a highly unorthodox trinitarian. Still, aspects of his theology – for example, his rejection of the doctrine of original sin – did influence those who [in the latter half of the 16th century] founded unitarian churches in Poland and Transylvania. Public criticism of those responsible for his execution, the Reform Protestants in Geneva and their pastor, John Calvin, moreover, inspired unitarians and other groups on the radical left-wing of the Reformation to develop and institutionalize their own heretical views. Widespread aversion to Servetus' death has been taken as signaling the birth in Europe of religious tolerance, a principle now more important to modern Unitarian Universalists than antitrinitarianism. Servetus is also celebrated as a pioneering physician. He was the first to publish a description of the blood's circulation through the lungs.

The freethinker persecuted

In Italy Servetus was horrified by riches of the church, the adoration accorded the Pope, and the worldliness of the priesthood. Some time in 1530 Servetus dropped out of the emperor's entourage and made his way to the Swiss city of Basel to join the Protestants. Having worn out his welcome there with constant theological dispute, Servetus moved to more tolerant Strasburg. There, in 1531, he published *De Trinitatis Erroribus* (On the Errors of the Trinity).

If Servetus hoped his book would persuade the new Protestant establishment to re-think orthodox trinitarian doctrine, as traditionally interpreted from the fourth century Council of Nicaea through the late mediaeval Scholastics, and replace it with his own formulation, he was quickly disappointed. Meanwhile, in 1532, the Supreme Council of the Inquisition in Spain began proceedings to summon him, or to apprehend him if he would not appear before the tribunal. He was terrified. He fled to Paris and surfaced there with a new name, Michel de Villeneuve.

Refuge in scientific study

As 'Villeneuve' Servetus studied mathematics and medicine at colleges in Paris, then a center of religious ferment. From 1536–38 he was a medical student at the University of Paris. He followed Andreas Vesalius as assistant to Hans Gunther in dissection. Gunther wrote that 'Michael Villonovanus' had a knowledge of Galen 'second to none.' Servetus soon came to differ from Galen in the matter of pulmonary circulation. Galen had supposed aeration of the blood took place in the heart and assigned the lungs a fairly minor

function. Servetus, by examining the wall of the heart and noting the size of the pulmonary artery, concluded that transformation of the blood, accomplished by the release of waste gases and the infusion of air, occurred in the lungs. It is not clear whether Servetus or a contemporary, unknown to Servetus, first made this discovery. Servetus was the first to publish. Although he only expressed the new knowledge as a lengthy metaphorical aside in his theological writing, he was the first person to record a modern understanding of pulmonary respiration.

In 1538 Servetus, as Villeneuve, got into trouble with the faculty of medicine, the Parlement of Paris, and the Inquisition for mixing astrology with medicine. Although he was acquitted by the Inquisition, the Parlement ruled that his published self-defense was to be confiscated and he was to desist from the practice of astrology. Servetus left Paris shortly thereafter, perhaps without a degree, to practice medicine in the area of Lyons.

His Nemesis John Calvin

Calvin's theology had included little mention of the trinitarian nature of the godhead until, in 1537, another reformer, Pierre Caroli, accused him of being an Arian. Although cleared by a synod at Lausanne, Calvin was afterwards on his guard and determined to deal severely with deviations in this area of orthodoxy.

Servetus, surely aware of Calvin's previous lack of clarity on the subject, bombarded him with letters insisting on unorthodox conceptions more radical than those he had presented a decade and more ago. Calvin replied with increasing impatience and asperity. Servetus sent Calvin a manuscript of his yet unpublished [*Christianismi*] *Restitutio* [The Restoration of Christianity]. Calvin reciprocated by sending a copy of the *Institutio* [Institutions of Christian Religion]. Servetus returned it with abusive annotations. On the day Calvin broke off the correspondence, he wrote to his colleague, Guillaume Farel, that should Servetus ever come to Geneva, 'if my authority is of any avail I will not suffer him to get out alive.'

Darwin Day

12 February, 2009 will be the
200th anniversary of Charles Darwin's birth.

Plan to celebrate Darwin's world-changing
contribution to the place of humans in
the scheme of things.

When Servetus published the *Restitutio* in early 1553 he sent an advance copy to Geneva. On his way to northern Italy where, he believed, there were people receptive to his writings, he made his way across the border to Geneva. Recognized at a Geneva church service, he was arrested and tried for heresy by Protestant authorities. The Council of Geneva, after receiving the advice of churches in four other Swiss cities, convicted Servetus of antitrinitarianism and opposition to child baptism. Calvin asked that Servetus be mercifully beheaded. The Council insisted he should be burned at the stake.

Spectators were impressed by the tenacity of Servetus' faith. Perishing in the flames, he is said to have cried out, 'O Jesus, Son of the Eternal God, have pity on me!' Farel, who witnessed the execution, observed that Servetus, defiant to the last, might have been saved had he but called upon 'Jesus, the Eternal Son.'

Heretical heritage

Nearly all copies of Servetus' magnum opus, *Christianismi Restitutio*, were destroyed by the authorities. Only three have survived. Its peculiar, unorthodox trinitarian theology, which made Servetus a hunted man in nearly every country in Western Europe, cannot be summarized simply.

Servetus rejected the doctrine of original sin and the entire theory of salvation based upon it, including the doctrines of Christ's dual nature and the vicarious atonement effected by his death. He believed Jesus had one nature, at once fully human and divine, and that Jesus was not another being of the godhead separate from the Father, but God come to earth. Other human beings, touched by Christian grace, could overcome sin and themselves become progressively divine. He thought of the trinity as manifesting an 'economy' of the forms of activity which God could bring into play. Christ did not always exist. Once but a shadow, he had been brought to substantial existence when God needed to exercise that form of activity. In some future time he would no longer be a distinct mode of divine expression. Servetus called the crude and popular conception of the trinity, considerably less subtle than his own, 'a three headed Cerberus.' (In Greek mythology Cerberus is a three-headed dog-like creature of the underworld.)

Servetus did not believe people are totally depraved, as Calvin's theology supposed. He thought all people, even non-Christians, susceptible to or capable of improvement and justification. He did not restrict the benefits of faith to a few recipients of God's parsimonious dispensation of grace, as did Calvin's doctrine of the elect. Rather, grace abounds and human beings need only the intelligence and free will, which all human beings possess, to grasp it.

Nor did Servetus describe, as did Calvin, an infinite chasm between the divine and mortal worlds. He conceived the divine and material realms to be a continuum of more and less divine entities. He held that God was present in and constitutive of all creation. This feature of Servetus' theology was especially obnoxious to Calvin. At the Geneva trial he asked Servetus, 'What, wretch! If one stamps the floor would one say that one stamped on your God?'

Calvin asked if the devil was part of God. Servetus laughed and replied, 'Can you doubt it? This is my fundamental principle that all things are a part and portion of God and the nature of things is the substantial spirit of God.' Servetus was a dualist. He thought God and the devil were engaged in a great cosmic battle. The fate of humanity was just a small skirmish in salvation history. He charged orthodox trinitarians with creating their doctrine of the trinity, not to describe God, but to puff themselves up as central to God's concern. Because they defined God to suit their own purposes, he called them atheists.

Servetus' contemporaries most in sympathy with his thought developed and spread an early form of Unitarianism in Poland. They took heart from some aspects of Servetus' doctrine and ignored or rejected the rest. Nevertheless, although Michael Servetus has now no real disciples and never had any, his pioneering life and the tragedy of his death did inaugurate, in a sense, the history of modern liberal religion. It is one of the ironies of history that all the modern Unitarian churches and movements hold the memory of Michael Servetus in special honour – for every one of them developed historically from the Reformed tradition of John Calvin. □



Humorist Column

A Scottish tradesman, a painter called Jack, was very interested in making a pound where he could. So he'd often thin down his paint to make it go a wee bit further. As it happened, he got away with this for some time.

Then the Presbyterian Church decided to do a restoration job on their biggest church. Jack put in a painting bid and because his price was so competitive, he got the job.

So he set to, with a right good will, erecting the trestles and putting up the planks, buying the paint and – yes, I am sorry to say – thinning it down with the turpentine.

Well, Jack was up on the scaffolding, painting away, the job nearly done, when suddenly there was a horrendous clap of thunder. The sky opened and the rain poured down, washing the thin paint from all over the church and knocking Jack off the scaffold to land on the lawn.

Now, Jack was no fool. He knew this was a judgment from the Almighty, so he fell on his knees and cried, 'Oh, God! Forgive me! What should I do?'

And from out of the thunder, a mighty Voice spoke, 'Repaint! Repaint! And thin no more.'

After an evening of heavy drinking Louey took a short cut through the local cemetery and fell into a newly dug grave. He couldn't get out, so he lay at the bottom and fell asleep.

Next morning a gravedigger came past and heard someone groaning. He investigated, and saw a shivering figure in the grave and demanded, 'What's wrong with you, making all that noise?'

'I'm so cold,' Louey shivered.

'Well it's no wonder,' said the grave digger. 'You've kicked all the dirt off yourself.'

A Jewish grandmother was looking after her son's children in a coffee shop in Acland Street, St Kilda. A friend came along and asked, 'How old are the children?'

'Well,' replied the grandmother, 'the doctor is four, and the lawyer will be two next week.'

Vote on Freedom of Expression marks the end of Universal Human Rights

The following is based on a press release issued by International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) late March, 2008.

Proponents of free speech at the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) have accused Islamic countries of 'hijacking' a resolution intended to renew the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression and turning it into an order to report on defamation of religion.

In the words of the Canadian delegation: 'instead of promoting freedom of expression the Special Rapporteur would be policing its exercise'.

The amended resolution was adopted on Friday, 28 March, in Geneva by 32 votes in favour (mainly Islamic states with support from China, Cuba and Russia). There were no votes against, but 15 abstentions.

Roy Brown, spokesman at the UNHRC in Geneva for the International Humanist and Ethical Union, commented: 'Canada's position was echoed by several delegations, who objected to the change of focus from protecting to limiting freedom of expression. More than 20 of the original 53 co-sponsors of the resolution withdrew their sponsorship. These included the European Union and the United Kingdom (speaking for Australia and the United States), India, Switzerland, Brazil, Bolivia and Guatemala.

'Freedom of expression is most important for those who live under the tyranny of Islamic law. This was highlighted by a courageous group of 21 NGOs from the Islamic States who issued a statement appealing to delegations not to support the amendment.'

(See <http://www.article19.org/pdfs/press/petition-hrc.pdf>>)

Death of Human Rights

Brown added: 'We have just witnessed the death of the Human Rights Council, and with it the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan saw the writing on the wall three years ago when he spoke of the old Commission on Human Rights having "become too selective and too political in its work". The old system needed to be swept away and replaced. The Human Rights Council was supposed to be that new start, a Council whose members genuinely supported, and were prepared to defend, the principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Three years later Annan's dream lies shattered, and the Human Rights Council stands exposed as no longer capable of fulfilling its central role: the promotion and protection of human rights.

'NGOs and States who are genuinely concerned with human rights should now seriously consider withdrawing from the Council until such time as it puts its house in order. Or failing that, set up their own organisation actually committed to the promotion and protection of human rights.'

Brown's full report on the resolution and debate can be found at <http://www.iheu.org/node/3123>.

IHEU has Specialist Consultative NGO status with the ECOSOC and since its founding in 1952 at a Congress presided over by Sir Julian Huxley has played an active role at the UN in New York and at Geneva.

Roy Brown, IHEU main representative at the UN, Geneva, can be contacted by E-mail at: <roywbrown@gmail.com>.

Letters

'Hygiene hypothesis'

There are times in my life when I get nervous. Such a time is when I read the article on page 14 (AH No. 89) which tells me, and I quote, 'Children who attend day care in their first few months are much less likely to develop leukaemia than those who stay at home.'

The article also refers to the 'hygiene hypothesis' as an explanation for allergies etc. A hypothesis is just the germ of an idea before it becomes a theory, from when, after years of field work, research, trial and error it becomes, if you like, a product of one sort or another. We do face fewer threats these days from pathogens, parasites, microbes etc., and it is also true that the average male, in 1900, lived to around age 50 and today, squeaky clean to age 83.

Barry Revill, Moorabbin, Vic.

Syntagma 2

In England, for a long time they had discredited Nietzsche by giving out not only that he lost his reason after publishing his books, but that he had lost it even while writing the most important of them.

Oscar Levy

The noble soul has reverence for itself.
Nietzsche

Gregory Wilson, Albany, WA

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High noon at the U3A: thinking about change

Tom Marshall

I Think that the possible consequences of the global environmental deterioration, now taking place, are many times more serious than is generally realized. In a recent discussion at a University of the Third Age (U3A), session on current affairs, I argued that an assertion of John Howard's that the well-being of the economy must not be jeopardized by environmental considerations was wrong. I asserted that any economy depended solely upon what the environment alone could offer. It is the sole source of every resource that living things need for life itself, and its preservation, in a healthy condition, must be our most urgent priority above all other considerations. I was appalled to discover that most people in the session seemed not to grasp this simple proposition, and some even seemed to resent it. The opposition was led by an economist who is a strong supporter of the present system and, whilst I freely admit a complete ignorance of how mainstream economics work, I often wonder if its disciples understand either.

I decided to find how they could explain how the Earth could supply resources at the present rate of consumption for say, the next two or three thousand years. To this end, I bought a book by the architect of the modern brand of economics, Professor F. A. Hayek. I chose a copy of his work *The Constitution of Liberty*, because the blurb on the back cover of the book declared that at a meeting in 1975, Margaret Thatcher held this tome up, then banging it down on the table, announced sternly, 'This is what we believe.' I understand that Ronald Reagan believed the same thing, and eventually Bob Hawke and Paul Keating and every other mainstream economist came to believe it too. But I don't think any of them read it, because if they had they would have found the following passage, which is so obviously in error, and dangerously so; they could not possibly have accepted it as the main proposition on which to base a system of economics. In my edition of the book, Routledge Classics 2006, it can be found on page 319.

In a sense of course, most consumption of irreplaceable resources rests on an act of faith. We are generally confident that, by the time the resource is exhausted, something new will have been discovered which will either satisfy the same need or at least compensate us for what we no longer have. We are constantly using up resources on the basis of the mere probability that our knowledge of available resources will increase indefinitely and this knowledge does increase in part because we are using up what is available at such a fast rate.

The very first sentence that speaks of an act of faith is disturbing to me whom life has taught that faith is something that can never be relied on to provide for your needs. Economics claims to be a science, but the word 'faith' has connotations of a religion. Dr Hayek says 'on the basis of the mere probability that our knowledge of available resources will increase indefinitely'. This is nonsense. Our planet is well defined: we know its diameter, its volume and even (to my eternal mystification) its weight, so there is nothing indefinite about it. We plainly cannot go on finding new resources 'indefinitely'.

Our most precious resource, I guess, is water because we cannot live without it. Already, in varying degrees of

urgency, it is in short supply in many countries round the world. Most of the major rivers of the world are dangerously silted up and/or polluted, and world stocks of ground-water that took thousands of years to accumulate are being daily depleted. The polar ice caps are slowly sliding into the sea, rendering useless billions upon billions of megalitres of precious drinking water.

When we look at our history, we can see how we need to be cautious in our use of resources. The first humans emerged about one and a half million years ago, a relatively brief span of time when we consider the longevity of other species. We should reasonably expect our species to survive for at least as long again. That is if we don't render ourselves extinct by running out of essentials.

Here in Victoria we are going to build a desalination station on the coast to eke out the state's stock of water supplies. The sea is deep and covers two thirds of the planet but, taking the long view, we can understand that the sea is a finite resource and if we do not change the way we live we will have drunk it all up by the end of the next million and a half years. Recycling water is no answer either. Experience shows that each time we recycle something a little of its worth is lost and it must ultimately be discarded.

Although some form of early ancestors of modern man have been around for one and half to two million years, most of the resource depletion has occurred in the last 10,000 years, i.e. the relatively short time period since farming and settlements became a widespread way of life for our species. For how much longer can we afford to be prodigal with our resources? *Or do we owe no responsibility to the needs of future generations?*

The philosophy upon which this present system of economics stands, that the planet can supply new resources without end, is clearly false. If we do not rectify our mistake, Nature will step in and rectify it for us. Whether we like it or not we must change the way we live. Interestingly, another completely different set of factors point to exactly the same conclusion.

Last year the UN Committee on climate change brought down its report. In the public discussions that followed I learnt that the Committee had concluded that steps to mitigate global warming must be taken immediately or 'catastrophic' consequences would ensue. It did not specify what it thought these would be, but one scientist has already done so. He is James Lovelock, who wrote the widely read book of the 1980s, *Gaia. A new look at life on Earth*.

There are many scientific processes described in this book that my limited education prevented me from fully understanding, but I think I got some grasp of what he was saying. He says he was invited to join N.A.S.A. in the early days of the project and became interested in the work of the team of biologists there that were looking for traces of life on other planets. He was asked if he had any helpful suggestions and after a few days' thought, he realised that living things, through their exhalations, leave traces of their presence in the atmosphere of the planet on which they live.

His suggestion was adopted, but that was not the end of it, because when he returned to England he followed that line of research much further. From that, he formed the theory that in the eons that ensued after life began on the planet, as different and increasingly complex forms of life emerged and passed away, the modifying process of living things also developed and increased in complexity until, by the time humans emerged, there existed a natural system of checks and balances which kept the climate of the planet in a state suitable for the continuation of life.

Lovelock believes today that those checks and balances no longer exist because they have been overwhelmed by our emissions, and now the planet will heat to the point where life will only be possible in two zones – one around the North and the other around the South Pole. I have heard of no other scientist that fully agrees with him, so the probabilities are that he is wrong. I desperately hope so. On the other hand, the stature of Lovelock among his fellows does not allow us to dismiss his opinions, and I think we should be prudent, accept his prediction as the worst-case scenario and set a team of scientists to devise measures to meet the contingency should it arise.

Whatever is to happen in future, the environmental deterioration we are witnessing now, indicates that we have no option but to make radical changes to the way we live.

It well may be that my thinking is wrong on this subject but until I get an answer to the issues I have raised – an answer as honestly formulated as I have tried to formulate this little essay – then I will hold to my views.

If change is inevitable, then clearly we should, as Lovelock says, be planning the outlines of a future society. I am hesitant to put a view forward on so important a matter, but the responsibilities I feel towards the people who will follow us weigh upon me so heavily that I must bring into debate some things that are important to me.

Human beings are important to me because I believe they represent the highest creative achievement of Nature on planet Earth. The planet itself is important to me. It is unique in our solar system in that it is the source of all living things and the birthplace of an animal which has the gift of consciousness and the priceless faculty of reason. It is this animal, Man, the majority of scientists say, which is responsible for the environmental deterioration that has seriously damaging the biosphere. The salvation of the environment, it is now realised, is in our hands and ours alone.

I think it is supremely necessary that we have a far deeper understanding of ourselves than we now have, in order that we may shape a society that allows us to fulfil ourselves. Every human has some special talent, and the way to fulfilment is to exercise that talent. We also have serious deficiencies that must be addressed before we can build an enduring society.

The renowned biologist Konrad Lorenz wrote a book, *On Aggression*, in which he said that when two dogs engage in a vicious fight, each intent on killing the other; and if one surrenders its throat to the other. A remarkable thing then happens. Even though it plainly wants to, the victor is unable to kill its victim because of the restraint that Nature has placed upon it.

Humans have no such restraint. Nature has given them the free will to determine their own behaviour. A freedom we find difficult to exercise in a controlled manner. For

centuries thinking people have been urging their society to regulate their behaviour and follow codes they have drawn up. The earliest one I know is the Ten Commandments, but the problem of human misbehaviour has preoccupied philosophers through the ages to the present day. Planners will have to overcome this problem without interfering with the golden rights of freedom of thought and speech.

Our brief tenure of the planet clearly shows that creativity is innate to us. Our history over those million and a half years is defined by that creativity. Thus we have the Palaeolithic, Mesolithic and Neolithic periods of our history which show the steady development of technology in ancient times. After the invention of farming (Agricultural Revolution) the enormous increase in the production of food enabled the population to explode. Humans produced an avalanche of new technologies necessary to cope with the new conditions, and the development of social evolution took a steeply upward curve, which continues to the present day.

Clearly human beings are thinking, inventive animals, which Nature compels to enquire into every facet of their world and seek out reasons for every phenomenon they encounter. That we have superbly developed into a creature with the faculties to ferret out every invisible law of physics and the universe is self-evidently and abundantly clear. When we design our new society we have no option but to give this facet of our character high priority, but after we have created a sensible, sustainable economic base, that will endure if need be forever.

We are toolmakers but nature has endowed us with natural tools. We have imagination that enables us to create and reject an infinity of ideas in our head without putting pen to paper. We are magnificent spiritual beings (I am not here referring to religious or supernatural beliefs) that are able to create wonders of poetry and art, invention and science.

To what use will we put these precious tools? To create wealth? That is the vision offered to us by our present economists, a vision that shrivels the soul with its very pettiness and diminishes every human with a brain in the head to think with. We have the potential by virtue of our natural endowments to stand astride the universe, to play with the stars and to use black holes as hazards in cosmic games of golf. Who knows? We may be standing on the threshold of another revolution.

Tom Marshall is a retired fitter, HSV member with an interest in ideas.



‘Well, not to worry, of course the seas often rise from time to time...’

The Context of the Sustainability Movement

Carl Mahoney

Published in: *Forum*, Centre for Citizenship and Human Rights, Deakin University, Number 51, September 2007

Sustainability is not just a buzzword these days. It has well and truly hit the mainstream. This has happened here in Australia because of the sudden public awareness of climate change and its implications coupled with the critical water shortage and drought conditions. Many people who barely even knew what the word meant before have now unexpectedly found this aspect of life at the head of their consciousness. But this is not the full and true meaning of sustainable living, which lies deep in the ecology of all things. Although physical and environmental sustainability has hit the public consciousness first, we must look at this in the context of the now widespread movement to build ourselves back into the ecology of nature and facilitate and regulate all our actions in this way.

There are many kinds of examples that we can put together to form the beginnings of a whole picture. In business there is the Triple Bottom Line concept, the Corporate Social Responsibility movement and many Ethical Investment services, and there are now other hopeful signs emerging in the private sector. Sadly, the realisation and input of our leaders and regulators have not matched these largely individual and business led initiatives. Prof. Ian Lowe has classically said, 'you cannot see the economy from space,' indicating that the ecosystem of our planet must take pride of place in our thinking and action. He is totally right, but unfortunately you can certainly see from space some of the physical impacts of our economic actions on land and sea. This demonstrates the current uncaring attitude which comes from putting our economy first, because it is a truly false economy if it is unsustainable.

The move to give all people a better life on this planet has been working away quietly in the background for at least the last thirty years

Right now the huge power structures in the world, whether they belong to states, corporations or religions, are in an enormous and convoluted conflict situation. Therefore a huge countervailing social justice movement has arisen, basically to protest against and try to repair some of the glaring inequities and injustices that have arisen everywhere, even in the so-called 'developed nations'. These transgressions hit us every day in the media. Unfortunately, the struggle between the conscious and unconscious destroyers and the repairers and creators of a

new and better world is a little like a David and Goliath contest. The vast power of the dollar in today's world is largely arrayed on the side of big power and its economic and political interests. It feeds the ongoing conflict between its elements with little constraint. This can and might develop into a truly apocalyptic situation.

The move to give all people a better life on this planet has been working away quietly in the background for at least the last thirty years. This century, if it is about nothing else, is about the development of our ability to make quite marked and extensive changes to an entrenched and established way of life which has dominated us now for thousands of years, in fact from the time of the first settled agriculture and urbanisation. This is a very old paradigm which I call 'The Power of Rulers', and of course it has always assumed with varying degrees of arrogance that the masses who are ruled are either illiterate or irrelevant. In this outdated paradigm of life there is a definite separation between the ruling elite and the mass of those ruled. The feedback links from the ruled are still very weak as we who have suffered from this systemic discontinuity know very well. Evidence proves that it is a reasonable assertion that the representative democracy we now live under has developed as a logical extension of the feudal system. This may seem to some to be a little unfair, but in its historical context it is probably true that because of the lack of widespread mass education before the 20th century, whatever developed would have had to be an elite process anyway.

The new paradigm now arising, which wants peace, harmony and sustainability in the world through individual and group empowerment at the grass roots, has recently been developing fairly rapidly in its various forms. However, it has not always been entirely clear to everyone involved that they are actually groping hungrily towards a total ecological framework in our operations, our governance and our works in the biosphere. Nothing short of a beneficial symbiosis between our way of life and our life support systems will do, and nothing short of a change in the dominant culture and mindset will bring it about.

The paradox in all this is that, although it is bound to be a long drawn-out and complex process, we are faced with such pressing problems that we are very short of time. Although it is a transformation process it could contain the seeds of revolution. This would be a very undesirable outcome, since we have had enough bloody revolutions throughout the era of The Power of Rulers. We would not wish to add to this damage through the agency of truly constructive work. The real challenge is to find a way of integrating our work that uses the power of synergy to bring it together in a quicker and more efficient way. We have to use a subtle but effective approach of bending our existing frameworks and institutions towards a participatory democracy, because if we do not we might cause gross dysfunctionality and chaos. Look back at what happened to Marx's utopian ideas. We cannot let that tragedy happen to us again at this critical time in history when we are so well armed with hindsight. The one thing that is certain is that our new paradigm of life must continue and succeed. We in Australia have a much more educated nation now, and we should all be able to be involved in making it work here and everywhere.

Carl Mahoney, town planner with extensive experience in developing countries.

Website: <http://cma.alphalink.com.au>

Words

Rudi Anders

The meaning of a word is whatever the speaker means at the time, which changes according to mood, motive and context. The same swear word can be an insult or a term of endearment. As I learn more, my understanding of words changes. The subjective as well as the objective content of a word needs to be acknowledged.

I heard on the radio that philosophers have fifteen definitions of the word 'meaning'. My dictionary has three. I love words so much that I write the odd poem; some of my poems are very odd. In the last sentence I used the word 'odd' in two different meanings, but my educated wife tells me the meanings are quite clear. She uses the word 'oh' to mean many different things; depending on intonation it can mean surprise, horror, tell me more, etc.

Here is my take on some words

To me 'philosophers' means people who shuffle words and get paid for it. 'Existentialists' are similar but don't get paid. (Some philosophers tackle real issues.)

The word 'love' is very confusing, it has eighteen meanings in the dictionary. To do something out of love is to do it for no reward. The love of chocolate is the ultimate self-indulgence. To make love is to score sex; in tennis 'love' means no score. 'I love you' may mean I will take care of you, or, I want sexual gratification. I prefer the words 'compassion', 'like', 'want', 'affection' and 'enjoy' to the word 'love'. God's love has me very confused because it/he/she sends tsunamis, earthquakes, and other disasters that affect innocent animals and people.

'Spirit' is another word I avoid; it has twenty seven definitions in my dictionary. To me it means non-physical, such as spirit of competition, compassion, hate, loyalty or mirth, but the feelings are generated by a physical brain. I have seen no evidence of any sort of spiritual being. To have faith in the existence of one of the thousands of gods people talk about, I believe, is just habit, wishful thinking or fear driven. Alcoholic spirits and other drugs change the way people feel and think, which indicates that feeling and thinking are generated by chemical as well as electrical activity of the brain.

To me 'Humanists' are people who believe that human beings are intelligent and compassionate animals, and that there is no outside agency of any sort to guide them; they feel totally responsible for their own action.

'Religious faith' seems to mean 'I don't know if it is true but I believe it anyway.' When I was a child I had total faith that my parents could and would protect me from harm. Now I have a degree of faith that law and regulations, such as a bridge building code, will keep me from harm.

Words can be repeated over and over until they hypnotise people into abandoning critical thinking.

'Loyalty' as attachment for the purpose of security, pride and gratification is tricky; at first glance it seems beneficial. To be emotionally attached to country, political party, person or community gives one a warm feeling, a feeling of belonging and security. The unfortunate part of attaching to any group for emotional support and security is that it inherently means favouring that group over the rest of humanity. The paradox is that attachment to country, tribe,

economic community, belief system or any other group for security is dividing the human race and is causing insecurity. 'Loyalty' is an example of a word with a mine-field of complex personal psychological content.

'Leadership' also sounds beneficial, but if I am ignorant and choose a leader from my ignorance I will choose a bad leader. If I am wise I don't need a leader, if I am not wise I don't know how to choose one. (If you have a solution to that one, let me know.)

'Scepticism' is part of the solution to the last one. I hope I will question and re-question every conclusion until the day I die.

'Traditions' can be a lot of fun and sometimes evoke a lot of emotion. These emotions must be respected. Traditions change over time and were created by people. Since we are as good as the people who created traditions, I see no reason why we shouldn't change them if we want to, but we should take care not to throw out something irreplaceable. I have a similar respectful response to the word 'sacred'.

'Financial institution' sounds respectable; the finance sector has grown from 10% of the economy to over 30%. Moving money from one place to another produces nothing. Financial advisers produce nothing. Working hours are not getting shorter despite computers, other labour-saving machines and importing manufactured goods. I would like to ask an economist why we have not reduced the working week for such a long time. The answer may not be unbiased.

That word 'closure' has me stumped, perhaps it means acknowledging the fact of a loss after being in denial. Listening to some conversations I gained the impression some of the people really meant revenge.

'Choice' sounds like a fair thing, but it is a spin word when advertisers and politicians don't supply the information to make an informed decision.

'Stereotyping' is a lazy way to judge people. Housewives, builder-labourers, vegetarians, Hollywood stars, shop stewards and atheists can all be put into neat boxes, can't they? No-one fits in a box until they are dead. I have at times caught myself trying to live up to other peoples expectations: I was putting myself in a box!

I get a kick out of accurate communication, which I think is subtle and requires sensitivity, patience, good-will and sometimes a sense of humour. It helps to read between the lines to get a feel for the spirit of the statement rather than the letter of it.

Writing this gave me an enormous respect for dictionary writers.

Rudi Anders, Melbourne-based Humanist.



Humanist Internet Discussion Group

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To subscribe go to

<http://lists.topica.com/lists/humanist/>

DYING: A MEMOIR

by Donald and Myfanwy Horne

Viking (Penguin Books), Melbourne, Victoria,
266 pp. \$35, ISBN 978 0 670 07102 (hbk)

Reviewer: **David Milan**

December 2003: Donald Horne, journalist, editor, academic, professor emeritus, university chancellor, 2002 Australian Humanist of the Year, and all-round great Australian, was dying.

Myfanwy and I stood in the street outside the doctor's rooms, silently holding each other, tears in our eyes. Not through fear of death, but through sorrow at the coming to the end of our relationship – a relationship I see as having an existence beyond the lives of the two of us. Like a star.

The specialist's words had been spoken gently, carefully, but they told an apprehensive Donald what he didn't want to know – this was the beginning of the end, and he well understood what lay ahead. Remorseless suffering and the indignity of total dependence on others as death closed in. No miracle cure, there remained only 'symptom management': for how long? – nobody could say.

Pulmonary fibrosis is a merciless foe that destroys lung tissue, leaving the patient exhausted and gasping for air. Donald described these frightening episodes as 'storms of breathlessness', and it was against this nightmarish backdrop that Donald determined to write this, his last book, but to do so would demand almost unimaginable personal fortitude as well as the unconditional love and support of his family.

The book would be in three parts. The first section is Donald's, in which he, chronologically, traces his journey towards oblivion. He records the misery of relentless suffering, and the times of despair, but also the times of black humour and laughter, as for instance, when it became necessary to have a stair-lift installed in their tenement home as Donald became too weak to struggle upstairs. Great hilarity surrounded his first ascent, clinging grimly to the machine, perched precariously on the seat, oxygen supply tank in tow.

No wallowing in self-pity, but a candid, unsparing and brave account by a dying man of what that experience was like, day by day, for him. Donald's original title (*Journey of a Terminal Illness*) says it rather well. As always, Myfanwy would be his strength, his rock, while, on the practical level, playing her usual role as his very competent, insightful consulting editor. So they faced off their formidable task together with grit and determination.

January 2005: the illness has almost completely incapacitated Donald and he is struggling to write. More correctly, he uses a dictating machine (which he despises), but even then he is so frail that one of the family is often needed to press the 'record' button. He has taken extraordinary measures to keep himself alive long enough to finish his part of the book. Apart from his voluminous drug

regime, Donald must strategically position oxygen concentrators and nebulisers around the house; the task of supplementing his failing lungs is the urgent focus of each weary day.

Philosophically, Donald's convictions remained unshaken. Having abandoned religion in his teens, Donald could say, as he pondered his imminent demise seven decades later, 'my nearness to death has not produced a belief in the supernatural – death is simply not being here any longer.' Towards the end, the hospice chaplain visited, and was unfazed when Myfanwy declared that 'we are both liberal secular humanists.' The chaplain smiled and addressing Donald said, 'I don't know you, but thank you for all you have done.'

Myfanwy chose 'Requiem' as the title for her section of the book. An accomplished journalist in her own right, an author and social commentator, she was also the skilled literary partner for her renowned husband, making her important contribution to Donald's success as his consulting editor. But Myfanwy found in her life-partner much more: she would write, in her grief, 'my husband, my lover, my most constant companion, and my friend'. Having accepted the fact that Donald's condition was terminal, Myfanwy nevertheless wondered about her capacity to deal with the nightmare that lay ahead. But as the day-to-day difficulties increased, they sustained each other by their familiar rallying-call, 'It's not over until the fat lady sings.'

Myfanwy's writing is simple, direct and deeply expressive, but she wrote with grief at her elbow, long before Donald died. Ever busy, she became organiser *extraordinaire*, protective of Donald's frailty, juggling visits from friends, doctors, allied health professionals, and became expert in administering his medications, oxygen and nebuliser. Nurse, administrator, alert for something tasty which might tempt Donald's non-existent appetite, in general, a 'wonder-woman'. Their children, Nick and Julia make up this tightly-knit family, and were never far from their parent's side as Donald's life was ebbing away.

Donald used part three of the book to record his final thoughts on some big human questions which had always beguiled him. He muses on the arts, on the value of a rational, engaged mind and a few regrets for things yet to be realised. His essay on 'Faith' is splendid. For him, faith is an attribute common to all humankind; it is the engine driving thought and actions. 'Secular faith' is no oxymoron, but of a different order which, unlike religious faith, has no need for its validation by belief in the supernatural. Donald Horne's faith as a humanist was as real as that of the religionist, and just as legitimate. Ever the intellectual, it is fitting that he should close his book persuasively arguing his case by way of these brief essays. They are a tribute to a fine mind and a great Australian. □

**TWELVE GALTON LECTURES:
a centenary selection with
commentaries**

edited by Steve Jones & Milo Keynes
London: The Galton Institute. 348 pp. 2007.

Reviewer: **Valerie Yule**

Eugenics has had a bad name. Most things are judged by their extremes and their worst implementations, not their central messages. The Eugenics Society, founded in 1907, was largely inspired by Francis Galton, who in 1883 had defined the new word 'eugenics' as 'the scientific study of the biological and social factors which improve or impair the inborn qualities of human beings and of future generations'. This has been the concern of the Eugenics Society ever since, but by 1989 it had to change its name to the Galton Institute, because the popular connotation of 'eugenics' had become 'getting rid of the unfit' – which the Nazis took up enthusiastically, and others more well-meaning have interpreted as stopping the perceived 'unfit' from reproducing.

The nineteenth-century eugenicists were indeed concerned that if the brightest in the population had few children and the least competent had many, then society as a whole could change its gene pool of intellectual abilities. I don't know whether anybody has dared to check out whether they were correct. However, they were also concerned, as their successors still are, that most people do not have the opportunities to reach their full potential, for social and environmental reasons which could and should be changed.

The twelve lectures in this book, selected from the annual Galton lectures between 1914 and today, and given brief introductions, show the wide range of concerns within the original definition of eugenics.

They begin with Sir Francis Darwin's 1914 lecture on Francis Galton himself, who had died three years previously. Lectures now of historic interest on attitudes to eugenics were by Bishop Barnes of Birmingham on eugenics and religion, 1926, and Mr Justice McArdle, 1933, concerned about the 'burden of the unfit': 'About one in every ten of our people is either too dull or too weakly to earn a living unaided.' He advocated sterilisation, while being in modern eyes forward-looking about abortion, contraception, and population growth. Sir Julian Huxley's 1962 lecture on Eugenics in evolutionary perspective was controversial then and still is. J. A. Beardmore, in his introduction, calls it a 'mix of good science, sensible thinking about human evolution and rather poorly thought out socio-technological engineering'. The ethical issues have since extended further. The 'father of in-vitro fertilisation', Professor Robert Edwards, gave the 1982 lecture on the current clinical and ethical situation of human conception in-vitro.

Social aspects of population health and growth that are still relevant today were considered by John Maynard Keynes, 'Some economic consequences of a declining population', 1937; Sir William Beveridge, the architect of the welfare state, on 'Eugenic aspects of children's allowances', 1943; Professor T. H. Marshall, 'Social selection in the welfare state' on more equal opportunity through education, 1953; Sir Cyril Burt, 1955, on 'The meaning and assessment of intelligence' and how it might be possible to

realise 'that ideal polity in which the apparent injustices of nature are reconciled and harmonised by the wisdom and justice of man', and James Meade, 1972, on 'Economic policy and the threat of doom', described in its introduction by David Vines as an 'astonishing' lecture, still 'one of the best pieces available on the current debate about global warming and the Kyoto Treaty'.

Sexuality was discussed in 1978 by Professor Paul Gebhard of the Kinsey Institute, considering 'Sexuality in the post-Kinsey era', and how attitudes and behaviour have and have not changed, and in 1976 Alex Comfort queried the still wide-spread assumption that 'sexuality in old age' was non-existent.

The lectures reflect changing attitudes during the past century, although the continuing concerns with real social problems are still with us, mostly unsolved. Since the 1960s the Institute has focused particularly on advances in the life sciences, especially reproductive health, population, the environment and genetic diseases. Its newsletters and symposia continue to break ground in our most urgent issues today, and it gives practical support for reproductive health and family planning at home and abroad.

The etymology of 'eugenics' is Greek, 'well born', and the nature/nurture issues of achieving this for everyone are still critical for our future.

***THE END OF AMERICA: A letter
of warning to a young patriot***

by Naomi Wolf

Scribe, 2007, \$24.95

***NEMESIS: The last days of the
American Republic***

by Chalmers Johnson

Scribe, 2007, \$35.00

Reviewer: **Howard Hodgins**

Both these authors share the belief that the US as a democracy is doomed. Both make comparisons with the demise of other empires such as Roman, British, and Russian, and the circumstances of their downfall.

Wolf's emphasis is on the decline and disappearance of democratic principles, human rights and free speech. She notes the loss of voices from the past like Thomas Paine and the founding fathers of the Constitution and calls on the younger generation to resist the steps taken to close down an open society. She exhorts them to see the ways this administration has aborted the process by invoking threats both internal and external, restricting the press, arbitrarily detaining and surveilling citizens, establishing secret prisons, and maligning criticism as espionage and dissent as treason. The existence of secret prisons, 'rendition', and development of a paramilitary force have demeaned the USA in the eyes of the rest of the world. She exposes how the escalation of presidential executive has eroded the core values of the US Constitution.

Chalmers Johnson, an historian, on the other hand expands on a thesis covered in his trilogy (*Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire, The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy and the End of the Republic*

and *Nemesis*) of the effect of unforeseen consequences of his government's actions, and particularly those of the CIA, against other peoples of the world. In his view the most important characteristic in the imminent collapse of the American republic has been the expansion of militarism and the breakdown of constitutional government.

It is worthwhile recording that in October 2002, Senator Byrd (Democrat from West Virginia) asked plaintively about the separation of powers, 'Why are we being hounded into action on a resolution that turns over to President Bush the Congress's Constitutional power to declare war?.... The judgment of history will not be kind to us if we take this step.' Nonetheless the resolution was carried overwhelmingly in both the Senate and the Congress. The president now dominates the government in a way no ordinary monarch could. No president since Harry Truman, having discovered what unlimited power the CIA affords him, has failed to use it. Meanwhile the 'defence' budget of the Pentagon dwarfs those of the rest of the government, creating a form of military Keynesianism, which has undermined democratic decision-making in the process. Funds for military hardware are distributed to ensure that any member of Congress who might consider voting against a new weapons system would be accused of putting some of his constituents out of work. The costs of professional, permanent military operations including weapons and salaries is \$425 billion. A further \$100 billion is allocated to veterans, hospitals and pensions. Chinese, Japanese and other Asian investors are paying for these through trade deficits. Further hostility towards US hegemony is generated by the 737 military bases scattered throughout the world from Japan to Kyrgyzstan, from Guam to Germany (and Australia).

Johnson notes that since 1947 in no country amongst the long list which suffered US military power for political or military gain has democratic government come about as a result. Indeed America holds the unenviable record of having helped install and supported such dictators as the Shah of Iran, Suharto in Indonesia, Batista in Cuba, Somoza in Nicaragua, Pinochet in Chile, Mobutu in Zaire. Another writer, Anatol Lieven, author of *America Right or Wrong: An Anatomy of American Nationalism*, concludes 'US power, as presently conceived by the overwhelmingly majority of the US establishment, is unsustainable.... The empire can no longer raise enough taxes or soldiers, it is increasingly indebted, and key vassal states are no longer reliable.... The result is that the empire can no longer pay for enough for the professional troops it needs to fulfil its self-assumed imperial tasks.' □

THE HUMAN STORY: A New History of Mankind's Evolution

by Robin Dunbar

Faber & Faber, 2004. \$24.95

Reviewer: **Rosslyn Ives**

The appeal of *The Human Story* is its use of widely known archaeological findings to give an account of selected aspects of human evolution. The author, Robin Dunbar, a UK professor of evolutionary psychology, focuses on the evolution of the mind and its more interesting products like language, stories and religion.

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The book is divided into seven chapters. Each begins with an imaginatively constructed story by Dunbar, about a possible incident in our human evolutionary past. Each story results in a real archaeological find, such as cave paintings, footprints, or fossil remains, which provide intriguing evidence of earlier human activities.

In chapter one Dunbar sets the scene by considering the superb cave paintings of southern France as examples of a new and startling advance in human capabilities that seems to have occurred between 40,000 and 25,000 years ago. In chapter two he discusses possible ancestral connections between humans and the various living ape species. Chapter three looks at similarities and differences in mental cognition between humans and apes. Chapter four considers aggressive and sexual behavioural patterns as seen in apes and what they might, or might not, tell us about humans.

In the last three chapters Dunbar looks at the role of music, language and finally religion. He views religion as a cultural pattern that arose to meet important needs in humans, such as giving people a sense of belonging and a coherent view of their surroundings. In considering the psycho-social advantages offered by religion, Dunbar writes near the end of his book, on page 199,

In a rational humanistic world, such as that which Descartes himself set in train, our natural response must be to wean ourselves off the drug that religion ultimately is. But to succeed in this, we will need to find something in the social sphere to replace it.

He concludes with the thought that humans are 'an oddly mixed-up species'. And, he reminds the reader that,

the processes of evolution simply lead to where the benefits of any given change outweigh the costs. So it is that we are a hotch-potch of things that seemed a good idea at the time, but which, in hindsight, might perhaps have been done better or differently.

The Human Story is recommended for anyone interested in an up-to-date introductory account of human evolution. Plenty of references are supplied for each chapter, for those wishing to pursue any aspect of this topic further. □

BLIND FAITH

by Ben Elton

Bantam Press, 2007. \$32.95

Reviewer: **Bill Hawthorn**

If you would like to see Humanism as a movement against religious indoctrination then read Ben Elton's book, *Blind Faith*. This new best seller is a dark savagely comic novel about a post apocalyptic society where religious intolerance combines with a confessional, sex obsessed, egocentric culture to create a world where nakedness is modesty, ignorance is wisdom and privacy is a dangerous perversion. The only hope the world has for a decent future is for Humanism to succeed in its fight against 'blind faith'.

This is an amusing tale full of astute observations of our society indicating how much better it could be if we all believed in Humanism. □

Review essay

The Future of an Illusion

by Sigmund Freud

First published 1927

Reviewer: **Ralph Secombe**

I wanted to look at Freud's essay on religion, *Die Zukunft einer Illusion*, to see how much it would have to say to today's reader, given Dawkins, Hitchens etc. I wondered how well Freud's look into the future would stand up to the lapse of time since 1927. I also wanted to try out my rusty German.

Freud begins with a sketch of society, which he sees as consisting of the dominant, who are exploiters, controlling the subordinate and exploited. This notion of control is the lead-in to a discussion of religion, which is still relevant today. Social control by religion endures in the Western world (the sole subject of Freud's attention), and it is worse in Asia, Latin America and Africa.

Origin of religion

Freud paints a simple picture of early humans. He acknowledges positive effects here, contrasting society supported by religion with a state of nature, in which people – men, anyway – have a strong brutish drive to kill each other, as typified by a cartoon pic of cave-men. Freud does not see religion as totally bad, at least historically.

Like writers of today, Freud finds the origin of religion in the distant past, namely in the 'childhood of mankind', when people viewed human characteristics in terms of natural forces, such as tempest and disease. In particular, they found characteristics of a father – one who both protected and punished. Acting like a neurotic individual, mankind developed such father-figures into gods, which are still retained today.

A religion may have the appeal of selecting one's own group for special divine love, e.g. the Jewish belief in being God's chosen people and the Americans claim to be 'God's own country' (Freud uses the English term).

Decline of religion

Religion started to weaken as a result of observations that natural phenomena follow rules or laws and thus lose their humanlike quality. However, the gods endured, retaining their threefold function: to ward off the terrors of nature, to provide reconciliation with the cruelty of fate (especially as manifested by death) and to compensate people for the sufferings and deprivations demanded by living together in society. He notes that, notwithstanding those early observations that natural phenomena follow impersonal laws, the gods still retain their above mentioned three functions. Freud notes that the grip of religion is weakening and predicts that this will continue. He was correct. He sees the United States as exceptional in the strength of its adherence to Christianity. He might have predicted – but did not – that the variety of Christianity that would prove the hardest in the West would be the anti-intellectual, evangelical kind.

Freud views science as the cause of the decline of religion. Because his focus is on the present and future

rather than the past, he does not address history, like the church's suppression of such people as Galileo. In a reference to the USSR, Freud notes methods of social control which do not rely on religion. He refrains from passing judgment on such social experiments.

However, his picture of primitive man is crude and simplistic. Having never watched David Attenborough or Sigourney Weaver cavorting among great apes, he does not imagine that early humans or pre-humans in a state of nature could manage to settle disputes without bloodshed. For Freud, nature was red in tooth and claw. His speculations on particular cases of murder by early man (Oedipus) sound, well, rather Freudian!

Responses to decline of religion

Freud highlights the role of wish fulfilment in religious belief – 'a thing is so because I wish it to be so.' This is still relevant today, as it is not rare to hear manifestos like, 'I can't believe in a world without purpose or a creator. If I am unable to endure this darkness, I must believe in a god – most conveniently the one that fits my culture.' Predictably, when I became a Christian decades ago, I fell into this trap.

Freud draws a distinction between an *error*, like the opinion of Aristotle that cockroaches arise spontaneously from filth, and an *illusion*, in which wish fulfilment plays an essential part. He cites the belief of 'certain nationalists' in the superiority of the Indo-German (alias Aryan) race. As a Jew, Freud had scant reason to love the Nazis.

Freud acknowledges that the existence of God cannot be disproved. He poses the rhetorical question, why not accept the comfort of religion? Why not, indeed? Freud responds that there is *no* right to believe.

No rational person will behave so frivolously in other things and be satisfied with such impoverished reasons in making his judgments or allegiance: only in the highest and holiest things does he allow himself to indulge himself thus. In reality, such conduct is only an effort to demonstrate continued belief to oneself or others – whereas really such a person has long since detached himself. When it comes to religion, people are guilty of every possible dishonesty and intellectual impropriety. Philosophers overstretch the meaning of words till they scarcely retain anything of their original meaning; they label some blurred abstraction which they have made as 'God' and are now deists, believers in God, to all the world and are proud of recognising a higher, purer concept of God, though their God is rather an insubstantial shadow and no longer the powerful personality of religious teaching.

The first point anticipates *The End of Faith*, by Sam Harris, who argues that just as one is not intellectually entitled to have one's personal physics or personal geography (e.g. my intuition is that the capital of France is Berlin), so one is not entitled to adopt unfounded metaphysical beliefs. The second part of the passage forms a close match with Bishop Jack Spong, who has been described as an atheist. I would say he is one. However, Spong insists that he believes in God, explaining that this is not a 'theist god'. His God is a set of abstracts like love, the ground of our being and so on.

Benefits of religion and change

I was curious about Freud's attitude to change. Would the conservatism of religion be seen as a drawback? He sees advantage in recognising laws as having human rather than

divine origin, as this helps to overcome the 'rigidity and immutability' of society. This anticipates commentators of the present century, who lament that religion delays social progress. (As I recall, a recent news report mentions a pre-election commitment by Kevin Rudd to the Australian Christian Lobby to refrain from giving homosexual unions the status of marriage.)

Freud examines the question of practical benefits of religion: 'it is doubtful whether people in times of unlimited dominance of religious teachings were happier than today. They were certainly not more moral.' On this second point he goes on to write of inventive ways people found to evade the teachings. I believe he is on the right track about highly religious societies; there is evidence that they score poorly in social indicators. Gregory Paul's paper on 'Cross-national co-relations of quantifiable societal health with popular religiosity and secularism in the prosperous democracies' shows a correlation between such problems and high levels of religious belief. In particular, the United States – the most religious of the Western democracies – indeed the only strongly Christian nation remaining among the advanced democracies – has alarmingly high rates of homicide, juvenile and adult mortality, STD infections, abortion and teen pregnancy (*Journal of Religion and Society*, 2005, and transcript of ABC Radio National, *Late Night Live* for 4 October 2005).

The future

Freud assures us that he regards his essay as harmless, it will not shake a pious believer. Moreover, better men have said the same thing more powerfully and impressively (Nietzsche is presumably among the writers he had in mind). Perhaps Freud wrote that tongue in cheek. In any event it seems likely that his essay contributed to easing the burden laid on Western society by Christianity. Freud addresses the education of children in one of his more rhetorical passages.

Delay of sexual development and acceleration of the religious influence: these are the two main points in the program of today's pedagogy, are they not? By the time the child's thinking awakes, the religious teachings are already unassailable. Do you think that it fosters the strengthening of the function of thinking, to close off such a significant arena by the threat of punishment in hell? Whoever has managed to accept without criticism all the absurdities brought to him by religious teachings and even to overlook the contradictions between them – the weakness in such a person's capacity for thought is not much of a cause for wonder.

Here Freud anticipates Dawkins's view that religious instruction and labelling of children are abuse. He suggests the experiment of a non-religious upbringing of children. Happily, this is taking place more frequently nowadays.

Freud is optimistic that, as more people have access to scientific knowledge, the decline in religious belief will continue, shedding first its outmoded, offensive garb, then basic tenets. Only the Americans show themselves to be consistent, as the 'monkey trial' in Dayton demonstrated.

I see Freud's essay standing up pretty well after eighty-one years.

Ralph Seccombe, NSW Humanist member and book reviewer for *AH*.

Seventh World Atheist Conference

Atheist Centre,
Vijayawada, A.P. INDIA

5-7 JANUARY, 2009

Theme: *March of Atheism*

Many prominent humanist and atheists from around the world will be speakers at this conference.

Registration fee for foreign delegates, US \$150 (incl. food and simple accommodation). Those who wish to stay in hotels at their own expense, many good hotels are available at Vijayawada. Atheist Centre is in the heart of the City. Vijayawada is well connected by train and road and domestic air services from Hyderabad and Chennai. Nearest International Airport: Hyderabad, which is the capital city of A.P.

Those who cannot attend, can register as 'Non-Participating delegates' by contributing US \$100, and they will receive Conference souvenir and the material. Send the Conference registration fee and the donations in the name of 'Atheist Centre' by cheque or banker's draft, payable at Vijayawada.

For details, contact Conveners: Dr Vijayam (Mobile +91 98484 58220), Dr Samaram, Dr (Ms) Maru, Mr Niyanta and Mr Vikas Gora.

Address: Atheist Centre, Benz Circle, Vijayawada, 520010, A.P., INDIA.

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Email: atheistcentre@yahoo.com or
positiveatheist@gmail.com.



HUMANIST SOCIETY NEWS

CAHS

LETTERS and E-mails were sent to the state Premiers and Chief Ministers of ACT and NT, with copies to Opposition leaders and main newspapers, to implement resolution (no. 2 HSWA) on voluntary euthanasia. Replies and acknowledgements have been received as follows.

The WA Minister for Health indicated that the government while being opposed to 'euthanasia' recognizes the rights of the terminally ill to 'die with dignity' and of the medical practitioners who respect their wishes to be protected. He referred to The Acts Amendment (Consent to Medical Treatment Bill 2006) Bill. The Queensland Acting Premier replied that if a private members bill was introduced the Premier would allow her members a conscience vote but was at the moment committed to palliative care. Opposition leader Springborg considered euthanasia voluntary or otherwise 'not acceptable in a civilised society'! Tasmanian Opposition leader Will Hodgman stated that if the government brought in a bill allowing voluntary euthanasia for the terminally ill Opposition members would be allowed a conscience vote. The Chief Minister, ACT, stated that the ACT does not have the constitutional capacity to permit voluntary euthanasia as a consequence of the rescinding of the 1997 NT VE legislation. Further the issue being one of 'conscience' would need a private members bill. He concluded, 'it should not be assumed that [he] would support such a Bill.'

We hope that both the legislation before the Victorian Parliament on 'physician assisted dying' and the legislation Bob Brown has brought before the Federal Parliament calling for the repeal of the Act which overturned the NT 1997 legislation on VE, are successful. Many thanks to Rosslyn Ives for completing the CAHS submission to the Senate Committee Inquiry.

An acknowledgement only has been received from the NSW Minister for Education to the letters sent to implement resolution (no.1 HSNSW) regarding compulsory R.I. in government schools.

Zelda Bailey will be the Australian delegate at the 17th IHEU World Humanist Congress and General Assembly in Washington in June. Thank you, Zelda.

Reports from IHEU representative at the UN, Roy Brown, regarding Human Rights issues are a matter of concern calling for serious consideration. The Humanist movement has had a long association with the United Nations, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights has been a basic Humanist value.

Thanks to all for their co-operation with Convention reports and to HSNSW for hosting the Convention. We look forward to catching up with our colleagues at an interesting and productive Convention.

Mary Bergin, CAHS Secretary

New South Wales

AT OUR recent Special General Meeting, we approved several changes to the rules. We've not yet incorporated material endorsing human rights. We need to review the wording of the changes, something Waratah Gillespie will coordinate. She will make a presentation on this at the next NSW Humanists afternoon talk.

We recently held a successful Darwin Day event on the 13 February, in conjunction the Sydney Mechanics' School of Arts (SMSA) and the Australian Science of Communicators. We had an audience of about 60.

Anne Musser, paleontologist and palaeo-artist with the Australian Museum, spoke on Australia's mega-fauna in Pleistocene, including the giant goanna *Megalania*, and large muscled kangaroos amongst others. Anne showed us artist's impressions, skeletons and digs. This megafauna became extinct over quite a long period, and while perhaps humans caused some of the extinction, it was not the sole cause. Robin Holliday, HSNSW member, gave another possible reason for their extinction: while competition might push animals into larger and larger sizes, this very size means a slow rate of growth and rate of reproduction; this carries its own problem – a reduced ability to make evolutionary changes in response to a changing environment. So to speak, larger animals are more 'specialised' and therefore have less ability to adapt.

Darren Curnoe, University of NSW, spoke on what makes humans unique. One view is that there was an explosion of creativity in early man about 50,000 years ago, but Darren challenges this viewpoint, saying that Neanderthals were capable of artistic expression. And what about the sudden jump? Well, it seems early humans had their stagnant periods of several hundred thousands years too. Was there a genetic change about 50,000 years ago, letting us vocalise better, perhaps? Or was it just the luck of the draw? That's where there's room for professional disagreement, with Darren articulating one point of view.

We held a follow-up Humanists Afternoon Talk with a presentation by Victor Bien, which prompted much lively discussion on the part of members.

The issue of ethics education as an alternative to religious instruction continues to simmer. Parents in NSW get in touch with the NSW Humanists, and I continue to bump into people who are seeing what they can do on their own bat at their own local schools. Over time we may be able to better support such individual parent initiatives around NSW.

John August, HSNSW President

Queensland

ON 24 FEBRUARY HSQ held its AGM. The following members were elected to the Management Committee: Zelda Bailey (President), Vic Lloyd (Vice-President), Maria Proctor (Secretary and Journal Editor), Bernie Doran (Treasurer) and Tony Williams (Publications Coordinator). This committee is a cohesive group who has shown a commitment to Humanism over many years and it was pleasing to receive the appreciation of other members for the workload that they continue to take on.

I am delighted to report that the Secular Freethinkers' Society (SFS), a student group at the University of

Victoria

Queensland (UQ), affiliated to and supported by HSQ, has had great success recruiting members. At the recent UQ Open Day the SFS table drew crowds of interested students and staff, with its huge banner and display of items for sale and secular information. 170 members were signed up. Most of all it was the secular message and opportunity for the non-religious sector of the university to meet together that was of real significance. For the first time in ten years Humanism, Rationalism and Secularism were back on campus, supported financially and in many practical ways by HSQ. It was particularly pleasing to be joined by Max and Meg Wallace, members of HSQ, at the SFS table. They clearly enjoyed talking with the students and it provided a fine opportunity to promote Max's book, *The Purple Economy*. (See report on next page.)

Those who remember the earlier UQ student group Humanitas (also affiliated to HSQ), will recall how hard we worked to support its establishment and how disappointing it was when it fizzled out through lack of continuous leadership and a strong sense of direction. However, with Maria Proctor as President of SFS, we are confident that the group will go from strength to strength. Maria has worked tirelessly this year not only to produce journals of professional quality for the HSQ, but also to bring SFS to the position it now enjoys, and we are sure that she will lead it to a great future.

As a consequence of the success of SFS I believe that HSQ should revisit the plan we had some years back to place a secular Humanist chaplain at the Chaplaincy Centre, UQ. Members who remember our efforts back then will recall that the university rejected our efforts to place our voluntary chaplain at the Centre because Humanism was not a religious faith and there was 'no such thing as a Humanist Chaplain'. We disagreed and gave examples of Humanist Chaplains elsewhere. Now this issue needs to be re-examined in the knowledge that the Centre is currently advertising its services stating that it 'doesn't matter if you're a follower of faith, an agnostic or an atheist.' Surely they cannot discriminate against a Humanist Chaplain any longer. This is something we need to test again and, with the SFS behind us, we intend to do so very soon.

Zelda Bailey, HSQ President

South Australia

THE ANNUAL General Meeting of the Humanist Society of South Australia (HSSA) was held in March, there were no surprises, the old committee was re-elected. They have been doing a good job for many years, and for most of us over 20 years, so our replacement is long overdue. However no new committee members are coming forward. No doubt we will continue until we drop!

Did you notice the improvement to the last *Humanist Post* issued on the 2 March? It came in a big envelope, printed by a professional printer on A3 paper with minor format changes. I had to learn how to produce a PDF file. The main advantage is there is less work involved in the printing and assembly. Comments, suggestions or encouragement would be appreciated.

Dick Clifford, HSSA Vice-president

OUR 2008 program opened with a Darwin Day celebration (Charles Darwin's birthday) on 12 February, with a barbecue on the banks of the Yarra River close to the Botanic Gardens. It was great to share this happy occasion with the Atheists and Skeptics. We thank HSV member Andrew Rawlings for organising this event. The theme continued at the February Public Lecture with a most interesting and well researched address by our immediate past-president, Rosslyn Ives, on 'Why Charles Darwin matters'. The lecture put Darwin's work in its context in the history of science and examined the wide impact of his discovery.

Our Public Lecture in March featured Dr Tamas Pataki, author of *Against Religion* and lecturer in philosophy at University of Melbourne. His lecture entitled 'Humanism, psychology and religion' was largely an analysis of the effects of religion and of Humanism on human behaviour. Question time was particularly interesting. These meetings are ably chaired by Stephen Stuart, who is also to be complimented on the selection of speakers and topics. A number of members contribute to the success of the meetings by assisting with the preparation of the room, helping at the door and with the supper. Marie Hodgens, Maureen McPhate and Halina Strnad over the years have done a great job with the latter. Jennie Stuart's excellent summaries of the public lectures for publication in *VH* provide a permanent record of these addresses for all and make them accessible to members unable to attend.

A submission was drafted at our February Discussion meeting on the 2011 Census which was completed and submitted by Rosslyn Ives. Unfortunately, as you will know, no changes are to be made to that Census. We discussed CAHS Motions at our well attended March Discussion. These gatherings provide an opportunity for members to socialize over a shared lunch which follows. Thanks to all who help to make these occasions so pleasurable, in particular to Marie Hodgens, Jennie Stuart, Halina Strnad and Rosaria Palmese.

Dr Harry Gardner has significantly increased the number of lessons for his Humanist Ethical Education Project. He is looking for assistance with the evaluation of these lessons. Dr David Fotheringham has assisted Harry in obtaining volunteers to deliver the lessons.

Stephen Stuart gave a very well received address on 'Separation of Church and State' at the Unitarian Church in March.

Rosslyn Ives continues as Editor and distributor of *VH* which provides an essential link in our communication process. The February leading article was a reprinted article by Babu Gogineni about Humanism, its history, goals and the variety of its achievements. The March *VH* editorial, by Rosslyn, was a call for tolerance towards those with different beliefs to ours as long as they do not violate human rights.

Mary Bergin, HSV Secretary

Western Australia

MEMBERSHIP has again been at the top of the priorities list for WA, with recent attempts to expand our base showing early signs of success. Particularly rewarding was the decision to extend a welcome hand to other rationalist organizations to join us on Darwin Day for our Public Meeting. The day was very successful, bringing together

many like-minded individuals to hear a speech by Michael Tan, of the Australian Secular Party. He spoke about the aims of the Secular Party and the current status of religion in Australia.

For the first time, and certainly not the last, Perth's local universities have welcomed a Humanist stall at their orientation days. Many thanks to Steve Cross, Des Young and Eric Pyatt who helped organize the days. There was some genuine interest among young people about secular issues, many attracted by the slogan gracing our new banner, 'Good without God.'

We are optimistic about the possible benefits of maintaining affiliations with local like-minded groups, like the student organizations being formed at the universities. By coming together, we give a bigger voice to secular issues. It was encouraging to have some of our new members attend our equinox celebration, thanks to Eric Pyatt for hosting. The focus of our upcoming members' meetings will be about the basics of Humanism, done both for the benefit of our newer members and to refresh our own minds about what brings us together as Humanists.

The enthusiasm and dedication of some of our individual members have led to some fantastic contributions. Thanks to Jens Kahlenberg for organizing our new logo, which looks incredible on my bumper and will be available for viewing at the Humanist Convention next month in Sydney. Thanks also to Steve for his continued work on our web site. We encourage all members to sign up to the website, try out the new features and hopefully it will play a larger role in the Society's future. See you at the next members' meeting.

Clifford Nock, HSWA committee member

Students are interested in humanism

Meg Wallace

Queensland University, along with all the others throughout Australia, recently had its Orientation Week, which included a day for the many student societies and services to display their existence and sign up participants. On Wednesday 20 February, countless colourful booths were offering all sorts of goodies along the cloisters of the square ringed by the remarkable sandstone building reminiscent of traditional English academe. Among these booths were those of a great variety of religious groups: Catholics, Anglicans, Evangelical, Buddhist, and Islamic, and others. But there, also, were the Queensland University Secularists and Freethinkers! This student society is headed by energetic and dedicated humanist, Maria Proctor, and is proudly sponsored by the Queensland Humanists whose tireless President, Zelda Bailey, helped with the preparation of materials and turned up to sign up members. Max, my husband, and I were there to support the Society as it presented itself to the student population. Campus Humanist groups are sadly lacking, and we believe that this initiative deserved all the support it can get.



From left, Michael Vincent, Maria Proctor and Zelda Bailey, President HSQ, happily flogging humanism at Queensland University Orientation Week 2008.

Was the presence of a booth worth while? You bet! 'If we get 40 new members we will be over the moon' was the mood of the early morning, 'but that is probably optimistic.' By 3 pm at least 170 students had joined. The Society made around \$800 through membership and sale of goods such as T-shirts ('I Think Therefore I'm Dangerous'), badges, and books. More than a few students stopped when they saw the society's banner, and said 'At last!' They were being offered an alternative environment for exploring and developing their world-views.

People are finding religion is just not providing them with the answers it promises, and deserting it in growing numbers. On the other hand, membership of our various humanist societies is dying out because we are all getting older. Almost a quarter of the Australian population (over 4 million people) said they had no religion at the last census. The proud heritage of humanism needs to be reinvigorated and promoted, with emphasis on providing a 'roadmap' for an ever-increasingly complex world for the young. By sponsoring and supporting university free-thinking societies we can promote an environment where young people meet and discuss issues with like-minded peers – and we can see that doing this *works!*

While there is some good work going on in humanist circles, I believe it is time to consider the need for political action more seriously. Mainstream religious groups are using the political system to grow in power. They reach out to people – recognising especially the importance of speaking to youth. They can get the NSW Government to spend \$100 million of public funds – *our* (state) money, pass security legislation limiting speech and access to public sites, and dedicate 300 public servants to the Catholic Proselytisation Spectacular in July (separation of church and state?). The Federal Government has chipped in millions as well – *your* (federal) money. We can be more outward-looking and active in spreading our message, starting with a campaign to encourage students to set up humanist groups in an environment that is meaningful to them. Maybe then we can really start to believe that change is possible.

Meg Wallace, a Sydney-based humanist is completing a PhD on critiquing current approaches to freedom of belief and considering a secular, more effective model.