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## No moral chaos here: the ethics of a secular Humanist

### Zelda Bailey

As a Humanist and secular freethinker, I am often surprised when people I meet have difficulty accepting that I have absolutely no religious beliefs or religious affiliation. When this is eventually accepted they then urge me to profess at least some feeling of 'spiritual' connection with the cosmos. When this suggestion, too, is rejected they then may ask me how I separate 'good' from 'bad', 'right' from 'wrong', because, they claim, everyone needs a religion, for without it we have no rules to live by and, therefore, no ethics. Secular Humanists, of course, know this conclusion could not be further from the truth.

Kai Nielsen, in his book *Ethics Without God* (1973:1), described a common attitude among monotheists in relation to morality and the will of God. He presented their position thus,

without a belief in God and his law there is no ground or reason for being moral. The sense of moral relativism, scepticism and nihilism rampant in our age is due in large measure to the general weakening of

religious belief in an age of science. Without God there can be no objective foundation for our moral beliefs... Without God life would have no point and morality would have no basis. Without religious belief, without the Living God, there could be no adequate answer to the persistently gnawing questions: What ought we to do? How ought I to live?

In undertaking to respond to these questions, my task is to show how a Humanist with absolutely no belief in the supernatural, especially gods, can and does provide an answer that is totally adequate from a non-religious point of view.

The questions, 'What ought we do?' and 'How ought I to live?' presuppose that there is an aim to our lives; a point to which we orient our behaviour; a direction to our efforts and a purpose to our endeavours. It seems to me that this sense of purpose develops naturally along with our capacity to visualise a future time when things will be fairer and more just than they are at present. It is this belief in the

possibility of a better time, and the desire to make it happen, that gives our life meaning and purpose.

So, where does a non-religious person start when reaching for a secular guide to behaviour and an ethical goal to strive for? Humanists view ethics – that is ethical principles – as a creation of the human mind born out of the necessity to regulate society and, therefore, social behaviour. But although the social necessity is an objective reality, any ethical system formulated to meet that demand is not. Instead, it is a uniquely human and deeply subjective exercise involving a combination of imagination and practicality and often, but not always, ennobled by the best of humanity's instincts and aspirations.

### **social beings**

As a 'social necessity' ethics must begin with people, both as individuals and as members of society. Human beings are social creatures by birth and evolution, so the normal desire to connect with others is 'hard-wired' into our nervous system. Making satisfying social connections requires an understanding of the social relations of people around us. This process is, of course, facilitated by the loving and caring attitudes of those nearest to us and it goes without saying that the social context into which we are born gives us the earliest experience we have of social and cultural dynamics. The point to be emphasised here is that, although specific social practices are different across the world, there are some basic elements that are universal, due to the fact that we are all born into a social network of some kind and are by nature socially orientated beings from birth.

Living together places demands on us that cause us to modify our behaviour to fit in with the people around us, and those who are unwilling or unable to subjugate their anti-social impulses or drives must suffer the negative consequences of acting them out. Even though the specific values and beliefs will differ from group to group, from culture to culture, they will nevertheless be inculcated and reinforced through the same kind of social practices and social structures that all communities set up to ensure that individuals comply with the common social imperative of identifying with and fitting into the existing group.

The desire to fit into one's social network, the need to belong, provides a strong motivation to shape one's behaviour to conform to the group's expectations and values, creating the conditions for the inculcation, or even indoctrination, of ideas and beliefs about the meaning and purpose of life. Whatever particular form these may take they are a combination of the cultural values of a social group, the accumulated knowledge available at the time and the natural processes of individual self-actualisation. The point here is that *none* of these depend on specific ideas or experiences of a religious (i.e. supernatural) character to arise and take shape.

### **naturalism and universalism**

Given that the Humanist outlook rejects supernaturalism of any kind, Humanists must ground their beliefs in the natural world – the real world where human beings are just one species among many, a world in which there are always others present, both human and non-human.

Since ethical judgments and moral behaviour have significance only when there are others to be taken into account, it is society at large, even a 'global society', which we need to conceptualise. The concept of a fully integrated

and interdependent global society is, I suggest, the smallest unit that we must focus on because we need to face the reality that what we do here and now is likely to affect every other part of the planet.

So, taking humankind's global context as the starting point, I will begin the search for a secular ethics within the natural world, deliberately seeking out those universal natural qualities that maintain, support and enhance life in its infinite diversity on our planet. In other words I will attempt to set out the framework for a non-religious morality that takes as its foundation three core characteristics of human life, i.e. the *natural* aspect, the *universal* aspect and the *benevolent dispositional* aspect, all of which can be examined empirically.

From a Humanist perspective human beings are part of the natural world and totally dependent on it. This belief circumvents religious metaphysics, goes straight to empirical experience and the evidence of science, and directs us to the physical foundations of a system of ethics that is informed by the ecological nature of our biosphere and scientific knowledge of our material place in it.

With this in mind, a Humanist system of ethics must be broad enough to make planet Earth the central object of value, so that actions that sustain biodiversity and maintain the health of the planet are to be held as 'good' or 'moral' and actions that diminish its biodiversity or reduce its general health are to be held as 'bad' or 'immoral'.

It is because of its naturalism, in setting human beings within this ecological context, that a Humanist ethics ensures that concern for human welfare is not raised above concern for all other forms of life. As part of an integrated biosystem, the welfare of people is understood to be contingent on the well-being of the whole Earth, and it is understood that conditions that threaten one part of the planet, will threaten other parts too.

Just as physical conditions and biological processes are worldwide, or 'universal', we can see that modern human social and intellectual life, too, is globally interconnected, a perfect example being the internet and the World Wide Web. This universalism in both its material and social aspects encourages an outlook towards others that unites, interrelates and sets in place a social framework for reciprocity, cooperation and the recognition of global interdependence. Taking these behaviours and attitudes to be 'good' in themselves, Humanist ethics would deem actions that advance and maximise them to be moral, and those that reduce or diminish them to be immoral.

### **social justice**

Although acts of reciprocity, cooperation, empathy and altruism are already evident in non-human species, the pro-social behaviour which we see across the animal kingdom and young children can be greatly encouraged by human cultural practices that promote benevolence and caring relationships, the third strand of Humanist ethics. These positive attitudes can be further strengthened by means of political policies and programs which address human needs, basic rights, areas of responsibility and issues concerning fairness and social justice. Social structures that reinforce feelings of commonality and connectedness, equality and good-will, serve to unify communities and help individuals to develop a sense of their own self-worth and capacity to contribute to the greater good.

On the other hand, when these feelings of connection are reduced because of individual differences such as religion, race, colour, language, gender, culture or age, we need to show that these potentially divisive characteristics are relatively insignificant when compared with similarities and shared values.

I suggest that the central role of government should be to promote and strengthen these natural connections for reasons of the common good. To this end governments would do well to concentrate on providing community services and building community networks that emphasise and support the ideals of an ecologically sustainable and socially just secular global society. None of these tasks should prevent government from ensuring that the natural diversity and individuality of each human being is protected as broadly as possible by means of guaranteed freedoms and liberties, especially in areas of private life.

### **visualising a new global society**

Having grounded secular ethics in the natural, universal elements and benevolent attitudes already present in the world, I will now turn to the challenge of visualising a new global society which respects and actually lives by these values.

As it has been established that all human life is fundamentally dependent on the environment, an international system for monitoring the well-being of the biosphere is needed to provide the data required to establish the ecological baseline for human decisions, choices and actions. With this baseline in place, whenever human activity oversteps, or even comes close to overstepping, the capacity of the environment to absorb it without detriment, that human activity can be labeled as 'immoral', vigorously denounced and acted against by government and community institutions.

What are critically needed now are the base-line data for all the crucial aspects of the biosphere, so that both negative changes and improvements can be identified quickly and assessed. Standards reflecting the health and capacity of these systems to respond to human impact should be a focus of on-going public concern. And deterioration in any of the systems across the world should become a major public issue involving appropriate international and local community action, including remediation and the imposition of severe penalties where necessary.

In other words, the environment would always come first and humankind would need to readjust its practices, including modifying its own birth rate, if it is clear that a reduction in human population is indicated. This can be supported by improving women's health, education and income capacity, and by the provision of widely available family planning programs.

This would be the minimum level of environmental awareness and social commitment that is required; as only when these processes and social systems are firmly in place could a secular ethics with a global reach be expected to operate successfully.

Since responsibility for one's behaviour is largely dependent on being wellinformed about the potential consequences of one's actions, a high level of scientific knowledge and environmental education are prerequisites. For this reason, a society that adopts the ethical principles of naturalism, universalism and benevolence has a duty to set in place a public education system that develops in citizens the necessary understanding, expertise and positive attitudes.

So, returning to the question, 'What ought we to do?', according to the points already raised in relation to naturalism, we should prioritise protecting the environment and take steps to create a global society that examines every public policy, law, civil institution and government practice from that starting point, putting each through an ecological sieve. Water conservation and air purity, the fertility of soils, the protection of endangered species and habitats, on-going monitoring of biodiversity, control of feral pests, research into sources of clean, renewable energy etc., should be on the agenda in every case. Only those practices that pass the ecological test should be permitted to continue and operate. This must apply to both the public and private spheres, and cultural or religious beliefs would not be allowed to lower this standard by, for example, the hunting of endangered species for religious or other cultural purposes.

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In a similar vein, the universalistic values of a secular 'commons' should apply to society as a whole. This is to say that the protection of human and civil rights, and practices that increase connection, inclusion, equality and sharing should be raised by government to the same level of priority as the environment, with the ultimate aim of creating a global secular society that ensures that these values form the bedrock of its policies, laws, institutions and practices. This should be done in the name of the 'common good' and 'in the interest of future generations'. It is this, I suggest, that is the proper role for government and the proper use of the revenue from general taxation, i.e. the use of public money for public purposes. Religious interests, on the other hand, should remain in the private sector, as should other sectional or commercial entities, with guarantees that their freedoms and liberties would be protected, provided that their actions did not infringe upon the rights of the 'commons'.

In my opinion, the separation of the public and private sectors is every bit as important as the separation of religion and state. Just as religion must not be allowed to undermine the universal values of the 'commons', the values of the private sector must not be allowed to undermine them either. The important distinction to be made here is that the values of the public sector or 'commons' emphasise inclusion, non-discrimination, transparency, universality and naturalism, whilst the values of the private sector emphasise exclusivity, profits, secrecy, competition and monopoly – all of which are fundamentally unstable and potentially socially and environmentally destructive. We have all seen this capacity for disaster lived out in the latest economic crash on Wall Street due to commercial greed, deception and the lack of appropriate government regulation.

# The longest word

Laadan Fletcher

We must appreciate that it is within the ‘commons’ that the socially orientated and benevolent feelings of individuals become directed towards the well-being of society as a whole. The expression of this benevolence can be seen in public services set up and operated by government according to the secular values of the ‘commons’ which respect and uphold the principles of equality and non-discrimination. However, just as the biosphere has its limits, public services provided for the benefit of all must have limits.

The greatest area of human need, of course, can be found in groups living in remote regions. Their situation is particularly perilous. I hope there will come a time when a new kind of World Bank is established to assist and support communities living on the edge of subsistence to sustain their way of life by enhancing self-sufficiency. In return, I believe these groups would agree to protect their local environments, including the protection of endangered species and improving habitat, on behalf of the world but according to ecologically sound principles by which the carrying capacity of the land would be the guide to human population control. Under these circumstances, there would be no pressure on them to produce surplus crops or other goods to barter their way out of poverty. They would, however, be given access to the modern world of knowledge and technology via programs provided by the New World Bank and this would suggest options not available to them before.

It can be seen, therefore, that for every issue canvassed in this article, a broad general education is called for. For this reason, it is in everyone’s individual and collective interest that society through its government institutions should provide the best system of public education possible. Indeed, it seems to me that without a sound general education the concept of the ‘global commons’ and all that that implies would not be acceptable to many people, and without that vision and consequent commitment to the project of bringing it into being, it is most unlikely that the natural sociability and benevolent feelings of people across the world could be directed towards one common goal.

## conclusion

It seems to me that although naturalism, universalism and benevolence are already widespread, they nevertheless require the determination of ordinary people to place them in a position of greatest priority. The success of this project depends on us all accepting a common system of ethics for a new world society which lives peacefully on the basis of shared values that take into account life as it really is. When this happens there need be no fear of moral chaos in the absence of religion.

I believe that I have demonstrated that a comprehensive and coherent system of ethics can be induced from the objective, natural world without recourse to supernaturalism or religious dogma of any kind which, by its very character, can only detract from any truly universal ethical enterprise.

Zelda Bailey, President of the Humanist Society of Queensland.

When I was a boy I was absolutely certain that the longest word in the English language was ‘antidisestablishmentarianism’. I loved to test my mates on whether they shared this vital titbit of erudition. I had no idea what the word referred to but was content just to allow it to flow gracefully off my tongue in a way that might arouse a modicum of admiration. Little did I realise that the word was not only remarkable for its length, but because it reflected one of the longest debates in the history of our monarchy – a debate which is still significant for our Humanist movement and for our nation today.

The word ‘establishment’, at the heart of the longest word, has wide and familiar meaning but it has many specific uses. Seven of these are listed in the *Shorter Oxford Dictionary* (which isn’t very short, occupying two heavy volumes). It is the seventh of these recognised usages (in its verbal form) that appears in the Australian Constitution (Section 116) where it is declared that ‘The Commonwealth shall not make any law for establishing any religion . . .’ Some of our older members may remember the legal action by the group known as Defence of Government Schools (DOGS) in the 1970s. This sought to have government funding of non-government schools declared unconstitutional on the basis of the provisions of Section 116. The action was probably doomed to fail from the outset because the word, ‘establishing’ was used in that section in the specific sense of government adopting a specified religion as a national religion rather than merely giving financial support.

This special meaning has a long history, going back at least to the year 325 CE, when Constantine ‘the Great’ (274–337) declared Christianity the official state religion throughout the Roman Empire, presumably with the purpose of controlling the hearts and minds of all subject people. To this end, he directed the ‘founding Christian fathers’ to erect the doctrinal fabric of the church and even to determine which ancient scriptures should be selected to form the foundation document, later known as *The Bible*.

Once ‘established’ and protected, the papacy began to gain power and a momentum of its own. In the centuries following the fall of the Roman Empire, rulers of emerging kingdoms in Europe came substantially to bow to the spiritual power of the Papacy and its perceived divine authority. As Lord Acton so perceptively once reminded us, however, ‘power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely;’ and the corruption of the Catholic Church was so gross as to alter the direction of European history for ever. The exciting story of Martin Luther’s voluble protest, which gave rise to the great Protestant movement across Europe, is well known. No less fascinating is the complex and intricate account of the rejection in England by Henry VIII both of the hitherto supreme Papal authority and of the Catholic Church itself.

It would hardly be appropriate to provide here even an outline of the intrigues, manipulations, divorces, statutory changes and murders sufficient for an Agatha Christie plot, which comprised the events from which the establishment of the Church of England emerged.

In one respect, Henry took one step more than Constantine had done, all those centuries earlier. He made himself head of the Church and thus he and his successors acquired the title of, 'Defender of the Faith'. Many of us have been reminded of this when fingering the abbreviated inscription, '*Fid Def*' on British coins of the realm. Perhaps the reminder has brought with it a little amazement at the anachronisms that are the legacy of history generally, especially when it is remembered that Henry's prime motive was to secure annulment of his marriage to Catherine and, hence, make way for the very desirable Ann Boleyn. Nowadays, as the multicultural nature of the British population increases, the anomaly of individuals having to declare allegiance to a sovereign who is also the 'established' head of just one of the almost innumerable 'Christian' (and other) churches, becomes ever starker. It is not surprising that disestablishment has been a major cause of controversy and even bloody conflict in Britain ever since Henry made his dramatic take-over.

When the Americans created their Constitution, following the War of Independence, on the face of it there was really no need to worry about the question of establishment because they had ridded themselves completely of the monarchy anyway. But they were not prepared to take any chances and included an amendment which specifically prohibited the establishment of a national religion. A century later, when the colonies comprising Australia decided to unite to form a national entity, this same clause was incorporated as Section 116 of its Constitution. This gave rise to a strange anomaly in that the imperial monarch remained Defender of the Faith (i.e. the Church of England brand) in England but had no such jurisdiction in Australia.

In Ireland, a campaign had led to the disestablishment of the Church of Ireland three decades previously (in 1871). Fifty years later, the Church of Wales was also disestablished. But all the while, opposition to these developments from the perennial, conservative groups, throughout Britain, who like things to remain as they are, continued to make their voices heard. As already noted the name that was given to them also provided lexicographers with a word widely held to be the longest in the language, to the delight of precocious young boys and girls.

In today's Britain, the movement for disestablishment appears to be strengthening and, when asked by the media to comment on this, Rohan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury and effective leader of the Church of England, recently said, 'it's by no means the end of the world if establishment disappears'. After all, he would be liberated from parliamentary and royal oversight if it did. He is Welsh and had spent 10 years as bishop in the *disestablished* Welsh Church. Some time before he became archbishop he was reported as expressing the view that 'the notion of the monarch as supreme governor has outlived its usefulness'. Since appointment as archbishop, however, his views seem to have shifted somewhat and he sees the matter as being 'not at the top of the agenda for the Church of England'. Of one thing we can be sure: our Humanist colleagues in the UK will be as eager as we are to see the entire separation of organised religion from state governance and will (as surely as ourselves) continue to work stolidly towards that end.

Despite the provisions of Section 116, Australia is by no means free from the effect of the Establishment issue. It has already been pointed out that our monarch has a duty of

defending a particular Christian faith which a large majority of our people reject. The practical impact of this is probably minimal in Australia but it does affect eligibility for the crown. Presumably, for example, a member of the royal family who became a Humanist (or a Catholic) would, in so doing, disqualify himself or herself from the throne. What an interesting exercise it might be to try to recruit Prince Charles and his two sons to our Humanist membership or that of our English colleagues!

When Malcolm Turnbull led the national debate, calling for an Australian Republic, he was outflanked by the wily John Howard who demanded a 'model' that could give precision to the debate and allow voters to know what they were voting for. The move was completely successful politically, as it split the pro-republic lobby on the issue of nomination or election. The republican cause was lost. Apart from uncertainty arising from this issue, the conservatives offered little in support of the monarchy *as a concept*, of value in its own right. Rather, they argued for preserving the *status quo*.

The modern, American, version of this position is embodied in the expression 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it.' But it *is* broke and has been since 1975, when Governor General John Kerr dismissed our democratically elected government by using latent powers that the Crown itself, as a constitutional monarchy, has always resisted using. Even the manner in which the 'coup' was achieved was highly conspiratorial and a stain on our international reputation. One might have expected that the blatantly obvious need for radical change would have led to high-level enquiry by a Royal Commission at some time during all those thirty-odd years since. But the fact that our constitutional framework was found wanting was quickly forgotten and all heads were soon buried in the sand. Perhaps it is surprising that in that 'Great Debate', however, nobody called for a 'model' of a monarchy that could be shown to be capable of working effectively and democratically in time of crisis. It might have faced the inherent arbitrariness in appointment of both the head of state and his or her support structure and suggest ways of compensating for these.

If a public survey were held into the kind of qualities we would prefer in our head-of-state, probably none would include experience as head of a religious body, amongst them. But then, few would seek a monarch who was bred from a restricted gene pool in a far-away country, or one brought up largely in isolation from the so-called 'common people'. Some might even prefer a person whose skin colour matched that of Barack Obama.

Our founding fathers showed great wisdom when they chose to embody an anti-establishment clause in our Constitution, and we should be forever grateful for their foresight. We must never tire in our campaign for a total separation of church and state nor fail to be ready to contribute to the next national debate on the formation of a Republic of Australia in which that separation is complete.

**Laadan Fletcher**, long-time active member of HSWA and Outstanding Humanist Achiever 2005.

# Taxes and subsidies: the cost of ‘advancing religion’

John Perkins & Frank Gomez

When Australia’s future tax system is reviewed, it may be hoped that one of the most archaic and inequitable features of the current system will be addressed. This is the policy that grants benefits of billions of dollars annually to religious organisations under the false assumption that their activities are necessarily charitable. The principal problem is the legal definition of a charity and of charitable purpose.

Charities are eligible for a wide range of tax concessions. To be eligible, an organisation must be operated for public charitable purposes. These are

- the relief of poverty, sickness, or the needs of the aged;
- the advancement of education;
- the advancement of religion; and
- other purposes beneficial to the community.<sup>1</sup>

We may accept that some of the activities of religious organisations may be charitable however, what is objectionable is the blanket ‘*advancement of religion*’, as such, in the definition of charitable purpose. Its inclusion is unduly broad, anachronistic, inequitable and gives rise to several glaring anomalies.

It is not rational or justifiable that ‘the advancement of religion’ should be considered, of itself, a public benefit. It is not necessarily a public benefit, and therefore not necessarily a charitable purpose. Charitable purpose is sufficiently defined without this inclusion. Concessions should only apply to the operations of religious organisations that have a bona fide public benefit.

Under this definition, any sect, cult, etc may be deemed eligible for such concessions, provided that they express belief in a supernatural being or principle. Given that religious groups may adhere to conflicting beliefs and ideologies, their promotion may thereby contribute to social disharmony. It is therefore anomalous that the advancement of religion be deemed an automatic public benefit. This gives rise to further anomalies in relation to Goods and Services Tax (GST) and Fringe Benefits Tax (FBT) concessions and income tax exemptions for the commercial enterprises of religions.

Section 116 of the Australian Constitution states that the ‘Commonwealth shall not make any law for establishing any religion, or for imposing any religious observance, or for prohibiting the free exercise of any religion ...’ As a result of the 1982 High Court decision on the Defence of Government Schools case, the advancement of any or all religion has been deemed permissible under the constitution. There is however, no constitutional requirement that religion should be advanced. The free exercise of religion does not imply that it must occur at taxpayers’ expense.

In addition, the concept of freedom of religion does not require that the exercise of such freedom be the subject of tax concessions. Declarations of such freedom refer to the ‘freedom of thought, conscience and religion’ and they require the absence of coercion. If the advancement of freedom of thought and conscience were similarly deemed a charitable purpose, then presumably freethought groups such as Humanists, Rationalists, Secularists and Atheists should also be entitled to tax concessions.

The extent of the current anomaly is not limited to this. Australia is one of only three countries in the world where even the commercial enterprises of religious organisations are granted tax concessions. One may wonder how such a situation could possibly have arisen.

The origins of these regulatory shortcomings, which also apply to disclosure regimes, can be traced to the legal framework inherited as a result of the Preamble to the Statute of Elizabeth, or the Statute of Charitable Uses (1601). Following this, the presumption entered common law that all religious activities were inherently charitable. Subsequently, the concept became entrenched and has remained so ever since. It is an anomalous anachronism, therefore, that the tax regime in Australia in the 21st century should be determined by the persistence of a medieval doctrine.

The ‘advancement of religion’ should be removed from the definition of charitable purpose. Certainly, the activities of religious organisations may be charitable. To the extent that they are, they will be covered by other items in the definition.

There is another instance where such archaic perceptions appear as part of current legislation. The Extension of Charitable Purpose Act 2004 – Sect 5 (1) (b) defines a group or religious order that ‘regularly undertakes prayerful intervention at the request of members of the public’ as being for the public benefit. People are entitled to engage in such activities if they wish, but there is surely no justification for what may be regarded as little more than superstition being defined as a charitable purpose for the public good.

The available evidence on this matter suggests there is no benefit. Clinical trials have been conducted in the United States in which groups suffering from serious illnesses were either prayed for or not. Prayerful intervention was found to make no difference, except in cases where a group knew that prayerful intervention was being undertaken on their behalf by others. The medical outcomes of this group were found to be significantly worse. The suggested explanation for this was that the intervention caused psychological damage that adversely affected their recovery.<sup>2</sup>

If ‘evidence-based policy’ is the objective, then ‘prayerful intervention’ is disqualified as being charitable. As to obtaining evidence regarding the extent of the concessions that are available to religious organisations, this is difficult, due to inadequacies in the disclosure regime. These bodies are not required to report the breakdown of their charitable, business or investment activities. This lack of transparency makes it difficult to determine the actual cost of these exemptions. However, attempts can be made to quantify the magnitude of the revenues and concessions. An estimate of the revenue and assets of churches is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1 – Revenue and Assets of Churches (2007 estimates)**

	\$ Million	Notes
Revenue of the 10 biggest churches	47,647	W
Estimated collections	2,760	X
Catholic Church Assets	150,000	Y
Estimated other church assets	217,647	Z

*Notes:*

- W 2005 information from BRW article ‘God’s Business’, June 2006 + 20%  
X 10% of estimated Catholic Church revenue  
Y 2005 information from BRW article ‘God’s Business’, June 2006 + 50%  
Z Assumes Catholic assets same ratio of total (40.8%) as of revenue

**Table 2 – Estimates of Cost to Taxpayers**

	\$ Million	Notes
Income tax lost (at corporate rate )	15,122	A
Capital gains tax lost (corporate rate)	6,529	B
Grants for family counselling	64	C
Chaplains in schools programme	30	D
Grants to religious schools (from commonwealth)	5,630	E
Grants to religious schools (from states)	1,800	F
Grants for abortion counselling	20	G
Grant for interfaith convention Melbourne	2	H
Grant for Catholic World Youth Day (state & federal)	140	I

*Notes:*

- A 30% of the estimated revenue  
B Assumes 10% realised CG from asset holdings, property + shares  
C 2005/2006 budget forward estimates  
D One third of \$90 million announced over 3 years  
E 2007 Budget Papers (90% of total non-govt of \$6.256 billion)  
F SMH article as above estimate of NSW funding x 3  
G Media releases  
H 2007 Budget Papers  
I Govt media + budget

**Table 3 - Income Lost to State and Local Governments**

	\$ Million	Notes
Payroll tax exemptions	473	J
Stamp duty exemptions	418	K
Land tax exemptions	139	L
Rate income lost to councils	\$ 610	M

*Notes:*

- J Based on NSW treasury figures X 3 for whole country  
K Pro-rated on above  
L Pro-rated on above  
M Pro-rated on above against Association of Local Councils source

On the basis of these figures, some estimates can be provided of the cost to taxpayers and to governments of the concessions available to religious organisations. Federally, these apply to income tax, fringe benefits tax, and the goods and services tax. State government exemptions cover land tax, payroll tax, stamp duties and car registration fees. Local governments provide exemptions from municipal rates. Concessions may also be granted for some water and power charges. It is not possible to provide cost estimates for all these items. However we can provide estimates for direct grants from government, which are another significant cost to taxpayers. These estimates are given in Table 2.

Further estimates of income lost to state and local governments are given in Table 3. The information in these Tables suggests that religious organisations receive ample support via direct grants for many of their activities. It is

questionable whether local and state taxpayers should pay higher taxes and rates as a result of extending exemptions to organisations that are already subsidised through direct government expenditure.

Combining the costs shown in Tables 2 and 3, it can be seen that our estimate of the total cost of concessions to religious organisations in Australia exceeds \$31 billion. This is a gross figure and necessarily somewhat speculative. It may be discounted for bona fide charitable works and for expenditures that may otherwise be required. However it does not include items such as FBT and GST where we are unable to source data on the value of concessions. The figure gives some idea of the magnitude of the cost of concessions which arise as a result of the continued adherence to the medieval ‘advancement of religion’ doctrine.

More accurate estimates of this kind could be obtained if the information was available, but it is not. It is standard budgetary procedure that the loss of revenue, arising from exemptions, for example those applying to superannuation pensions, are listed in budget papers and can be quantified. It is anomalous that no such requirement exists for religious organisations, even those that may be involved in significant business and investment related activities.

Further anomalies occur in relation to the application of the Fringe Benefits Tax and the Goods and Services Tax. As the FBT is exempt to employees who are religious practitioners, eligible employers can provide remuneration packages that are based wholly in terms of fringe benefits, thereby avoiding any income tax. This device can also create an unwarranted entitlement to social security benefits. This is a loophole that should be closed.

In relation to the GST, an anomaly occurs in relation to ceremonies for weddings and funerals: if performed by a civil celebrant, GST is payable, whereas if done in a church, it is not. Apart from being grossly inequitable, the situation is of doubtful legality in the light of equal opportunity laws that prohibit discrimination on the grounds of religion.

In summary, to rectify the situation, the following issues should be addressed.

1. The definition of 'charitable purpose' should be reformed to exclude 'advancement of religion', which would reflect the modern view that religious worship and indoctrination by any sect, cult or religion not charitable activities in themselves.
2. The activities of any charitable organisation, religious or not, should not be exempt from accountability or from taxation.
3. The investment and business related activities of any organisation should not be exempt from taxation.
4. Only the bona fide charitable activities not connected with religious worship or indoctrination should be tax exempt.
5. A Charities Commission should be established for the purposes of regulating and making accountable the charitable activities of all non-profit organisations. This should include religious organisations, and ensure that tax exemptions are provided only in relation to bona fide charitable activities, and are not used to disguise religious worship or indoctrination.
6. All not-for-profit and religious organisations should be required to submit annual reports that are audited, and publicly available in a manner similar to that for public companies.
7. If religious organisations receive tax exemptions, these must be provided only to the extent that their activities are bona fide charitable. Where an organisation is involved in religious worship and indoctrination, their business activities, investment income and other taxable activities should be separated, either through an accounting division or through operational separation.

In conclusion, a rational reform of the taxation regime for charities, along the 'evidence based' lines, is necessary to improve transparency and accountability in this sector. It is also an essential first step in addressing the anomalous situation whereby tax exemptions are extended to religious organisations for activities that are not bona fide charitable activities.

**John Perkins** is an economist, freethinker and founding member of the Secular Party of Australia.

**Frank Gomez** is a banker, atheist and Secular Party committee member.

[This article is based on a submission by the Secular Party to the federal government's Review of Australia's Future Tax System in October 2008.]

1. See for example, the Treasury Discussion Paper, 'Architecture of Australia's Tax and Transfer System', that was released on 6 August 2008. In particular, see Box 2.4 on page 20.

2. See H. Benson, J. Dusek, J. Sherwood, P. Lam, C. Bethea, W. Carpenter, S. Levitsky, P. Hill, D. Clem, Jr., M. Jain, 'Study of the Therapeutic Effects of Intercessory Prayer (STEP) in cardiac bypass patients: A multicenter randomized trial of uncertainty and certainty of receiving intercessory prayer', *American Heart Journal*, Volume 151, Issue 4, Pages 934-942  
<http://linkinghub.elsevier.com/retrieve/pii/S0002870305006496>

## Not Too Hard For the Bard

I manage bands of rogues and vagabonds  
 For sundry lords and petulant King James,  
 And arbitrate when male brunettes and blonds  
 Dismantle hair and call each other names.

My learning springs from Stratford Grammar School  
 And flows through travel, drama, books and beer:  
 I never call the King "the wisest fool  
 In Christendom" when royal spies are near.

Though I'm no spastic, ethnic female gay,  
 I understand AA and EEOs;  
 Though deathless verse remains my normal way,  
 I can transmit your standard sickly prose.

If you give me the prize for which I hanker,  
 I undertake to learn to be a wanker.

"Will Shakespeare"

**David Tribe**

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# Losing the plots: Rookwood cemetery

Vincent Phelan

(Reflections on the ABC TV program, *Compass*, screened on 28 September 2008.)

‘Welcome to *Compass*, the ABC’s popular year-round series from across the globe devoted to faith, values, ethics, and religion. *Compass* critically examines the world of belief and values, seeking meaning and a sense of purpose in life.’ This is how presenter Geraldine Doogue introduces her weekly program. I took particular note of the subject on the night of 28 September, which was Rookwood Cemetery, and what to do with the dead now the cemetery’s full. ‘Losing the Plots’, a play on words, is a great title.

It’s my advanced age, of course, now that I’m 77 and planning my death and burial. But my interest in Rookwood goes further. I know it well. My parents and grandparents are buried there, as are my brother Chas and his wife Vera. Most of my uncles and aunts, many friends and other relatives, over the years, all ended-up there. What about me? I intend to be cremated.

The program pointed out that Rookwood is one of the largest cemeteries in the world and also one of the most diverse. Its 800 acres of parkland are divided up among dozens of religious groups in our multicultural society. There are Catholics, Anglicans, Greeks, Jews, Moslems, Hindus, Buddhists, Chinese, Russians, Serbians, and a host of other faiths and cultures, all with differing belief systems, and vying for a space in this ever decreasing land area. What alternatives are on offer?

## cremation and other ancient practices

Cremation is the first and obvious alternative to burial. In some countries, with the shortage of land, cremations are running at 90%, compared with Sydney at 67%. Jews and Moslems, however, are hostile to cremations, as were Catholics until recently. And now the Catholic Church has recently commissioned a brand new crematorium.

India leads the world in cremations and has done so for many thousands of years. I was privileged to be invited to sit with a family at a ghat alongside the Ganges River in Varanasi. There must have been a thousand cremations taking place that day along the riverside. The eldest son in our host family placed his father’s corpse on top of a pile of logs and set fire to it. Members watched as the body was consumed. When it had burnt away to about the size of a cat, the son picked-up the remains on a pitchfork and dropped it into the fast-flowing river to float away. The family then dispersed. It was all over and very final.

The Parsees in Mumbai leave their dead on the top of towers to be eaten by vultures. The Solomon Islanders lay their dead out on a reef for the sharks to eat. And some Australian Aborigines used to leave the bodies of the dead in trees.

## high rise mausoleums

The situation when I was in Rome in the 1950s and 60s was that there was no more land for burial, so they built upwards and began burying the dead, not under the ground, but in pigeon holes above the ground inside tall buildings. Ten years ago the Catholic Church built, at a cost of nine million dollars, its state-of-the-art ‘Mausoleum of the Resurrection’ at Rookwood. It reflects a Mediterranean tradition of above-ground burial with modern technology and constant care.

## recycling

There is another way to organize space at Rookwood, although it would mean some disruption to the dead. It is to reuse graves through multiple burials, or to recycle plots that are no longer visited.

But for the Jewish community, as represented by Jack in the *Compass* program, sustainable burial, especially the reuse of graves, is not possible. ‘We cannot, for religious reasons, reuse these graves. Jewish law forbids, absolutely forbids reusing graves. That’s part of our religion and we abide by that.’ Jack admitted that it will cost the Jewish community many thousands of dollars to restore century-old graves no longer tended, but taking up much needed space. Superstitious? Sounds like it. I think they should think about it and question their ancient law.

Moslems, for similar reasons, have rejected recycling, and are desperately seeking ways of squeezing in extra burials between existing plots.

## preserving bodies

The Egyptians and the Incas mummified their dead with spices, herbs and chemicals, to prevent decomposition. Some people have proposed preserving their dead in amber like the 30-million-year-old frogs we find in fossils. Embalming is done, as is taxidermy. Cryonic freezing is another method, as is done with egg and sperm cells, in the hope that future technology might be able to bring the person’s body back to life. Again a denial of death.

## appeasing the spirits

Many early burial rites and customs were practised to protect the living by appeasing the spirits who were thought to have caused the person’s death. Such ghost protection rituals and superstitions have varied extensively with time and place, as well as with religious perception, but many are still in use today.

I was amazed at the belief in ghosts and superstitions revealed by the persons interviewed on this program. The Catholics had clearly not accepted death. Rocco and Nancy were at the mausoleum of their mother and grandmother, both called Caterina, and were speaking to them as if they were still alive and could hear them. ‘For 25years, I have been visiting the family vault and keeping the place clean and tidy because my mother would get very upset if it was dirty.’ (But she’s dead!)

The Chinese couple, Ray and Beverley, told how important it is in Chinese culture to look after the ancestors. They arrived with food and drink for the dead – pork, fish, chicken, tea and wine. ‘The ancestors get drunk, you know. They’re absorbed into the soil and they can taste it.’ They even burnt \$10,000 at the gravesite. (Monopoly money, I hope). As one of them explained, ‘Because on the other side they have to spend the money to buy things.’ (Sounds like a continuation of our consumer society.)

Then came this extraordinary admission, ‘But the thing is nobody’s come back to tell us what really happens!’ (They need to think about this. Question everything.) In Mexico, as in Italy, they make a big thing about All Souls Day, when offerings, including money, food and flowers, are made to the deceased. I’ve lived in both countries during this festival. There’s a joke about the event that tells of two people visiting a cemetery, one putting flowers by a grave and the other putting food on one. ‘When is your dead one going to come up to eat the food?’ asks the first person. ‘When yours comes up to smell the flowers,’ replies the second. (Think about it, I say, and question everything.)

Finally, there is the Hindu tradition in Bali, where much effort is exerted in parading the corpse round in circles hoping to confuse it so it will not be able to find its way home. A denial of death? It still happens in so many societies, even here in Australia. Belief in ghosts? Refusal to believe the person is dead? Even Geraldine Doogue claimed in her introduction that since 1867 around 800,000 ‘souls’ have been laid to rest at Rookwood. Shouldn’t she have said, ‘dead people’? There is no such thing as an immortal soul, or a ghost. People who believe in ghosts see them everywhere. People who don’t believe in ghosts don’t see them anywhere.

The Moslems interviewed on the program, Jamil and Wasim, had come to visit their mother who had passed away three years ago. They planted palm trees, as is done in the Middle East. They said, to provide shade to protect the person from the hardships of the grave. Again a denial of death. ‘The loved one is underground suffering hardships.’ They need to think about this and question everything. Even if there were a disembodied soul, it would not be able to see or hear or feel or taste or suffer hardships, because it no longer has a body. And if it were to leave the body like the air out of a specially shaped balloon, it would no longer have its balloon shape. It would be dissipated into the atmosphere and cease to exist. The existence of immortal souls has been shown scientifically to be highly improbable, in such books as *Mortal Minds in Mortal Bodies*. Which is my view.

Vincent Phelan, member of Humanist Society of NSW.

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Why even a child can spell it!

(Child collapses trying to spell they’re/their/there.)

## Finding common ground

New wave atheism is aggressively antagonistic to religion. But, argues Richard Norman, it’s more fruitful to find common ground.

The year 2007 was not a good one for God. Richard Dawkins’s *The God Delusion* and Christopher Hitchens’s *God is Not Great* have been riding high in the international bestseller lists, while in the US Sam Harris has addressed his *Letter to a Christian Nation* and Daniel Dennett’s *Breaking the Spell* has explored the question of how to explain the irrationality of religious belief. Michel Onfray’s *In Defence of Atheism* has added a distinctively French tone to the assault, and A. C. Grayling’s latest collection of elegant English essays is *Against All Gods*. It’s not surprising that cultural commentators have identified a cultural wave, and given it a label: ‘The New Atheism’.

Then there has been the rush of responses. Alastair McGrath’s *The Dawkins Delusion* and John Cornwell’s *Darwin’s Angel* have replied to Dawkins in particular, and John Humphrys has followed up his radio interviews of religious leaders with a book, *In God We Doubt*, which is subtitled *Confessions of a Failed Atheist* (he can’t bring himself to accept religious belief but he thinks it would be nice to be able to do so).

My intention here is to stand back a little from this parade of views and counterinterviews and ask about its implications for the humanist movement. What can we, as humanists in Britain now, learn from the debate around the New Atheism?

We should begin by recognising that the ‘New Atheism’ is not really new. Its distinctive themes – religion as the enemy of science, of progress and of an enlightened morality – are in a direct line of descent from the 18th-century enlightenment and 19th-century rationalism. The ‘new’ movement is better seen as a revival, a reassertion of the values of rational thought and vigorous argument. It has struck people as new because it has given new life to old disagreements and debates and done so with great panache and style. But we need to beware of fighting old battles in a world which has moved on.

### start of New Atheism

What kick-started the New Atheism was, of course, the attack on the Twin Towers. That event, and subsequent acts of Islamist-inspired terrorism, reminded the world of the terrible deeds that can be performed in the name of religious fanaticism, especially if it is reinforced by dreams of immediate rewards in paradise. How to combat Islamist fanaticism is obviously a pressing question. At the same time, it would be foolish to let our attitudes to all religions and all religious believers be coloured by a small set of specific outrages.

A second development which no doubt reinforced the New Atheism was the resurgence of creationism, on a small scale in the UK and on a scarily large scale in the US. In the States it's linked with the religious right and the malign influence of Christian fundamentalists on politics and government. Unsurprisingly, it's in the US that the New Atheism seems to be taking shape as a cultural movement, not just a publishing success. Dawkins has launched the 'Out' campaign, encouraging American atheists to 'come out'. The success of these developments is sufficient evidence that they respond to a real need, and they reflect the extent to which American atheists have felt beleaguered. In some parts of the US it takes courage to come out as an atheist. But let's be honest – in Britain today, for most of us, it's a doddle.

This points to the danger of over-generalising about religion and about religious believers. By far the commonest criticism directed against the New Atheists is that they do over-generalise, and I think that the criticism is justified. To avoid being guilty of the same mistake myself, I'll focus only on the two bestsellers, Dawkins and Hitchens, because their books have done most to generate the larger movement. They are quite explicit in their desire to generalise about religion. Dawkins says, 'I do everything in my power to warn people against faith itself, not just against so-called "extremist" faith. The teachings of "moderate" religion, though not extremist in themselves, are an open invitation to extremism.'

And Hitchens is even more frank: his subtitle is 'religion poisons everything'. That really is too simple. In the 'religion' that Dawkins and Hitchens relentlessly attack I simply do not recognise the many good, sensitive, intelligent and sometimes wonderful religious people I know.

### **reasons Dawkins and Hitchens give**

Of course the generalisations are not just crude prejudices, they are considered and they are defended, and we should examine the reasons Dawkins and Hitchens give. For Dawkins the problem is that all religious believers are committed to faith rather than reason. He is rightly appalled by the resurgence of creationism, by the fact that many people still reject neo-Darwinian evolutionary theory because it is incompatible with a literal reading of the first chapter of Genesis. He knows perfectly well that the vast majority of Christians and other religious believers in Britain (though, worryingly, not in the US) are not creationists, but he thinks that, just by accepting the idea of 'faith', they have sold out. He says, 'Fundamentalist religion is hell-bent on ruining the scientific education of young minds. Non-fundamentalist, "sensible" religion may not be doing that, but it is making the world safe for fundamentalism by teaching children ... that unquestioning faith is a virtue.'

So for him the difference between the so-called moderate, sensible religious believers and the fundamentalists is a minor one. He thinks that the real divide is between science and religion, because science is based on reason and religion is a matter of faith. In other words it's religion as such that is the problem.

Is that right? We need to be aware of the ambiguities of the word 'faith'. In some cases faith is no more or less than a set of overarching beliefs with which people make sense of the world. All religions are faiths in the first sense, and so is humanism, though most of us would prefer not to use the

word because of its other connotations. There's no necessary opposition between faith in this sense and reason.

But faith can also refer to our readiness to accept beliefs on grounds which are not conclusive. This covers a range of cases, from a hunch which you think will be confirmed, to a well-founded expectation based on past experience. A creationist website links to a video clip of Dawkins saying that he has 'faith' that fossils will be found to fill gaps in the fossil record. He didn't mean faith in the creationists' sense of believing it without evidence, but it's a perfectly legitimate sense of the word – a belief backed by previous experience, for which further confirmation is sought. And though it's not the creationists' sense of the word, there are plenty of religious believers who would say that they have faith in this sense. They can't prove that there's a god, so their commitment goes beyond the evidence, but it's not unsupported.

Faith is also a way of describing a commitment to a belief which has no rational basis. Are there religious believers with this sort of unmediated belief? Yes, I'm sure there are, though I suspect that they often play on the ambiguity between that version of faith and the more everyday manner in which we say that we have faith in a person, that we trust them. I'm thinking of the evangelical Christians who say things like 'How can I doubt God, since he has saved me, I have this special relationship with him and I trust him with everything in my life.' But the general point is that faith means different things for different religious believers, and from the fact that they claim to have faith you can't infer that they are all irrationalists who believe things on 'blind faith' without any evidence and have therefore sold the pass to the creationists.

### **religion and evolution**

Take the case of the many people who both hold a religious belief and accept evolutionary theory. They value scientific method, they accept the scientific evidence, and they say that the origin of species through natural selection just is the process by which God has created all living things. The question they then have to answer is: if we've got the scientific account, why do we also need a belief in divine creation? They would probably say something like this: the theory of evolution explains how living things have come into existence, but it doesn't explain why there existed, in the first place, a universe suited to lead to the evolution of life. Many Christians these days are keen on the so-called 'fine-tuning argument': that if the basic physical constants had been just slightly different, the Big Bang would not have led to the emergence of galaxies and suns and planets, including at least one planet with the right conditions for the evolution of life. The initial conditions had to be 'just right', and God is the best explanation of why they were.

Dawkins has an excellent reply to this argument. He argues that whatever the explanation of the initial conditions may be, God is not a good explanation, because the existence of a hugely powerful intelligence who knew all the physical constants and scientific laws is even more difficult to explain than the things it is supposed to account for. The essential point is one about 'simplicity'. Philosophers like Richard Swinburne argue that the best explanation is the most economical one, and explaining the universe by divine intention is the preferred explanation because it is the simplest. Dawkins rightly points out that this is a confusion. The explanation in terms of a divine creator may be simply

stated, but the entity which is supposed to do the explaining is a highly complex entity, not a 'simple' one. I agree with Dawkins. The argument fails. But it is still an argument. As so often, deciding whether an argument succeeds is a matter of judgement – of faith, if you like, in the second sense. But a mistaken argument is still an argument, still an appeal to reason and evidence. For a great many religious believers, belief in a god is like that – faith, but not 'blind faith'.

Dawkins also thinks that it is blind faith that leads to crazy acts of religious fanaticism. 'Even mild and moderate religion,' he says, 'helps to provide the climate of faith in which extremism naturally flourishes.' He's thinking, obviously, of suicide bombers and Islamist terrorists, not to mention Christian extremists who murder abortionists, Hindus who slaughter Muslims, and all the rest of the fanatics. It was the killing of 3,000 people in the World Trade Centre that was the initial spur for the New Atheism, and for Dawkins it demonstrated that it is not extremism, but religion as such, that is the problem.

That's also Hitchens's view, and I turn to him now. His reason for generalising about all religion, for claiming that religion poisons everything, is primarily an appeal to the historical record. He has no difficulty compiling an appalling catalogue of all the terrible things done in the name of religion. The Old Testament is full of justifications for massacre and slavery. The Koran contains incitements to intolerance and the spreading of Islam by force. In the modern world, in the name of religion, rival groups have been slaughtering one another in the Middle East, Northern Ireland, Yugoslavia, the Indian subcontinent and elsewhere. People's lives are blighted by repressive religious views and practices concerning abortion, contraception, masturbation and genital mutilation. And the length of the list demonstrates, for Hitchens, that religion poisons everything.

### **good things in name of religion**

But it's a selective list, and it's not enough to justify the generalisation, since it invites the response: 'What about all the good things done in the name of religion? What about all the religious believers who have stood up against political repression, who have worked for peace and tolerance, who have campaigned for justice and against slavery and poverty, and have devoted themselves to improving the lot of their fellow human beings?' Hitchens's answer is that if people do these things, it's not really their religion that motivates them – 'this is a compliment to humanism, not to religion'. The classic example is Martin Luther King, whom Hitchens rightly admires. King was a committed Christian who used the language of the Old Testament, the language of the 'promised land', to inspire the Civil Rights movement. Hitchens says that this is mere metaphor. Although King uses the image of Moses leading his people out of Egypt, there is nothing equivalent to Moses's exhortation to massacre the other tribes in the land which God had promised to the people of Israel. King preached non-violence, and did not advocate revenge against white racists. Therefore, Hitchens infers, he was not a real Christian: 'When Dr King took a stand ... he did so as a profound humanist and nobody could ever use his name to justify oppression or cruelty ... his legacy has very little to do with his professed theology. ... In no real as opposed to nominal sense, then, was he a Christian.'

The circularity in Hitchens's argument is obvious. Religion poisons everything. What about the good things done in the name of religion? If they're really good, that just shows that they're not really religious. The same circular argument appears in Hitchens's discussion of the atrocities generated by secular creeds. He says of totalitarian societies that because their leaders are regarded as infallible, such states are theocracies and therefore essentially religious. So the counter-examples simply confirm, for Hitchens, that it's religion that poisons everything.

Hitchens's appeal to the historical record is what I call the 'headcount' argument – 'Your lot have killed more people than our lot.' It gets us nowhere. The fact is that human beings are capable of doing terrible things and they are capable of doing wonderful things. This is true of religious believers, it's true of atheists, and it shouldn't surprise us. Religion – here I agree with another of Hitchens's persistent themes – is a human creation. It is, I suggest, a mirror which humanity holds up to itself and in which it sees itself reflected. Human beings attribute to their gods all their own human qualities – cruelty, revenge and hatred, but also love and compassion and mercy. That's why you can find a justification for anything, good or bad, in religion.

For Dawkins and for Hitchens that is part of the problem. Religious believers cannot avoid cherry-picking. They select from their sacred texts whatever fits their prior agenda. The homophobes pick out the texts from Leviticus or the Koran which order the killing of gays; their opponents say that this is incompatible with the idea of a god of compassion and tolerance. The warmongers and jihadists pick out the injunctions to slaughter; the peacemakers appeal to the contrary texts. Religions are deeply contradictory, and the application of them will always be selective.

But that is precisely why we should not lump all religious believers together. Humanism is more than atheism, it is about putting humanist beliefs and values into practice and trying to make the world a better place. And that is impossible unless we're prepared to cooperate with others who share those values, including those for whom the values are inseparable from a religious commitment.

It goes deeper than that. For many humanists, religious believers are also friends, lovers, colleagues, neighbours, spouses and partners. The attitude that religion poisons everything is unlikely to be an auspicious basis for such relationships. We really do need something a bit more nuanced.

### **practical conclusion**

If we are serious about our humanist values, we should look for all those who share them, and work with them. If, according to Hitchens, that means that such people are really humanists after all, then call them that if you wish, but accept that they may also be committed Christians or Muslims or Hindus or Buddhists or whatever. The labels don't matter. If Christians are happy to defend science against the idiocies of creationism, let's work with them. When the news broke that state schools in this country (UK) were teaching creationism as science, Dawkins and Richard Harries, then Bishop of Oxford, issued a joint statement of criticism. Dawkins has been accused of inconsistency in doing so but it doesn't matter, it was the right thing to do

and it was highly effective. After the most recent attempted suicide bombings in Britain, national newspapers carried a full-page advertisement by Muslim organisations condemning the bombings and dissociating themselves from them. What are we supposed to say? 'You're just as bad?' That would be madness. They need our encouragement, and we need their help.

**Humanism is more than  
atheism, it is about putting  
humanist beliefs and values  
into practice and trying to  
make the world a better place.**

We have problems enough in the world. The threats of climate change, global poverty, war and repression and intolerance can never be countered unless we are prepared to work together on the basis of a shared humanity. Simplistic generalisations about religion don't help. In Dawkins's terminology that means working with the 'moderates' to counter the 'extremists', but it's actually more complicated than that. Some of our allies against creationism may be deeply prejudiced against gays. Some of the best people working to combat global poverty may be Catholic anti-abortionists. Some of the Muslim allies we need to counter Islamist violence may have deeply sexist attitudes to women. It all demonstrates what a deeply contradictory phenomenon religion is. But we know that. And if religion is so contradictory, that's probably because human beings are a deeply contradictory species.

**Richard Norman**, professor of philosophy at the University of Kent and author of *On Humanism*, Routledge 2004.

[Originally published under the title 'Holy communion' in *New Humanist*, November/December 2007.]



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6.30 for 7.00 p.m. Convention Dinner  
Presentation to the AHOY09

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9. a.m. to 11.30 a.m. Presentation of papers (Previously submitted & advised)  
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**Dorothy Bell**, President HSSA

# Secularism is NOT atheism

Max Wallace

Secularism is a form of government where a nation opts for an identity which is neither religious nor anti-religious, but simply neutral. Neutrality means government disassociation from religion and non-belief. Religionists equate neutrality with hostility to religion and imply that secularism is a variation on the theme of atheism.

An atheist form of government *can* be hostile to religion. The USSR saw religion as a form of false belief and part of the cultural apparatus of the ruling class. It seized church property, gaoled and even executed clerics, put strict controls on religious practice including a ban on religious education in schools. If religion is tolerated at all in an atheist form of government there will be a strict separation and distrust between church and state.

Outside North Korea, and possibly Cuba, there are now no governments that could be characterised as atheist. China and Vietnam come close but both allow some religion.

Theocracy is the direct opposite of atheist government. In this case the state identifies with a religion. There is little tolerance of other forms of belief. Belief in another religion or non-belief may attract a death penalty. Apostasy, i.e. a decision to leave the religion, can also attract the death penalty. There is no separation of church and state. The divine word, the source of all law, comes from a book, and there is usually one ruler who has authority to interpret and apply law and may delegate authority to other clerics in order to do so. Women are in the control of men. After the 1979 Iranian Revolution the wearing of a black veil became compulsory for women. But not all theocracies are so hard-line. If you are a citizen of the Vatican and you decide to give up your Catholic belief and leave, you won't be executed but you will face eternal damnation.

The defining characteristic of secular government is separation of church and state. What distinguishes secular government from atheist government is that where atheist government barely tolerates religion, if at all, secular governments agree to freedom of religion. That is, unlike North Korea and the Vatican which are not democracies, secular governments are democracies which respect a citizen's right to believe whatever they want and usually practice those beliefs, so long as that practice does not entail the breaking of a law.

## **The defining characteristic of secular government is separation of church and state.**

There are many variations on the theme of secular government with widely varying degrees of constitutional separation of church or mosque and state. Some of these in alphabetical order are: Angola, Brazil, France, Gabon, Guinea-Bissau, Hungary, Latvia, Liberia, Macedonia, Mexico, Mongolia, Mozambique, Philippines, Portugal, Turkey and the USA.

In the United States, those members of Congress who choose to swear on the Bible rather than affirm once elected, swear on the Bible to uphold the Constitution. They do not swear on the Constitution to uphold the Bible. There is no mention of God in the US Constitution and there is little federal funding of religious schools.

So despite the facts that about 20 per cent of Americans are evangelical Christians, over 70 per cent believe in creationism rather than evolution, and George Bush has in the last eight years all but totally compromised separation by various policies, the government is still, at this point in time, nominally secular, thanks to court rulings that have upheld the constitution against attacks by militant Christians. The defeat of the attempt to impose creationism in the guise of intelligent design on the curriculum of state schools was the most recent important example.

Notice all the countries not on the list above concerning constitutional separation of church and state. Among the absentees are Australia and New Zealand, which are constitutional monarchies, not republics.

Given that our two countries have not formally separated church and state, it's fair to say that we are formally theocratic in our style of government rather than secular. We have the head of a major religious tradition as our head of state: Queen Elizabeth II. Our flag contains three Christian crosses in the Union Jack: England's Anglicanism, Scotland's Presbyterianism and St Patrick's Catholic cross of Ireland. We have a Christian National Thanksgiving Day each year when it is said Jesus Christ reigns over Australia. This has been approved by the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition and the Governor-General; 'God' is mentioned in the Preamble to the Australian Constitution and the National Anthem; Christian prayers are held to open our parliaments; Bible study meetings have been held in Australian parliamentary offices; hard-core evangelicals exempted from laws that apply to others are given parliamentary passes to lobby members whenever they wish; homosexuality has been decried in the Great Hall when it was hired by conservative Christians; \$12B annually is given to religious schools while state schools are languishing needing \$3B annually to meet their commitment to children in state schools; federal and state money is given to the Scripture Union to place Christian and other religious chaplains in state schools while humanists and others are banned from serving as chaplains.

Militant Christians see all of the above as perfectly normal and not an affront to secular governance. The notion that governments should be respectful of all opinions but favour none has been mostly abandoned. Our governments

have become soft theocracies but with a secular twist according to political contingency. For example, despite their best attempts militant Christians have seen parliaments pass legislation allowing civil marriages, oral contraception, abortion, prostitution, women's rights, gay law reform, IVF and stem cell research. But while they are losing battles their structural integration into government remains untouched.

For example, all religions that have a supernatural belief qualify for exemptions from all major forms of taxation and many minor ones, thus they are subsidised by all citizens irrespective of a citizen's personal beliefs. This privilege can be sourced back to the 1601 law passed in the reign of Elizabeth I. It gave charitable status for the 'advancement of religion'. As charities, religions are tax exempt. Atheism is not tax exempt because it is not a form of supernatural belief.

Religions also receive many hand-outs. The Catholic World Youth Day was sponsored by federal and NSW governments to the tune of around \$160M, but a breakdown of how the money was spent has been disallowed under Freedom of Information exemptions (see M. Moore, 'Pope visit too sensitive to talk about', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20/21 September 2008, p.38.)

If Australia was a republic with a constitutional separation of church and state, straight out donations of cash to religions like this could be unconstitutional. In fact, they should be unconstitutional because it would not be the role of the Commonwealth of Australia to 'advance religion' were it a republic with a constitutional separation of church and state.

That is not to say the various good works charities religions run could not continue as tax exempt organisations where they are serving a public purpose, such as the relief of poverty. But to 'advance religion' is a private purpose, one that was considered to be in the public interest in the 17th century when religious belief was expected and blasphemy laws were enforced. Last July in Britain, blasphemy was abolished, but the tax exemptions for the advancement of religion continue.

Those who oppose Australia becoming a republic are supporting a system of tax exemptions for churches and, in principle, the monarchy. Those who support a republic have never argued that our republic should have a constitutional separation of church and state. Republicans are thereby tacitly agreeing with constitutional monarchists that tax exemptions for the advancement of religion and the monarchy are untouchable.

While the question of whether Australia should have a president elected by parliament or by the people directly is important, the question of separation of church and state as part of a republic is equally important. If it were not, why do the countries cited above have separation? If the United States can have it, why can't we?

Clearly, the fear for political parties is that if they were to argue for separation of church and state the churches would rise as one against them to protect their tax exemptions, their school funding, their grants, their access to the minds of children, not just in their own schools, but also in state schools. But this is an irrational fear. Christianity has declined at every census since federation. In New Zealand now only about 51 per cent state they are Christians. Also, moderate, even-handed Christians recognise that their voice is only one of many and should compete equally.

Secularism is a form of neutral government that listens to all points of view and tries to strike a balance between conflicting ideas. Militant and some moderate Christians don't want that. They want it all their own way without qualification. They want a republic made in their own image. To protect their interests they put the fear of electoral consequences into the minds of already compliant politicians while demonising secularism as godless atheism. To put it another way, they don't want democracy, they want soft theocracy: they want religious government with a democratic facade to continue to lock in their privileges. They talk about democracy but they practice theocracy because they don't believe, they *know* they are right, and since they are right they believe they should impose their will on us. In other words, they are doing the same thing they accuse 'godless' secularism of.

**Max Wallace** is Director of the Australia New Zealand Secular Association, author of *The Purple Economy: Supernatural Charities, Tax and the State*.

It's Passover, and a Jewish guy is eating his lunch in the park. A blind man sits down next to him, so the Jewish guy offers him some of his lunch – a piece of matzoh. The blind man takes it, fingers it a moment, and says, 'Who writes this crap?'

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A Frenchman walks into a bar. There's a parrot wearing a tuxedo perched on his shoulder. The bartender says, 'Wow, that's cute. Where did you get that?'

The parrot says, 'In France. They've got million of guys like this over there.'

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In a bar is a pianist with a monkey which goes round after each number collecting tips. While the pianist is playing, the monkey jumps up on the bar, walks up to a customer and squats over his drink, putting his testicles in the drink. The man is miffed, walks up to the piano player, and says, 'Do you know your monkey dipped his balls in my martini?'

The piano player replies, 'No, man, but hum a few bars, and I can probably pick it up.'

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Old 'Doc' Bloom, the local hardware store owner, who was known for his miraculous cures for arthritis, had a long line of 'patients' waiting outside his door, when a little old lady, completely bent over, shuffled in slowly, leaning on her cane.

When her turn came, she went into the back room of the store and, amazingly, emerged within half an hour with her head held high.

A woman waiting in line said, 'It's a miracle! You walked in bent in half, and now you're walking erect. What did Doc do?'

She answered, 'He gave me a longer cane.'

# Parliament not a church\*: Rudd, Rawls, religion and state

Meg Wallace

\* This title echoes the words of Joe Hockey, MP, who, in a moment of enlightenment when speaking on stem cell research in the Australian Parliament, said, 'I do not believe, as do some of my colleagues, that it is the role of government to preach and legislate morality. This is not a church and I am not standing in a pulpit it is not my role to exclusively impose my values on others.'

In 2006 Kevin Rudd (elected Prime Minister in Nov. 07) expressed his views on the relationship between religion and the state. He spoke at a conference at the University of Melbourne in September, held in honour of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian who was executed for his anti-Nazi activities. Bonhoeffer was a brave and intelligent man. He was a minister of religion, and a member of the German resistance, who was part of a bid to assassinate Hitler. He was captured and executed. Truly a man to be admired. Rudd's speech was published as an article in *The Monthly* (Oct 2006), and he expanded his views in an interview with Stephen Crittenden on the ABC's *Religion Report* (4 Oct 2006). Rudd declared that Bonhoeffer is the man he admires most of the twentieth century.

## John Rawls's political philosophy

However, it is proposed here that as the political leader of a nation where there is a wide diversity of beliefs, both religious and secular, Prime Minister Rudd would do better by seeking political (rather than personal moral) guidance, from the views of a political theorist, not a theologian. Such a theorist was John Rawls (1921–2002), widely acclaimed political philosopher, who was concerned to ensure those of all beliefs, not just Christian beliefs, enjoy equal opportunity for self-fulfilment, both material and immaterial. All citizens would have a say in government, but Rawls was aware of the need to ensure that no ideology, religious or otherwise, would be used to influence unduly policy and legislation.

Rawls was concerned with developing a model for a liberal democratic society that provides for justice and fairness, for all members. He began in *A Theory of Justice* (revised edition, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1999) by considering how we would determine such a society by developing what he called a theory of justice. He realised that those determining the principles that should underlie such a society would naturally want to bring to the task their personal perspectives and interests, such as their religious or other beliefs, their gender, ethnicity and culture. They would tend to favour a society that best served these interests. To ensure this did not happen, he concluded, such people would have to work from behind a 'veil of ignorance'. Their task would involve determining a society that is just and fair for all, regardless of the above specific characteristics. Religious beliefs as such, then, would not determine the principles of a just society.

Under these circumstances, practical reason would lead our architects of society to require the best basic standard of fairness, equality and treating others as one would want to be treated – standards that all could accept. The principles of justice would form what Rawls went on to call 'public reason' in *Political Liberalism* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1993). Public reason, he said, is reasoning for the structure of government and human rights upon which all citizens can agree. Public reason would be determined and affirmed through a democratic process that fairly includes all individuals and underlay public policy. It would thus be 'freestanding' of personal philosophical, religious and moral doctrines ('comprehensive doctrines').

While those participating in the functions of government may be guided by their personal convictions, public reason requires that public policy, legislation and judicial decision-making is justified from principles of public reason, not comprehensive doctrines (although the two may well be compatible). Meanwhile, individuals can adopt their chosen comprehensive doctrines and exercise them in accordance with the accepted public reason (that is, in a nutshell, limited only if they adversely affect the rights of others to do the same).

This model, Rawls argued, provides a means for a peaceful, tolerant and durable liberal democracy, with true freedom of belief for all. The price for this freedom and durability is reciprocal recognition of the rights of others, based on an 'overlapping consensus' regarding the principles of liberal democracy. Many nations have subscribed to the international human rights instruments; which include *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*; *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* and the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Political Rights*. Australia is signatory of all three. Those countries signing up have in effect adopted a form of public reason by accepting basic, internationally recognised human rights.

A central aspect of Rawls's approach, then, is that it is consistent across all beliefs and all circumstances when it comes to dealings between the church and state. The state is neutral, and personal beliefs are not the deciding factor in governance, thus discounting arbitrariness, unpredictability and favouritism.

## Evaluating Rudd's views on church and state

How do Prime Minister Rudd's views on church and state measure up to this political model of a durable liberal democracy in a society of diverse, often mutually incompatible beliefs? I believe they fall short in several ways.

Firstly, Rudd is selective. He gives Christianity favoured consideration, and fails to tell us how his views on belief/state relations operate in respect of other religions and non-religious beliefs. Rudd praises Bonhoeffer for following his moral views. He agrees with Bonhoeffer's repudiation of the two kingdoms: the view that there is the 'inner sphere where the Kingdom of God reigns' and the outer sphere, the 'realm of the law', which is 'not subject to the gospel's message'. This raises the question of whether Rudd would merge the two. This would mean theocracy. But simultaneously, and confusingly, Rudd does go on to say that a Christian perspective on contemporary policy debates 'must be argued, and weighed, together with other arguments from different philosophical traditions, in a fully contestable secular policy.'

Rawls pointed out that a satisfactory resolution of such debate would not be feasible. How, for example, would you weigh the different, incompatible views of different gods, all of whom are to their followers immutable and unquestionable? The only way for a sustainable liberal democracy is to develop policy and legislation from public reason – values that all can accept. This includes mutual and reciprocal recognition of basic human rights, the closest we can get to a tolerant society in which there is a diversity of incompatible beliefs. In a just society, unless argument can be made that legislation dealing with such matters can be justified on the ground of public reason it does not give equal consideration to the right of all individuals to exercise their freedom of belief. This leads to dissatisfaction, disharmony and social unrest. Thus public reason should not appeal simply to religious or other ideologies.

The political actions of Bonhoeffer, based as they were on his religious beliefs, are commendable because they were founded on what we all recognise as human rights. But it is well established that Bonhoeffer's concern for Jews was mainly restricted to his concern that *Christian* Jews be allowed to participate equally with others in the Christian community. Jews were to be accepted so long as they converted to Christianity and were baptised. In hitching his political wagon to Bonhoeffer, Rudd should remember that Bonhoeffer was a theologian and minister of religion, concerned with the interests of his church and its survival under the Nazi regime. His growing awareness of the plight of the Jews was a political one. The desire to end the rule of Hitler was certainly inspired by his bible-based humanitarian concerns, but those concerns were also inspired in others by other religious and humanist principles. His religious beliefs did not have a monopoly on such principles. Like many others, Rudd unduly credits his brand of Christianity with a humanitarianism that is common across many diverse philosophies and beliefs.

Rudd then adopts a political slant on religion, accepting only those Christians with whom he agrees. Even some Christian groups, namely 'right-wing' groups citing 'family values', are rejected. Thus we have an acceptance of Christian involvement in politics that suits Rudd's particular views.

The Prime Minister is also on shaky ground when he attributes the saving of Jews to Bonhoeffer. Rudd states that Bonhoeffer 'organised the secret evacuation of a number of German Jews to Switzerland'. In fact Bonhoeffer's religious beliefs led him to concentrate on converting Jews to Christianity. Bonhoeffer's political concerns were as a

Christian, rejecting the excesses of the Nazi regime, regardless of to whom they applied.

The Commission for the Designation of the Righteous among the Nations, a public committee appointed by the Yad Vashem Directorate (the 'Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority'), Israel's official memorial to the victims of the Holocaust, chaired by a Supreme Court Justice and made up of lawyers, historians, Holocaust survivors and private citizens, considered Bonhoeffer's pro-Jewish activities. The Committee grants the title of 'Righteous Among Gentiles' to non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jews. It found that Bonhoeffer 'did refer one convert (who held a high position in the church) to the care of this brother-in-law who worked in military intelligence, this man took a group of 13 Jews and converts, disguised them as spies and spirited them to Switzerland'. It concluded that in fact Bonhoeffer did not save any Jews, 'never spoke out publicly against the persecution of Jews,' and had not publicly retracted his justification of the persecution of Jews from a theological perspective, explaining that 'it would never stop until the Jews asked for forgiveness for the crucifixion of Jesus and accept Christianity as their faith.' Their finding is available at [http://yad-vashem.org.il/about\\_yad/press\\_room/press\\_releases/Court.html](http://yad-vashem.org.il/about_yad/press_room/press_releases/Court.html).

Rudd goes on to discuss Bonhoeffer's opposition to the atrocities of Nazism as a 'political theology'. He does not explain how this mixture of politics and theology is relevant to practical politics, again demonstrating confusion about the relationship of religion, church and state. He told Stephen Crittenden, in the *ABC Religion Report* (mentioned above) that there is a separation of church and state in Australia, because there is no established church in this country. This is also the view of former Prime Minister John Howard. This view is wrong, both legally and, I would argue, in practice. The High Court of Australia in the 1981 case *Attorney-General (Vic) ex rel Black* has specifically recognised that there is not a constitutional separation of church and state in Australia. (See also Max Wallace, *The Purple Economy: Supernatural Charities, Tax and the State*, Sydney/Melbourne, ANSA, 2007, pp 41ff.)

Rudd appears to imply that 'religion' equals 'Christianity' equals 'truth', and is the sole source of 'true' values. This elitist approach ignores the many other religious and secular bodies that exercise the values Rudd espouses, without the 'Christianity'. Indeed, the very organ that resulted from the atrocities of World War II, the United Nations, whose mission is the promotion of human rights and social well-being for all, is a secular body, as are, eg, the Red Cross/Crescent, Amnesty International, Médecins sans Frontières, and many other aid bodies.

Humanitarianism does not stem solely from Christian, or any other religious belief. It stems also from acceptance of justice as fairness, based on the principles that those operating from behind a 'veil of ignorance', as described above, would accept as fair and reasonable for all. While differing beliefs are a feature of human life, I believe Rawls would say there is no need for Christian or any other religious belief to inform governance of the sort of society Rudd envisages. Indeed, public reason can also prevent the excesses of religious fundamentalism. Principles underlying theoretical Christianity, such as care for the vulnerable and oppressed, freedom of belief, speech and assembly, are

contained within Rawls's concept of the just and fair liberal democracy. These principles are expressed in the international human rights documents.

### conclusion

If Rudd is to convince those of us who are not like-minded Christians that he understands the need as a political leader to ensure equal consideration for the free holding and expression of diverse beliefs, religious or secular, he may well render unto Bonhoeffer's memory the high regard he does, but he would be better served for political inspiration to consider political theorists such as Rawls, who offer a more impartial and politically durable model of justice as fairness for everyone, which recognises, as a matter of principle, that Parliament is not a church.

**Meg Wallace** is a PhD student researching freedom of belief at Macquarie University. This is an adaptation of an OnLine Opinion piece, and summary of an article in Murdoch University eLaw Journal, Dec. edition 2008.

# Anthropogenic global warming and climate change?

**David Tribe**

According to Dr Victor Bien (*AH*, No. 92) I have a lot to answer for. My low-profile June talk to the Humanist Society of NSW (précis and his reply in *Humanist Viewpoints*, July-Aug-Sept 08) has 'inconveniently' precipitated in Topica a debate on anthropogenic (human-generated) global warming and climate change (AGWCC).

One can sympathise with those who have devoted years trying to get the media, general public and politicians (in that order) to recognise what they see as an impending disaster, only to find that, when it is recognised, some humanists on whom they'd relied for support are sowing the seeds of doubt. But they should remember that the humanist movement is a 'broad church'.

I agree with Victor that 'the issue and associated questions are complex and extensive' (*AH* No. 92), and so wrote a long article for *the Skeptic* (Spring 2008) on its origin, arguments for and against, postulated outcomes, and attempted solutions. To this end I posed and sought to answer six questions: (1) Is there steady or escalating global warming? (2) Is there climate change caused by global warming? (3) Are greenhouse-gas emissions increasing? (4) Are greenhouse-gas emissions significantly caused by human activity? (5) What consequences face us if questions 1 to 4 are answered affirmatively? (6) What should we do to avoid postulated catastrophe? Anyone interested in details can refer to the article. My overall conclusion was: 'My doubts about the supposed reality of AGWCC are

sufficiently grave that, on a risk-return basis, heroic, costly and clearly problematic "solutions" should be avoided.'

Geological and fossil evidence and our own experience demonstrate that planet Earth has always been subject to alternating warming and cooling, not only seasonally but according to natural cycles: intradecadal (El Niño and La Niña), decadal (sunspot activity), millennial (orbital shifts) and millional (tectonic-plate movements). Depending on where one starts a time bite to trot out statistics and construct models, Earth can be shown to be in a warming or cooling pattern. A favourite AGWCC onset time in this cherry-picking of data is the start of the Industrial Revolution, which happened to coincide with a Little Ice Age. Obviously, it's warmer now than then.

After World War II, involving two atom-bomb attacks on Japan, the Cold War and atmospheric testing of nuclear weapons, there was talk of a 'nuclear winter' as aerosols and other particulates reflect solar radiation back into space (albedo). Volcanoes added to this effect. A passionate, indeed strident, proponent of AGWCC, Professor Stephen Schneider, then wrote *The Genesis Strategy* (1976) on the dire consequences of global cooling. The hottest year in recent times was 1998, closely followed by 2005. Since then the globe has actually been cooling, though the AGWCC chorus line says warming will resume in 2015, and because of ocean currents and overturning (vertical currents), a few areas are warming now.

Rising sea levels inundating all deltas, coral islands and coastal plains, escalating storms and tempests, destruction of food crops, stricken biosphere and other disasters are confidently prophesied by 'experts' who can predict the local weather (and that imperfectly) only five days ahead. And what's responsible for these impending disasters? A gas used in carbonated drinks. Seriously though, numerous measurements do indicate an overall correspondence between atmospheric carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) and temperature. But ice cores from the end of the last Ice Age (10,000–12,000 years ago) show temperatures rose before levels of CO<sub>2</sub>. That is, warming is raising gas levels, largely through oceanic emissions, not visa versa. Moreover, this gas is chiefly formed by the burning and natural aerobic decomposition of organic matter, as in human respiration.

I was pleased to see Dick Clifford's warning against overpopulation, as I did in *AH*, 91 2008, in my article 'On population'. Obviously, the more people the more pollution, whatever its consequences. He also pointed out that the albedo effect of particulates in erupting volcanoes produces short-term cooling but their CO<sub>2</sub> emissions last longer in the atmosphere.

Various greenhouse gases come from other non-human and human activities. Less in volume but 23 times greater in greenhouse effect is methane, chiefly produced by the anaerobic decomposition of organic matter, ruminant farting and belching, and mining. In my view, however, the main reason for reducing man-made pollution is the presence of highly toxic trace gases and aerosols in industrial emissions. If CO<sub>2</sub> is such a curse, it could be more simply and cheaply controlled by adding it to the list of 'toxic' gases regulated under State Clean Air Acts instead of through a clumsy, costly and inefficient Emissions Trading (Carbon Pollution Reduction) Scheme (ETS). Curbing deforestation would prove even more effective.

If developing countries don't get thermal black coal from Australia, they'll get it from other countries where its sulphur content, producing acid rain, is higher. Speaking of sulphur, 'geo-engineering' shooting sulphite/sulphate aerosols or metallic particulates into the stratosphere could prove a disaster.

Known in the media as the 'inconvenient professor', AHOY for 1995 Ian Plimer, told television viewers and the Sydney Mining Club that 'an emissions trading scheme would send the country broke' (*Australian Financial Review*, 7 November 2008). Whether or not 'broke' is apposite, any scheme that disrupts industry and power generation, especially in the current economic climate, will not only impoverish all Australians but reduce our capacity to provide aid, as we do on a regular and ad-hoc basis, to the developing world. Everyone agrees that renewable sources of energy should be promoted, but their capacity totally to supplant coal, oil and gas is problematic and certainly not imminent.

As I elaborated in *the Skeptic*, belief in AGWCC and ETS has taken on the trappings of a new religion for the 21st century, whereby sceptics are demonised as 'deniers' (like holocaust deniers) and outrageously said to be in the pocket of the coal and oil industries. In the 20th century many lapsed Christians showed a disturbing tendency to latch on to rival magic and mystery, 'certainty' and 'salvation': there were strange new cults combining pseudo-science and super-naturalism, Marxism, psychoanalysis, extraterrestrials in UFOs, parapsychology, hypnosis, homeopathy etc. What price rationalism?

Dr Andrew Glikson doesn't need to worry that the AGWCC message is being eviscerated by media 'balance'. When did he last see or hear a sceptical view described in the mainstream? But overall enthusiasm is waning. My prophecy in *the Skeptic* has been vindicated. As soon as the world's dollars, jobs and votes are threatened, AGWCC Tribulation and the Second Coming of Al Gore fade in consciousness.

**David Tribe**, former scientific and policy officer with the NSW State Pollution Control Commission (later Environment Protection Authority).

## Faith and reason can be compatible

**Victor Bien**

David Milan in *AH 92*, expressed the commonly held view amongst Humanists and like-minded people that reason and faith are not compatible. It is a view which seems deeply implanted in these circles. It is a view found on the Secular Party's web page on religion.

I have a quarrel with it and my argument against this view was thrashed out on the CAHS Topica discussion group back in September 2006. It was a discussion prompted by Pope Benedict's remarks about reason and faith at the time. At its simplest and most abstract my problem with David's argument is that he counterpoises

*faith* against *reason*, but I think it much more appropriate to counterpoise faith and knowledge.

His article does talk about knowledge, as conveyed by the terms 'knowledge', 'scientific enquiry' and 'empirical evidence', but these are used as subordinate terms relative to his top-level distinction, *faith* against *reason*. I consider that the proper distinction should have faith, knowledge and reason all at the same logical level or, better, with faith counterpoised against knowledge with reason playing the subordinate function.

His article gives several examples of clearly unreasonable faiths, particularly faiths associated with the religions and superstitions we as a movement are concerned about. However, it can be argued that David is being selective in the examples he picks.

Not all approaches, beliefs, expectations, hunches, hypotheses, ideas etc., which may all be considered 'faiths' of some sort, are unreasonable. Any scientifically testable approach, belief, or expectation that is yet to be tested would be considered reasonable. Now for various ordinary science hypotheses this is easily accepted, but what about a proposal like string theory in high-energy physics? Many physicists have dismissed string theory as no better than theology because it seems unlikely to be ever empirically confirmed. However, that is rather unfair. Unlike theology we know from the past, the train of scientific observation and thought which has led to string theory is impeccably scientific! The barrier seems to be that empirical science has reached practical limits. With what science and technology can do, humanity has not yet the means required to actually test string theory. I mean it is something along the lines that while the new atom smasher in Geneva is huge – 27 km round – perhaps to start to test string theory one ten or a hundred times as big is needed. Perhaps that means humanity will never be able to do the required testing? So is there a veil to existence which science will not be able to penetrate? Note 'veil' implies there is something out there but we can never gain any knowledge of it.

We should recollect that Isaac Newton formed his theory of universal gravity, inspired by a religious faith that the universe must have an understandable in the absence of astronomical observations which subsequently confirmed his theory of gravity. We should remember that before his theory was confirmed it was a sort of faith. Expectations can also be dashed. The famous one in physics is Einstein's dictum that 'God does not play dice with the universe'. Unfortunately quantum mechanics shows that at a certain level there is a fundamental indeterminacy i.e. like dice throws!

High-energy physics may perhaps be rather out-of-this-world, so I now turn to complementary medicine, an area which David dismisses as unreasonable. Well if this is so there would not be a huge effort going on to ascertain what is reasonable or not in this field. Recently Control Publications has produced an *Issues* magazine focussed on complementary medicine, and it is not by any means possible to dismiss all such alternative therapies as unreasonable. See:

<http://issues.control.com.au/issues2008/bi84.shtml>.

And deistic faiths like those of Prof Paul Davies are not unreasonable even though they will forever remain in the domain of a hunch or faith.

Of course in public life, policies must be based on proven tested knowledge, so we have bodies like the

# LETTERS

Therapeutic Goods Administration to oversee therapeutic goods and services. All unprovable faiths must remain in the private domain. It is knowledge that is the determining factor, not reason.

This line of thinking touches on the old distinction between atheism and agnosticism. At its most fundamental, while we can say there is no personal God like the Christian one, some sort of deistic being cannot *ipso facto* be ruled out. The correct position to take is agnosticism. For practical purposes though, particularly as we relate to society generally we should be atheistic with respect to a personal Christian, Islamic or Jewish God or any of the other supernatural notions.

To take a stronger line than that, i.e. to the philosophical level would go too far. Below is a quote from a book, which was important for my development as a Humanist. Even though the book is decades old, for me it sums up the key points I have been trying to make above, the emphases are mine.

The conclusion of the *Critique of Pure Reason* is, therefore, that no theoretically valid arguments for the existence of God can be given, because Kant thought that these were the only three possible rational arguments (ontological ~, cosmological ~ [~ from first cause] and the ~ from design, ). The *Critique of Pure Reason* did not, however, deny the existence of God; it only denied that we could *know* [my emphasis] it. He said: 'I have found it necessary to deny knowledge, in order to make room for faith.' This sounds a good bit like some passage already quoted from Hume; Hume said that theology could not be based upon reason, and that if we would be religious we should have to have recourse to faith.

*But though Hume and Kant sound as though they were saying the same thing, in fact they were not.* Hume contrasts reason with faith, and when he recommends faith he knows that it will be taken with the proper grain of salt. Kant contrasts faith with *knowledge*, not with reason, because he believed that there was a reasonable form of faith, faith that a rational man could not fail to have and remain rational in tracing out the implications of his [existential – my comment] experience. Such faith is rational but it is not knowledge; yet it is not a blind faith that has no reasonable standards and criteria and that arises only from our emotions and sentiments. When Kant makes room for rational faith in his philosophy, it is without the skeptical and perhaps ironic attitude with which Hume had recommended faith just a few years earlier. Faith for Hume, as for most theologians, is something outside the realm of reason; *faith for Kant is only one of the aspects of reason, the other being knowledge.*

Rational faith is based on morality, not on science and speculative philosophy. We must therefore look briefly at Kant's ethical theory as expounded in his second great work, the *Critique of Practical Reason*. Kant made a sharp distinction between actions which are moral and those which are merely proper or prudent. A prudent action, like telling the truth in order not to lose one's good standing, is one that.

(From a chapter on Kant, in *Six Secular Philosophers*, by Lewis White Beck, Free Press paperback, The Macmillan Company, 1966.)

**Victor Bien** is a long-standing Humanist and treasurer of HSNSW.

## Evolution of Australian Humanist

AT A Victorian Humanist meeting a member complained that the *AH* was not as easy to read as it should be. (I don't remember his exact words.) I had no problem with the style of *AH* and always looked forward to reading it, but the member's words continued to play on my mind.

*AH* does necessary work addressing issues which are technical and too dry for many people. Most of the articles are somewhat abstract and academic, which makes them an effort to read. After reading the summer 08 issue in one sitting I felt exhausted, but the jokes and illustrations gave me more energy. I also felt my energy rise when I read about the people who sell a lifestyle philosophy DVD, and their subsequent quarrel, which indicates a lack of wisdom in some people who tell others how to live.

I guess that less than 5% of Australians are willing to read semi-academic articles as published in *AH*, and guesstimate that over 30% of Australians are Humanists at heart, even if they have never heard of Humanism. I wonder if *AH* can evolve to cater for 30% of the population.

Clever managers encourage people to experiment with new ideas, and believe that failing is part of a healthy process. Not changing when you are in front means getting behind.

As part of the mix of articles I would like to read real-life stories of people coping with life in a Humanist way. Priests tell funny stories of ceremonies gone wrong. Humanist celebrants must have funny or touching stories to tell. I would welcome a sprinkling of fiction with a humanist theme and also short biographies of prominent humanists. I am interested to know how other readers feel.

**Rudi Anders**, Alphington, Vic.

Contributions to the *AH* as suggested in this letter are welcome. Our aim is to publish items about humanism, humanists, and humanist views. – Editor.

## Population control

IT IS encouraging to see, as Ann Young has pointed out in her article in the *AH* No. 92, Summer 2008, that others realise that 'Population increase is the root of all Evil.'

This of course may not always have been true, as the history of *Homo sapiens* shows how we have spread across the Earth as competition for food and sustainability has forced increasing populations to find further areas to inhabit. On the other hand historically increasing populations when there is nowhere else to go have engaged in warfare, cannibalism, self-destruction and annihilation.

Technology of course has enabled huge populations to develop, but current consumption rates are unsustainable. One solution is as Ann Young indicates, 'Educating the women in under developed countries in the world we know, will raise the standard of living of the whole community. Population increase always falls as a consequence.'

An excellent example of this is Taiwan, where 50 years ago the average number of children per family was seven; today the average is 0.7 per family. That is progress in population control.

**Bill Hawthorn**, member of HSWA

# Sacred cows and moral codes

We are so clever and yet so dumb. Other people's sacred cows are easy to laugh at, but what about our own?

## Rudi Anders

Careful logical thinking and unbiased painstaking observation has given us astonishing technology. We can walk on the moon. We take for granted that we can whisper into a phone and be heard on the other side of the world. Unfortunately, words are not heard when our psychology gets in the way, no matter how clever the technology.

Ideas somehow get fixed into our heads as if they are facts. Interestingly, to sustain indefensible ideas, observable facts are sometimes ignored.

In 1850 the clever British had a rifle that was much more deadly than any other at the time; it had to be greased with animal fat. They ignored the fact that the bible clearly commands 'Thou shalt not kill', and used the rifle to spread Christianity and British civilisation. Hindu soldiers hired by the British didn't object to shooting people, but were very upset about using fat from sacred cows to grease the rifles. Muslims hired by the British objected to touching pig fat and there was a revolt in which thousands of people died.

While India sends a satellite into orbit round the moon, sacred cows obstruct traffic. I like respect for animals, but why single out one species?

In his fascinating book about New Guinea, *Throwim Way Leg*, Tim Flannery (AHOY 2005) describes how in living memory one tribe raided other villages to capture people to eat; all adults in the village had to be killed to prevent reprisals. Their moral code approved of such raids, but for them the very worst breach of etiquette is to break wind in public.

When Inuit people became too old to be useful they went out to die, which was rational because it helped the others survive, but it goes against our notion of what is right.

In different parts of the world people feel differently about covering different parts of the body for no rational reason. I don't see why believers would want to hide bits of what they regard as 'God's creation'.

The Muslim Indonesians, with their ideas about modesty and the uncleanness of pigs, govern the people in West New Guinea who go naked and cover themselves in pig fat. It must be difficult for Indonesians to be accepting of New Guinean culture.

Everywhere people unquestioningly follow tradition for no better reason than that it feels good to fit in with the people close to us, but the consequences can be horrendous. Unexamined rules with strong emotion attached go by many names: values, morals, loyalty, faith, patriotism, sacred, civilised and so on. Many moral codes are only based on group identity and are not morals at all.

The sense of group identity called patriotism is a sacred cow too common in all countries. Many citizens remain loyal to their government when the government commits crimes, because patriotism (by any name) is regarded as a

virtue. It is extremely difficult for most of us to stand up to our peers, for example our ethnic group. Our opinions depend more on which group we want to belong to than on thinking.

Pointing the finger at other people's sacred cows and follies is easy – the fun bit. What about our own? Loyalty is a powerful sacred cow. I sometimes do not have the courage to make it clear to my friends or workmates that I disapprove of something they do or say. When a feeling of national pride wells up in me I realize that my patriotism is as childish as anyone else's and it dies a quick, easy death. Getting rid of patriotism and other forms of sense of group belonging is a mature and rational response to the 'them and us' mentality. Freethinking includes the freedom to be critical of myself.

Economic growth is another sacred cow. Politicians repeat it like a mantra. The more we grow, the less room there is for nature, but we need nature to survive. Nothing can grow forever; the universe isn't big enough. Even the current rate of consumption is unsustainable.

Simple things matter. A European once told me he could tell Australian campers because they always had clothes drying on their tent ropes! Unnecessary washing wastes water and energy and wears out clothes. The ritual shower every day wastes water and adds to our carbon footprint; of course washing hands is important. I grew up with eight siblings in a house without a shower and we all thrived. A paper serviette with ice cream or takeaways is a wasteful habit of the new generation which destroys forests. A lot of the limited resources of this beautiful Earth are squandered on fashion – status – for showing off. Global warming is a psychological problem!

It feels like a moral duty to visit relatives, but is it necessary to fly to the other side of the world every few years? Or drive interstate regularly? Working hard is regarded as a virtue, but what is the point in getting a big house and filling it up? Wouldn't life be better with less stuff and more time for the kids and neighbours?

Moral authorities, religious or non-religious, are obvious sacred cows. If I don't know the answer how can I choose which of the competing authorities is right? It is lazy to lean on authority, be it Gandhi, Karl Marx or scriptures.

The mindset spreading all over the world is that the purpose of life is to progress: more possessions, more travel, more leisure, more money, more power, more recognition. In this society I suppose it is sacrilege to suggest that life is simply for living, not to progress to some goal. The fact is, we just live and die as the dinosaurs did.

There is a lot of fuss made about identity, a huge amount of time and energy is spent on family trees. I don't need my ancestors to tell me who I am; I can just take an honest look at myself. To be tethered to the past is a handicap. We change all the time anyway.

I don't think it makes sense to select anything as more sacred than anything else. To me everything in the universe is amazing: a blade of grass, clouds, a discussion between good friends. Paradoxically it is the anxious pursuit of growth and fulfilment that reduces the enjoyment of living. Compassion informed by independent, relaxed, rational, honest thinking in the present is what is needed. That is what I say.

**Rudi Anders**, a creative writer and HSV member.

# IHEU NEWS

Abstracted from *International Humanist News*, Nov. 2008.

## Mary Bergin, CAHS secretary

**‘On Slavery’, Sonja Eggerickx, IHEU President.** HUMANISTS must take the lead in demolishing the slavery of the Dalits if we want to remain relevant. Slavery is not only in the third world but in factories all over the world and in the sex industry with women whose pass-ports have been confiscated by their employers. IHEU is holding a conference in London in June this year about the Dalits..

**‘Freedom of Expression and Political Islam,’ Maryam Namazie, founder of Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain.**

THE AUTHOR defends need for freedom of expression and need to criticize Islam with the view to pushing Islam and religion out of the public sphere. She considers we must choose to defend the human being or Islam and religion. Having a right to a religion or belief does not include ‘the right not to be offended or the right to have your belief or religion respected, tolerated, and deemed equal and equally valid.’

**‘Free of God!’ Sohaila Sharifi, member Worker Communist Party of Iran, and Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain.**

AN ACCOUNT of her life in Iran before, during and after the 1979 Iranian revolution. To her and many others the revolution led to a questioning of Islam, and a growing but repressed protest movement involving thousands of university students.

**‘Dalits Celebrate the Humanist Centres for Social Change’, Babu Gogineni, International Director IHEU.**

BABU describes the Disha Project to help Dalits, one of many projects in India now funded by IHEU, with 20 villages each to get a library with information on Human Rights, Dalit Rights, and Humanism, housed in a room called the ‘Centre for Social Change’. The education program includes the debunking of superstition.

**‘Having Dreams and Realising them,’ Ms Deepmala, a year-12 student working with the Social Development Foundation, Delhi.** THE AUTHOR, daughter of a Dalit mother, has been saved from illiteracy and her life changed through the IHEU Social Development Foundation.

**‘Future Developments in Iran,’ Azar Majedi, chair of Organisation for Women’s Liberation, Iran, and a veteran campaigner for women’s rights and against political Islam.**

BEFORE the Islamic revolution of 1978, Iran was fairly Western culturally, with many female university students.

During 1981 to 1990, the Islamic regime brutally crushed the growing women’s rights and other movements, which formed part of the opposition to the Shah.

During the 1990s, movements were formed for women’s rights, freedom of expression and association, and cultural emancipation from strict religious rules and were later joined by one for economic justice. These movements are growing rapidly despite often-brutal attempts to crush them. They threaten the ‘Islamic regime and political Islam in general and create a window to freedom, equality and prosperity in the Middle East.’

**‘Democracy vs. Theocracy: Liberal Democracy and Freedom of Expression,’ Ibn Warraq,**

Senior Research Fellow at the Center for Inquiry. HE CONTRASTS a theocracy with a liberal democracy. The latter depends on freedom of thought and expression. Further, these two freedoms are the basis of human rights. He stresses that liberal democracy is necessary, not just a democracy, and deplores the fact that the delegates from the Western nations abstained from voting in March 08 when the Special Rapporteur on freedom of expression was required to censor its use.

**Matt Cherry** has returned to IHEU to help create a US and expanded global presence for IHEU. He has over twenty years leadership experience in the free thought movement and has represented IHEU at the UN since 2002 and is Vice-president of the UN NGO Committee on Freedom of Religion or Belief.

## IHEU Monthly Update December 08

**A.C. Grayling, Professor of Philosophy and well known Humanist, will join Roy Brown and the Human Rights Team at the Human Rights Council, Geneva, ‘where his incisiveness and clarity of expression will add welcome strength to IHEU’s work in defence of Human Rights’.**



A bit of free market forces will fix this up.

## BOOK NEWS

### ***AGAINST ALL GODS,***

by **A.C. Grayling**

Oberon Books, London, 2007. 64 pp (\$24.50) hb.

Reviewer: **David Milan**

‘Does religion deserve respect? No more than other viewpoints and not as much as most!’ Thus the author immediately and boldly nails his colours to the mast in this feisty little book with the subtitle, *Six Polemics on Religion and an Essay on Kindness*. Prof. Grayling is a distinguished British philosopher at London University, best-selling author and fearless apologist for a humanist position. He also finds time to be an active Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts, a regular contributor to the media and he recently co-authored a successful play *On religion (or Grace)*.

Mounting his case, Grayling unapologetically presents his polemics as ‘blunt and brief’. His style is typically combative because, he argues, ‘The contest between religious and non-religious is so important that there can be no temporising.’ His ‘kindness’ essay, ‘The Alternative: Humanism’, is, by contrast, an articulate, moving and elegant testimony to his conviction that humanism offers a life-enhancing, ethically rich way forward which is there for any thinking person wishing to live a meaningful non-religious life, the life directed by honest enquiry, not convention.

We are called to be ‘ethical agents’, to act for and in concert with others, to live more achieving lives where ‘kindness and mutuality is the note of ethical interaction.’ Grayling’s is a warm, engaging humanism, true virtue minus superstition. He reminds us of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s admonition, ‘give others what we give a painting, namely, the advantage of good light.’

In all six polemics, Grayling is a man with fire in his belly. Having stripped religion of its risible claim to inherent respect, he focuses his unsparing attention upon several matters of contemporary debate. He easily dismisses the weary old canard about atheism being ‘just another faith’, a patent falsehood, then comprehensively torpedoes the specious argument which holds that anyone who robustly denounces the irrationality of supernatural belief systems is himself guilty of ‘Fundamentalism.’

He confesses astonishment that, in the third millennium, so many otherwise intelligent people are content to ignore mountains of evidence and betray their own reason in order to cling to an array of supernatural agencies and entities, depending solely for their existence upon the spurious certainty of subjective personal faith. Grayling observes that, to test the relative merits of science and religion, ‘compare lighting your house at night by prayer or electricity.’

Elsewhere, Grayling, with a simple lesson in semantics, unravels for us (as he impishly did for two English arch-bishops) the meaning of the words ‘secular’, ‘atheist’ and

‘humanist’. I hope those celebrity clerics benefited from the professor’s erudition: I certainly did. He next scathingly examines claims being peddled by certain British journalists that the world has become weary of empty materialism (= secularism) and is poised to re-embrace traditional religion. This putative push for piety is met with derision by Grayling who finds to his satisfaction that the evidence for revival is actually yielding an opposite conclusion, namely, ‘as a factor in public and international affairs (religion) is having its final and characteristically bloody fling.’

To sum up, *Against All Gods* comes as a book of two nearly discrete parts. The first (six polemics) sees the swashbuckling Grayling in full cry. Unsparing, aiming for the jugular, his formidable intellect dissipates the chimera of superstitious belief systems. The second (his ‘kindness’ essay) is written with passion and fervour, but gently and reverently as he argues his case for humanism as a view encompassing a rich, selfless ethic with a responsibility to live honourably and selflessly. Professor Grayling is justly proud of his humanism and so should we be!

### ***DARWIN ON RELIGION***

***The Autobiography of Charles Darwin and Selected Letters, edited by Francis Darwin.***

Dover Publications, 1958, first edition (1892).

Commentator: **Howard Hodgens**

As the 200th anniversary of Charles Darwin’s birth (12 February) approaches, it is of interest to read some of his views on religion expressed in correspondence with his friends and colleagues.

His son, Francis, writes that Darwin thought a man’s religion to be an essentially private matter – ‘What my own views may be is a question of no consequence to anyone but myself. But, as you ask, I may state that my Judgment often fluctuates... In my most extreme fluctuations I have never been an Atheist in the sense of denying the existence of a God. I think that generally (and more and more as I grow older), but not always, that an Agnostic would be the more correct description of my mind.’

Until his voyage on the *Beagle* Darwin was quite orthodox, quoting the bible on matters of morality. ‘By further reflecting I gradually became to disbelieve in Christianity as a divine revelation. The fact that many false religions have spread over large portions of the earth like wildfire had some weight with me.’ Gradually he found it more and more difficult to accept ‘the old argument from design in Nature, as given by Paley, which formerly seemed to me so conclusive, fails, now that the law of natural selection has been discovered. We can no longer argue that, for instance, the beautiful hinge design of a bivalve shell must have been made by an intelligent being, like the hinge of a door by man. There seems to be no more design in the variability of organic beings, and in the natural selection,

than in the course which the wind blows.' He felt the most usual argument for the existence of an intelligent God is drawn from the deep inward conviction and feelings which are experienced by most persons. He had similar feelings towards the existence of God and of the immortality of the soul. While in the midst of a Brazilian forest, 'it is not possible to give an adequate idea of the higher feelings of wonder, admiration, and devotion which fill and elevate the mind.' Such feelings could not be sustained as an argument for the existence of God, any more than the powerful though vague and similar feelings excited by music.

On 'design' he writes, 'One more word on designed laws and undesigned results'. I see a bird which I want for food, take my gun, kill it, I do this *designedly*. An innocent and good man stands under a tree and is killed by a flash of lightning. Do you really believe that God *designedly* killed this man? If you believe so, do you believe that when a swallow should snap up a gnat that God designed that that particular swallow should snap that particular gnat, at that particular instant? I believe that the man and the gnat are in the same predicament. If the death of neither man nor gnat are designed, I see no good reason to believe that their *first* birth or production should be necessarily designed.' His intellectual modesty in the face of all that he had discovered and analysed was this acknowledgment – 'I am, also, induced to defer to a certain extent to the judgment of many able men who have fully believed in God; but here again I see how poor an argument this is. The safest conclusion seems to me that the whole subject is beyond the scope of man's intellect; but man can do his duty.'

Lastly he sums up: 'The mystery of the beginning of all things is insoluble by us, and I for one must be content to remain an Agnostic.'

***EMPTY PULPITS:  
Ireland's Retreat from Religion,  
by Malachi O'Doherty***  
Gill & Macmillan, 2008, 254 pp.

Reviewer: **Jennie Stuart**

**D**uring the Counter Reformation in the seventeenth century, Ireland hoped that an alliance between the exiled Gaelic chiefs and Catholic Spain would help repel the English. The ensuing tussle with England during the nineteenth century entrenched this orientation as a mark of distinction between the Irish and their overlords. In the past Ireland was a profoundly Catholic society, with the exception of the Protestant enclaves of the North, if church attendance and the number of priests and nuns are a guide. The preamble to the Constitution of the Irish Republic invokes the 'Most Holy Trinity', and Article 44 commits the State to hold the name of Almighty God 'in reverence'.

However, within the last generation dramatic changes have occurred. Between November 2000 and November 2006, a mere 101 new priests were ordained for the whole of Ireland, whereas during the same period 1,173 died and many others simply left. Priests, once almost princely in their authority as moral guides and decision-makers, have lost a great deal of status within their communities. Despite

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the fact that they are more accommodating to the subjective morality and 'free thought' of their flock, congregations have shrunk. Many Catholics still choose the rituals of the Church for weddings, funerals and baptisms, but they are no longer in thrall to the injunctions issuing from Rome. All candidates seeking a vocation are now subjected to psychological testing, but the Church appears to be facing a crisis. There does not seem to be any plan to redress the manpower issue, though the laity have discussed the ordination of women and review of the rule of celibacy.

Malachi O'Doherty, an author, journalist and broadcaster, who grew up as a Roman Catholic in Belfast in the 1950s, is interested in the nature of this change and argues that those who have been swept up by it are well placed to enlighten the debate between the secularists and the religious, as they bestride both worlds, or have done. He draws examples from Irish literature and media to suggest that it is the institution of the church which has been cast aside, in particular, rather than a collapse of faith. In an agricultural society, especially one that was stressed by famine and poverty, the Church was a source of support, employment and social acceptance. Economically, times have changed and communities are less cohesive. Furthermore, even when religious tradition held sway, the Irish were still able to invoke the fairy-folk when a rationale for mishap and catastrophe was wanted.

O'Doherty takes the atheists to task for dwelling on evolution and creation unduly and failing to explore and better understand the nature of religious sensibility. His challenge is that if Ireland can change so abruptly and atheism is committed to a religion-free, reason-based world, then Ireland as a case-study might have much to offer. He ranges lightly across the views of Dawkins, Hitchens, Gray, Fukuyama and Grayling, amongst others, but tends to favour the notion that there has been a liberalising of religious attitudes in Ireland rather than a wholesale secularisation.

This book offers an interesting window onto contemporary Irish society and the place of Catholicism within it, but the lack of comprehensive references gives it a journalistic rather than a scholarly tone.

***THE AGE OF AMERICAN  
UNREASON,  
by Susan Jacoby***

Pantheon Books, New York, 2008. 356 pp. US\$17.16

Reviewer: **Ken Wright**

**I**t is the dream of every historian to produce a work that endures and provides the foundation for insights that may lie decades or centuries in the future. Such a book is Richard Hofstadter's *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, published in early 1963.' In these opening lines, Susan Jacoby reveals her profound admiration for this classic work of scholarship, to which her own book may be regarded as a sequel. Whilst her book surveys the intellectual and cultural development of the United States since its foundation, most of the chapters concern the period since Hofstadter's book appeared. She perceives this period as one of general intellectual decline, driven by two major

influences, the dominance of visual images over words, and the resurgence of fundamentalist religion.

Jacoby regards reading, especially of books, as a vital component of intellectual life. It involves a degree of effort by the reader, and acts as a stimulant to reflection and independent thought. Watching visual images, on the other hand, requires minimal effort, allows no time for reflection, and distracts from serious thought.

A particular source of concern is the effect on children. 'A growing body of paediatric research does indicate that frequent exposure to any form of video in the early years of life produces older children with shortened attention spans. The intrusion of video into the psyches of Americans at ever earlier ages is not only making it unnecessary for young children to entertain themselves but is also discouraging them from thinking and fantasizing outside the box, in the most literal as well as a figurative sense.'

Another contributor to the decline of serious reading is the availability of the Internet. 'The Internet is the perfect delivery medium for reference books and textbooks, which were never designed to be read from cover to cover. But a narrow, time-saving focus is inimical not only to reading for enjoyment but to reading that encourages the retention of knowledge. Memory, which depends on the capacity to absorb ideas and information through exposition and connect new information to an established edifice of knowledge, is one of the first victims of video culture.'

In seeking to explain the resurgence of religious fundamentalism, Jacoby points to the widespread failings of US public education. A 1998 survey by researchers from the University of Texas found that, one out of four public school biology teachers believes that humans and dinosaurs inhabited the earth simultaneously. Only 48% of Americans accept any form of evolution (even guided by God), and just 26% accept Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection. One of the most important causes of the low level of science education is local control of elementary and secondary schooling, giving rise to vast and persistent regional disparities in the quality of education across the states. There seems to be no prospect of local school boards surrendering their power over curricula. Though recent court decisions have prohibited the teaching of 'creation science' or 'intelligent design', they are incapable of ensuring that evolutionary biology will be competently taught.

In her concluding chapter, Jacoby asks whether anything can be done to stem or reverse the decline of intellectual standards which she has documented. Pessimistically, she reflects, 'It is possible that nothing will help. The nation's memory and attention span may already have sustained so much damage that they cannot be revived by the best efforts of America's best minds. There is little evidence to indicate that Americans have either the desire or the will to lessen their dependency on the easy satisfactions held out by the video and digital world ...'

'If there is to be an alternative to the culture of distraction, it can only be created by one family at a time, by parents and citizens determined to preserve a saving remnant of those who prize memory and true learning above all else. To raise children whose minds are not absolutely in thrall to commercially generated images.'

This recommendation would seem to have application well beyond the borders of the United States of America.



## HUMANIST SOCIETY NEWS

### CAHS

THE CAHS executive met on 20 December to finalise the implementation of the 2008 resolutions. A reply has been received to our letter to the Federal Minister of Education, Julia Gillard, protesting at aspects of the chaplaincy program (HSQ Res.). The reply was from a manager of the program and did not address the specific concerns raised. It quoted from a Code of Conduct that does not allow chaplains to proselytise for their religious denomination or belief in the program.

We have sent a goodwill message to the World Atheist Centre, Vijayawada, on behalf of all Australian Humanists, prior to their hosting of the seventh World Atheist Conference.

Once again the selection procedures for AHOY has been handled by E-mail.

We thank HSSA for hosting the CAHS Convention, 8 – 10 May 2009, with the very important and topical theme for Humanists of 'Human Rights and a Civil Society' and hope the convention will be well supported. We look forward to meeting our colleagues there.

**Mary Bergin**, CAHS Secretary

### New South Wales

I ANNOUNCE the signing of a Memorandum of Agreement with the United Nations Association of Australia (UNAA), our new tenant, who has moved into the previous bookroom, providing relief from our financial pressures. Thanks to Affie for the negotiations towards this outcome. We've moved the bookroom into the main meeting area – thanks to Fred and Gillian for their efforts here.

We had a presence at the Newtown Festival, along with the Sydney Atheists and the Secular Party at a shared stall. One Christian blog bemoaned the fact there were no Christians there and only one stall of Atheists. (<http://sydneyanglicanheretics.blogspot.com/2008/11/down-among-dead-men.html>)

We've joined with the UNAA and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom to organise a symposium as a part of International Women's Day 2009, called 'Bougainville Women Resisting Mining Companies'.

Reaching out, I've spoken with Graham Long of Wayside Chapel – this is in the Uniting Church, the most progressive of the mainstream denominations – talking about definitions of poverty (remember 'The Poverty Wars'?) and also what's involved in getting Uniting Church operations financially transparent like regular non-religious charities and businesses. In addition to the business operations of the Catholic Church and Uniting Church (noted in *AH* No. 92, by S.N. Stuart), Graham drew attention to the operations of the Seventh Day Adventists (running Sanitarium Foods) and the Salvation Army.

Ian Bryce drove his 'World Truth Day' Popemobile around during the recent World Roman Catholic Youth Week, and had it taken off the road for 'having a roof ornament likely to distract drivers' – strange, given how much roof-borne advertising we have around. The NSW Council for Civil Liberties has taken up Ian's case, and recently represented Ian in the first procedural salvo at Downing Centre Courts, requesting further details from the police. Some say the charge will be quietly dropped.

**John August, HSNSW President**

## Queensland

LOOKING back over 2008, two general questions spring to mind, given the large amount of work undertaken during the year by the Humanist Society of Queensland and the other State Societies. These questions are, 'Have Humanists improved their position compared with the privileged position of religionists in Australian society?', and 'Has Humanism improved its status compared with the privileged status of religion in Australian law and governance?'

It seems to me that we can measure the organizational strength of the Humanist movement in Australia by the degree of equality with religion we have achieved in the structures of our society. What is more, we can test our level of success by asking ourselves a number of pointed questions such as, 'Is the "advancement of Humanism" accorded the same charity status as the "advancement of Religion" in Australian law?'; 'Has Humanism been taken out of the list of Religions in the Census, and listed under No Religion instead?'; 'Have governments allowed Humanist programs into public schools during the time set aside for religious instruction?'; 'Have public universities allowed Humanist Chaplains into their Chaplaincy Centres for the purpose of supporting nonreligious students and staff?'; 'Do State Anti-Discrimination Commissions ensure that the representatives of Humanist Societies are treated equally in the community with those who represent religious organisations?' and 'Has political reform removed "God" from the Constitution or prayers from the start of parliamentary sessions?'

It seems to me that, at this point in time, the answer is 'No' to all these questions.

No doubt others will add even more pertinent questions with exactly the same answer, but surely these examples are enough to draw attention to the important structural work that remains to be done.

I therefore suggest, that State Societies select one or more of these issues for a joint campaign and that combines our resources and efforts for as long as it takes to achieve success, or at least make some measurable progress in that direction.

**Zelda Bailey, HSQ President**

## South Australia

ON JANUARY 1 some fourteen SA Humanists gathered at the Botanic Gardens. The kiosk was open for business so we were able to eat and talk about many things.

I asked the question, 'Suppose you had a microphone and you were about to broadcast a few words of wisdom to the

whole world: what would you say?' These are some of the answers I got.

Colin: 'To the old and the young – grow up, stop acting like fools.'

Brian: 'We destroy -- we civilize, our survival depends on which wins.'

Coralie: 'Make love, not war.'

Stefaney: 'Eat less, buy less.'

Karen: 'Think about it some more, before you do it.'

John: 'Send money, not cheques.'

Gerhard: 'Encourage fewer children; allow death for those who wish it.'

Dorothy: 'Stop fighting!'

Marie: 'Let the women take charge!'

We visited the Amazon water lilies, now housed in a new glass pavilion, very modern, and made with huge glass plates and metal columns, looking most attractive, a veritable crystal palace floating on a green carpet, showing off the lilies to perfection.

The lilies have circular leaves floating on water about one metre in diameter that can grow up to 3 metres. It flowers only rarely with a large white flower at night issuing a perfume that attract beetles for a sex orgy, pollinating the flowers in the process. Tablets on the pool tell the story.

We also visited The Bicentennial Conservatory housing tropical rainforest plants from Northern Australia, Papua New Guinea and Indonesia and squirting fine mist occasionally to keep the humidity up. Indeed a visit to the Adelaide Botanic Gardens on North Terrace is well worth while, for residents and visitors alike.

**Dick Clifford, HSSA Vice-president**

## Victoria

OUR AGM (25/11) was well attended. Stephen Stuart was re-elected as President. We were pleased to gain three new committee members, Jean Brown, Leon Midalia, and John Russell. The latter was formerly a co-opted member and is now Vice-president. Jean Brown has been very helpful to us at our new premises, and attends Sunday Discussion Meetings. Leon Midalia is a long-time member and attendee at Discussion meetings and other events. Three of our dedicated stalwart workers, Dr Alan & Maureen McPhate and Halina Strnad, retired from the Committee. Alan until this year was CAHS President, a former HSV President and our most recent Vice-president. Maureen was HSV secretary from 1997–2006 and continued as minute secretary. Halina Strnad joined the committee in 1981 holding a number of key roles, but her outstanding contribution was made as Submissions Convenor, which she combined for over twenty years with hosting Discussion and Committee meetings at her home. She prepared information beforehand and sought input from members for these submissions, which were a credit to her and to HSV. In addition, our very able Treasurer since 2007, David Fotheringham, retired due to business commitments.

Dr Harry Gardner has held extra Humanist Ethical Education workshops recently. An application for accreditation of the program in Victorian State Primary schools is under-way and a group is meeting regularly on this development. The widespread media attention about our proposal has kept Marie Hodgens (Membership Secretary),

busy. Stephen Stuart handled the media interviews with his usual skill. We thank Harry and his team for the wonderful work done so far and hope the application is successful.

The high standard of our public lectures has been maintained. In October, Vicky Walker (Aboriginal Catholic Ministry) and Dr Hilary Martin (Catholic Theological College) addressed the important issue of 'Reconciliation, the way forward'. The former explained her Aboriginality while the latter addressed life in the Northern Territory for our first Australians and the effects, positive and negative, of the recent Intervention in the Northern Territory. After our AGM in November, HSV member Robert Bender gave an address on 'David Ehrenfeld & the arrogance of Humanism', which stimulated a most interesting discussion.

A submission made to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission on Freedom of Religion and Belief in the 21st Century expressed a number of Humanist concerns including encroachments on separation of church and state in Australia, the duty of the Australian government to protect its citizens from human rights abuses practised in the name of religion, the need for toleration of religions and belief based on education in comparative systems of beliefs, concern at attempts to introduce creationism and 'intelligent design' into schools and regret that the universality of the UN Declaration of Human Rights has been eroded by the adoption of an Islamic version for Islamic countries which sanctions the abuses of *sharia* law.

Another important submission to the Communications Department on the 'ABC and SBS : Towards a Digital Future', made a number of very important points including the need for editorial independence from commercialism and government interference as well as better government funding, so that these national broadcasters can play their essential role in education and communication, as well as providing quality entertainment.

Stephen Stuart and Rosslyn Ives gave a presentation, on request, to the interfaith summit of the Darebin Interfaith Council, which was well received. Rosslyn Ives answered an invitation from the local ABC radio afternoon show to discuss whether parliaments should continue to recite the Lord's Prayer on the opening of each sitting.

Again, Jenny Stuart produced Humanist greeting cards for sale on behalf of HSV.

We marked the end of year with the usual enjoyable Solstice party with the theme 'Golden Days'. Entertainment included the singing of Humanist songs accompanied by Harry Gardner's fiddle and the telling of jokes, stories etc.

**Mary Bergin**, HSV Secretary

## Western Australia

OVER THE last couple of years we have trialled many ideas to strengthen our WA Society, with varied success. A top priority has been, and still is, to build our membership numbers from which, it is hoped, there would be an influx of people some of whom would help with administration; helping us to be out there in the community and make a difference. An encouraging project was that, together with the WA Voluntary Euthanasia Society (WAVES), we hired a stall at the annual Fremantle Festival. We were so pleased with the support and exposure that we intend repeating at other similar festivals.

The regular monthly get-togethers are moving along nicely with encouraging attendances. At the October

meeting VP Dr Bill Bennett presented his competently put together 'Finding a Niche'; a paper on a 'Strategic Plan – 2008–2010', which includes a 'Mission' statement, a 'Vision' and a set of 'Values'. Bill handed out copies of his paper and in his address encouraged audience participation when the question was asked, 'Isn't it a bit too idealistic?' As was explained, we need ideals and, from there, to do our best to achieve, even if we only make it part of the way.

It was passed unanimously, 'That the 'Strategic Plan – 2008–2010' be accepted as a working document for the Humanist Society of WA Inc'; and later ratified by the committee.

Together with the Perth Atheist Meet-up Group we celebrated Darwin's release of his well renowned book *On the Origin of Species* with our own Alan Beasley presenting us with a '149 Evolution Day Address'. Attendance was in the high thirties.

Reflecting on Alan's address, what did stand out was the impact that the release of Darwin's book had on the society of the day, and continues still today. He knocked the human species off the top of the ladder with a thud. What a blow to the ego. What a blow to the power brokers who found it so easy to sell the story that we humans are above all else.

Wouldn't you want to believe it?

Here are some of the quotations and points Alan put to us.

- Darwin did not privilege the position of human beings in the natural economy.
- 'Alerting humans to the fact that we don't occupy [a] central position in the universe Darwin denied mankind its self-assigned demigod status and included us in the jumble of struggle and change.'
- He extended Copernican thinking *from cosmology to biology*.
- He extended History into Science *and* Science into History.
- Darwin wrote in an early notebook, 'people often talk of "intellectual man" [yet] the appearance of insects with other senses is more wonderful.'

This was an encouraging get-together which augurs well for the future. From this it was arranged that the two organisations, together, celebrate 'Xmyth' by way of a picnic/BBQ held at a park overlooking the Swan River. Close enough to forty attended, with about a fifty-fifty from each group. Mixing in was quite noticeable with exchanges of ideas well discussed – fellowship at its best.

**Eric Pyatt**, HSWA Secretary/Treasurer



### Humanist Internet Discussion Group

CAHS hosts an internet discussion group where Humanists share their thoughts on issues of interest.

To subscribe go to

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