

An Atheist Assails Religion

Articles, Essays, and Letters to the Press

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Preface

I was born in Yarrawonga Victoria in 1922. I have never been a believer. In our household as a child religion was of no importance. I escaped any degree of indoctrination. There are those that say that I am obsessed by religion, and there is certainly some truth in that accusation. I have been doing my best for years, using the few writing and reasoning skills that I have, to combat what I regard as a very serious and all-time blight on all humanity.

I have an enormous pity for the peoples of the world that suffer from its pernicious effects on their lives. Consider, for example, the ban on condoms by the Church of Rome, and the spread of AIDS. I have, also, an enormous respect for historical truth, and religious dogma violates truth in all directions.

Beginning in 1975, when a letter (below) to The Australian was published, I (later) began to write more letters to the press. There were long breaks in this activity for one reason and another. I self-published my "An Ordinary Aussie Pestors The Press" in 2000. Letters relating to religion in part one of that book are contained in this document. I have not included many brief letters. For some years, I have been a member of The Atheist Foundation of Australia, and some of my opinions are contained in that web site.

In 2001, I began sending letters to the ABC Melbourne Guestbook and they, very much to my surprise at first, published many letters of mine attacking religion. I am now legally blind so I encounter many difficulties in using a computer. In this regard, my wife, Elizabeth, has been very helpful. Indeed without her help my computer use would have to be much more severely curtailed than it is. (Not to mention my reliance upon her in many other ways.)

I have put this document together hoping that it will in some small way help turn some people away from religious belief. My son, Richard, in April 2007, went about formatting the document for me. I thank him for that. The task has been another interesting thing for me to do in my final year(s).

John Rawson

April 2007

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Letters to Newspapers

The Australian – November 1975

It is probably too much to hope that the proposal to introduce the subject of religion into the Victorian school system will be rejected: the influence of the Church is pervasive indeed, especially in its influence upon conservative governments.

Should the authorities succumb to the great pressures that the Churches will undoubtedly apply, it will be interesting to see the form that the instruction will take.

Will the subject of religion be carefully examined as any school subject ought to be? Will the existence of a god be assumed, or will the powerful arguments against the existence of god be put to the children?

Will the Christian version of the creation be revealed as the fairy tale that it is? For example, will any of the teachers be willing to admit that the existence of fossils alone, long ago made nonsense of the Christian Church's theory of the creation?

Will the teachers speak of the great poverty, ignorance and cruelty associated with religious teachings over the centuries? Will the children learn that, generally speaking, the established Church has always associated itself with the rich and the powerful in their oppression of the poor and the weak?

And what of hell? Will it be seriously maintained that there is such a place? Or will the Church practice of terrifying people with this concept be not included in the curriculum?

Presumably, the teachers will give instruction on the several great religions. Will they explain that only one of the them can be true; and that, indeed, it may well be that none of them is true?

How much better it would be if children were taught to face life without the aid of myths! Then, hopefully, greater numbers of our citizens would grow up unwilling to accept lies and deceit and hypocrisy. If that should happen, then the possibilities for good are, I should maintain, beyond calculation.

A reply to the preceding letter – The Australian – November 1975

The sheer inaccuracies and distortions contained in J Rawson's attack upon religion in general and Christianity in particular demand a response.

For example there is no "Christian churches theory of creation" and never has been. The biblical creation mythology is sourced in antiquity and predates Christianity by thousands of years. Furthermore, to equate mythology with lies, deceit and hypocrisy is unworthy of even the least educated mind.

All cultures and sub-cultures have at all times had their own mythology and a moment's reflection should make this obvious even to the most convinced atheist.

It is true that poverty, ignorance and cruelty have been associated with religion from time to time. However, in modern times, the great barbarities have been the work of the followers of the godless creeds of rationalism, atheism, Communism and racialism, and on a scale to make the inquisition look like a children's party.

The churches have no mortgage on inhumanity. To go further and imply that cruelty etc are an essential concomitant of religion displays an ignorance of religion that can only be wilful.

Finally the statement that only one of the world's religions can be true is meaningless in the context of modern religious thought: and after all now is where we are, not back in the 18th century where the objections of J Rawson historically belong.

The rationalist wrath at religion ought to be seen for what it is: mythology.

The Rev KSW Colbert

The Australian – December 1975

The Rev. Colbert did not come to grips at all with the central issue in replying to my letter of 11th November.

If he were in a position to decide whether religion as a school subject should be examined as all subjects ought to be, what would be his decision? Quite predictably, he made no mention of it at all. Even the “least educated mind” soon grasps the significance of that evasion.

It was careless of me not to be more precise in my reference to the Church and the creation. Perhaps I should have written “the Christian Church’s (adopted) theory of the creation.”

It is refreshing, though, that he acknowledges that the biblical account of creation is mythology, that is, that it has no foundation in fact. It really does seem that he agrees with me – and disagrees with many fellow Christians – that it is a fairy tale. It was honest of him, too, in writing of inhumanity, poverty, ignorance and cruelty, not to disassociate the Church from blame for the existence of those conditions.

I do not equate myths with lies, deceit and hypocrisy. My objection is to the Church practice of equating myths with truth. That is surely deceit – and lies and hypocrisy surely follow from it.

It is noteworthy that the Reverend Colbert did not include among his list of barbarians those responsible for the two World Wars. But then they belonged to Christian nations. And what better examples of racialism than some of the devout Christians of Rhodesia, South Africa, southern USA? I can only suppose that obscurantists did not get a mention because they are not followers of godless creeds.

Really, it does seem to me an odd position to take to describe as “meaningless” the contention that only one – if any of several conflicting religious philosophies can be true. His religion, then, is not the only “true” religion?

Reverend Colbert writes of rationalist wrath as mythology, and yet he seems to accept mythology as part of the Christian faith. Thus the syllogism: mythology is not lies, deceit and hypocrisy; rationalist wrath is mythology; therefore rationalist wrath is not lies, deceit and hypocrisy.

Comment: I sent a copy of the above letter to The Reverend Colbert. His reply follows.

Dear Mr Rawson

Thank you for yours of the 11th instant. I will attempt a brief reply to each paragraph in turn and make any general comments at the end.

(a) The “central issue” does not concern me, hence no comments upon it. Living as I do in Queensland, I have no knowledge in Victoria. All I know is that your education system is very different to ours.

(b) Why “quite predictably?” If I were called upon to make such a decision, and if all other subjects were examinable and if religion were part of the normal school curriculum, then I would follow the precedent of most universities and examine the subject. In Queensland the question simply doesn’t arise since we have abolished external examinations and I commend this to our Victorian friends. If I were a Victorian I would wish to see “religion” an elective subject, available to all students and including all religious systems in depth, the philosophy of religion and its place in the various world cultures. Such a study would be a great aid in understanding our near neighbours of the region.

(c) I don’t mind if you add “adopted.” I stand by what I said. Perhaps I should clarify that by saying that apart from asserting God as Creator (as in the creeds) the Churches are not terribly interested in the detail. Big bang, steady state, ex nihilo, they are all theories and ultimately unprovable.

(d) I am surprised that you are surprised by my agreement with some of what you say. We are however a fair distance apart in our understanding of the nature and use of mythology. The fact that a myth may take the form of a “fairy tale” is to me quite unimportant. It is the attitude or “truth” that the myth seeks to convey that is important. For my part, I have never in my life suggested (or believed) that the Genesis mythology was anything but that, so no “lies deceit and hypocrisy” on my part.

(e) Anyhow “lies deceit and hypocrisy” are pretty strong terms and require intimate knowledge of the accused. In the area of opinions, where both religionists and anti religionists operate, such judgements are difficult in the extreme, if not impossible. What sounds absurd to me may make eminent sense to you. Who is to say I am right and you are wrong? Try convincing someone to change his politics.

(f) I don't admit the concept of "Christian Nations". I don't think such a thing is possible. It's political rhetoric. Please don't call Adolf Hitler a Christian (or Churchill). Certainly some devout Christians support racist policies in the places you mention. Devout Christians also oppose these same governments are imprisoned for their trouble. The former Anglican Dean of Johannesburg, Gonville French-Baytagh, Bishop Trevor Huddleston, Martin Luther-King the Berrighans are notable, but by no means isolated examples. You should take a look at the record of the Anglican Church and Roman Catholic Church in South Africa and Rhodesia - Bishop Muserawah who has been imprisoned by the Smith Regime for ten years, the World Council of Churches and its anti racist programme and support for African liberation movements. You simply don't know what's going on in the world. You really ought to find out before tarring all with the same broad brush. "Obscurantist" is a term of abuse, not a description.

(g) You continue to miss the point. The only truth that I as a religionist am interested in is my relationship with (a) God and (b) my fellowman and the rest of creation and (c) myself and not necessarily in any order of priority. The way I choose may be true for me, but not for you. So be it. I cannot even prove that the God I worship and try to serve exists, but that God is still true for me and the assertion of "his existence" constitutes "truth" for me. Such is the nature of truth. You say my religion is not the only "true" religion. Quite so. I have profound respect for the Buddha. I know little of other religious systems, but they speak to millions. I find Christianity speaks to me of God in a way I can understand. I also believe that in the person of Jesus we have a unique demonstration of the nature of God. However we are now in the realm of faith which is outside the scope of this correspondence. I will only add that I can see no reason whatever to assert that my religion is the only "true" religion. Really the whole idea is quite meaningless to me.

(h) Your syllogism is quite ok with me. I have never suggested that anybodies mythology can be equated with lies etc. The psychological background of those who vehemently oppose religion may be of interest and may explain the lengths they go to oppose us, but "lies etc" would never be applied to their assertions by me at least.

General comment:

Your experience of Christians seems to be limited and unfortunate. I only hope that you can come into contact with some non-obscurantists Christians so that you can form a better opinion of us. I'm not asking you to join us but please find out about us as we really are and not as we may have been 100 years ago. Then we may have dialogue about the important things and not about irrelevant trivia like divinity exams. The ethical and moral dilemmas facing the world today are enormous and we religionists must engage in dialogue with you non-religionists so that together we can formulate a valid world-view that can sustain our civilization. It was with that end, the promotion of dialogue and the destruction of false images of Christians, that I wrote my original letter, and this one also. I can only hope that some progress in that direction has been made by this correspondence.

Yours sincerely

The Age – July 1985

Arthur Comer's answer (1/7) to what he perceives to be the likelihood of a complete breakdown of community morality is that we turn back to the church and embrace Christian morality.

Christian doctrine, though softened to some extent by opposition over the years from, and almost entirely from, freethinkers, has an appalling record in its attitude towards sex.

Obsessed with the notion of sin, determined to suppress knowledge on sex subjects, fanatical opposition (in some doctrine, at least,) to contraception and abortion no matter how cruel the consequences of a sexual union may be, all these and more constitute part of the deplorable influence of much Christian doctrine over the centuries.

To consider the nations of the world is to note that where religious belief is strongest there reside poverty and ignorance. In the name of religion, people are murdering one another all over the world – Christians included.

Religion is not, and it never has been, any kind of answer to the problems of humanity. Rather, it has helped cause many of them.

The Bulletin – July 1986

Father Doyle's letter was brief, and that was good, for religion, in Australia, at least, is widely regarded as rather boring.

No doubt without intending to do so, he plays right into the hands of non-believing opponents in recommending that "... courses should be intellectual : towards knowledge, understanding and critical evaluation." Were that to come about, atheists would aver, even fewer of our population would be taken in by religious myths and, indeed, all religions would be exposed for what, mostly, they are: untrue and harmful to mankind.

Such a treatment of the study of religion as Father Doyle recommends is never likely to occur in Australia. For one thing, the church itself would oppose the vigorous questioning of its dogma in the school room. And although the influence of the church is still unduly pervasive, and its hierarchy won Prosecutor: *The Bulletin*, 7/7/86) to receive payments of up to \$150,000 for a month's work, while huge numbers of our citizens receive less than adequate weekly wages, we can hardly claim the very highest status for our democracy.

Obviously, the individual's idea of what constitutes a democracy is relevant here: Ronald Reagan, for example, seems to regard democracy and capitalism as one and the same thing. Many people, though, certainly have, among other things, equal opportunity in mind when they speak of democratic principles. How can there be equal opportunity (consider education) when such huge income disparities exist?

It could well be, too, turning to another but related incomes matter, that there is little point in Mr Hawke and others exhorting the work force to give more. Many of the latter may quite understandably ask themselves why they should "bust a gut" in a society that heaps disproportionate rewards on (to quote Bernard Shaw, who probably, though, did not have lawyers in mind) "... persons with some cunning in planning combined with abnormal acquisitiveness."

Our economic system, as we all know, relies very heavily on the individual's desire for monetary gain: the profit motive, with all its attendant evils. That's all right, we say. But you should hear us (yes, many of the under-privileged, too) when ordinary Australians try to increase their incomes: unions are greedy. (Isn't greediness the name of the game?) We mustn't use those terms about the *truly* greedy ones, though, must we? That would be letting the system down.

The Age – September 1986

It may be that Arthur Comer is right when he asserts that man was either created by God or just happened through chance, and that "no other valid position is possible."

It may also be the case that it is incredible that anyone should believe that a life form, especially one that looks like us, could ever have existed on Mars.

Perhaps it is possible, too, that "the only book able to speak with authority about the origin of mankind remains the Bible."

How is it, though, it seems reasonable to ask, that anyone could be possessed of such certainty about the truth of his own beliefs as Arthur Comer seems to be? He should heed Bertrand Russell, who once wrote: "he that is certain is certainly wrong for there is no such thing as certainty."

The Herald – August 1989

The pro-lifers and the right-to lifers should add an explanatory word or two (in brackets?) after their titles.

As things stand, we could come to wrong conclusions about the meaning of the titles. For example, we may think that, like Albert Schweitzer, they have a "reverence for life," and so accord them an undue measure of respect.

(If Hanoi were bombed again would they protest?)

It should be made plain, if only for the sake of honesty and clarity, that their religious beliefs in most cases form the basis of their opposition to abortion.

The Herald – August 1989

Poland is in trouble. The Pope is a Pole. He should go home to Poland. There he could exert, perhaps, even more influence on Poland's affairs than he does from the Vatican

The Herald – January 1990

Atheists everywhere will not be surprised that Christian leaders have not spoken out against the summary execution of the Ceausescus. Imagine the outcry had Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos been similarly treated.

The Herald – February 1990

“May God have mercy on your soul.” Thus spoke the United States judge after pronouncing the death sentence upon James Savage in a Florida court recently.

Probably judges, in many countries, are required by law, or regard themselves as required by convention to use that expression in such circumstances. Some judges would certainly be atheists. Do they say it too?

Whatever the reason for the platitude's inclusion in the sentence of death pronouncement, when a judge, in Florida or anywhere else, uses it, two things seem to be clear: on the one hand, he shows himself to be quite without mercy; on the other hand, he expresses the hope that God will show mercy. All very confusing.

Were there a God, surely he would be offended by such hypocrisy, insincerity and patent claptrack.

The Australian – March 1990

James Murray, in his article, “Leaders overlooking truth and faith”, seemed to assume that readers would know what he meant by those two terms; he made no attempt to define them.

It is certain that he would not agree with Bertrand Russell's definition of faith. The great thinker has been quoted as saying that “Faith is a belief in something for which there is no evidence.”

As for truth, Russell has suggested that something is true when it is in accord with fact. Perhaps Mr Murray may take more kindly to that definition.

In any event, there are, of course, many people that believe that the truths Mr Murray probably had in mind – religious truths, presumably – are, in fact, myths. He really should be much more precise, not to say, sparing in his use of the word.

The Sunday Herald – January 1991

Belief in a supreme being and in immortality are, as Bertrand Russell noted, quite fundamental tenets of Christian belief. Can that opinion be disputed?

Experience shows, though, that many so-called Christians are not able to accept both, or even one of those things.

The description, “a Christian society,” then, is hardly appropriate to describe us any more.

The Bulletin – June 1991

Bob Hawke is usually quick to reject irrationality in argument. It is odd that he, an agnostic, should view so charitably the irrationality contained in the religious views of the Jawoyn. Is he, himself, in his final years, moving towards the acceptance of religious belief? Some weaken in that way.

The Sunday Age – July 1991

If the reporting of Doug Aiton's conversation with Brian Howe was accurate, then it seems that one can be a Christian without being religious. At least, so said Brian Howe: "Well, I'm not necessarily religious but I am a Christian."

To be entitled to describe oneself as a Christian, surely, as a very minimum, one must believe in a supreme being and in immortality. Isn't that being religious?

The Age – June 1992

Understandably, Bob Santamaria was anxious to defend the DLP against criticisms from Kevin Childs.

One wonders what his reaction was if he read, in 1963, an editorial of the Church of England newspaper the "Anglican." in Brisbane. The editorial attacked the DLP with great vigour.

Reviewing Federal elections it said that the DLP "was a disgrace and a serious threat to democracy in Australia." It wrote of "dirty fighting" the "despicable lies and misrepresentations." "This is a party, in our view, whose tactics are utterly beneath contempt." And finally: "It is a party of the blackest reaction, sustained by an unholy alliance between clericalism and large scale capitalism, indistinguishable in any respect from the Italian Fascist or German Nazi parties of the 30's."

In comparison, McMahon Ball's criticisms, as quoted by Kevin Childs, were mild indeed.

The Age – October 1992

Peter Ryan is a bit of a worry. "Education starts with original sin." he writes. Are we to understand that he accepts as indubitable the teaching of say, St Augustine on the activities of the mythical Adam and Eve and on the consequences of those activities? He seems to agree with St Augustine, too, (as well as with the Old Testament), on the question of human wickedness: wickedness is inherent in all our hearts. How does he manage not to mention evolution here? At least (presumably) he knows something (lots?) about it, even if the sages of earlier times were severely handicapped in their thinking processes by their ignorance of it and other things.

One could go on; there is much to criticize in his article. "Free will," for example, gets a mention as though there is no doubt that we all possess it. Determinists would not agree. Peter Ryan sneers a lot these days.

The Age – October 1992

Harold Klomp made plain in his letter that he holds certain religious beliefs. He seems to have no doubts at all about his opinions on the questions of God, Jesus, etc.

Some would say that if his beliefs are in accord with facts, then it would be valid to describe them as true beliefs. But what are the facts? Does he or does any one else know?

The Age – December 1992

"A multi cultural society such as Australia has become ... must prevent any overt criticism of ... religion." Such is the extraordinary, not to say chilling, opinion of Greg Bailey. "Must prevent." How? one may ask.

He is good on truth, too,. He writes of "relative truth," whatever that is. So there is no true religion anymore?

He attempts to refute Pamela Bones' contention that religious belief should be more subject to criticism in our society by claiming that "within special religions an enormous amount of public debate occurs." About what, though? The existence of God, perhaps? Oh, no – about things like the ordination of women in the Anglican Church.

Finally, incredibly, even though, according to Dr Bailey, criticism of religion must be prevented, he writes that "Ms Bone must be applauded for suggesting ... that debate on religion should be taken off the list of taboos." Oh, my!

The Sunday Age – January 1993

The letters protesting at Terry Lane's recent piece on religion could hardly have been better chosen. If, that is, the intention was to illustrate the fanciful nature of religious belief.

The Sunday Age – February 1993

Terry Lane is a very privileged man and some of us are very pleased about that. Those of us, I mean, that over the years have had their attacks on religious belief rejected time after time by the media. He gets away with it, and that's just wonderful.

It seems reasonable to think that if, say, from the years after Darwin, criticism of religion had not to a very large extent been taboo in the media, religious belief would have been much reduced. Reduced, too, would have been its harmful effects on much of mankind.

The Sunday Age – April 1993

Father Nicholas, begging the question, asserts that "What the Catholic Church believes is perfectly reasonable."

To make just one of many possible objections to that statement: the Church believes in hell – is that reasonable? In passing, surely only a mind beset by malignancy could conceive of such a place as hell.

The Sunday Age – April 1993

In his attempt to give credence to religious belief, and following Terry Lane's extended assault on it, Gordon Powell, who claims to know God, enlists the aid of Albert Einstein.

Gordon Powell quotes Einstein as saying, "science without religion is lame; religion without science is blind." Einstein did write that in his essay "Science and Religion." But a couple of pages later he wrote this: "In their struggle for the ethical good, teachers of religion must have the stature to give up the doctrine of a personal God, that is, give up that source of fear and hope which in the past placed such vast power in the hands of priests."

The Age – August 1993

Was The Age editorial writer serious in asking "Is it not God's work that the scientists are trying to emulate?"

If the writer, ignoring the facts of evolution, that now is 1993 not 1893, believes in the creation, well that's up to him or her.

But if the writer does not believe myths of that sort why, one may ask, did he or she give them support in this way?

The Age – January 1994

Apropos of Pamela Bone's piece on religion. She writes about, among other things, the possibility that religious belief is based on ignorance or lack of intelligence.

As for ignorance, it could be argued that before Darwin and before astronomers such as Copernicus people were in a very real sense ignorant. (Perhaps there is less ignorance about today?) Even Newton is said to have remarked that perhaps God hurled the planets into orbit.

It is not surprising that some people can be clever in some ways but very unclever in other ways. Mozart was a genius when it came to music, but it seems that he was intellectually pretty ordinary in other areas. Perhaps it is apposite to quote Bertrand Russell here: "People believe in God because they were taught to do so when they were little children."

The Age – January 1994

Karen Kissane tells us that, when her father died, her mother said that he had gone to heaven. Perhaps her mother sincerely believed that that would happen upon his death.

Not long ago, I was one of a group of people that included a lady, an intelligent lady, of 73 or thereabouts. At one point she said, “Oh, I don’t know what I’ll do if its not true.” She said this in relation to her going to heaven when she died.

What can be said in defence of institutions that inculcate that kind of confusion into the minds of the young, and that continue that process over the succeeding years?

The Sunday Age – January 1994

In Melbourne, not long ago, a small group of elderly people were having a discussion. One of the group, a lady of about 73, said, “Oh, I don’t know what I’ll do if it is not true.”

For some of the group, it can hardly be doubted, it was difficult to believe that a modern-day Australian, not unintelligent, and with a reasonable standard of education would believe in heaven. But, clearly, she did. She was obviously in an agony of doubt about it all.

What is there to be said in defence of institutions that inculcate that kind of falsehood into people’s, especially children’s, mind?

The Sunday Age – March 1994

As is well known, the practice of male and female circumcision began in early times. The practice became so imbedded in some cultures that it may never be done away with, despite the cruelty involved, in the case of women, and the seeming pointlessness of it (usually), in the case of men.

We may well ask ourselves why it is that much of mankind is so influenced in so many directions (not only in the matter of circumcision) by the opinions of, in present day terms, ignorant men of antiquity.

Yes, ignorant men. Men whose knowledge of the world was, through the circumstances of their day, poor indeed.

The Age – March 1994

Pamela Bone, this time writing about circumcision, again shows the admirable clear-mindedness that appeals so much to many of her readers.

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The Age – May 1994

In his letter (6/5), Michael Shadbolt, expressing a religious viewpoint, no doubt, used the term “universal truths.” Some will wonder what he means.

If religious truths are indeed universal, and given the meaning of that word, then the people of, say, China, should be familiar with them, too, surely. One suspects that most of them, being not Christian, have never heard of them.

The Sunday Age – May 1994

Brian Harris and Senator Harradine, maintaining, as they do, an unremitting opposition to birth control (and abortion), choose to disregard expert opinion on over-population, starvation, poverty, etc.

In looking for reasons behind such attitudes, it is reasonable to conclude that the words of Pope Pius XI, years ago, referring to those who practise birth control, are critical. They, he wrote, in his encyclical on marriage, “sin against nature and commit a deed which is shameful and intrinsically vicious.”

The Age – August 1994

Perhaps Brian Harradine, pursuing his unremitting opposition to birth control (and abortion), has been much influenced by the words of Pope Pius XI on those practising birth control in marriage: they “sin against nature and commit a deed which is shameful and intrinsically vicious.” Or does he reject that opinion?

His attitude seems to be that he is a caring, human rights activist, that he is an expert on these matters, and that is that. Experts should not be so biased, so driven by dogma.

GoodWeekend – October 1994

It seems to be the case, particularly, one may reasonably assert, among followers of conservatism, that a high intelligence may nevertheless sometimes be accompanied by a badly flawed ability to make soundly reasoned judgements about at least some issues of importance.

The public profile of Bronwyn Bishop supports such a contention.

The Sunday Age – October 1994

A recent public opinion poll has found that women are more influenced than men by religion. They accord it more importance, they attend church more often, and they are considerably more likely to believe in God than men are.

Perhaps this divergence of opinion between men and women has existed for centuries. In earlier times, women – whose right to be educated men barely acknowledged – were deprived, particularly, of learning opportunities in the field of science. And even in these more enlightened times, it is said, women are still less likely than men to engage in the study of science subjects.

Consider just one thing: do more men than women study evolution? (Education systems place nothing like the importance that is warranted on this subject.) Such a study is very likely to cause the student to wonder about the truth of much religious teaching.

The Age, Green Guide – November 1994

Thomas A Watkin and others are perfectly entitled, it goes without saying, to be admirers of Pope John Paul II and to say so. There are other people, however, who are equally entitled not to be his admirers and to say so. It seems that Sir Mark Oliphant belongs to the latter group.

For centuries, religion and its luminaries have been protected, often in the most cruel manner, from criticism. Why, considering all the harm religion has done and is doing, should criticism of it be suppressed, as Mr Watkin urges?

The Age, GoodWeekend – November 1994

The media has long been in the business of, to say the least, soft-peddalling articles that may be regarded as a criticism of religion or religious belief.

It was pleasing to some of us, therefore, that the editor of GoodWeekend saw fit to publish an account of the evil doings of some Christian Brothers in Western Australia years ago.

It is reasonable to argue that if criticism of religion had not been suppressed for centuries, often in the most cruel ways, religion may now have many fewer adherents throughout our troubled world, which situation would constitute a great advance for mankind.

The Sunday Age – December 1994

It is not at all surprising that the scandalous conduct of that priest was allowed to continue for years. For centuries, religion has been, often in the most cruel manner, protected from criticism, partly because, among other things, religion is perceived to be “good” by many people.

The media has long been in the business of protecting religion from its critics. “The Sunday Age,” however, in its few short years of existence, has demonstrated a willingness to bring criticism of it and of some other matters regarded as sensitive, before its readers.

At least some of its readers urge it to continue its efforts to arrive at the facts.

The Sunday Age – December 1994

It is rather unreasonable of Monsignor Cudmore and Rowan Forster to criticize Terry Lane for making “infallible statements” and for displaying “unshakable certainty.”

They, themselves, being Christians, must believe with certainty that, for example, a supreme being exists, despite there being no evidence to support their belief.

Shouldn't they, like Rowan Forster's hero, Dr M Scott Peck, retain an open mind on religion as we are assured Peck does on the question of demonic possession?

The Age, Green Guide – December 1994

Susanne Chambers, writing about the spiritual element in the marriage service, states that “The service speaks of a God who affirms and strengthens the love between couples and longs for them to have a relationship with him.”

How is it that the Reverend Chambers, or anyone else, for that matter, has had the kind of contact with God (if he exists) that justifies such comments?

The Age – December 1994

There have been, as most would know, anti-Communists at least since Marx laid bare, among other things, the evils of capitalism in England at that time. Brian Buckley makes it clear that he is one of the many millions of them.

The opponents of Communism, over the years, it seems to this aged atheist, supporters of socialism were, most of them, those that feared for the future of capitalism and/or those that feared the anti-religion effects of “Godless Communism.” Usually though, those things were not much mentioned, great emphasis instead being placed on the anti-democratic nature of Communism. That criticism has a more general appeal among the people being, therefore, more persuasive. (The USA has consistently shown throughout the world that it places capitalism ahead of democracy. We need only to consider Central and South America. In the USA democracy is used as a synonym for capitalism, one may argue.)

As for fervent anti-Communists, it is difficult not to agree with the opinions of Henry Rosenbloom. They always have been an obnoxious lot.

The Age – December 1994

If it is the case, as John McClaren argues, that there has been a marked deterioration of the quality of life in Australia, perhaps we should place the blame, on the long term effects of the kind of economic system we have.

Capitalism does, after all, depend on, among other things, competition and greed to drive it. Competition may not always have a worthy place in our economic life. And greed?

As Marx brought to notice last century, the kind of economic system a nation has does much to determine that nation's politics, institutions, laws, morals, religion, arts and so on. At least in some of these areas, its influence may well be very bad indeed.

Probably, owing to the fear of being labelled, few commentators ever attack capitalism as it deserves to be attacked. The reasons for this state of affairs are fairly obvious.

The Age – December 1994

As Craig Thomas reported, "The Resource Assessment Commission's final report noted that woodchips created an important market for the residual wood in many forests." The Commission said, too, that the industry utilized "trees that were unsuitable for saw logs and that would be left standing in the forests ... to be left to rot or burn."

Now anyone that accepted the rationality of the Commission's findings, would not, one would think, object to wood-chipping; provided, of course, that person approved of the forest industry itself.

It seems to follow that, at least to ardent conservationists, wood-chipping is not the real issue. They, it seems likely, would be pleased to see the end of the industry for the sake of their trees. (Never mind that the trees are replaced.) They should be more forthcoming about their true attitudes.

The Sunday Age – February 1995

And so we have Terry Lane declaring that there is no way that he means to be silenced by the International Year of Tolerance, and Kaz Cooke launching a sizzling attack on a few of the many ridiculous aspects of the monarchy and the papacy. More power to *The Sunday Age*.

If Kaz and Terry are intolerant, then let us have more of it. Let there be more prising open of the protective door behind which, for one thing, the many myths of theology have been enabled long to endure.

It is outrageous that the myths are still, as the 21st century approaches, propagated as truths.

Comment: By arrangement with me, the paper did not publish this last paragraph.

Take, for example, the matter of the alleged virgin birth. It is fairly widely known, but of course not much mentioned, that the words "young woman," were mistranslated from Hebrew to Greek as "virgin." Thus: "Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son ..." (Richard Dawkins: "The Selfish Gene.")

The Sunday Age – April 1995

It will be interesting to see whether there is any authoritative response to Terry Lane's comment about the question of the virgin birth.

Richard Dawkins, of Oxford University, in his book, "The Selfish Gene," declares that the words 'young woman' were mistranslated from Hebrew to Greek as "virgin."

The Sunday Age – June 1995

It seems to be the case, in all Australian parliaments, that prayers are said routinely. What purpose does this serve?

The assumption is, when one says prayers, that one speaks directly to a supreme being. But in the parliaments many, perhaps most, of the politicians are not believers, that is, they do not believe in a personal God. Perhaps they say something like this to themselves: “Oh well, let’s not rock the boat. Religion, as Marx said, is the opiate of the people. It is probably best that people do believe, so it’s a reasonable thing for parliament to help promote Christian belief.”

As for who is a Christian and who is not (many people, if asked, will describe a Christian as someone who is kind, who is good, etc.) Bertrand Russell wrote that as a very bare minimum a Christian must believe in a personal God and in immortality. How can that opinion be disputed? And on that basis, Australia has many fewer Christians than census figures indicate.

The Sunday Age – June 1995

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The Sunday Age – November 1995

A 73 year old atheist, I admit never to having read the book of genesis. (No doubt many that say they are Christians have not read it, either.) Recently, I did read it. An old copy.

I noticed, first of all, that God is credited with exercising his awesome power of creation in the year 4004 BC. Surely not very many believe that any more?

Perhaps, though, the question about the contents of Genesis that I should most like to have answered is this: how did the writer(s) get to learn all those details that are stated as facts?

The Age – June 1996

Rowan Forster described Dennis Minns as “sneering sarcastic and supercilious, and displaying a somewhat less than charitable disposition.” Some may think it less than charitable of him so to describe Mr Minns.

In his attempt to whitewash, indeed to deny, the ferocious cruelty exhibited by members of the Christian faith over the centuries, Mr Forster claims that “the true followers of Jesus were the victims of inquisition and incineration not the perpetrators.” (As an aside, Bertrand Russell described “faith” as a belief in something for which there is no evidence.)

Does he mean that the estimated hundred thousand “witches” put to death in Germany alone between 1450 and 1550 were Christian martyrs? Does he say that the Crusades, the soldiers of the cross, were all about wiping out Christianity? There is so much more.

He and other correspondents write about truth. Well, it seems that most philosophers, who are not pragmatists, consider that a belief is a true belief when it corresponds with fact. Is it a fact that God exists? Is it a fact that Jesus existed? Was he, in fact, divine? And so on.

The Age – June 1996

“The Age” in the last couple of weeks, seems to have gone out of its way to provide the opportunity for a number of adherents of Christian dogma to give us almost a daily, fairly heavy, serve of their opinions on some or other ecclesiastical matter.

At least, the most recent sally, by John Carroll, was no where near as boring or lacking in appeal as the earlier waffle. In passing, in a long life, I cannot recall anything like that opportunity being given to, say, humanists, who are not bothered, one may claim, by such things as sacraments, faith, prayer, angels, superior beings, the meaning of life (why, for heaven’s sake, should life have meaning? – one gives life a meaning) and all that stuff. But then the media, in general, protects religion from criticism.

It can hardly be doubted that John Carroll would describe himself as a Christian. That is, that at the very minimum he believes in a supreme being and in immortality. That lots of people who describe themselves as Christians in our society do not believe those two things, can be determined simply by asking around. A Christian is a good person, many say. So much for census results on religious belief.

Mr Carroll reprimands the church for its “... extraordinary intellectual failure of nerve to accept virtually unchallenged the evolutionary picture...” Bishop Wilberforce, in 1860, challenged it: “The principle of natural selection is absolutely incompatible with the word of God.” The poor chap had to reckon with Thomas Huxley. When would the church have rounded up someone with the intellect to better, say, RA Fisher in the thirties? Or Francis Crick, whom Mr Carroll mentions? Or SJ Gould of Harvard university? Or Richard Dawkins of Oxford university?

And if the church did have someone with the intellect to compete with those men of science, his position would be hopeless because he is all about dogma while they are experts in the field of biology. Evolution is a fact, not a theory. Mr Carroll seems to wish otherwise.

The Age – June 1996

Pamela Bone remarks that: “ I see from the letters to the editor, that while I have been away there has been a discussion about Christian truth.” (One cannot imagine Pamela being too impressed by the discussion it seems reasonable to remark.)

The question of truth and its definition was brought up by Beverly Lewis in an *Access Age* letter. As I remember, she did not specify Christian truth. (Do we have, by the way, Muslim truth, Jewish truth, Hindu truth – do all the religions have their own truths? Or is truth truth and that’s that? Let us proceed.)

Now I don’t know whether or not Beverly was satisfied with the definition of truth provided to her by Dr David Powys. Perhaps she was, perhaps she was not. But this was what he wrote: “Put simply, Jesus is what I mean by truth.”

So we have the opinion of a theologian about truth. What do philosophers have to say? No doubt their opinions would vary, but it would be unlikely that many would even approach Dr Powys’ unscholarly reply to Beverly. In an attempt to reach her through *Access Age*, and to provide her with a definition that some philosophers seem to agree upon, I phoned this brief comment to *Access*: “It seems that many philosophers, although not including pragmatists, consider that a belief is a true belief when it corresponds with fact. So one is speaking the truth, for example, if one says God exists, if, in fact, God does exist.” My letter did not appear in *Access*, however.

The Age – June 1996

It was refreshing to read Henry Herzog’s reply to Dr Roger Fernando on matters scientific. The latter was a participant in a recent spate of entries in the letters columns of *The Age*, when six or so contributors gave support to, and only one person (James Gerrand) was given the opportunity to criticize, some aspects of Christianity, and religion generally. It is a matter of history, and history is made up of facts, that religion has been a bitter opponent of science, and has had gradually to retreat in opposition since science became firmly established in the 16th century.

Science, as Mr Herzog explained, is a collection of facts, these facts being established, perhaps he would agree, by careful observation, experimentation, and the testing of hypotheses. No doubt there is more. Scientists know quite

well that there are many questions to which science does not have an answer.

Religion, it may be claimed, is principally about dogma. Chambers' dictionary: "A belief or principle laid down by an authority as unquestionably true." An authority?: The bible is one. Dogma varies, of course, from religion to religion. Bertrand Russell made this point: "It is evident as a matter of logic that, since they disagree, not more than one of them can be true."

He believed that none of them was true.

The Age – June 1996

Perhaps there were others, too, who were more than a little bemused by Bruce Barber's complaint about theology's not being allowed "Its place in the universities." This, he writes, is due to "That Australian prejudice," which has "Marginalized the theological enterprise from mainstream intellectual life."

For heaven's sake (or is that expression not appropriate here?), just what does he mean? There is a faculty of theology. He is its Dean. That's not a bad start if you want to get going on theology. Is he saying that theology should have influence over other faculties? Surely not. Do circumstances at the university prevent him from having intellectual dialogue with, say, scientists, economists, etc? What for heavens sake is his problem?

The Age – June 1996

On the grounds of religious belief, obviously enough, Kerry Flattely bases an assertion that the "Deepest of arbiters" is "The human soul." What does he mean when he uses the word soul? Where does mankind get the soul from? Are we born with it, is it part of the embryo? Or does it get popped into us, say, after we are born? When we die, does it rot with our bodies if we are buried or, if we are cremated, is it consumed by the heat? Or does it make its way to heaven if we happen to be one of the elect, or to that other place if we are not chosen for higher things? He then goes on to write of "religious yearnings or need – redemption and salvation remain the great human needs." "Littleness," it seems, is one of our problems.

Many people on this earth, especially if they were not indoctrinated with religious dogma when in their infancy and are thus able to live their lives without the help of myths, many people, I affirm, will see little or no validity in the opinions expressed by Kerry Flattely.

The Age Editor – July 1996

On Tuesday, 11 June 1996, I personally delivered to your mail room, an envelope marked "personal for the Editor or his deputy." The envelope contained a long letter from me to the Editor, with some other documents attached. These were copies of a letter I had earlier sent for publication, plus copies of three *Access* letters I had rung through. None was published.

I delivered, rather than posted, the envelope, because a few years ago, when I posted (not for publication) a letter to the Editor, I received no reply. It was later explained that the letter had not been received.

It is now more than three weeks since I wrote, and I have not been contacted by you or by one of your assistants. I have little doubt that if I were anyone of importance you, or someone on your behalf, would very quickly have written a note of acknowledgment or, perhaps, a quick telephone call would have been made.

Although aggrieved by your lack of courtesy, I am not altogether surprised. I feel sure that you were angry at some of the things I said in my letter, and my feeling is that you decided to continue the policy of not publishing letters from me, and had other reactions that I shall speculate on in a little while.

At that time, I had no reason to feel any animosity towards you. I knew that you had been Editor of *The Age* for a fairly short time and could hardly be blamed for the biased manner in which, from time to time in some areas, and nearly all the time in my own case, the letters' editor carried out his responsibilities. Besides, when you were with *Sunday Age* several of my letters (one out of three at that time) were published.

It seems to me that *The Age* has made a serious error of judgement in handling this matter. By refusing to print even one of the nine letters (three of them to *Access*) that I have submitted since the great religious letters and articles saga began on 6 June, you have made, I believe, a very positive reply to my claim that I am black-listed at your paper. That reply is: "Yes, you certainly are." I believe, also, that the expression "denied natural justice" is applicable to the treatment of me by The Age newspaper. Webster's on Justice: "Impartiality; equal distribution of right in expressing opinion." And more.

If you had been shrewd enough, not to mention unbiased enough, to publish just one of the letters, my charge of black-listing would have been disarmed, at least to some extent. "But no one, [and I again speculate on your reactions] not some nobody from the suburbs, is going to get away with accusing this newspaper of black-listing and of being biased. No sir! We will ignore him! Freeze him out! Who does he think he is?"

I have referred earlier to what I call "The great religious letters and articles saga" that began on 6 June. Let's see what can be said about bias during that saga. I mean, a quite outrageous bias in favour of religious belief. Up to, and including, 1 July, my figures may not be exactly correct, thirteen people have had twenty letters and articles published, all of them clearly supporting religious belief. Their opponents published total two, with a total of four letters. I must mention that the fourth of the letters opposing religion was only of forty-four words. Perhaps, in a bit of a panic about charges of bias, you popped in a letter from *Access*

You may reply that few letters opposed to religion were received. Many able men and women, I must admit, would consider it a waste of time to reply to such a lot of rubbish. It was also so unimportant and uninteresting, not to say boring. If, indeed, you received hardly any letters (apart from nine from me) in opposition to the views of the religious contributors, then why, although they were clearly not attracting the interest of those readers with contrary opinions, why, I ask, were those views published in such numbers over such a long period? (I can't recall a topic ever having been given such favourable treatment for so long in the letters columns of a newspaper.) The answer to my question is plain: someone at your newspaper is biased. Biased against me. Biased in favour of religion, and biased against expressions of opposition to it.

As for *Access Age*, the favouritism accorded to some individuals for quite a time has been tempered, I suspect because someone directed the letters' editor to stop it. Attacks by one contributor, who must be the all-time record holder in *Access* letters, on Mr Kennett, occurred time and again. Not everybody likes Mr Kennett, but the letters' editor should not have made his dislike of the Premier so obvious. Isn't balance one of his responsibilities?

As for the timber industry, one needs only to examine *Access* in the first couple of months of 1995 to see where the bias lies. On occasions, a big part of the column was taken up with the letters of opponents of the timber industry. Much of it mindless nonsense, I should add. In a periods of about four weeks, I sent in (I have the originals) seven letters supporting the industry. One was published when the letters' editor was on leave (those relieving him have published me.) The others were all rejected, even though, on more than one occasion, no letters with similar themes to mine were published. Then there was *Access* and the Grand Prix – I must not go on.

It is my intention now to explore the kinds of replies, had you bothered to reply, that you might have given to this question from me: "Why did you refuse to publish any of my nine recent letters?" I shall frame replies that you may give making comments, if I have any, after each reply.

"You accuse us of black-listing and bias, and threaten us with an intention to publish in your autobiography copies of letters of yours that we have rejected."

I mention the autobiography to suggest that I perhaps was able to write at a reasonable standard. Perhaps well enough to have at least one letter published in *The Age* over all those years since 1982. I did not mean to threaten, although I do agree that what I wrote could have been so construed.

"You should have sent the letters to the letters' editor, not to me."

The PS in the letters columns on 25 June 1996 (I sent in two letters to you after that date) gave that information. Wasn't that the first time readers have been so informed? I sent them to you personally hoping that I would get a fair hearing.

"In an *Access* letter, you said that there was bias and that the editor should step in."

A letter I have written in reply to Rowan Forster was not published. His letter contained opinions at variance with historical facts, I believed. You should have published somebody's reply, in my opinion. In *Access*, a lady asked the question, "what is truth?" I did my best to provide an opinion on two occasions. Reverend David Powys in a letter

said this: “put simply, Jesus is what I mean by truth.” To say the least, I was becoming frustrated by then, if not before. Hence the *Access* letter to which you refer.

“Your letters did not merit publication.”

I doubt that that opinion can be sustained. Compare them with just three of the letters published in the great religious, etc, saga. Consider, for example, the letter from I Vuttvci (15/6.) Did you agree with Rowan Forster’s (11/6) views about persecution and Christianity, and Kerry Flattely’s (26/6) views about the soul? They “got away with murder,” so to speak, because you failed to print my replies to them.

“Your letters were too long.”

The Age, I feel sure I am correct in saying, had a word limit of 300 for letters submitted, for many years. It was not at all unusual for a letter to exceed 300 words. In the PS that appeared on 25 June, the word limit was lowered to 250 words. Now this ruling (and the one about letters having to be addressed to the letters’ editor) may be very handy, it might have been thought, in defeating that pest from Greensborough. One of the letters I submitted before 25 June did exceed 300 words but, as I have said, that was not unusual. The three letters that I wrote after 25 June were all of fewer than 250 words.

In any case, Dr Geoff Thompson’s (27/6) letter was of 276 words. And, wait for it, on the very day that the PS appeared, Jill Redwood’s letter contained over 300 words. The very day! Jill, by the way, is a special case. A special favourite of The Age. A forest campaigner, she is now with the Wilderness Society. I’ll bet that there are others who, like me, doubt that Jill has ever had a letter refused in the last couple of years. She writes always on the same subject, often tendering, for one thing, spurious figures about the timber industry.

Some may consider it cowardly that an important newspaper is prepared to shelter behind silence when challenged by one of its readers on important questions relating to fairness, for one thing, in the management of its letters columns. Some may conclude, also, that the newspaper’s very silence suggests that there must at least be some substance in the arguments of its challenger. And substance there is.

The Age, GoodWeekend – August 1996

As it would be reasonable to expect, when Cardinal Clancy was asked to comment on what he believed, he included support for religious belief in his reply (“I believe.”) Indeed, it seems unlikely that a Christian could manage not to mention religious belief in answering such a question. And yet, of the other people “who attempted to answer life’s big questions,” only one could be said to have referred to religious belief.

No doubt some valid reasons for that seeming discrepancy may be adduced. Just the same, I believe that there are many more non-believers in Australia than census figures suggest. As to what constitutes being a Christian – well, that’s another matter.

The Sunday Age – September 1996

Allow me to congratulate you on Leo Schofield’s truly sensational article in your progressive newspaper.

“The bad apple” metaphor will no doubt yet again be employed to excuse the vile practices in Schofield’s church school. But if “Itchy” was a “bad apple,” how are we then to describe the leaders, over the centuries, all the way up and down the church hierarchy?

How could they possibly not have known about matters that seem to be an inherent constituent of church culture?

The Sunday Age – October 1996

There can be no question that representatives of religious organizations are able to exercise an enormous influence over the decisions of governments in this country. One reason for their success is that many politicians themselves act, in effect, as representatives. Some others, even though they may be atheists or agnostics, fear a religious backlash in their electorates. So, for example, they vote against euthanasia.

Now Religion is supposed to be “good.” Being good it should follow that religious opinion about ethical matters, those relating to euthanasia, for example, should be worthy of wide acceptance, But it seems that most Australians reject the religious arguments. Are those people, then, not good?

It seems reasonable to believe that religion is not, in practice, at least, possessed of the goodness claimed for it, that it promotes hatred on a wide scale is evidenced by events in the United States, Pakistan, Ireland, the Middle East and other, perhaps all, countries. How could it be successfully argued that during, say, the last two thousand years, religious belief has brought about more good than harm? Why is it that so many people on this earth need the myths of religion to help them live their lives? JS Mill, who was not one for confusing myths with truth, wrote this in his “On Liberty:”

“In the opinion, not of bad men but of the best men, no belief which is contrary to truth can be really useful.”

The Age – January 1997

The reader could perhaps infer from a comment from Paul Davies about Einstein, that the great physicist believed in a personal God. It seems that he certainly did not. In his essay, “Science and Religion,” Albert Einstein wrote these words:

“In their struggle for the ethical good, teachers of religion must have the stature to give up the doctrine of a personal God, that is, give up that source of fear and hope which in the past placed such powers in the hands of priests.”

The Age – January 1997

Any attempt by science to prove that God exists is, Albert G Waters argues, futile. Most scientists, themselves, would probably agree with that opinion. Mr Waters then goes on to write that “God is only perceived by faith.”

In the light of those two opinions, it seems to follow that he must therefore agree with the famous non-Christian, Bertrand Russell, who once commented that “faith is a belief in something for which there is no evidence.”

The Sunday Age - May 1997

In the fifties, Bertrand Russell predicted that “In 50 years time, religion will be regarded as an ancient superstition.” An over-statement, probably, but not too far off the mark just the same. Geoff Strong may, perhaps, agree.

The Sunday Age – May 1997

In their letters, Judy Crake and John Arackal both assume the existence of God. Her reference to “miracles of design,” suggests that the former supports the argument from design as proof of God’s existence. She rejects evolution.

John Arackal, one gathers, would argue that since miracles have occurred, God must therefore exist. His claim for miracles at Lourdes and Fatima, that thousands of pilgrims have been cured, and his reference to eminent physicians (who and how many?) are not convincing.

Over the years, the arguments for the existence of God have been demolished. Faith takes the place of argument. When you want badly to believe something, but you are unable to find any solid evidence for your belief, you are forced to rely on faith: “A belief in something for which there is no evidence,” as Bertrand Russell wrote.

The Sunday Age – July 1997

Terry Lane (I would say “God bless him” if I were not an unbeliever) asks, “Why are the opponents of assisted suicide so hysterical?” Perhaps one reason is that they, that is, those who oppose euthanasia on religious grounds, are, to use a term of Bertrand Russell’s, conditioned by the “effect of superstitious ethics.”

The great philosopher, in his essay, "Superstitious Ethics," made a number of comments apposite to the current debate. He wrote: "The traditional moral code stands out stark and cruel and immovable against the claims of kindly feeling." And: "Is it really credible that a wise, omnipotent and beneficent Being finds so much pleasure in watching the slow agonies of an innocent person that he will be angry with those who shorten the ordeal?"

The Sunday Age – July 1997

In his conversation with Doug Aiton, Sir Rupert Hamer said, "I don't see how you can live without any principles."

That's fair enough. The trouble is that he seems also to be saying that one has to be a believer in Christianity to have imbibed those principles.

Surely he did not really mean that. In fact, I can hardly doubt that he would agree with JS Mill, who wrote: "... a large portion of the noblest and most valuable moral teaching has been the work, not only of men who did not know, but of men who new and rejected, the Christian faith."

The Australian – February 1999

John Howard and Kim Beazley certainly seem to be very intelligent men. The former is a law graduate, the latter an historian. They both believe in a supreme being, we must understand, from what they are saying about the preamble to the Constitution. On the other hand, like many others, they may say that they are believers simply because it suits their purposes to do so. One certainly is entitled to suspect John Howard's motive here.)

In the course of their professional work, they would both be intent on the discovery of the facts of the matter on which they had concentrated their attention. Myths, they would quickly identify. Unproved assertions too, for example, would be examined thoroughly. Generally, in their everyday lives, they would not be easily fooled. They would think critically about, and then accept or reject, the opinions and beliefs of those with whom they had dialogue or dealings.

But it seems that they do not look – along with a big proportion of the rest of mankind – for facts and proofs when they turn their attention to religion. Why is this so? On what grounds does religion – the Christian religion in this case – not need to be subjected to the critical thinking processes that are used by most people in the conduct of their daily lives?

Many people think that religion is somehow 'good'. That is not what history shows us. There are a number of major religions. As Bertrand Russell pointed out years ago, because the religions are at variance with one another in important respects, only one of them can be true. He, like atheists everywhere, thought that none of them is true.

Here is Russell again: 'Faith is a belief in something for which there is no evidence.' Perhaps our two leaders should be willing to write down for us their thoughts on the existence of God? Perhaps they rely on faith? Perhaps The Australian may be willing to publish convincing essays from them in its columns some time?

The Age – May 1999

Peter Singer seems to be encountering the kind of opposition to his Princeton appointment that Bertrand Russell encountered in 1941 on being chosen to take up an appointment as Professor of Philosophy at the College of the City of New York — an opposition inspired mainly by fervent religious belief, it must be said. At the time, Russell was teaching at the University of California.

Earl Russell (1872-1970), an atheist, preferred to be known by his given name. He is regarded by many, perhaps by most, people of learning, as the most important philosopher of this century. Russell was denied the appointment. The bigots and haters beat him in what became a celebrated case. A judge named McGeehan was the principal instrument of those bigots and haters.

It is 1999 now — it is not 1961. Perhaps, then, it is less likely that people like David Oderberg (Opinion, 28/4) will succeed in denying the students of Princeton, not to mention others, the opportunity to benefit, in all sorts of ways, from the brilliant intellect and high ethical values of such a man as Peter Singer.

The Age – May 1999

Phillip Bliss and Graham Leonard (2/5) made at least one curious and quite erroneous assertion relating to religious belief — perhaps they were simply careless — when they wrote these words: “The number of Jewish servicemen who fought for Australia in the first and second wars was in far greater proportion than their Christian counterparts.”

No doubt there were many Australian servicemen in both wars who would describe themselves as Christian. There is no doubt, either, that there were numbers of them who would not. As for the Jewish soldiers, surely a proportion of them would not have embraced religion. Albert Einstein wrote (*What is a Jew?*), “The Jew who abandons his faith ... remains a Jew.”

The Age – July 1999

Joel Vernon (*The Age* 1/7) claims for himself the standing of a student of criminology and law. No doubt Justice Kirby (*The Age* 29/6) has some knowledge of those disciplines, too. It would not be surprising, either, that a person of the Justice’s erudition would be knowledgeable in the fields of evolution and genetics. It seems unreasonable, therefore, that his opinions on genes and criminality should be so irrationally dismissed by Joel.

Like many others, Justice Kirby might well have smiled to himself, and shaken his head in disbelief, that the opinions of criminologists 100 years ago should be supported so unconditionally. Perhaps he was saddened, as well, by having the words ‘distasteful,’ ‘anachronistic’ and ‘incorrect’ so recklessly used about his thoughtful opinions. Joel has employed what Richard Dawkins, the noted English Darwinian, has called, ‘The argument from personal incredulity.’

The Sunday Age – June 1999

Many will welcome enthusiastically the comments made by Anthony Burke in his excellent letter (*Sunday Age* 6/6). Many atheists will muse ruefully on the strong likelihood that a letter from one of their number making such telling assertions about the worth of many religious beliefs might well not have been published. It is undeniable that, over the centuries, religion has been widely regarded as somehow ‘good,’ and so it should be shielded from criticism.

Even so, atheists might well have noticed that in more recent times *The Age* has been pleasingly progressive in the way that it deals in its pages with matters relating to religious belief. I have in mind sorties from Terry Lane, to name just one writer. Allow me to quote JS Mill:

‘The beliefs that we have most warrant for, have no safeguard to rest on, but a standing invitation to the whole world to prove them unfounded.’

The Age, The Faith Editor – August 1999

I am a long-time reader of, and for some time now a subscriber to, *The Age*. Some months ago I welcomed the change of approach made to the Faith column in the Saturday edition of the paper: readers that were not believers were given a chance to contribute to the column.

It occurred to me that I should forward to you a contribution of my own. I am an atheist. I think that it would be a bit novel, not to say courageous, on your part to publish some controversial opinions on religion from an old and ordinary Australian male person, someone quite lacking the writing brilliance of some of the contributors. I know a number of people, and I am sure that there are many others in our community that would react similarly, who would applaud your taking the decision to publish a bit of unvarnished truth about religion. I have enclosed the article.

The Age, Green Guide – September 1999

Those two marvellous letters about *The Ark* and *Signs of God* may reasonably be regarded as constituting a major breakthrough in the way newspapers treat religious belief. The gloves have been taken off. Let there be more of that approach.

The two authors and The Age deserve the thanks of many, especially, obviously, the thanks of atheists and others who seek the truth.

The Age – January 2000

It was nice to hear that God was so eager to ensure that Arthur Comer and his wife should have a happy married life. (I have noticed, though, that He does not manage always to do a good job in that area of human relationships.) God was good to me in that way, too. He arranged for the USA to drop an atom bomb on Hiroshima. Peace was declared and I met my dear wife of 53 years during celebrations in the streets of Brisbane. You see, He was kind to me even though I am an atheist.

The Age – February 2000

It is not easy, the record shows, for those that are persuaded to believe the myths of religion, to accept Darwinian truths; even though Charles Darwin destroyed much of the basis of religious belief. Neil Mitchison (27/2) believes that the Darwinian theory (as Neil puts it) should be dumped.

Plainly, Neil belongs in the group that Richard Dawkins, the famous Darwinian, has labelled as being affected by the 'personal incredulity factor.' The group cannot believe that Darwin got it right, in which case, it must follow, he got it wrong.

There is some argument among the relevant experts about some aspects of the process of evolution, but those same experts agree on one thing: evolution is not a theory; it is a fact of existence.

Of course, if most of the finest intellects on this earth are wrong, and God did indeed perform all the functions of evolution, then since he is both omnipotent and omniscient, he must carry all the blame for all the horrid things that happen on this planet and elsewhere.

The Age – March 2000

Bravo! The Age. Bravo! Philip Ingamells. The latter for his incisive attack on deviant behaviour as practised in the Catholic church. The former for slowly, but it seems surely, moving away from a centuries-old condition: it is best, and sensible, for many reasons, not to criticize religion.

Advocates of Christian religious belief, adherents like Bishop Pell, Marie Porter, David Powys, Rowan Frostier and many others, get such a good go in the media. Non-believers should be given comparable space. The opinions of those who, for very good reasons, believe religion to be both untrue and enormously harmful (simply look around the world) should be available for scrutiny in a fair contest.

The Age – May 2000

Recently, an editorial writer from The Age expressed the notion that Mr Joe Gutnick's principles should be respected - presumably his religious principles. The writer seemed to be saying that an individual's religious beliefs should not be questioned. I should make the point, just the same, that The Age, in recent times, has been admirably progressive in this area.)

Why should religious belief be protected from criticism? I am an atheist. People are welcome to criticize my non-belief. Why do believers not welcome criticism? I'll tell you why - they are quite lacking in counter arguments.

The Age, to Felicity Bloch – May 2000

I thought that your article on Joe Gutnick was first class. One reason, I believe, for the matter's being 'strangely muted,' is that it has to do with religion. An editorial writer in The Age, for example, recently said that Joe's

principles should be respected. His religious principles, no doubt.

I am an atheist. I would not want anyone to believe that I am not. I wish that you had made some reference to your own beliefs. Many people seem to think that Jewish people are all religious. Comment: Bertrand Russell wrote somewhere that the Russian Revolution was organized by American-educated Jews.

The Age – August 2000

I am sending this to *feedback* rather than to the letters' page because, the record shows, I am in bad favour with The Age letters' page.

I write about the two pathetic articles in The Age today, Saturday 26/8, one by David Powys, the other by Rowan Forster.

Powys, in addition to the highly improbable things that he wrote about, claims that religion does not get a fair go in The Age. (If he had complained that atheists do not get a fair go, he would have been right.) For years, I have noted his success; he has been treated over-generously by far by the letters' page and Opinion. During a short period in 1996, he and others with similarly strange opinions, were printed 21 times by the then letters' editor. The Age, displaying a reprehensible bias towards the support of religious belief, managed to print just four letters in opposition, two of the letters being from one contributor, and another letter was of *Access* length only.

The Faith column is another sop to the religionists. Admittedly, it sometimes prints an atheist's view of things. (Isn't Dick Gross able to live a fulfilling life without the aid of mythology?) As for Rowan Forster and his outpourings this week ...

These people go on and on about god and Jesus Christ and resurrection and other fairy tales. They seem never to come out and say why it is that they believe that there is a god, or provide evidence for his existence, or for the existence of Jesus Christ. Which argument for the existence of god does Powys or Forster support? The reason that they don't provide us with arguments for the existence of god is that they are unable to provide one that would stand up to scrutiny.

Kant and others destroyed the arguments for the existence of god many years ago. Russell has written that it is extremely doubtful that Jesus Christ ever existed. But religionists are not into doubting things that they badly want to believe, things that many of them were taught in their infancy, or things that they were indoctrinated with later. Best for them not to mention any possibility of error in their beliefs.

The Herald Sun and The Australian – September 2001

The recent attack on the USA by religious fanatics was every bit as horrifying and grief-inducing for atheists as for any other section of society.

Atheists, of course, do not regard prayer as having any efficacy, so they will not be heeding the calls for prayers. To pray is to assume the existence of a personal God, a God that listens to people when they pray. If He does listen, then on the occasion of the terrorist attacks he seems to have turned away from Christianity.

The Weekend Australian – October 2001

Here I was, an old atheist, already having been fitted with my last legs, doing my best to write another piece that would help to send religion to its own hell (what sort of mind would invent that place?), when my dear spouse said, "Hey, you'll like this from Phillip Adams." Did I ever like it! And she read the great atheist's article to me. (My eyes are suffering from old age, too.)

There are plenty of atheists about. But most of them, unwilling to take a stand against religious belief, making excuses for its terribly harmful effects throughout history, frightened for their careers, suspecting that religion may be somehow "good," etc., etc., stutter things like, 'Oh, people are entitled to their opinions.' And they — the 'condoners,' I call them) do nothing to bring about the decline of religious belief. But not Phillip Adams. Not The Weekend Australian, either.

The Australian – October 2001

Karl Marx, an opponent of religion as well as of capitalism, were he on earth today, would almost certainly detest Osama bin Laden and the forces behind him. He may well, however, although much deploring the methods used, experience a degree of envy of the religious fanatic's ability to put the skids under capitalism.

The Australian and The Age - December 2002

Will the Australian people, most of them so-called Christian people, with little protest, support such a war, a war that will probably mean the slaughter of thousands of defenceless women and children? In 2001, The Australian government acted disgracefully during the 'Tampa' affair, but was returned to power even so. The Australian people will disgrace themselves if, under the influence of fear and racism, they support such naked power as the USA is determined to exert.

The Australian and The Age - January 2003

So we have George, Tony and John, in whom a fair degree of variation in the matter of the quota of intelligence required in a national leader, is apparent at times.

They are all probably, of course, God-fearing Christians, although why they find it necessary to fear a loving God, it is hard to say. (Perhaps George picked up the expression from Jerry Falwell?) Perhaps they are easily scared anyway. Presumably they all believe in, at least, immortality as well as in God, otherwise they could hardly claim to be Christians. (Mind you, many people that say they are Christians are not really truthful in such matters.) Probably all three believe in democracy, but George, at least, is more fond of capitalism than democracy and tends to confuse the two systems.

Tony used to be on the Left, but he decided that he liked George, the extreme Right-winger, and so decided to become one of George's lackeys. John has always been well to the Right, so now the trio are buddies with John, fully earning, like Tony, the appellation of lackey. Now they are putting their heads together to find the best excuse to shaft the leader of another country, and by doing so take over that country's oil reserves, for one thing. Who cares if thousands are slaughtered in the process, for George, after all, is commander-in-chief of the greatest nation on earth (his words) and he should be able to do just as he likes. What a pest the UNO is!

The Australian - 2006

Splendid letters from David Healey and others have blown to smithereens the foundations of religious belief.

The letters supporting religion have been small in number and quite lacking in intellectual authority. It is most significant, but hardly surprising, that not even one cleric, it seems, has submitted an argument for the support of religious belief. But then, there is no argument that would stand even concise scrutiny.

Bertrand Russel pointed out that since the four main religions differ from one another in important respects, then as a matter of simple logic, not more than one of them can be true. Of course, none of them is true.

The Australian - December 2006

If we think about the world's nations and the religion that each of them embraces, we may well note that they, particularly those nations that are saturated with religious belief, would be well down any list of advanced nations. Religion, of course, may not be the only impediment to the growth and welfare of nations.

Islam seems without doubt to be the religion that places the most severe clamp on the societal well-being and advancement of nations. Middle East countries would figure prominently in any relevant survey. For example, Saudi Arabia has more than 60 religious police stations. Indonesia, Malaysia and Pakistan are better placed than the Arab states, but they are well down our list, just the same.

Christianity seems certainly to be less damaging to nations than Islam. Even so, if we consider Poland, Portugal, The Philippines, Columbia and others, all of them have one dominant brand of Christianity: Roman Catholicism. They all compare badly with, say, Sweden and Australia.

The USA, is perhaps, a special case here. The United States is an advanced nation whose people are, however, mostly very religious. That they are very religious, points to the routine, profound religious indoctrination of children over the years. There is a phenomenon there known as the religious right. They are creationists, they deny the fact of evolution. This denial is suggestive of a poor intellectual and educational standard. . The president of the United States is of a similar mindset to the religious right. Democracy is seriously endangered in that god-fearing country.

The Australian and The Age - June 2006

Some time ago, John Howard mentioned the possibility that Australia may carry out a pre-emptive strike against terrorists in Asia. Surely, a most appropriate target would be that fiend, that infamous spiritual leader who devised the Bali massacre in 2002.

The Australian - July 2006

As an atheist, I find it difficult when thinking about the Americans, not to take very much into account the fact that a very big majority of them believe in God. Not only that, many millions of them are creationists and so they do not believe in evolution. This latter failing, particularly, creates disdain, and so dislike in many Australians I am sure. There are, of course, many admirable Americans, although I would certainly not place the present Administration in that group.

The Australian - July 2006

There is much to criticize about the way Israel is conducting its campaign against Hezbollah. Israel's opponents, however, are fanatics with world-wide evil connections. There is no option but to oppose that malevolence wherever it appears.

The Australian - August 2006

David Nicholls and HE Davies did well to bring to the attention of readers the mind-numbing, and so pernicious, universal practice of the religious indoctrination of little children.

The adjective 'pernicious' is apposite if only because for century after century religion has shown itself to be extremely harmful. Neither is it true.

Bertrand Russell pointed out that since the major religions differed from one another in important respects then, as a matter of simple logic, not more than one of them can be true. The great philosopher thought that none of them was true.

"Give me a boy when he is seven, and I'll show you the man." Infamous words those, words that were certainly not spoken by an atheist.

The Australian and The Age - September 2006

Any anti-Islam rhetoric from John Howard will receive widespread and enthusiastic approval from the Australian public. Should he fortify his criticisms with a statement that certain relevant immigration laws are to be amended by his government, then Kim Beazley will have little choice either to concur.

The Australian - October 2006

We are urged to shut up about religion. The world would be a much better place if religious people, yes, all of them, were to shut up. Just for one thing, think of the millions of innocent children who would not be indoctrinated with untruths.

The Australian - October 2006

D Khat, although he mentions Islam, seems to have been careful not to mention that it is religious fanatics that are killing and torturing one another in Iraq. He prefers to us “jihadists”. Religious fanatics do not, as he suggests, need lessons in savagery from Saddam.

The Australian - October 2006

We use the term “terrorist” frequently when it would be more accurate and more honest to use “religious fanatics.” “Sectarian” gets a lot of use because well, many of us, absurdly, do not like to associate religion with violence despite its history.

The Australian - October 2006

We Australians should be ashamed that we joined with the coalition in an immoral and illegal war. We are part of an invasion force that, quite without moral justification, has killed many thousands of innocent people. (The fanatics are not innocent.) Saddam kept the fanatics under control, and the nation had at least something of a future. Now the fanatics are on a rampage, killing and torturing one another almost at will. What hope is there for a democracy to function when a big proportion of its people are religious fanatics? We should bring our forces home. That would to some extent rectify the grave moral error that we made in 2003.

The Australian - October 2006

Philip Cole claims that opponents of religion argue “that religion is the cause of all the evil and violence in the world.” Rarely would a critic use “all”; “much” would be nearer the very religious mark. Horrors such as the Amish tragedy occur often in the United States. Perhaps Philip noted on one such occasion that an atheist was the killer?

The Australian - October 2006

Bill Giles tells us that the estimate of the number of Iraqis killed because of the illegal invasion of that nation is meaningless is nothing short of preposterous. Saddam, villain though of course he is, kept the Shiites under control, that being a necessary policy if the religion-riddled society was to operate at least reasonably well. The invasion was a ghastly error, a military and moral error of gigantic proportions. We should be ashamed that we ever joined the coalition. We made a similar mistake about Vietnam. We should get out of Iraq in weeks not months. The British general got it right last Friday.

The Australian - October 2006

A few days ago, Britain’s most senior military officer stated that the British forces in Iraq should be withdrawn. He made the observation that there was no possibility that a liberal democracy could be established in Iraq.

That Iraq will become a liberal democracy is desperately hoped for by the Americans. But is it possible to achieve democratic ideals in a nation whose population contains such large numbers of men that are prepared to resort to the utmost savagery when dealing with fellow men? (Terrible things do happen in wars as we all know.) What is it that induces Iraqi citizens to torture and maim and finally kill opponents. Religion is the answer to that question.

The Australian and The Age - October 2006

We now learn that the Federal Government will provide chaplains to the schools for the purpose of providing spiritual guidance for the pupils. We will hear much about Christian values.

Many will argue that morality is religion based. The English thinker, JS Mill, wrote: "A large portion of the noblest and most valuable moral teaching has been the work, not only of men who did not know, but of men who knew and rejected the Christian faith."

It is of great importance that freedom of speech be defended in our democracy. If we hold that view, then it follows that the Sheik, despite our anger, despite our contempt for him and for his opinions, should be free to express those opinions, provided that he does not break the law in so doing. . His religion is, of course, the spur to his foul views on the treatment of women. .Religion has always been harmful, and just now Islam is at its worst. There is, sadly, no hope of its becoming a friend of humanity.

The Australian - November 2006

If you want to have a civil war simply put two opposing religions in the same country. It's been going on for centuries. Sudan and Iraq are featuring just now, with Lebanon close to starting one.

The Australian - December 2006

What does it tell us that the term "sectarian violence" is almost always used in preference to "religious violence?" It really is a curious piece of cohesion among commentators.

It tells us, perhaps, for one thing, that the speaker or writer probably wants to avoid associating religion with violence. Religion is widely regarded as being somehow "good." Heaven knows why. Christianity and Islam, particularly, have an horrific record over the centuries, cruelty of the most fiendish kind, the causing of great misery through beliefs about sexuality among other things, and the rejection of much true learning being a part of their inhumane outlook.

Christianity, fortunately, is on the wane at least in some countries. As for Islam, well, we are being shown how awful it can be in Iraq. Its world-wide menace is very worrying.

The Australian - December 2006

David Hicks is certainly entitled to the protection of the law as it applies to his case. For many of us, however, that he chose to join the Islamic terrorists means a distinct lack of sympathy for him.

The Australian - December 2006

Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard seem to have made a very good impression among Australian voters. Rudd, voting as he did against the therapeutic cloning bill, would have angered many voters that go about living their lives without the aid of myths. But that decision should not much affect the result of the 2007 election. A win for Labor is not an unreasonable prediction for that event.

But what of John Howard? He has proven to be a most formidable political opponent. Not for him any hesitation about handling the truth carelessly. Not for him any hesitation in using the racist card. Not for him any doubts that he was right in joining with Bush and Blair to engage in an illegal and highly immoral invasion of Iraq. His character has been laid bare and many Australians don't like what they see.

Then there is the Peter Costello factor, you know, the treasurer that likes nothing better than to jeer and sneer at an opponent. He is not a popular figure. If the prime minister hands over the job to him, or if the voters know that he will get the job later, then Labor could benefit enormously at the poll next year.

The Australian - December 2006

When, recently, Kevin Rudd voted against the therapeutic cloning bill, he joined the religionists in the house, that is, those influenced by their religious beliefs in voting. His background suggests that early in his life he came under the influence of democratic labor doctrines, so it is not surprising that he voted the way that he did. It is easy to believe, as well, that Communism was very much feared and hated by some in close contact with him. It should be no surprise that he rejects socialism. The Greens must now be expecting a considerable increase in their vote total at the next election.

The Australian - December 2006

Kevin Rudd told us the other day that he is not a socialist. Being a social democrat is not for him either, it seems. Presumably, then, he is a capitalist. He is a religionist, too, evidently. Of what variety? Is he afraid to say? It would be interesting to hear which argument for the existence of god he supports. Since there us no valid argument, what could he say? I know of three long-time Labor voters in an extended family whose votes he will certainly not get in the next election.

The Australian - December 2006

Oh, isn't Kevin Rudd a good man! He is worried that Howard's industrial laws will mean that parents will not be able to take their children to church on Sundays. Is he really a simpleton at heart? Should he have been a 'man of the cloth.'

The Australian - December 2006

It is said often, and of course it is true, that the majority of people that embrace Islam are good people. The problem is, and it is a huge problem, that a very significant minority are very far from being good. In recent times, particularly, the world has been witness to the most horrifying displays of what radical Islam is all about. Just for one thing, consider the barbarism now flourishing in the unhappy nation of Iraq. (Christian nations are responsible for the collapse of order in that country.) We should not make excuses for Islam simply because it is a religion – indeed, such behaviour has been much a part of religion over all the centuries. A very sizeable proportion of Islam's adherents can accurately be as scum, as ignorant, savage, cruel, primitive and murderous members of Homo sapiens. The Australian immigration authorities are probably, as they should, be exercising their powers with extreme caution when examining Islamic applications for entry to our country. The authorities must take no risks at all.

The Australian - December 2006

(The following is a response to a letter from 'Peter')

I am not an historian. I did not mean to imply that Australia and Canada are historically superior nations. Even so, both are secular nations and that, in my opinion, makes them morally much superior to all those nations where Allah is worshipped. All the religions are harmful. None of them is true, either. How much better the world would be without them!

The Australian - January 2007

Saddam is gone and many will regard him as a martyr. He was a brave man, it seems. On finding himself in heaven, perhaps he will use his influence there to get some kind of revenge against George Bush, the latter having proved himself to be a much more prolific killer than Saddam.

The Australian - January 2007

“China was an advanced civilisation when the English were still painting themselves blue with woad in the marshes.” So, someone wrote.

It could well be argued that China’s best piece of good fortune was that it escaped any significant influx of Christianity or Islam. Justifiably, the authorities may reason, and since both those religions have done much more harm than good in much of the world, it sees very little reason why it should allow either of them to gain a strong foothold there. Buddhism, a much less harmful religion than Islam or Christianity, is there for those needing spiritual comfort. The experts predict that China will be one of the world’s greatest superpowers in a relatively short time.

Since WW2 Australia has turned to the USA for protection from possible aggressors. We have done their bidding by joining them in wars in Korea, Vietnam and now Iraq. We can take pride in the valour of our servicemen and women. But the invasions of Vietnam and Iraq were both illegal and immoral. The present Australian government should be damned forever for our involvement in Iraq.

To our north there are Islamic nations whom it would be most unwise to trust. The world knows well now the character of Islam. Still, it seems unlikely that they pose an invasion threat to us.

China and Australia are good trading partners. We should strengthen our links with that powerful nation. A military pact should be considered.

The Australian - January 2007

The inclination to believe things that are patently false seems to be inherent in the minds of a big proportion of humankind. It is easy enough to believe that people of poor intelligence may easily be deluded by the myths of religion. But it is a real puzzle that many intelligent people, who in other areas of their lives, always seek evidence to base their decisions about all kinds of matters, nevertheless do not seek that evidence when it comes to religious belief.

Most of us, in living our lives, have come to realize that, in the case of our own mental performance, we perform much better intellectually in one or more areas than in some other areas. And so we have the student, say, that is brilliant at mathematics but performs badly in another part of his or her intelligence. Perhaps many minds do not handle well the choice of believing or not believing religious dogma. Perhaps geneticists will find the answer to the puzzle.

The Australian - January 2007

Bertrand Russell argued that people believe in god because they were taught to do so when they were little children. Perhaps he should have said “the great majority of people” to allow for exceptions to his rule. Religionists don’t like the term “indoctrination,” but there is no doubt that it goes harmfully on and on, with varying degrees of intensity, from religion to religion, from home to home, from church to church, from mosque to mosque, from synagogue to synagogue, from school to school.

Anyone that is inclined to argue with Russell should consider China. China has pretty much escaped the influence of those religions that worship a supernatural being. (Is there indoctrination with Buddha’s teachings?)

The absence of the indoctrination of belief in a supernatural being, does not seem to have damaged, to have made inferior, the quality of China’s citizenry.

The Australian - January 2007

Have a discussion about religion, about Christianity, and in about five seconds flat someone, Marcus Bondi, in letters 6 Jan, say, will make the ridiculous claim that morality is religion-based. How could an educated person believe that twaddle? The English, 19th century, thinker, JS Mill, wrote: “A large portion of the noblest and most valuable moral teaching has been the work, not only of men who did not know, but of men who knew and rejected the Christian faith.”

The Australian - January 2007

Among his comments about David Williamson's article (3/1), Kevin Liston (Letters 6/1) writes: "That there might be intelligent and reasonable grounds for believing in the reality of God does not seem to have occurred to him."

Over the centuries, over and over again, attempts have been made to prove the reality of God. Probably David Williamson has thought about the several arguments for the existence of God, but is far from convinced by any of them.

I have noticed, over many years, that supporters of religion, orally or in writing, very rarely supply an argument for God's existence. That fact, itself, supports the opinion that there is no argument, that there is no God. Perhaps Kevin will try one on us? But keep it away from Richard Dawkins: he would demolish it speedily.

The Australian - January 2007

It is of great importance that freedom of speech be defended in our democracy. If we hold that view, then it follows that the Islamists in Australia, despite our anger, despite our rejection of much of Islam's belief system, and despite our outrage at the wickedness carried out in the world in its name, we should always have in mind the imperative of freedom of speech.

That said, however, we are faced with the incontrovertible fact that a very sizeable part of the world's Islamic population is made up of religious fanatics. There is no question that many of them are good people. What of Australia's Islamic population? Are they all "good" people? We can only guess.

We simply must, therefore, carry out a careful and ongoing supervision of the beliefs and activities of those in our society that may present a danger to our way of life. Almost certainly, this is being done. A severe reduction in the numbers of Islamic immigrants should apply. Such measures are most necessary. There is no need for apologies.

The Australian - January 2007

Islam imbues its fanatical adherents with the aim of attaining world pre-eminence for the followers of Allah. The religious violence in Baghdad is sufficient to show the world that it has no interest in democracy, freedom of speech or tolerance towards other creeds. It is fiendish cruelty, hatred and savagery, and more, on a rampage. Its fanatics are every bit as brutal as the fanatics of the crusades. . Do not be fooled by the defence that many Muslims are good people. That, of course, is true. There is no possibility, however, that the "goodies" will persuade the "baddies" to live decent, civilised lives, eschewing violence and caring for other, infidel, members of humanity. The task ahead for Islam's opponents is gargantuan.

The Australian - January 2007

All this talk about someone named Jesus. It would be such a relief if we could be supplied with some proof of his existence. Bertrand Russell, the great English 20th Century philosopher, thought it most unlikely that he ever existed. One suspects that he might have done some exhaustive research into the question. As for God's existence --- anyone prepared to have a shot at an argument that shows that he exists? I'll bet not.

The Australian - February 2007

Thanks Miranda of Townsville for your splendid letter of 9 February.

As you probably know, Russell wrote a book a year for 70 years. I have read a great deal of his output, although I do not recall having read the piece on history that you mention. In regard to immortality, he maintained that to be a Christian, at the very least, one had to believe in god and in immortality. I know people, admirers of Jesus, that say that they are Christians but who do not believe in god. Census figures?

No doubt you also know that he won a Nobel Prize for Literature. Perhaps you have read "Why I am not a Christian."

It was first published in 1957. He examines the character of Christ and decides that he was not “superlatively good.”

So far, no one has written to argue that Christ did, indeed, exist. That absence of argument really does tell us something, doesn't it?

The Australian - February 2007

Christopher Pearson (Inquirer 9/2/07), seemingly an intelligent man, goes on with such a load of rubbish that you have to wonder. Next time he writes a piece, he should (but he will not) put forward the arguments for the existence of god (or for Jesus) and tell us which one of the arguments he supports. If god does not exist, if Jesus never existed, then that should be the end of Christianity. Given its frightful record, Christianity does not deserve a place on this planet.

The Australian - February 2007

It has been plain for a long time, and it has been said time and time again, that the infidels are to be wiped out by Islam. Our government was imprudent and immoral enough to become involved there. Our Prime Minister wanted to please the Americans. Iraq is an Islamic nation so many of its inhabitants are, from their point of view, and especially now, our sworn enemies. But to fight and beat them there in this civil war is near enough to being an impossibility. In any case (thank goodness), our troops are not much engaged in the killing. (One may well wonder what the average American soldier thinks of that arrangement). That we became involved in Iraq was a shameful decision.

The Australian - March 2007

Kevin Rudd would be very much more welcome to many voters as leader of the Federal ALP, were he, like Gough Whitlam, an atheist. Hawke was, at the very least, an agnostic. But since Hawke we have had Keating, Beazley and now Rudd – all of them the products of religious indoctrination.

Consider the question of the resurrection. How do they manage to believe that myth? (Men believe what they want to believe?) Presumably, both Keating and Rudd accept the fairy-tale of the virgin birth. Here is what Richard Dawkins, in his, “The selfish gene,” had to say about that preposterous belief: “Take, for example, the matter of the alleged virgin birth. It is fairly widely known, but of course not much mentioned, that the words “young woman,” were mis-translated from Hebrew to Greek as “virgin.” Thus: “Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son.”

The Australian - March 2007

Islam's religious fanatics have shown themselves to be pre-eminent among the vilest human beings on our planet. David Hicks chose to join their ranks. The law system should, of course, be administered with the utmost fairness and that has not happened in the trial of Hicks. In the light of what we know about those whom he chose as comrades, how is it that there seems to be so much sympathy for him?

The Australian - April 2007

One of the many preposterous things about religion is the apparent belief of many millions that a supernatural being hears and acts upon the pleas of the faithful.

Kevin Rudd has described John Howard as very intelligent. People think that Rudd is very intelligent. Do both of them really believe in the efficacy of prayer, or do they simply like voters to think that they do?

Articles

Oh, for Freedom from Religion!

(Published on the Atheist Foundation of Australia Web Site, August 2003)

Doubtless it will take centuries and, indeed, the task will be gargantuan, close to impossible, given past centuries of indoctrination (such as learning the Koran by rote), just for one thing. Just the same, again over the centuries, there have always been some men and women, sufficiently humane, enlightened and courageous, determined enough, to argue the case against religious belief. (In earlier times, being burnt to death at the stake was just one of the fiendish ways such people were treated by Christians, for example.)

One thinks of Bertrand Russell, the great English philosopher, mathematician, logician and social commentator, who died in 1970, and Richard Dawkins, the Oxford professor, the leading Darwinian, a scholar of eminence, who in these times must surely be regarded as one of the world's leading intellect on the side of atheism. In Australia, one thinks of Phillip Adams, a citizen of many talents, a very effective supporter of atheism.

Now is the time for people, millions of people that presently choose to stay on the sidelines despite their rejection of religious belief to exert their influence. They abound in numbers. They need to argue more and more and more against religion, against the source of so much history-recorded, cruel, poverty-creating, truth-rejecting, destructive, widespread content of the human mind.

The inclination to believe things that are patently false seems to be inherent in the minds of a big proportion of humankind. It is easy enough to believe that people of poor intelligence may easily be deluded by the myths of religion. But it is a real puzzle that many intelligent people, who in others areas of living their lives, always seek evidence on which to base their decisions about all kinds of matters, nevertheless do not seek that evidence when it comes to religious belief.

Most of us, in living our lives, have come to realize that, in the case of our own mental performance, we perform much better intellectually in one or more areas than in some other areas. And so we have the student, say, that is brilliant at mathematics but performs badly in another part of his or her intelligence. Perhaps many minds – and we must not overlook the pervasiveness of indoctrination - do not handle well the choice of believing or not believing religious dogma.

Some months ago, this contributor heard on radio, but, not surprisingly, only once, a suggestion from science that certain genes may play a part in creating minds that are receptive in that way.

In recent times, the centuries-old, terribly harmful effects of religious belief and its consequences have been displayed to a world audience. There is no point in saying that the other religions are “good” and that no such things would be done in their name; history records that other religions have an even worse record than the one presently carrying out evil deeds.

The perpetrators are saturated in religious belief. Is there, by the way, a record of such behaviour on the part of unbelievers? No. They are the ones, then, who must take up the task of freeing humankind of its shackles, both intellectual and moral. A world in which unbelievers have very much more influence is a world that is very much desired.

A Response to Letters in The Age

The letters in The Age (1/8) from David McKenna and Dick Baltzy attacking the Vatican for its most recent dictatorial edict, this time ordering Catholic politicians to vote against humane legislation relating to homosexuality were welcome indeed.

It is, surely, an undeniable fact that huge numbers of people in the world are religious because they were indoctrinated with religious belief when they were little children. And it is undeniable, too, that religion itself is both untrue and, in the main, harmful. Can those opinions be refuted?

Putting aside parental influence, the principal sources of indoctrination in the Christian and Islamic religions are, of course, the Bible and the Koran. (Learning the Koran by rote is the norm in Islamic schools, although perhaps there may be exceptions somewhere.)

The Bible and the Koran were compiled hundreds and hundreds of years ago by men who, although they might have been intelligent, were ignorant in the extreme, having little or no understanding of the nature of the world and its place in the universe. There seems to be no possibility, however, that their influence will ever decline satisfactorily.

In relation to the latest statement by the Vatican on homosexuality, G.A Thompson (4/8) expressed staggeringly fanciful opinions. Simply consider his final statement: 'It shows yet again the moral and intellectual greatness of the church as a bastion of civilization'

Even many Roman Catholics may think that as overdoing things a bit – the non-Catholic world, in the main, would reject it, probably with justified derisive and scornful laughter.

It is a cruel kind of morality that, just for one aspect, condemns millions of impoverished women all over the world to bear child after unwanted child because of the Vatican's opposition to contraception.

As for intellectual greatness, no doubt there are many fine intellects in the Vatican, but is it not the case that the beliefs of Aristotle (384-322 BC) and Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) dominate their thinking?

The two men had brilliant intellects, but they had very little understanding of the world that they lived in. Perhaps the same could be said about the Vatican.

Some Opinions of an Unbeliever

(Published on the Atheist Foundation of Australia Web Site)

Ours was not a religious family – I write of the 1920's and 1930's. For a start, my father was an atheist. He did not drum atheism into his children's heads, though. On the other hand, the drumming of religious belief into the heads of children, any questioning of those beliefs being deliberately put aside, has been practised on children throughout the world for a very long time: 'Give me the child for his first seven years, and I'll give you the man.' That often-quoted statement is attributed to the Jesuits. What a staggering admission of arrogance, of contempt for a child's intellectual advancement, of credulity-creation in his psyche!

Mother said once, at least, that if there is a god he should show himself, but she did occasionally attend the Presbyterian church. For a time, she belonged to the Presbyterian Women's Missionary Union. I had some contact with the church, at Sunday school mainly, up to the age of 14. I was eventually to become first an agnostic and then an atheist, but I did not make those decisions until some years later.

When, at 16, I moved to Melbourne, I was to attend the Royal Melbourne Hospital for treatment. I had shot myself.) In filling in the necessary form, my father, in answering the question about my religion, must have indicated, one way or another, that I was not religious. The hospital clerk said, 'What are you, a heathen?' I felt very embarrassed. What a nerve he had! Dad's action annoyed me, too. I brought the matter up with him when next I saw him. He smiled in his endearing way. He would have agreed with Bertrand Russell, who wrote somewhere, 'Most people believe in god because they have been taught from early infancy to do it.'

For some years to come, I wrote Presbyterian when a form required me to declare my religion. I am an atheist; I do not believe that there is a god. There is a number of arguments for the existence of god, and there is no disputing that many eminent thinkers have believed in his existence. The number of eminent thinkers that are believers has surely seriously declined during the last couple of hundred years or so.

Plato (born 428-27 BC), was an enormously influential Greek philosopher, although he was not, of course, a Christian. He evidently believed in goddesses if one is to accept his reference to them on the first page of his *The Republic*: 'I wanted to say a prayer to the goddess...' What is one to say?

The German philosopher, Leibniz (1646-1716), '...was one of the supreme intellects of all time' according to Russell. Leibniz was a Christian believer. In 1755 there was an earthquake in Lisbon that killed 35,000 people. People wondered why, if god is good, if he is omnipotent and omniscient, he allowed such terrible things to happen. (Some people still wonder about such things, of course.) Leibniz thought hard about god, no doubt, and came up with an answer of this sort: 'If we did not have nasty things happen to us we would not be fully appreciative of the good things that happen.' He believed that 'This is the best of all possible worlds.' The famous French writer, Voltaire (1694-1778), gave Leibniz a bit of a hard time, so to speak, in his *Candide*. Using the pseudonym Dr Pangloss for Leibniz, he went very successfully about ridiculing the philosopher.

Sir Isaac Newton (1642-1727), English mathematician and physicist, despite his huge contribution to science, held on to religious beliefs, although surely he must have modified those beliefs to some extent as time passed? How did the planets get going in their orbits around the sun? God hurled them into orbit he is said to have opined.

Had that great man, Charles Darwin (1809-1882), a compatriot of Newton, published his Origin of Species in the 17th century, it seems reasonable to believe that Newton's religious beliefs would have received a severe setback. Was the argument from design an argument that Newton thought to be a powerful one? (It was in its time.) Darwin's evolution findings finished that argument. Even so, despite the almost total acceptance of the fact of evolution by the experts, for example, many on our planet, out of sheer ignorance, out of minds stunted by religious belief, reject and do their best to discredit, evolution. There are, as may be expected, arguments about detail.

The opinions of David Hume, the Scot (1711-1776), might well have had their effects on Newton had Newton known of them. Hume destroyed the ideas of both the soul and the mind. That is what some say. Before Hume, Berkeley had gone about doing his best to do away with matter. Now some wits were saying, 'No matter, never mind.' Hume, an empiricist, some have described as the greatest of British philosophers.

As for Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), Russell has written that the diminutive German philosopher destroyed all the arguments for the existence of god, but then thought up one of his own. The argument went a bit like this: 'There are many good persons on this earth for whom fate has handed out a rough deal. Surely there must be a god to provide them with rewards after their deaths.' (Kant evidently said that he was '...awakened from his slumber' by the opinions expressed by David Hume.)

It is easy to understand that the idea of an all-powerful being might enter into primitive human culture. Fear of death and an utter ignorance, to mention just two things, were no doubt pervasive in those cultures. In many cultures that followed, too. If humanity had never felt the need to believe in gods and goddesses and miracles and the like, the world would surely be a very different place from the world we know. I think that there would be a very good chance that it would be a much better place. What good has religion ever done on any scale? That it has done great harm cannot be doubted.

More than 2000 years ago, the Greeks gave great impetus to the acquisition of knowledge. For something like a period of 1000 years before the Renaissance, however, the church was largely in control of things in the western world. These were the Dark Ages. The fearful practices of the Inquisition established by the Jesuits, had their beginning. Galileo (1564-1642) was perhaps their most famous target. Many regard him as the first great scientist. Among his unwelcome arguments was that the earth goes round the sun. He was 70, very ill and going blind. The Inquisition sentenced him and forced him to abjure those of his opinions that were in conflict with the scriptures. At least they did not burn him at the stake as they did Giordano Bruno and many others. I reproduce now two extracts from the sentence of the Inquisition:

1. *The proposition that the sun is the centre of the world and immovable from its place is absurd, philosophically false, and formally heretical; because it is expressly contrary to the Holy Scriptures.*
2. *The proposition that the earth is not the centre of the world, nor immovable, but that it moves, and also with a diurnal action, is also absurd, philosophically false, and, theologically considered, at least erroneous in faith.*

From Galileo, His Life and Work, by J.J. Fahie, pp. 313 ff. 1903.

Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), an Italian, wielded then, and still does wield, enormous influence in the Roman Catholic Church. He possessed a superior intellect, no doubt. Look, though, at the period in history when he was on this earth. There is so much that humanity has learned in the ensuing years, knowledge of which the people of his day were ignorant. People even believed, for example, that everything above the earth and the moon revolved around those two bodies.

As for god, Aquinas knew so much about his existence. So much! Just how did he acquire that knowledge? It seems reasonable to ask that question. Perhaps god told him? Perhaps he was capable of such profound thought that he needed no empirical evidence to support his opinions? (But then, surely, experimentation and observation will not get anyone anywhere in an attempt to reach a supreme being – particularly if there is not one.) Many must have thought, and many must still think, Aquinas to have been so capable. Pure reason was the tool in the understanding of the many complexities of the universe. In the eyes of some thinkers, at least.

Again consider the question of god's existence. If the world were just beginning now, and yet humanity were possessed of all the knowledge that humankind does at this time possess, the question of the existence of a supreme being would not come up too seriously among the educated people on this planet. At least, that is what I think. Again, consider the Chinese people, for example. Most of them manage not to need a belief in a god. Finally, more than once I have heard it said that Albert Einstein (1879-1955) believed in a personal god. These words of his refute any such opinion:

In their struggle for the ethical good, teachers of religion must have the stature to give up the doctrine of a personal God, that is, give up that source of fear and hope which in the past placed such vast power in the hands of priests. From *Out of my later years*, by Albert Einstein, pp28-29.1950

Atheists Unite

(Published on the Atheist Foundation of Australia Web Site, August 1999)

It is time that atheists came out. And agnostics, too, for that matter. It is time that the acceleration of the decline of religious belief was given extra impetus by continual injections of contrary opinions from those that have been too silent for too long.

This silence — not a total silence, of course — is a state that has endured over the centuries.

The reasons for its longevity are many including, especially in earlier times, the punishment by death of the unbeliever. Further, the opinion that religion is somehow 'good' has been fostered over the years. People feel that it should not be criticized. So people with strong arguments of refutation of religious belief weaken in their resolve to take a stand, having thoughts like, 'Oh, --people are entitled to their opinions, so I should leave them alone.' Some consider that their success, say, in business or in politics or in some other activity, would be jeopardized were they to reveal themselves as opponents of religious belief. And so on and so on.

Mankind is not up to the task of taking seriously and practising the tenets of the Sermon on the Mount. You need only to look at much of the conduct of the so-called Christian nations over the centuries — and just recently for that matter. I have in mind the events in the Balkans And I have in mind particularly here the reaction of the church to the bombing atrocities in Yugoslavia. What reaction? you may well ask. I thought the silence of the wide Christian community, not to mention other religions, contemptible.

Religion is not only not good; it is positively harmful. On top of that, and perhaps even more to its discredit, it is not true. (And I am about to use an argument of Bertrand Russell's here.) There are a number of major religions. They differ from one another in important respects. It follows logically that not more than one of them can be true. Atheists think that not one of them is true. As for the harm that religion does, consider first this example: in many parts of the world people kill one another in its name. That is true. Little children, in many parts of that same world, are indoctrinated with opinions that cannot stand up to scrutiny. That is true. Over much of the world unwanted little children are born because there is religious objection to other than church-approved means of contraception. That is true. Criticisms of religion are so very easy to come by. Not so praise, if truth be adhered to.

What of faith? If there are religious teachings that you badly want to believe, or being a religious leader you badly want others to believe, but there is no proof of their truth, what do you do? You rely on faith. Russell said: 'Faith is a belief in something for which there is no evidence.' Someone else wrote: 'Faith is believing in what you know to be false.' (When I write of truth, I am using the opinion that a statement or belief is true when it corresponds with fact. If it is a fact that a god exists, then it is a true statement to say that he does.)

Atheists and agnostics should not be afraid to proclaim their unbelief or doubts about the existence of god and other religious so-called truths. They should not be afraid to come out. The media is more receptive to the opinions of unbelievers than was earlier the case. Religion has had its opportunities for so long now to show the world that, even if it is not true, it is at least 'good.' It has failed dismally the world's peoples. It is time for it to be regarded as the ancient superstition that it is.

God - The Onus of Proof

(Published in *Debating the Issues*, Edited by Justin Healey, The Spinney Press, 2005)

The question of whether or not god exists is still, amazingly, being asserted in the affirmative, even by some very intelligent men and women. In other areas of their thought, their living, they would not normally consider accepting assertions of a different nature, other than the assertion that god exists, without being convinced by evidence. Usually, the god in question is the god worshipped by adherents of the three monotheistic religions of Islam, Judaism or Christianity.

As I have argued before, most of us, in living our lives, have come to realize that, in the case of our own mental performance, we perform much better in one or more areas than in some other areas. And so we have the student, say, that is brilliant at mathematics but performs badly in another part or parts of his or her intelligence. Perhaps many minds do not handle well the choice of believing or not believing religious dogma. Perhaps one day science will find the answer to the puzzle.

And, indeed, in recent times, the present writer heard on the radio that some psychologist group believes that that may be the case. It is not surprising that the writer has not heard any more on the topic, religion always having been widely protected from scrutiny. On that matter, however, things are slowly improving.

Were they asked to provide proof that god exists, believers could not provide that proof. It is no answer to demand that the atheist has to prove that god does not exist. Is one able to prove a negative, in any case?

We know of the indoctrination of children, a process that occurs in churches, mosques and synagogues. It occurs in homes and schools, and a part is played by the media. Truth is so important! Truth is sacrificed. The indoctrination of religious belief is brainwashing exemplified. It is a widespread and disastrous practice throughout most of our world, producing terribly harmful effects. The world of Islam is probably the leader in that regard in these times. Will the harm done by religious belief ever stop?

Children come into this world and are called Christians, Muslims or whatever, even though, as English philosopher, John Locke (1632-1704), an empiricist, argued, at birth the mind is devoid of innate knowledge. He compared a child's mind at birth with a blackboard without any writing on it. (He believed in god, even though many of his opinions would persuade the reader to believe otherwise. But, then, note the years in which he lived That is, children at birth have no religion, but have it foisted upon them as already mentioned. In this area, the Jesuits, especially, have a huge reputation. But even they, it may well be the case, are surpassed by their equivalents in the indoctrination of Islamic beliefs.

Bertrand Russell made the point that since the several major religions disagree in important respects, it is a matter of simple logic that not more than one of them can be true. An atheist, he believed that not one of them is true. He also argued that a statement or opinion may be regarded as true if it is in accord with fact. Is it a fact that god exists?

Most believers do not concern themselves, of course, with opinions that are contrary to their own. Myths and angels and fairy tales are more in their line.

Belief in a supreme being, one can understand, might well arise in the early centuries of humankind's existence and continue as it has (no doubt there have always been some unbelievers) because general ignorance prevailed about the world, the understanding of that world, and its relationship with the contents of a vast universe.

Despite their huge intellects, men of the great Greek civilization, Plato, for example, were ignorant of many things that even school children have known for a long time now. Examples are hardly necessary. Plato was, of course, not an adherent of one of the three monotheistic religions, but he was religious as is confirmed by his words on the first page of his *Republic*: 'I wanted to say a prayer to the goddess.'

There is no valid argument that proves that god exists. That means that at least those three religions are without a sound basis for their belief systems.

Charles Darwin and his evolution findings destroyed what was once, probably, the best argument: the argument from design. English clergyman and theologian, William Paley, (1743-1805), early in the 19th century, in his writings, did much to reinforce the argument for the existence of a supreme being. His book, *View of the Evidences of Christianity* was extremely influential.

Aristotle's first cause argument (he, of course, was not a Christian, and Russell wrote of the great philosopher's 50

gods), and others like it, the contingency argument, for example, is destroyed by the question, 'If there has to be a first cause, then who caused God?'

Finally, (there are others, in varying degrees of weakness,) the ontological argument, which Bertrand Russell explained briefly as follows: 'God, being the greatest object of thought, cannot lack existence, else he would not be the greatest,' Not a convincing argument, is it?

A Reply to Comments Made About my Article *God Exists?*

(To 774 ABC Guest Book, August 2003)

In relation to the fact of evolution, that it is part of god's plan, is a routine and pathetic explanation from many cleric and others. For years and years, long after there was no doubt of its being no longer a theory, the religions fought against it, fighting against and holding back human knowledge and progress. That is what religion has always done, and is still doing. In earlier times, at least, Inquisitions, (the Jesuits were specialists in such barbarism as were the Spaniard Torquemada and his evil assistants) burning at the stake (especially 'witches), fiendish torture and so on and so on, by Christians, particularly. These are historical facts.

You have to wonder why god sanctioned all the terrible things that happened over the centuries –plainly, he still looks the other way. Religious fanaticism is rampant, and will remain rampant, for who knows how long. There are still millions of people that are so ignorant that they do not accept evolution at all. Ask a creationist.

As for the question, 'Could not god be timeless?' Is that an argument for his existence? (Nobody seems to be able to produce one.) If it is, it is very far from being convincing, and needs much further explanation from macca...

Yes, if god exists, certainly he must be very different from humankind. I mean, just for a start, he is said to be both omniscient and omnipotent. And imagine the intellect he must have to have achieved all that is attributed to him. As for imagination, I don't for a moment imagine that he exists. I think the whole idea preposterous. I do not take to mythology.

Should I go to a church, what would I find there? For one thing I'd find the Bible there. Despite, I realize, that some of its contents, as with similar books, may be admirable in thought, , much of its contents certainly are not, (how ridiculous Genesis is!) and in any case it was put together something like a couple of thousands of years ago by ignorant writers. Their understanding of the world was minimal.

And as for Jesus Christ, from what I have read it is very doubtful that he ever existed. The gospels were written, in Greek, 40 to 60 years (approximately) after his death, and they do not agree about important detail relating to him. (Read *The Misery of Christianity* by Joachim Kahl to mention just one title in which highly intelligent men and women demolish religion.)

Of course I agree that that there are things and places and happenings that we never see but we nevertheless accept their existence.. But we don't, or at least we should not, accept them as true unless they are supported by evidence. The big problems with religions is that they are neither true nor other than extremely harmful. I am told by Catherine that the big question is "What if He [god] does exist?" If he does exist and we know that to be so, then we should chastise him most severely for the shocking mess 'he' has made of his responsibilities.

Clear Thinking - The World's Foremost Need

(Published on the Atheist Foundation of Australia Web Site)

Doubtless it will take centuries and, indeed, the task will be gargantuan, close to impossible, given past centuries of indoctrination, just for one thing. Just the same, again over the centuries, there have always been men and women, sufficiently enlightened and courageous, determined enough, to argue the case against religious belief. One thinks of Bertrand Russell, the great English philosopher, who died in 1970, and Richard Dawkins, the Oxford professor, a scholar of eminence, who in these times must surely be regarded as the world's leading intellect on the side of atheism. Now is the time for such people, joined by millions of others that presently choose to stay on the sidelines, to argue more and more and more against the source of so much history-recorded, cruel, anti-intellectual, poverty-creating, truth-rejecting, destructive, widespread content of the human mind.

The inclination to believe things that are patently false seems to be inherent in the minds of a big proportion of humankind. It is easy enough to believe that people of poor intelligence may easily be deluded by the myths of religion. But it is a real puzzle that many intelligent people, who in others areas of living their lives, always seek evidence on which to base their decisions about all kinds of matters, nevertheless do not seek that evidence when it comes to religious belief.

Most of us, in living our lives, have come to realize that, in the case of our own mental performance, we perform much better intellectually in one or more areas than in some other areas. And so we have the student, say, that is brilliant at mathematics but performs badly in another part of his or her intelligence. Perhaps many minds do not handle well the choice of believing or not believing religious dogma. Perhaps one day science will find the answer to the puzzle.

In these last few weeks, the centuries-old, terribly harmful, effects of religious belief and its consequences have been displayed to a world audience. There is no point in saying that the other religions are “good” and that no such thing would be done in their name; history records that other religions have an even worse record than the one presently carrying out evil deeds. And our Prime Minister, John Howard, says that this is not a religious war that is happening now!

The perpetrators are saturated in religious belief. Is there, by the way, a record of such behaviour on the part of unbelievers? No. They are the ones, then, that must take up the task of freeing humankind of its shackles, both intellectual and moral. A world in which unbelievers have very much more influence is a world that should be desired.

Comment in Various Forums

If the vilification legislation is passed by the government of Victoria, it seems to me, people may well be charged with an offence even though what they said or wrote was true. Consider this letter. Bertrand Russell believed that a belief or a statement is true when it is in accord with fact. That opinion makes a lot of sense, surely.

In letters to the press, and in books that I have published, I oppose religious belief. I argue that all religion is untrue because, just for one thing, I do not believe in the existence of god. (Buddhists do not have a god, I realize.) Believers, I must say, have very poor arguments about that. Do they deal in facts?

And, I assert, religion is harmful. In the light of the historical record, how can that be denied? Facts are facts. Perhaps a little bit of good is done here and there.

So am I, and others like me, likely to be in trouble with the law because of the Bracks government's misguided intention to please certain sections of society at the expense of free speech?

The highly-esteemed American psychologist and philosopher, William James, did not believe, it seems, in the existence of God, but thought it best that others did.

Our own William James (27/2), a regular contributor to The Age letters page, seems certainly to believe in God, which position, evidently, he reaches through the exercising of faith.

Remarkably, he seem to believe, also, that mankind is morally lost without a belief in a God, which kind of thinking belongs in the 19th century and before. Are, for example, the Chinese people morally lost? we may ask him. As for atheists, how, he asserts, can they grasp the obscenities of the suffering of children? Amazing.

The letters in The Age from about the latest dictatorial edict from the Vatican, this one laying down the law to, among others, Catholic politicians, were more than welcome to many of us. Islam, particularly, does this, too, of course, in these times being almost certainly the most harmful of all the religions. All the religions are, and always have been, harmful and untrue. Can that opinion be refuted?

It is, surely, an undeniable fact that huge numbers of people in the world are religious because they were indoctrinated with religious belief when they were little children. There has also been, for a very long time, another kind of indoctrination process occurring: I mean, many people that are not believers in any religion, nevertheless think that, since religion is "good" and "people are entitled to their own opinions," etc., etc., one should not criticize religion

You need only to read some of the journalistic comment in recent times to note that the writers are very careful about what they say. And so, religion continues to be protected, as always it has been, from criticism. Religious fanatics (and they exist all over the world) killed all those poor people in the USA. That is, religion is heavily to blame.

Since religious fanatics carried out their fiendish plans on 11 September 2001, much of the world has done its best to ignore, one way and another, an inescapable fact: Adherents of one of the world's major religions, driven to a fanatical fervour by the teachings that they had imbibed, probably since infancy, carried out that vile crime against humanity.

Simply because the big majority of religious people are themselves good people, it does not necessarily follow that religion itself is "good". More than any event in a very long time, this should persuade us of its grave deficiency in "goodness."

Religion, although perhaps it does a little good here and there, has always been harmful – and Christianity, too, has always been a prominent influence in the spread of that harm. The facts of history are, however, immutable. If only humankind were guided more, much more, by truth!

If one of us gets things wrong, then the only chance that he or she has to get things right is to face up to that error and to seek to correct it. Humankind, most understandably, right from the beginning, got many things wrong. Consider just one thing: the error about the origin of life. The strong likelihood is that there will never be a satisfactory facing up to many errors no matter how fragile their basis may be. An exorcism from the human psyche of many false

beliefs – particularly the belief in a supreme being — seems to be most unlikely.

It is easy to understand that people, in their ignorance, in their fear, people in the hands of oh-so-cruel nature, would seek an explanation for their existence in the form of gods, goddesses, angles -and so on. Had humankind begun with the knowledge that is now accessible on this earth, it is easy to believe that such beliefs would have had great difficulty in surviving. But ignorance was supreme at first. Later, advances in knowledge always met opposition. They still do.

With effects of often calamitous proportions, many of the beliefs have been passed on through the centuries; much of humankind is still under their influence. Religion is still a potent force in the world, a terribly harmful force, a blight on humanity, it may be argued. There has been in history a hundred years' war with religious conflict at its base. Is 2001 to be the beginning of another such war?

There are plenty of atheists about. But most of them, unwilling to take a stand against religious belief, making excuses for its terribly harmful effects throughout history, frightened for their careers, suspecting that religion may be somehow “good,” etc., etc., stutter things like, ‘Oh, people are entitled to their opinions.’ And they (the ‘condoners,’ I call them) do nothing to bring about the decline of religious belief

In these last few weeks, the centuries-old, terribly harmful, effects of religious belief and its consequences have been displayed to a world audience. There is no point in saying that the other religions are “good”, and that no such thing would be done in their name; history records that other religions have an even worse record than the one presently carrying out evil deeds. And our Prime Minister, John Howard, says that this is not a religious war that is happening now!

The perpetrators are saturated in religious belief. Is there, by the way, a record of such behaviour on the part of unbelievers? No. They are the ones, then, that must take up the task of freeing humankind of its shackles, both intellectual and moral. A world in which unbelievers have very much more influence is a world that should be desired.

Dear Lucy Duffy

I am an atheist, a member of The Australian Atheist Foundation, and I oppose all religion very strongly. Religion has a long history of being very harmful – this is an historical fact – and it is composed of myths not truth. Those are the two main reasons for my opposition to it.

I expect that you received the article by Andrew Sultan from the New York Times Magazine. Many of my opinions about religious belief are contained on the AFA web-site. If you go to the Articles heading you will find these titles:

‘Atheists unite!’ , ‘Clear thinking – the world’s foremost need’, and ‘Some opinions of an unbeliever.’

There are, as well, three untitled articles of mine on the Bits ‘n’ Pieces section.

Bertrand Russell and Richard Dawkins both famous atheists and intellects also are on the web-site. Russell, philosopher, mathematician and logician, wrote 70 books, many of them containing material on religion. His ‘Religion and Science’ and ‘Why I am not a Christian’ should interest you. (He is very unpopular with your church.) Dawkins, a biologist, a professor at Oxford University, is very probably the most widely known atheist of these times. His ‘The Blind Watchmaker’, is spell-binding, not to mention many other books and essays.

Frankly, I doubt very much that you will be prepared to persevere with the writings that I have mentioned, not to mention opposition from others. As Russell said, “People believe in god because they were taught to do it in their infancy.” That is, they were indoctrinated with religious belief.

Good luck with your studies.

John Rawson

The inclination to believe things that are patently false seems to be inherent in the minds of a big proportion of humankind. It is easy enough to believe that people of poor intelligence may easily be deluded by the myths of religion. But it is a real puzzle that many intelligent people, who in other areas of their lives, always seek evidence to base their decisions about all kinds of matters, nevertheless do not seek that evidence when it comes to religious belief.

Most of us, in living our lives, have come to realize that, in the case of our own mental performance, we perform much better intellectually in one or more areas than in some other areas. And so we have the student, say, that is brilliant at mathematics but performs badly in another part of his or her intelligence. Perhaps many minds do not handle well the choice of believing or not believing religious dogma. Perhaps science will find the answer to the puzzle.

Terror is a natural result when people are subjected to horrors such as occurred when those religious fanatics destroyed the World Trade Centre in 2001. Terror will reign, also, in Iraq if the USA, Britain and Australia launch their war on that country. Terror inspires hatred and blind fury, and those two emotions may well drive some, even if they are not fanatics, to seek revenge over years, especially revenge by the killing of leaders of the attackers.

How refreshing it was to hear Jon Faine respond in his logical and very intelligent way, in the manner of an unbeliever, to a supporter of religion on Monday morning, October 21! Religion always has done, and is still doing, enormous harm throughout the world, and even many atheists condone its terrible history by not raising their voices against it. Some centuries ago, Roman Catholics and Protestants engaged in a war of fiendish cruelty in Europe for 130 years. When will the present religious war ever end?

Of course it is true, as is often said, that much of the world's Muslim population are good people. Nevertheless, their religious beliefs cause some of them to do terrible things. Religious belief has, undeniably, that kind of record. It is a world record.

Without doubt, many of the people that embraced Nazism were good people, too. But terrible deeds sprang also from the beliefs of Nazism. It is just as fatuous to absolve religion from blame when religious fanatics carry out their vile intentions, as it would be to absolve Nazism from blame when its fanatical adherents were in power in Germany. Nazism, at least, did not last very long. Unfortunately, religion has been with humankind for a very long time. Whereas people, in the main, condemn Nazism, it is a widespread practice for most people not to criticize religion. Why is this so?

In spite of all the evidence to the contrary, religion is widely regarded as somehow 'good.' Many atheists and agnostics - the 'condoners,' I shall call them - must think it 'good' also, for they stand weakly on the sidelines, helping to hold back human progress, tendering excuses for religion, failing to face up to the fact of religion's terrible historical record and its patent lack of truth. 'Oh,' they may say, 'people are entitled to their opinions.' Certainly people are entitled to their opinions. But why should opinions held in support of religious belief be regarded so widely as sacrosanct?

Its record is so bad! One is perfectly entitled to criticize a political leader for, after all, politicians are mostly 'bad,' even though many of them are very fine people, doing their best to represent the political idea in which they believe. In contrast, clerics, like their religion, are mostly 'good,' and so they must not be criticized. Yet, they are the leaders of the (widely varied) religious faiths that have been the source of much of the misery in the world for centuries. As for the more recent fiendish outcomes of religious belief, an end to them seems likely never to occur in the lifetimes of today's world population.

Some years ago, an Anglican cleric wrote the following in a letter to me: 'God is still true for me and the assertion of "his existence" constitutes "truth" for me.' He seemed to take the view that he will decide for himself what is or what is not true, so one is more than inclined to conclude that 'truth' in religious matters may well not always be the 'truth' at all.

The pragmatists have their own idea of 'truth' also, but perhaps Bertrand Russell, the great English philosopher, provides a description of 'truth' that many of us would agree with. He thought a belief or a statement is true when it is in accord with fact. So if one believes that there is a God, then that is a true belief if, in fact, God exists.

Surely many people were shocked and disgusted that animals were sacrificed in Bali recently, in accordance with some cruel and mindless religious practice. Were there protests to the media at all? Certainly, the sacrifices were carried out at the time of a very sad gathering of those having lost loved ones, and that fact might have dissuaded protesters. But, in any case, any protests made would have amounted to a protest against a religion, and society, in the main, and over the centuries, does not think that religion should be criticized. Again, some Christians do not believe that animals have (those mysterious entities) souls, so would they care much about the cruelty to the animals anyway.

Because I declare my self as an atheist, and I am doing what an atheist should do, that is, oppose religion, there is virtually no chance that this letter will be published That's the way it is. But here goes anyway.

'Truth' is a word that is used very loosely, especially in the world of religious belief. Some years ago, an Anglican cleric wrote the following in a letter to me: 'God is still true for me and the assertion of "his existence" constitutes "truth" for me.' He seemed to take the view that he will decide for himself what is or what is not true, so one is more than inclined to conclude that 'truth' in religious matters may well not always be the 'truth' at all.

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Two Australian (old) men, good friends of mine, said to me on separate occasions, that the covering up of women's bodies in the Muslim way was probably a good practice. They meant that the sight of, say, bare female bellies promoted lust. One cannot deny that that opinion has some truth to it, but to what sort of minds does that attitude appeal? Certainly most of the men of the "Allah is Great" millions on earth follow the Koran in such matters and the women, too, have, in the main, gone along with the nonsense. It seems to me that the women accept it because, as in other religions, indoctrination of minds with religious and social fallacies has the effect of hiding and distorting the facts of existence. Just the same, since I believe that all religion is a blight on humanity and should be combated earnestly, it is difficult as an atheist not to regard the wearing of ridiculous lust-reducing attire other than with a degree of contempt for them, but a huge degree of contempt for the men and the system that enforce the habit. . The same, of course, applies to the dress of bishops and the like, although they, at least in these times, seem much less dangerous than the religious leaders of Islam, who treat women as very much the inferiors of men. When we were in Damascus years ago, our daughter told us that all a man had to do to obtain a divorce was to say three times 'I divorce you.' I must admit, though, that I met some very likeable Muslim men in Syria. (One of them told me that he would take me to a belly dance show but he never ever did. His son's name was Jihad).

Jon and Terry and Peter (Singer) together on the conversation hour last Thursday. What a combination! The three of them atheists, highly intelligent, very knowledgeable and displaying a (too?) high degree of tolerance towards Carolyn Haley's opinions about religion, many of which, with very good reason, they would reject. (Just as well they did not ask her which argument for the existence of god she supports, as the reply would have embarrassing all round, that being a reason, probably, why the question is rarely asked.)

Carolyn said that 70% of Australians are Christians. In a long life I have known many that say that they are Christians but who do not believe that there is a god. Some regard themselves as Christians simply because they are admirers of Jesus Christ, whose existence, in any case, has never been proved.

Christian crusader, John Howard, the Prime Minister of the minor rogue state of the now notorious trio of rogue states, is on his whirlwind swan to receive, first of all, further instructions from that other Christian crusader in Washington. The third crusader, also now despised by many, the prime minister of Britain, is no doubt waiting impatiently for his fellow right-winger to arrive. He will be eager to hear the latest from their master in Washington. What a pitiful Christian trio they are! Meanwhile, the civilized leaders of France and Germany are doing their best to solve the problem of Iraq by means other than the mass slaughter of innocent civilians. Protest, protest, protest Australians!

It is plain from what Andrew (Guestbook 20/2) said, that he is one of many (including the Government of Victoria) that oppose free speech, at least as it applies to religious belief. He should write again and tell us why religion should not be criticized.

Blair, Bush and Howard all say that they are Christians. For their political opinions they all receive often well-deserved criticism and people generally accept that criticism as the justifiable exercise of free speech. But leave religion alone, people like Andrew say.

As for 'holy crusade,' Christians organized the crusades against the Arabs all those years ago, so the word 'crusade' is not entirely inappropriate as applied to that (many believe contemptible) trio of Christians that are determined to slaughter the Arabs of Iraq.

Finally, Andrew (Andrew who?) should let his mind dwell on the terrible history of Christianity, even disregarding the crusades, and defend that history, too, in his next letter. (Perhaps he should e-mail Tony, or John or George requesting help.)

Dear Editor

Please allow this old Australian atheist to congratulate you for publishing that very fine article by Andrew Sullivan. Great stuff, Andrew! It is such a pity that religion has, and always has had, such a terribly harmful influence in this world! That is beyond dispute. Why is it that people are unable, as Bertrand Russell said, 'to live their lives without the aid of myths?' Even Presidents have that weakness. In addition, I thank the NYT for making it possible for me to have the article sent by e-mail to a number of others, some believers, some not. The NYT is a very fine newspaper.

'Truth' is getting quite a few mentions in the Guestbook lately. Some years ago, an Anglican cleric wrote the following in a letter to me: 'God is still true for me and the assertion of "his existence" constitutes "truth" for me.' He seemed to take the view that he will decide for himself what is or what is not true, so one is more inclined to conclude that 'truth' in religious matters may well not always be the 'truth' at all.

The pragmatists have their own idea of 'truth' also, but perhaps Bertrand Russell, the great English philosopher, provides a description of 'truth' that many of us would agree with. He thought a belief or statement is true when it is in accord with fact. So if one believes that there is a God, then that is a true belief if, in fact, God exists.

Guestbook contribution from William Wallace was very interesting and informative, and let us hope that it helps further to turn members of the Australian public from supporting the three hell-bent-on-war leaders of the USA, Britain and Australia.

All three of them describe themselves as Christians which description, although they may think otherwise, does nothing to add lustre to their characters. They are displaying very undesirable characters, one is entitled to think.

Al Gore should really be the President of the USA, not George Bush. The Supreme Court (Bertrand Russell wrote that the court was there to serve the interests of the plutocracy) gave Bush the help that he needed to win the election, and of course the ignoramuses of the religious right are on his side. He is repaying them, although the separation of church and state is written into the USA Constitution.

Centuries of history, and history is made up of facts, demolish Mark Durie's(26/8) defence of religion against charges that religious fanaticism has a deadly record. We are seeing part of that record in the form of terrorism in these times.

Does he deny that religion was behind the Inquisitions, behind the Crusades, behind the burning at the stake of witches ('thou shall not suffer a witch to live'), behind the 200 years war between Protestants and Roman Catholics in Europe? How can he?

Among other matters in her fine article (Opinion 23/8) Pamela Bone writes about the indoctrination of children with religious belief.

Such indoctrination is a process that occurs in churches, mosques and synagogues, for example. It occurs in homes and schools, and a part is played by the media. Truth is so important! Truth is sacrificed.

The indoctrination of religious belief is brainwashing exemplified. It is a widespread and disastrous practice throughout most of our world, producing terribly harmful effects. The world of Islam is probably the leader in that regard in these times. Will the harm done by religious belief ever stop?

Children come into this world and are called Christians, Muslims or whatever, even though, as philosopher John Locke (1632-1704) an empiricist, argued, at birth the mind is devoid of innate knowledge. (He believed in god, even though many of his opinions would persuade the reader to believe otherwise.)

Children at birth have no religion, but have it foisted upon them. In this area, some Christian organizations, have a huge reputation. But even they, it may well be the case, are surpassed by their equivalents in the indoctrination of Islamic beliefs.

Oh, for freedom from religion.

Very soon after the terrorist attack in New York on 9/11/2001, Andrew Sullivan of *The New York Times* wrote an acclaimed article that was headed *This is a Religious War*. He was absolutely right. No matter that many prefer to describe it simply as 'terrorism,' that war is continuing and will almost certainly have no ending in our lifetimes.

Of course it is true, as is often said, that much of the world's Muslim population are good people. (Some years ago, I lived in Damascus for several months, meeting numbers of very fine Muslim people. And, by the way, I felt more

safe there than I did in New York a little earlier.) Nevertheless, their religious beliefs cause some of them to do terrible things. Religious belief has, undeniably, that kind of record. It is a world record.

Without doubt, many of the people that embraced Nazism were good people, too. But terrible deeds sprang also from the beliefs of Nazism. It is just as fatuous to absolve religion from blame when religious fanatics carry out their vile intentions, as it would be to absolve Nazism from blame when its fanatical adherents were in power in Germany. Nazism, at least, did not have a world-wide influence, and did not last very long.

It is a cruel kind of morality that, just for one aspect, condemns millions of impoverished women all over the world to bear child after unwanted child because of the Vatican's opposition to contraception.

As for intellectual greatness, no doubt there are many fine intellects in the Vatican, but is it not the case that the beliefs of Aristotle (384-322 BC) and Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) dominate their thinking?

The two men had brilliant intellects, but they had very little understanding of the world that they lived in. Perhaps the same could be said of the Vatican.

Back in November 2002, Bryan Collyer made this comment in the Guestbook: 'Is there a short pier somewhere that Bryan Ward could take a long walk down!!'. Two lots of twaddle in a couple of days - far too much. Go tell someone who cares Bryan'

The same day, Marna (Marna who?) wrote this: 'Bryan Collyer, do you reckon Bryan Ward might just take John Rawson by the hand and do a double act off the pier?' That comment raised a chuckle in our household.

I felt a twinge of sympathy for Bryan Ward. Although he did not mention my by name in his several letters, I felt sure (it was impossible to follow them) that they were prompted by letters from me as an opponent of religion. And so a couple of days ago Bryan Ward wrote again, this time using my name. It is sad, but the letter is not worthy of a reply. Twaddle? I'm afraid so.

That admirable Christian gentleman, Tony Blair, declared yesterday (21/1) on BBC World, that if objections in the Security Council to an attack on Iraq, not reasonable, then the attack will go ahead. What does John Howard say?

Capital punishment is not these days carried out in Australia. There are, however, still many countries where "legal murder" still occurs. It is carried out in some states of the USA, Texas, for example, where a well-known former Governor, George Wallace Bush, always signed his name as chief executioner. He has kept up the good work as we know, having thousands of Iraqis slaughtered in recent times. Ironically, he is now, in the opinion of many, a criminal himself - a war criminal, that is.

Capital punishment is carried out in that less than admirable country, Saudi Arabia, too. There the leading executioner (how many others?) averages about seven executions each day. "It doesn't matter to me," he says. "As long as I am doing God's will, it doesn't matter how many people I execute." He said this about his first job as an executioner: "The criminal was tied and blindfolded. With one stroke of the sword I severed his head. It rolled metres away." Of course he was nervous then, he says, as many people were watching, but now stage fright is a thing of the past.

Usually, he beheads the victim with a sword, but sometimes he uses a gun, especially in the case of women. Some times, though, the government wants him only to cut off a leg or a hand, in which cases he then uses a knife.

He has executed numerous women without hesitation, he explains. "Despite the fact that I hate violence against women, when it comes to God's will I have to carry it out." He is teaching one of his sons to carry on the role of executioner.

He, at least, would seem to be safe from the religious police, who have about 40 religious police stations in the country. (**Part Source: Saudi Arabia Arab News**)

As there is supposed to be separation of state and church in Australia, how is it that a Protestant Archbishop became Governor-General?

The Treasurer told us that the Prime Minister, without consultation with cabinet or (presumably) any of its members, made the decision about the filling of the position. Prime Ministers, it seems, can get away with that kind of undemocratic practice.

But why did he act against the convention(?) of separation? He is, himself, a protestant, and like many that are religious, probably does not particularly believe, or doesn't believe at all, in the separation. In addition, and this point of view may well be wrong, perhaps he thought about the previous Governor-General.

The former incumbent was strongly Roman Catholic. A highly thought of Governor-General, he took stands from time to time that clashed with the opinions of the Prime Minister.

Perhaps John (and Janet?) Howard thought that it would be nice to have protestant cleric to (more than) balance things up a bit. Plainly, the appointment was a monumental error on the part of the Prime Minister.

Pamela Bone (Opinion 27/7), as always in her articles, brings to our attention, a mind that is uncluttered by religious belief.

She mentions the question of whether or not God exists. (And it seems safe to assume that she has in mind the three monotheistic religions, Christianity, Islam and Judaism.)

The first thing to be said (and I mean to be brief) is that there is no valid argument that proves that He does exist. (And I challenge any reader to write a letter to *The Age* putting forward an argument that is at all convincing.)

Charles Darwin and his evolution findings destroyed what was once probably the best argument: the argument from design. Aristotle's first cause argument is destroyed by the question, 'If there has to be a first cause, then who caused God?'

Finally, (there are others) the ontological argument, which Bertrand Russell explained as follows:

'God, being the greatest object of thought, cannot lack existence, else he would not be the greatest.'

Tom Donellan, like millions everywhere, and over the centuries, takes the view that religion should not be criticized. Undoubtedly, he, like other believers, would not hesitate to criticize political beliefs. Why the glaring inconsistency?

Unlike Terry Lane (Opinion 27/7) I am not a pacifist. But, like him, I am an atheist. Because he is an atheist, I should have thought it very likely that he would have been appalled by the grisly steps taken by the Americans with the bodies of the two Iraqi men in Baghdad. (The 14 year old is rarely mentioned, is he?)

As is plain from what I have said, I believe that atheists are much more likely to be distressed by such barbarism than are believers. Perhaps atheists are, and always have been, many steps ahead of believers, many of whose record in history is shocking, when it comes to concern for the ethical nature of humankind?

Recently, a radio journalist described Prime Minister Blair as 'deeply religious.' Being a born-again Christian, President Bush may reasonably be similarly described. As for our own prime minister, well. you have to take much that he says with a grain of salt, don't you? (Why should we now, indeed, believe any of the three?)

If a person is 'deeply religious' is not he or she widely regarded as, like religion itself, as 'good'?

But there is a problem here. Aren't the terrorists 'deeply religious' too? It makes you wonder, doesn't it, whether religion is all it's cracked up to be?

In fact, throughout history deeply held religious belief has been behind the most terrible cruelty and misery. The record is indisputable. Religious belief will continue over the centuries to create further misery, horror, ignorance and death throughout humankind. Shouldn't more of us move away from it?

Some parents that say that they are in a bad way financially, nevertheless send their children to public schools. Is it unreasonable to say that they are 'living beyond their means?' Most would not regard that practice as a virtue. Why should the rest of the financially deprived people subsidise their aims for their children?

How important is truth? Striving for truth brought death at the stake for Bruno. A similar fate awaited Galileo in his search for truth. To escape that fate, he agreed to abjure those opinions that were in conflict with the scriptures.

If the vilification legislation is passed by the government of Victoria, it seems to me, people may well be charged with an offence even though what they said or wrote was true. Consider this letter. Bertrand Russell believed that a belief or a statement is true when it is in accord with fact. That opinion makes a lot of sense, surely.

In letters to the press, and in books that I have published, I oppose religious belief. I argue that all religion is untrue because, just for one thing, I do not believe in the existence of god. (Buddhists do not have a god, I realize.) Believers, I must say, have very poor arguments about that. Do they deal in facts?

And, I assert, religion is harmful. In the light of the historical record, how can that be denied? Facts are facts. Perhaps

a little bit of good is done here and there.

So am I, and others like me, likely to be in trouble with the law because of the Bracks government's misguided intention to please certain sections of society at the expense of free speech?

The highly-esteemed American psychologist and philosopher, William James, did not believe, it seems, in the existence of God, but thought it best that others did.

Our own William James (27/2), a regular contributor to The Age letters page, seems certainly to believe in God, which position, evidently, he reaches through the exercising of faith.

Remarkably, he seem to believe, also, that mankind is morally lost without a belief in a God, which kind of thinking belongs in the 19th century and before. Are, for example, the Chinese people morally lost, we may ask him? As for atheists, how, he asserts, can they grasp the obscenities of the suffering of children? Amazing.

The letters in The Age from about the latest dictatorial edict from the Vatican, this one laying down the law to, among others, Catholic politicians, were more than welcome to many of us. Islam, particularly, does this, too, of course, in these times being almost certainly the most harmful of all the religions. All the religions are, and always have been, harmful and untrue. Can that opinion be refuted?

It is, surely, an undeniable fact that huge numbers of people in the world are religious because they were indoctrinated with religious belief when they were little children. The sources for this indoctrination, in relation to Islam and Christianity, are suspect indeed. The bible and the Koran were put together hundreds and hundreds of years ago by ignorant me who, although they might have been intelligent, were lacking in understanding and knowledge of the world.

The recent attack on the USA by religious fanatics was every bit as horrifying and grief-inducing for atheists as for any other section of society.

Atheists, of course, do not regard prayer as having any efficacy, so they will not be heeding the calls for prayers. To pray is to assume the existence of a personal God, a God that listens to people when they pray. If He does listen, then on the occasion of the terrorist attacks he seems to have turned away from Christianity."

A comment by the contributor relating to the above follows:

All the media, including the ABC, most of the time, refuse to allow unbelievers to have a voice on religious matters. In doing this the media supports mythology and superstition against truth, just for one thing. Think of the harm that religion does. This contribution, of course, will not be accepted. Perhaps the ABC, a fine organization with hordes of very intelligent and educated people, has the courage, the integrity, to defend its disservice to humanity? I, for one, am waiting.

It is, surely, an undeniable fact that huge numbers of people in the world are religious because they were indoctrinated with religious belief when they were little children. There has also been, for a very long time, another kind of indoctrination process occurring: I mean, many people that are not believers in any religion, nevertheless think that, since religion is "good" and "people are entitled to their own opinions," etc., etc., one should not criticize religion

You need only to read some of the journalistic comment in recent times to note that the writers are very careful about what they say. And so, religion continues to be protected, as always it has been, from criticism. Religious fanatics (and they exist all over the world) killed all those poor people in the USA. That is, religion is heavily to blame.

Since religious fanatics carried out their fiendish plans on 11 September, 2001, much of the world has done its best to ignore, one way and another, an inescapable fact: adherents of one of the world's major religions, driven to a fanatical fervour by the teachings that they had imbibed, probably since infancy, carried out that vile crime against humanity.

Simply because the big majority of religious people are themselves good people, it does not necessarily follow that religion itself is "good". More than any event in a very long time, this should persuade us of its grave deficiency in "goodness."

Religion, although perhaps it does a little good here and there, has always been harmful—and Christianity, too, has always been a prominent influence in the spread of that harm. The facts of history are, however, immutable. If only humankind were guided more, much more, by truth!

If one of us gets things wrong, then the only chance that he or she has to get things right is to face up to that error and to seek to correct it. Humankind, most understandably, right from the beginning, got many things wrong. Consider just one thing: the error about the origin of life. The strong likelihood is that there will never be a satisfactory facing up to many errors no matter how fragile their basis may be. An exorcism from the human psyche of many false beliefs – particularly the belief in a supreme being — seems to be most unlikely.

It is easy to understand that people, in their ignorance, in their fear, people in the hands of oh-so-cruel nature, would seek an explanation for their existence in the form of gods, goddesses, angles -and so on. Had humankind begun with the knowledge that is now accessible on this earth, it is easy to believe that such beliefs would have had great difficulty in surviving. But ignorance was supreme at first. Later, advances in knowledge always met opposition. They still do.

With effects of often calamitous proportions, many of the beliefs have been passed on through the centuries; much of humankind is still under their influence. Religion is still a potent force in the world, a terribly harmful force, a blight on humanity, it may be argued. There has been in history a hundred years' war with religious conflict at its base. Is 2001 to be the beginning of another such war?

Here I was, an old atheist, already having been fitted with my last legs, doing my best to write another piece that would help to send religion to its own hell (what sort of mind would invent that place?), when my dear spouse said, "Hey, you'll like this from Phillip Adams." Did I ever like it! And she read the great atheist's article to me. (My eyes are suffering from old age, too.)

There are plenty of atheists about. But most of them, unwilling to take a stand against religious belief, making excuses for its terribly harmful effects throughout history, frightened for their careers, suspecting that religion may be somehow "good," etc., etc., stutter things like, 'Oh, people are entitled to their opinions.' And they — the 'condoners,' I call them) do nothing to bring about the decline of religious belief. But not Phillip Adams. Not The Weekend Australian, either.

Congratulations to Phillip and to The Weekend Australian for their excellent contribution towards the arguments against religious belief.

Dear Ruth

Yes, it was a very interesting article. I was pleased to see that the NYT was prepared to print such an article (perhaps they print them all the time). Would you say that Andrew Sullivan is an atheist? If he is, he certainly managed to obscure the fact. Perhaps he had to or he would not have been printed. As you know, our constitution separates church and state, too, and that is a help, of course. (The Governor-General?) I should think that Marx would not like his theories to be compared with religion in the way that Sullivan did it. Personally, I'd much, much prefer Communism to any religion. Mind you, I do accept that a fair amount of dogma is involved in the former.

The USA is by far not my favourite nation. Its absorption with religious belief is one of the reasons that I have little admiration for it. The place is crowded with religious fundamentalists, headed by most awful individuals such as Graham and Falwell. (The latter used to spend time at the White House with Bush senior.) Those fundamentalists did much to bring Bush junior to power, of course. A huge proportion of Americans (is it 80%) say that they believe in god — 47% really do believe that there is a devil, Peter Singer tells us. They are people that, to use an expression of Russell's, "are unable to live their lives without the aid of myths."

It is good that you and your son can still get on well together despite your rejection of religion. I have two sons (54 and 50) and two daughters (48 and 46). All, I think, are unbelievers. Just the same, there is by no means mutual agreement with me about religion. Three of them take the view that religion should be left alone by atheists like me. I am too militant for them. That is, I should not do the things that I do in opposition to it. I e-mailed Sullivan's article to them but there has been no acknowledgment at all. And I do not think that there will be. It could hardly be much plainer: Dad (silly old Dad?) should keep out of such activities. In any event, do not involve me.

I have tacked on a comment of mine that The ABC put in its Guestbook a week ago. It is such a pity that humankind got off on the wrong foot! I have had much luck with them — six have been published in the last few weeks. Mind you, I am well aware of my own limitations and their need to fill spaces.

Regards to you and Eric, John R

Doubtless it will take centuries and, indeed, the task will be gargantuan, close to impossible, given past centuries of indoctrination, just for one thing. Just the same, again over the centuries, there have always been men and women,

sufficiently enlightened and courageous, determined enough, to argue the case against religious belief. One thinks of Bertrand Russell, the great English philosopher, who died in 1970, and Richard Dawkins, the Oxford professor, a scholar of eminence, who in these times must surely be regarded as the world's leading intellect on the side of atheism. Now is the time for such people, joined by millions of others that presently choose to stay on the sidelines, to argue more and more and more against the source of so much history-recorded, cruel, anti-intellectual, poverty-creating, truth-rejecting, destructive, widespread content of the human mind.

The inclination to believe things that are patently false seems to be inherent in the minds of a big proportion of humankind. It is easy enough to believe that people of poor intelligence may easily be deluded by the myths of religion. But it is a real puzzle that many intelligent people, who in others areas of living their lives, always seek evidence on which to base their decisions about all kinds of matters, nevertheless do not seek that evidence when it comes to religious belief.

Most of us, in living our lives, have come to realize that, in the case of our own mental performance, we perform much better intellectually in one or more areas than in some other areas. And so we have the student, say, that is brilliant at mathematics but performs badly in another part of his or her intelligence. Perhaps many minds do not handle well the choice of believing or not believing religious dogma. Perhaps one day science will find the answer to the puzzle.

In these last few weeks, the centuries-old, terribly harmful, effects of religious belief and its consequences have been displayed to a world audience. There is no point in saying that the other religions are "good" and that no such thing would be done in their name. History records that other religions have an even worse record than the one presently carrying out evil deeds. And our Prime Minister, John Howard, says that this is not a religious war that is happening now!

The perpetrators are saturated in religious belief. Is there, by the way, a record of such behaviour on the part of unbelievers? No. They are the ones, then, that must take up the task of freeing humankind of its shackles, both intellectual and moral. A world in which unbelievers have very much more influence is a world that should be desired.

Dear Pamela (Bone)

I was so pleased, and I thank you, for replying when I sent you that article by Andrew Sullivan of the NYT. May I say, as well, that I much admire your opinions as you express them in The Age.

A number of articles written by me are on the web-site of The Australian Atheist Foundation. Lee Holmes is the web director. One of the things that he said about my latest article, was that I should try The Age (for one newspaper) with it. (It and others are on the ABC Guestbook.) It follows that I would think of you. I hope that I am not a pest, but perhaps you would be willing to say whether or not there is any chance of its being published? I am not seeking payment, I should add. The article appears below. Lee asked me to give it a title. I decided on, "Clear thinking - the world's foremost need."

I shall be away for perhaps 10 days from Tue next. My son monitors my e-mail. I hope to hear from you.

Regards and best wishes, John R

How refreshing it was to hear Jon Faine respond in his logical and very intelligent way, in the manner of an unbeliever, to a supporter of religion on Monday morning, October 21! Religion always has done, and is still doing, enormous harm throughout the world, and even many atheists condone its terrible history by not raising their voices against it. Some centuries ago, Roman Catholics and Protestants engaged in a war of fiendish cruelty in Europe for 130 years. When will the present religious war ever end?

When I was a small boy, a boy ten years old, I did something that I stopped doing a long time ago: I prayed. I prayed, with hands clasped, while lying in bed, after the last embers of a Guy Fawkes bonfire had been doused with a garden hose in Yarrowonga in 1932. Ours was not a religious family – no grace before any meals for us. But I prayed occasionally, in those times, I seem to remember. Prayers were, in Christian Australia, more likely to be uttered by people then than by their descendants now. The prayer was for my mother who had suddenly been taken to hospital. And grandma said, 'People are taken to hospital when they are not well.' (That my mother was pregnant was a condition beyond my powers of discernment, that is, I had not noticed that she was in 'the family way.')

These are very sad times, not only in Australia. Religious belief, of one kind or another, is very often behind the horrifying cruelties and calamities that inflict terror and a desire for revenge upon humankind. I have no reason to

believe that my prayers to God helped my mother. Does prayer have any efficacy at all? Is there a God that listens to people that pray?? If God does exist, He seems to take no notice of entreaties. Is to pray simply a ritual that achieves nothing? Why do members of parliament, those that are atheists or agnostics, submit to the reading of the Lord's Prayer without, it seems, any protest? The argument for atheism is very strong.

Of course it is true, as is often said, that much of the world's Muslim population are good people. Nevertheless, their religious beliefs cause some of them to do terrible things. Religious belief has, undeniably, that kind of record. It is a world record.

Without doubt, many of the people that embraced Nazism were good people, too. But terrible deeds sprang also from the beliefs of Nazism. It is just as fatuous to absolve religion from blame when religious fanatics carry out their vile intentions, as it would be to absolve Nazism from blame when its fanatical adherents were in power in Germany. Nazism, at least, did not last very long. Unfortunately, religion has been with humankind for a very long time. Whereas people, in the main, condemn Nazism, it is a widespread practice for most people not to criticize religion. Why is this so?

In spite of all the evidence to the contrary, religion is widely regarded as somehow 'good.' Many atheists and agnostics - the 'condoners,' I shall call them - must think it 'good' also, for they stand weakly on the sidelines, helping to hold back human progress, tendering excuses for religion, failing to face up to the fact of religion's terrible historical record and its patent lack of truth. 'Oh,' they may say, 'people are entitled to their opinions.' Certainly people are entitled to their opinions. But why should opinions held in support of religious belief be regarded so widely as sacrosanct?

Its record is so bad. One is perfectly entitled to criticize a political leader for, after all, politicians are mostly 'bad,' even though many of them are very fine people, doing their best to represent the political idea in which they believe. In contrast, clerics, like their religion, are mostly 'good,' and so they must not be criticized. Yet, they are the leaders of the (widely varied) religious faiths that have been the source of much of the misery in the world for centuries. As for the more recent fiendish outcomes of religious belief, an end to them seems likely never to occur in the lifetimes of today's world population.

Surely many people were shocked and disgusted that animals were sacrificed in Bali recently, in accordance with some cruel and mindless religious practice. Were there protests to the media at all? Certainly, the sacrifices were carried out at the time of a very sad gathering of those having lost loved ones, and that fact might have dissuaded protesters. But, in any case, any protests made would have amounted to a protest against a religion, and society, in the main, and over the centuries, does not think that religion should be criticized. Again, some Christians do not believe that animals have (those mysterious entities) souls, so would they care much about the cruelty to the animals anyway

Because I declare my self as an atheist, and I am doing what an atheist should do, that is, oppose religion, there is virtually no chance that this letter will be published That's the way it is. But here goes anyway.

'Truth' is a word that is used very loosely, especially in the world of religious belief. Some years ago, an Anglican cleric wrote the following in a letter to me: 'God is still true for me and the assertion of "his existence" constitutes "truth" for me.' He seemed to take the view that he will decide for himself what is or what is not true, so one is more than inclined to conclude that 'truth' in religious matters may well not always be the 'truth' at all.

The Pragmatists have their own idea of 'truth' also, but perhaps Bertrand Russell, the great English philosopher, provides a description of 'truth' that many of us would agree with. He thought a belief or a statement is true when it is in accord with fact. So if one believes that there is a God, then that is a true belief if, in fact, God exists.

Two Australian (old) men, good friends of mine, said to me on separate occasions, that the covering up of women's bodies in the Muslim way was probably a good practice. They meant that the sight of, say, bare female bellies promoted lust. One cannot deny that that opinion has some truth to it, but to what sort of minds does that attitude appeal? Certainly most of the men of the "Allah is Great" millions on earth follow the Koran in such matters and the women, too, have, in the main, gone along with the nonsense. It seems to me that the women accept it because, as in other religions, indoctrination of minds with religious and social fallacies has the effect of hiding and distorting the facts of existence. Just the same, since I believe that all religion is a blight on humanity and should be combated earnestly, it is difficult as an atheist not to regard the wearing of ridiculous lust-reducing attire other than with a degree of contempt for them, but a huge degree of contempt for the men and the system that enforce the habit. . The same, of

course, applies to the dress of bishops and the like, although they, at least in these times, seem much less dangerous than the religious leaders of Islam, who treat women as very much the inferiors of men. When we were in Damascus years ago, our daughter told us that all a man had to do to obtain a divorce was to say three times 'I divorce you.' I must admit, though, that I met some very likeable Muslim men in Syria. (One of them told me that he would take me to a belly dance show but he never ever did. His son's name was Jihad)

So the Australian Prime Minister has (as I heard on 774 at 10 o'clock news Sunday morning) declared that if Iraqi children are killed in the war that he and Blair are prepared to their help the tyrant from Texas launch, then Saddam Hussein will be to blame. Such a statement could surely come only from a man of at least as poor quality (and that's saying something) as the master upon whom he fawns in Washington. ((Despite what Blair is doing, he seems to me to be a much better human being than either of the other two with whom he is disgustingly embroiled.) This is not the first time (remember *Tampa?*) that the Prime Minister of our country has displayed a patent unsuitability for high office. He is a national disgrace, who is well on the way towards laying the basis for unremitting acts of revenge against Australian citizens. Do the enormous protest crowds in Australia amount to a kind of uprising? As an atheist, I should like to pay tribute to Arch-bishop Watson, whom I applauded several times as he addressed the gathering at Federation Square last Friday evening. And those other three are Christians?

Unlike Terry Lane (Opinion 27/7) I am not a pacifist. But, like him I am an atheist. Because he is an atheist, I should have thought it very likely that he would have been appalled by the grisly steps taken by the Americans with the bodies of the two Iraqi men in Baghdad. (The 14 year old is rarely mentioned, is he?)

As is plain from what I have said, I believe that atheists are much more likely to be distressed by such barbarism than are believers. Perhaps atheists are, and always have been, many steps ahead of believers, many of whose record in history is shocking, when it comes to concern for the ethical nature of humankind?

Very soon after the terrorist attack in New York on 9/11/2001, Andrew Sullivan of The New York Times wrote an acclaimed article that was headed *This Is a Religious War*. He was absolutely right. No matter that many prefer to describe it simply as 'terrorism,' that war is continuing and will almost certainly have no ending in our lifetimes.

Of course it is true, as is often said, that much of the world's Muslim population are good people. Some years ago, I lived in Damascus for several months, meeting numbers of very fine Muslim people. And by the way, I felt more safe there than I did in New York a little earlier.) Nevertheless, their religious beliefs cause some of them to do terrible things. Religious belief has, undeniably, that kind of record. It is a world record.

Without doubt, many of the people that embraced Nazism were good people, too. But terrible deeds sprang also from the beliefs of Nazism. It is just as fatuous to absolve religion from blame when religious fanatics carry out their vile intentions, as it would be to absolve Nazism from blame when its fanatical adherents were in power in Germany. Nazism, at least, did not have a world-wide influence, and did not last very long.

Kerryn writes, "can you prove therefore that He does not exist? Go convince me."

Come on, Kerryn, believers like you say that he does exist – it is up to believers to prove that assertion. I mean, should I assert that there existed a human being with ten heads, it would be up to me to prove that there was, wouldn't it? In any case, it is widely believed that one cannot prove a negative. I am afraid that the ball is in your court in the matter of proof for the existence of a god. Let us read your argument. Religion relies heavily on faith. Bertrand Russell wrote that, 'Faith is a belief in something for which there is no evidence.'

Kerryn (27/08/2003), I accept what you say about hypotheses I suppose, but I do think that you are trying to muddy the waters a bit. I am a bit of a pedant, I also suppose, but your two split infinitives and your failure to use question marks when normally required are of interest to me. (A good argument for not splitting infinitives is that sometimes the result sounds ugly - try, 'She began to beautifully sing.')

It is all pretty straightforward, I think. I certainly cannot prove that there is not a god, of course I can't. You, though, seem to be firm in your opinion that there is. You appear unable, however, to put forward any kind of argument to support your opinion. You should do so.

As for the mess that the world is in, (hasn't it always been in a mess?) of course, since I do not believe in his existence, I cannot blame a god. But since believers believe in him as all-knowing and all-powerful, etc etc, they must wonder why he lets things be the very imperfect way that they are.

It is no wonder that The Age published Harold Aspinall's 'dream' letter on 28/9. How could such a delightful piece of writing, a piece that will please immensely a good proportion of the paper's readership because they, themselves have the very same dream, be rejected? Letters will have flooded in rejecting and complaining about his dream, his wish, , but those letters will be quite lacking if considered from the viewpoint of the search for truth.

Pete, (29/8) your making it plain that you do not believe in evolution fits in well with the rest of the things that you write: you might well have lived in medieval times. How do you know what god thinks? As for free will, have you never heard of determinism? Perhaps we do not have free will.

As for evolution, you should understand that hardly a biologist in the world, I am not able to say how many, does not accept the fact of evolution, although there are differences about some of its aspects. They, Pete, are scientists, experts. Do you really believe that they (experts in that field) are all wrong and that you and others like you are right?

Put the Bible away (better permanently) and read scientist such as Richard Dawkins, Stephen Jay Gould and Daniel C. Dennett not to mention the great man Darwin, himself.

Like the several others that have defended religion in reply to my comments, you make no effort to argue in any way convincingly, that god exists. The fact is that there is no convincing argument, no evidence.

John Yeo(1/9) in writing of the (he alleges) harmful effects of the non-influence of religion in Russia, China and North Korea was not likely, of course, to mention countries where religion has a very strongly, harmful effect, indeed. Consider this list: Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia (40 religious police stations), Pakistan, India Indonesia Nigeria and more.

As for Christian nations, well, I'll not consider them, just now.

Twice very recently, letter writers to The Sunday Age (this time from Ralph Horner 7/9) have argued that a lack of religious belief in Russia (there were, of course many believers) had a detrimental effect on that society.

Many of us would argue, based on compelling evidence, that the contrary is the case - religion has a detrimental effect on any society in which it has any kind of influence. This is so obviously true that examples are unnecessary.

On 9/9, Jon Faine learned on 774 from someone that he was speaking to, that the mayor of one of the Melbourne councils had decided that in future there would be no prayers said before council meetings.

There are protests, including a petition, about this decision. It seems that that curious practice is common among councils and parliaments, the Christian God, presumably, being the one to whom the prayers are directed.

Jon, who always strives for fairness and accuracy in his programs, wondered why, in the light of there being people of a number of religions in Australia, the prayers of other religions should be excluded from the ritual.

But Jon, this time, was not fair. He failed to mention the rights of so many people in councils and parliaments and elsewhere that reject religion altogether and regard prayers as having, anyway, no efficacy at all since they believe that there is no God to whom to pray.

The ritual of the Lord's prayer being said before, for example, a federal parliamentary daily session begins, is a practice that should long ago have been discontinued, not only because of the hugely important separation of state and church.

As for the hypocrisy of those politicians and councillors that are atheists, perhaps some of them, at least, do not say 'Amen.'

Catherine (9/9), I do not mean to be unkind, but the shelves of religious bookshops are crowded with fairy tales and I gave up reading them many years ago . It is one of the mysteries of existence that men or women with the fine intelligence of C.S. Lewis accept those fairy tales as truth . As for knowing god in your head and heart – perhaps that 'knowing' helps drive the religious fanatics to carry out their present-day appalling deeds. You should read Bertrand Russell's 'Why I am not a Christian' or his 'History of Western Philosophy'. Have you heard of Richard Dawkins?

Michelle (11/9), I am sure that your irritation about the widespread and fatuous declaration that "We should all join in prayer," is shared by many. People actually see tragedies such as the 9/11 attack by religious fanatics, and then pray to a god that allowed it to happen.

Leo (11/9), I should have thought that it is 'abundantly clear' that I am an atheist, not an agnostic. An agnostic neither affirms nor denies the existence of god – an atheist does deny that god exists. The term 'agnostic,' I understand, was

coined by Thomas Huxley, a famous English biologist, (1825-1896.)

Unlike you, I have always thought that the concept of a supreme being, in the case of the three monotheistic religions, at least, was an integral part of religious belief. In not attending church, you are one of a steadily growing proportion of populations that fail to see a purpose in doing so. May the trend accelerate.

In passing, it seems to me terribly (typically?) cruel that the present Pope, old and in the poorest health, is being trundled about the world in support of the faith, and the ever-continuing money making process so heavily promoted by the Vatican. And in relation to your remarks about politics and economic systems, let me say this: I would much prefer Communism to the rule of the Vatican or any other theocracy.

Keep on enjoying your life, and thanks for your good wishes. Let me add something that Bertrand Russell wrote:

"I believe that when I die I shall rot, and nothing of my ego will survive. I am not young, and I love life. But I should scorn to shiver with terror at the thought of annihilation. Happiness is none the less true happiness because it must come to an end, nor do thought and love lose their value because they are not everlasting."

Again and again one reads and hears that, as claimed, by Roger Marks (21/9), God gave us free will. That argument is a very useful one for Christians to have at hand for they can use it to excuse the fact that God does not take any steps to prevent just for one example, evil deeds.

Those that hold that opinion might well never have heard of Determinism because they are into theology rather than philosophy.. Many people believe that what we do is not an expression of free will but results from our genes and our history.

A few days ago, macca (macca who?) referred to a very famous English Earl as an 'old fraud.' Bertrand Russell, (1872-1970) as he preferred to be known, was a person of great eminence, and I have already written of some of the reasons for his huge reputation in an earlier reply to comments by macca.

He was an atheist, so of course he was hated by many, perhaps most of all by the Roman Catholic church. He had a torrid love life and married four times: Alys, Dora, Peter and Edith. He wrote the most beautiful love letters one could read. In passing, I can say that I know a great deal about him, having read dozens of books written by him and by others about him. (I cannot read books anymore.) He wrote 70 books in 70 years, and thousands of papers, essays and letters. He was very much a leader in the field of thought.

Just the other day the leader of the Roman Catholic church, in St Peter's square, said that God had been telling him certain things. How is it, macca, that the thousands in his audience could believe such a statement? Answer: because they were among other things, indoctrinated human beings, indoctrinated from infancy. If they were asked in what way God communicated those directions to their leader, they would not, of course, have a rational reply. Indeed, they could not even give a rational answer to, just for one thing, to the question, "Does God exist?" That's religion for you.

Could macca's ill-informed description of Russell be more accurately applied to the theologian rather than to the philosopher?

I was interested to read your comments macca, although there was something frantic about them. They were, too, very self-revealing I thought. You remain anonymous, but at least we now know for sure that you are a religious person and a right-winger. (You are, of course, perfectly entitled so to be.)

On the other hand you make no real attempt to defend your religion against my arguments, badly put as they may well be. I mean about god, the terrible history of religion, the lies told in its name and the fact that it is made up of myths, for example. The fact is that you have very few, if any, arguments that will stand up to proper scrutiny.

Sure, I have plenty to say, and there is no doubt that you are not the only one that finds me abhorrent. And I must say that I think the ABC, particularly the Moderator, admirable for giving an atheist a fair go in its Guestbook. That there have been protests about my opinions I have little doubt. The ABC in Melbourne obviously believes in free speech. (By the way, I do have three books in the State and other libraries, but I will not claim any real quality for them)

It was rather indelicate of you to use the expression "got through more women" in relation to Russell's wives. The bit about the hot dinners was pretty silly. At least, though, women were his preference; he was not one to prey upon little children, of which heinous behaviour the world knows much about in relation to an institution that you seem plainly to support.

No, I did not mention Russell's being an Earl to impress anyone. To help describe him, it seems reasonable to me to mention his place in the English aristocracy. I am quite without regard for any such rubbish, and wish all societies

were rid of such class distinctions . How about our new Australian prince?

When, in the 1960s, Paul Johnson was made editor of the left-wing “New Statesman,” some were surprised, one reason for the surprise being that he was a Roman Catholic. (I was a subscriber.) He was a brilliant writer, but was not in the job for very long. (Perhaps he refused to print articles on religion from Russell?) He became an historian of some fame, became more and more religious (frightened of death?), and he and Margaret Thatcher were very friendly. He could hardly have chosen a more right-wing friend, could he?

I don't mind being called a loose cannon or a crackpot and other things like that, but I would hate to be called a papist or any other name that branded me as religious. Exclamation marks, by the way, are for use after an exclamation. And as you did not write an exclamatory sentence, you did not even need to use one let alone three on one occasion.

Thanks for correcting me on “What goes,” I had a feeling that it was not right. I certainly agree with you about The Age. Most of the journalists (although many write very well) , don't know why a keyboard has square bracket keys. (Note their use near the end of this entry.) They have no idea what an infinitive is. They have never heard of a relative pronoun. The use of “who” and whom” and “will” and “shall” are mysteries to them. They write sentences such as “thunder and lightning is expected,” and so on and so on.

The Age will not print letters to the editor from me, one reason being that I criticize religion. The main reason, though, is that a former letters editor (now the religious affairs writer) asked the present letters editor not to do so after a couple of my letters (not on religion) did appear. I have expressed to The Age my opinions on this black-listing and no attempt has been made to deny my allegations. I can tell you that The Age is good at ignoring complaints of that sort, hoping that it will all go away.

Yes, my text does get mucked up from time to time. I am about a eyelash from being legally blind, and those things happen mainly when there is no proof reader available. I am not looking for sympathy; I thought an explanation necessary.

It seems to me that one is irrational when he or she fails in the use of reason. Religious dogma pits aside, in the main anyway, the use of reason. To believe in, say, the resurrection, seems to me to be a good example of irrationality. As for miracles...

Many very fine thinkers used their reason (and their emotions and instincts) to support Communism. That Communism in the Soviet Union failed (but how about China?) does not show that they were irrational. But asserting that god talks to you is surely certainly so.

As I remember, Gorbachev suffered the huge indignity on two occasions of having to visit the Pope before the collapse occurred. Later on, Gorbachev wrote, “It [the collapse] would never have happened without the Pope”.

Fountain says that he is an atheist, but I have to say that my experience it is very unusual for an genuine atheist to abuse publicly fellow atheists as he has done. Atheists agree on a very important question:: there is not a supreme being. Believers, on the other hand, indulge, all over the world, for thousands of years, in killing one another and those that they regarded as heretics. (I do not include Buddhists, I should stress,) . The religions all disagree with one another to extent that logic dictates that only one of them can be true. Of course, none of them is true.

As for Fountain, he needs to put together an entry to the Guestbook that will explain to us his reasons for describing David Nicholls and me as “intellectually arrogant” and “fools,” else it will be reasonable to conclude that he is intellectually cowardly or deficient. He needs to demonstrate to the readers that he, himself, is not a fool.

Many people everywhere must be angry, sad, nervous and convinced that religious fanatics, as, indeed, they have done over the centuries, will continue for many years to come to bring chaos, misery, and millions of deaths throughout the world.

Making a heavy contribution towards barbarities in the past, now and in the future are the Islamic spiritual leaders that we hear about so often in these times.

Like the spiritual leaders of all the religions, I mean popes, archbishops, priests, rabbis, etc., one of their main functions is ensuring that little children are indoctrinated with religious belief. (Many of us have seen on TV, for example, some of the activity in schoolrooms in Pakistan).

Since, as Bertrand Russell has pointed out, the major religions differ in important respects, only one of them can be true. Which one? He, of course, thought that not one was true, and anyone trying to prove any religion to be true has an impossible task on his or her hands. Try arguing that god exists. (The ‘faith’ bit is no argument). Another thing that religions have in common is that they are, and always have been, enormously harmful, not only with regard to

killings. Why is it that so much of humankind is unable to live their lives without the aid of myths. (Russell again).
The invasion of Iraq was inexcusable, but a war on religious fanatics must be pursued relentlessly.

Think about the world and its nations, and you may well be struck by the notion that, and it may well be more than a coincidence, those nations that are most saturated by religious belief are less advanced than other more secular nations.

Huge inroads into the viability of religious belief would be made if it were possible to institute as a universal practice the banning of the religious indoctrination of children in schools. Most people that believe in God do so because they were taught religion when they were little children. This contributor to The Forum escaped that misfortune and is exceedingly grateful for his lack of religious belief. It is surely the responsibility of unbelievers to proclaim their atheism. And, of course, many do so.

The Australian deserves much praise for accepting in The Forum and in letters to the editor, opinions on religion that not many years ago would be thrown into the wastepaper basket.

“Sectarian violence” is such a handy expression for the media and others to use. It means that “religious violence” can be avoided.

We Australians are entitled to feel some pride in our nation. Its path through history, although perhaps not an illustrious one, compares very favourably with many other advanced nations, Canada, for example.. We often criticize our democracy, but we are glad to have it just the same.

Australian governments, however, it may well be argued, have made (at least) two very serious errors, errors in international relations and in our relations with humanity: we allied ourselves with the United States in the illegal invasions of Vietnam and Iraq. In both cases, the arguments for war were patently phoney.

The war in Vietnam now belongs to history. The war in Iraq drags on its bloodcurdling way. The coalition is waging what is pretty much a conventional war. Its opponents are in guerrilla war mode. In addition, there is a religious civil war being waged. Religious wars, driven by fanatical religious belief, (consider the Crusades), are carried out with the utmost savagery, with unbridled ferocity. They are typified by the appalling conflict in Iraq.

Led by the admirable Jim Cairns, thousands and thousands of Australians protested the war in Vietnam. Where are the protesters now? Where is the Australian Left? Where is the church? How is it that we protested with passion against the war in Vietnam but not the war in Iraq? Is there a religious factor here, a racist factor, perhaps? One may reasonably assume that we Australians are not particularly concerned about our involvement in this hideous illegal war. Does that attitude reveal a flaw in our national character?

Let the government put chaplains in government schools, and the protests should almost amount to a revolution.

To deny the fact of evolution, as Terry Pietsch does, is a very curious position to take in our reasonably well-educated society. That position is much at odds with (not only) the opinions of the best intellects in the world, including the scientific world. Among the scientists, biologists are the most involved group to be in touch with evolution. Hardly any of them would deny that evolution is a fact of existence. To say that they are wrong is, indeed, an extremely rash step to take. The arguments for contrary opinions, although people are entitled to have them certainly, are so lacking in validity, that it is difficult to believe that they would have any chance of being accepted. But then, we are dealing with religion, aren't we?

Helen Murray mentions faith. . Since the existence of God cannot be proved, believers have to rely on faith. As someone said, “Faith is a belief in something for which there is no evidence.”

One gets more than a little tired of hearing about “God’s will” and that “Allah is great.” How about “Atheism is better” for a change?

Some time ago, John Howard mentioned the possibility that Australia may carry out a pre-emptive strike against terrorists in Asia. Surely, a most appropriate target would be that fiend, that infamous spiritual leader who devised the Bali massacre in 2002.

As an atheist, I find it difficult when thinking about the Americans, not to take very much into account the fact that a very big majority of them believe in God. Not only that, many millions of them are creationists and so they do not believe in evolution. This latter failing, particularly, creates disdain, and so dislike in many Australians I am sure. There are, of course, many admirable Americans, although I would certainly not place the present Administration in that group.

Peter Coleman admired Santamaria, one of whose heroes was the fascist dictator, General Franco of Spain. Was Peter Coleman also an admirer of Franco?

Think about the world and its nations, and you may well be struck by the notion that, and it may well be more than a coincidence, those nations that are most saturated by religious belief are less advanced than other more secular nations.