

# WA HUMANIST NEWS



Organ of the Humanist Society of WA Inc. Box T1799, GPO Perth, WA. 6001.  
Patrons: Diana Warnock, former MLA & Dr Laadan Fletcher.

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## EDITORIAL

This is my final newsletter as your editor. 'From the President's Desk', on page two, second paragraph, will give you an insight as to the newsletter's future.

For the moment, the best avenue for communication is the Humanist Society of WA Meetup Web site. It is recommended that, if you have not already done so, **enrol**. It doesn't cost you a thing. I refer you to page three, under the heading, 'How to get the most out of the HSWA Meetup website'. Amongst other information, there is a direction on how to enrol. For those not on-line, don't feel left out. You will be well catered for.

I do thank those who encouraged me through the many years as editor. Thanks to those who sent in articles from which I seemed to have a plethora of information, such that I could not publish all of them. To those people, I apologise. It was always my wish, firstly, to inform and from there make the newsletter something that you looked forward to receiving. A special thanks to Diana Warnock who did a very professional job in proof reading my work, and from her journalistic background, helped educate me. *Thanks to all who read the newsletters. You wanting to read them is the reward an editor is seeking.*

My wish above all is that Humanism will more than survive, and will go forward, through the power of reason, fulfilling all of its dreams of tolerance, understanding, peace and equality on this planet of ours; learn and have the will, collectively, to look after it and not plunder it to our detriment.

All the best to the committee, particularly in this coming year, and for the future.

Regards, Eric.

*Letters or articles in this Newsletter do not necessarily reflect the views and/or policies of the Society*

# A VERY HAPPY SOLSTICE TO ALL OUR READERS

## FROM THE PRESIDENT'S DESK

First of all I must say how humbled and honoured I am to have been entrusted by the Society to be its President for the coming year. It certainly was a shock when Eric put my name forward at the AGM. Any concerns I had were soon alleviated by the election of an excellent new committee for the Society, including four first time HSWA committee members. We have already held our first, very constructive, committee meeting and are beginning to explore various potential initiatives to reinvigorate the Society and raise its profile in the wider community. More details will follow once we have a clearer idea on the practicalities (and costs) of the ideas currently being reviewed.

What has been resolved is that, unfortunately, this is to be the last paper version of the Society's quarterly newsletter, for the time being. Moving forward, the Society's newsletter will be e-mailed to members in an electronic format. This will save the Society considerable expense and the physical burden of having to place the printed newsletter in envelopes, affixing with address labels and stamps. I would also urge all members to ensure that the Society has an up to date record of their e-mail address. For those members who do not have internet access we will, however, post out a printed copy. Please, let us know if this is your preference.

In regards to get-togethers, the committee has agreed that we will definitely put on three events over the coming year; December (for details, refer 'For Your Diary'), Darwin Day and Winter Get-Togethers. We will also promote and encourage members to attend events being put on by our sister group, Perth Atheist Meetup.

There has been a lot of feedback (some good and some not so good) regarding our decision to move away from a dedicated website and onto the Meetup forum. Unfortunately, this was done due to practical and financial considerations and technical difficulty in creating a viable and user friendly HSWA website. It is certainly our intention, when we have the resources and manpower, to have our own website. However, in the meantime, I would encourage members to register on our Meetup website, so to keep abreast of upcoming events and vigorous intellectual discussion that occurs on its Discussion Forum (see under 'Reports': How to get the most out of the Meetup website).

Finally, on behalf of the HSWA I must give whole hearted thanks to two Humanists who are retiring, this year, from "active service" on the committee, Diana Warronock and Eric Pyatt. Without their sterling efforts and hard work over many years the Society, probably, would no longer exist. Former President Diana, and former Secretary, Events Organiser, Treasurer and Newsletter Editor, Eric, on behalf of all the members, Thank You So Much.

**James Fairbairn.**

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If a statue in a park of a person on a horse has both front legs in the air, The person died in battle. If the horse has one front leg in the air, the person died as a result of wounds received in battle. If the horse has all four legs on the ground, the person died of natural causes. <<

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## FOR YOUR DIARY

### DECEMBER GET-TOGETHER

**4.00 to 7.00 pm**

**Saturday, 17th December, 2011**

**@**

**President James' home**

**7 Walcha Street, Mullaloo**

**RSVP Mobile: 0423 026 548**

**An informal get-together of the like minded**

**An opportunity for philosophical debate**

**Enjoy the company of fellow Humanists**

**Participate in a light-hearted quiz**

**Subject: Humanism**

**Please, bring a plate of food to share**

**BYO liquid refreshment**

## REPORTS

### AGM

**Held at Lutz Elber's home,  
1 Wanborough Close, Gwelup  
2.00pm, Sunday, 16th October, 2011.**

There were 13 members in attendance with three guests and 5 apologies.

A motion was proposed, "That we enter discussions with Perth Atheists, Skeptics and others to form a joint non-religious organisation". Though it was decided in the negative, the gate must be left open. The motion was a little premature, as was proven as the meeting progressed. It was needed to test the meeting if any one would put up their hand to join the executive and committee. As it turned out all executive positions were filled and four committee members were elected, leaving two spaces for anyone who may show interest during the year.

President Diana thanked everyone for their support in her term of office and pointed out that new blood was needed to stimulate the Society and that she would not seek re-election or stand for committee but, of course, remain a member.

In his Editor's report, Secretary/Treasurer Eric thanked those for their encouragement and support with articles of interest. He enjoyed the experience and personal development, even though it was in his later years. He will deliver one more newsletter and leave it to the new committee to decide on the future of the newsletter.

He pointed out that he would not be standing for any executive position or committee.

On being elected President James thanked all for their support and called for a meeting of the new committee at the closing of proceedings. <<

## HOW TO GET THE MOST OUT OF THE HSWA MEETUP WEBSITE

<http://www.meetup.com/Humanist-Society-of-WA/>

This is our new online home. It is where we will publish details of upcoming events; have vigorous discussions in the Forum and where we will record the activities of the Society.

**FIRST STEP:** Register your details on Meetup by clicking on the “Sign Up” icon on the top right hand corner of the web page.

**Important Note:** Though you must put your real name into the registration, you may then set your profile so that only a partial name (e.g. John B) or a nick-name appears whenever you do anything on the site, such as post a comment on the Forum. This will enable those of you who fear hell-fire and damnation to protect your identity! Add a photo if you wish, but this is not mandatory.

**SECOND STEP:** Familiarise yourself with the main page.

On the left hand column are details about us as a Society, who are the organisers and who are the members of our online community.

The middle column has details of our upcoming events ( or those of our sister organisations) and reviews of our previous events.

The right column, “What’s New”, shows recent activity in the forum or of new members joining. To find out more on these just click on the links.

**THIRD STEP:** Options along the top of the page.

- **Home:** By clicking this it will just take you back to the main home page.
- **Members:** Here you can view and edit your own online profile; see any messages that other members have sent to you; to see the details of all the other members.
- **Sponsors:** This is currently blank. Unless a suitable humanist oriented company ever wanted to sponsor our website, it will remain so.
- **Photos:** Currently, quite Spartan but this is where we can post photos from events for all to see.
- **Page:** This is all the background information on Humanism and the Society itself (sorry, not a great descriptive header but we have no influence over that).
- **Discussions:** This houses both the Forum and the Video and Media Archive. The former is where any member can start a debate on any relevant subject and others can comment on that. Obviously, common sense must prevail in regards to not defaming anyone and keeping the debate civilised. The latter is where you can watch or listen to various videos and podcasts which have a Humanist flavour.

- **Polls:** Where we conduct periodic polls on questions of the day.

- **Files:** Where we can store various documents, e.g. Our Constitution.

- **Promote:** Gives you the tools to invite your friends to join our online community as well as other useful features.

- **Stats:** Is unsurprisingly statistic about the site itself.

- **Group Tools:** These are only accessible by Group Organisers who are currently all of the committee members and enables us, among other things, to email all members of the online community.

**FOURTH STEP:** Get involved.

The site is designed to be dynamic so, please, do respond to event RSVP’s and definitely get involved in the debates on the Forum. We’d love to hear from you.

Hopefully, that covers all that you would need to know. If not, please, do feel free to email me at:

<thehistorian@openyoureyesnews.com>

**James Fairbairn.**  
President HSWA.

## REASON AUSTRALIA

*The following is an article from the Victorian Humanist. Should HSWA follow suit? CAHS is a member.....Ed.*

The HSV has become a foundation member of the national free-thought association, Reason Australia—which was foreshadowed in AH 103, pages 8-9, and became incorporated on 5th July. The founding partners are groups listed on the website:

<www.reasonaustralia.org>

There you can read, ‘ We are a voice for reason in Australia, a national umbrella organisation of “free-thought” groups (atheists, humanists, rationalists, secularists and skeptics) and individuals who care about evidence-based reasoning and good science in public debate.

We aim to influence public policy and public opinion in favour of a secular society, freedom of inquiry and universal human values.

‘We share:

- a naturalistic understanding of the universe
- the view that there is no credible evidence for the existence of supernatural beings or phenomena.
- a commitment to the development and use of evidence-based reasoning and universal human values for the benefit of society’

Rosslyn Ives and Stephen Stuart were appointed to the board at the first meeting, held 25th September. Members of HSV who would be willing to contribute in any practical way to campaigns that Reason Australia will develop are invited to register their interest on that website.

**Stephen Stuart.**  
President HSV.

DEATH is the price of evolution.

## VALE

### Roland Harvard Farrant

Roland is no longer a part of our lives. But we should not grieve—to live a good and fulfilling life for 90 years, with only the last couple of months marred by failing health, and then go peacefully, is something to be thankful for.

Roland Farrant was a Humanist and there are many people whose lives have been enriched by having known him. He will be remembered as a father, a father-in-law, a grandfather and a friend.

His early grounding in Humanism was to a large extent influenced by his parents. Especially his father, Arthur Farrant who encouraged his son's interest in science, culminating into a very distinguished career later on in life. After completing his undergraduate studies at UWA, Roland and his loving wife, Pam, spent some time in Melbourne and Sydney before moving to the United States where he completed his doctorate at North Western University in Illinois. He was subsequently made Professor of Psychology at the Laurentian University in Ontario, Canada. As a further testament of his capabilities he delivered his lectures in French, but as Pam said, "He did it with a very strong Australian accent".

Roland was very committed to Humanism and although he was not a very expressive person and rarely seen to laugh, he compensated by having a wit and an intellect that few can match. Very often he would pleasantly stump many of us with his one-liners that would encapsulate what was discussed in the lively committee meetings of HSWA. He was also very committed to the Society's activities and would immediately renew his contact with the Society upon his sabbatical back in Australia. He also served as a Vice-President and a committee member with the Society. We at the Society are going to miss him.

All living things are subject to death; it is the basis for growth. Through evolution, in the course of millions upon millions of deaths, humanity has evolved. We carry this inheritance. But we, as individuals, have a more personal contribution to make, each in the value of our lives.

**Mike Cheam.**  
**Secretary, HSWA.**

*(Mike is a registered Celebrant who conducted the proceedings at Roland's funeral.)*

An individual human existence should be like a river, small at first, narrowly contained within its banks, rushing passionately past boulders and over waterfalls. Gradually the river grows wider, the banks recede, the water flows more quietly, and, in the end, without any visible break, they become merged in the sea and painlessly lose their individual being. The man or woman who, in old age, can see his or her way will not suffer from the fear of death, since things they care for will continue.

**Bertrand Russell.** Philosopher, historian, humanist.

## ARTICLES

### SOMETHING FROM NOTHING

#### Dennis Southam

In almost every debate with religious apologists you will hear the argument, "How can something come from nothing?" A variation on this is the question, "Why is there something rather than nothing?" But that requires the universe to have a purpose, which is a different discussion.

At first sight the 'how can something come from nothing' question seems convincing, and as a stand alone question it is certainly a difficult one. Of course the unspoken answer from the religious apologist is: 'It can't, therefore God did it'. This, actually, is a rather weak argument. First, obviously something has come from nothing, but this is no reason to rush to the conclusion of a supernatural cause—there is simply no basis for that except laziness. Second, if you accept the 'God did it' answer, then clearly God did make something come from nothing, which sort of negates the original statement. The whole thing needs to be rephrased as 'something came from nothing, how did that happen?'

Christopher Hitchens generally answers the 'how can something come from nothing' question along the lines of maybe we don't know how something came from nothing, but there's a whole lot of nothing ahead of us. This is to specifically counter the argument that the universe is designed with us in mind. After all, we know that in about five billion years the sun will run out of hydrogen, and with its internal energy source shut down, gravity will cause the core to collapse. That collapse will generate enough heat to expand its outer layers, turning our Sun into a red giant that will expand beyond the Earth's orbit. We will be obliterated. But we may not last that long. We may well go the way of the dinosaurs, with all life on the planet wiped out by the impact of a large meteor. Our galaxy, the Milky Way, and the Andromeda galaxy are on a collision course, and in about three billion years the two galaxies will collide. And if we somehow avoided all of these things by escaping to another galaxy, the universe will continue to expand forever, leaving us in a cold dark place, very much filled with nothing. As Christopher Hitchens has observed, 'that's some design!'

But as it happens science now has some answers to this 'how can something come from nothing' question. One of the first things we need to do when addressing the idea of something from nothing is to realise that our intuitions about some natural phenomena are not necessarily a good guide to reality. We live in the macro world, but subatomic particles live by their own rules in the quantum world, and they make no sense to our macro-world brains. An electron, for example, can be in two places at the same time, which seems ridiculous based on everyday understanding of the world around us, and yet it is true. In the same way we need to keep an open mind, and throw out all preconceived notions, when addressing the issue of 'nothing'.

When we try to visualize nothing, most people think about empty space, the region between stars and

between galaxies. Here there is no matter, no radiation, just nothing. But this is where our intuitions already start to let us down. ‘Empty’ space is in fact a seething mass of virtual particles, Particle-antiparticle pairs which pop in and out of existence. This is not just speculation, this is a verifiable fact and in accordance with quantum theory. Because of this phenomenon empty space, or ‘nothing’, actually weighs something, again stretching our intuition to the limit. But it gets worse, if that is the right word. A proton, one of the main building blocks of atoms, has internal structure consisting of smaller particles called quarks. But about 90 per cent of the mass of a proton comes from the empty space between the quarks, not from the quarks themselves! Empty space is therefore responsible for about 90 per cent of the mass of our bodies. This, by the way, provides one of the most accurate comparisons between theory and observation in science, being in agreement to some ten decimal places.

Expanding this out to the universe as a whole, it turns out that about 70 per cent of the total energy of the universe resides in empty space. This is what scientists call dark energy. Another approximately 0 per cent of the universe is dark matter, leaving a little less than one per cent for ‘normal’ matter and energy, i.e., us and the stars and planets. We are in fact substantially less significant in the scheme of things than we thought when we learned that earth was just another planet in just another solar system, one of billions, of just another galaxy, one of about 100 billion in the universe. The universe was not really designed with us in mind, you would have to conclude.

Now here is the truly interesting bit. All of the positive energy of matter is exactly balanced out by the negative gravitational energy in the universe, such that the net energy of the universe is zero. Quantum fluctuations allow a zero energy universe to begin from nothing. The universe is in fact the ultimate free lunch. Something can come from nothing.

*Footnote:* Lawrence Krauss, the well-known American theoretical physicist, is bringing out a book on this subject early next year.

Dennis Southam *is a member of the Atheist Foundation of Australia (AFA) committee and Public Relations Team. This article was published in The Australian Atheist, Issue No 28, July-August, 2011.*

## UNRESOLVED PROBLEMS TAINT CHURCH IMAGE

**Jane Hammond**

The failure of churches to accept homosexuality has been identified as the leading reason why Australians reject Christianity, new research suggests.

The research, commissioned by Christian media group Olive Tree Media, found hell and damnation and abuse within churches were turn-offs to Christianity, as was the Bible.

The survey found that although Australians could separate the perpetrators of sexual abuse from religion, most felt churches needed to do a lot more to address the problem. Nearly 30 per cent of all respondents said the

stance of churches on homosexuality blocked them from engaging with Christianity.

Based on a national survey of more than a thousand Australians, including churchgoers and follow-up focus group sessions, the research was designed to underpin a series of videos aimed at tackling the top ten “belief blockers” preventing people from adopting Christianity.

The videos will be shown on Christian television channels and on social media.

Head of Olive Tree Media and a senior minister with the Baptist Church in Sydney, Karl Fasse, said he was not surprised by the findings and said they showed that the Australian attitude of a fair go for all was still strong.

Mr Fasse said the survey highlighted the challenges faced by Christian churches, including the way the message of Christianity was sold.

Celebrities speaking about religion was something Australians found repulsive.

Stories of healing and miracles were also found to repel Australians.

The survey found religion and spirituality were seen as separate by most Australians and the majority did not actively practice any religion.

“Australians seemed to be moving away from their religious roots, with three in ten (29 per cent) expressing that whilst they had been shaped in a religious household and had religious connections, they were now no longer religious,” the survey found.

Gen Ys (aged 18 to 31) were most likely to have issues with Christianity, and baby boomers (50 to 65) were most likely to consider themselves Christian, with 41 per cent indicating this, compared with 24 per cent of Gen Ys.

*The West Australian.*  
9th November, 2011.

## POPULATION CRISIS AS WE HIT SEVEN BILLION MARK

**Agence France-Press  
Paris**

Already straining to host several billion souls, earth is set to teem with billions more and only a revolution in the use of resources can avert an environmental crunch, experts say.

As early as 1798, Thomas Malthus gloomily forecast our ability to reproduce would outstrip our ability to produce food, leading to starvation and a culling of the species.

But an industrial revolution and its impact on agriculture proved Malthus and later doomsayers wrong.

“Despite alarmist predictions, historical increases in population have not been economically catastrophic,” notes David Bloom, a professor in the Department of Global Health and Population at Harvard.

Today, though, it seems reasonable to ask if Malthus wasn’t simply a couple of centuries ahead of the curve.

Next Monday, the world’s population is officially scheduled to hit seven billion—a rise of two billion in less

than 25 years. Over 60 years, the global fertility rate has roughly halved and amounts to a statistical 2.5 children per woman today. But this varies greatly from country to country. And whether the planet's population eventually stabilises at nine, 10 or 15 billion depends on what happens in developing countries.

As our species has expanded, so has its appetite of the planet's bounty, from fresh water and soil richness to forests and fisheries.

At its current pace, human kind will need, by 2030, a second planet to satisfy its appetite and absorb its waste, the Global Footprint Network calculated last month.

And through the coal, oil and gas that drive prosperity, we are also emitting greenhouse gases that alter the climate, potentially maiming the eco-system that feeds us.

"From soaring food prices to the crippling effects of climate change, our economies are now confronting the reality of years of spending beyond our means," GFN's president, Mathis Wachernagel, said.

For some experts, voluntary birth control is the key while others say the answer lies in reducing poverty and boosting education, especially of women.

*The West Australian.*  
24th October, 2011.

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## ***The Charter for COMPASSION***

**THE PRINCIPLE OF COMPASSION** lies at the heart of all religious, ethical and spiritual traditions, calling us always to treat all others as we wish to be treated ourselves. Compassion compels us to work tirelessly to alleviate the suffering of our fellow creatures, to dethrone ourselves from the centre of our world and put another there, and to honour the inviolable sanctity of every single human being, treating everybody, without exception, with absolute justice, equity and respect.

**IT IS ALSO NECESSARY** in both public and private life to refrain consistently and empathically from inflicting pain. To act or speak violently out of spite, chauvinism or self-interest, to impoverish, exploit or deny basic rights to anybody and to incite hatred by denigrating others—even our enemies—is a denial of our common humanity. We acknowledge that we have failed to live compassionately and that some have even increased the sum of human misery in the name of religion.

**WE THEREFORE CALL ON ALL MEN AND WOMEN**—to restore compassion to the centre of morality and religion—to return to the ancient principle that any interpretation of scripture that breeds violence, hatred or disdain is illegitimate—to ensure that youth are given accurate and respectful information about other religions and cultures—to encourage a positive appreciation of cultural and religious diversity—to cultivate an informed empathy with the suffering of all human beings—even those regarded as enemies.

**WE URGENTLY NEED** to make compassion a clear, luminous and dynamic force in our polarised world. Rooted in a principled determination to transcend selfishness, compassion can break down political, dogmatic ideological and religious boundaries. Born of our deep interdependence, compassion is essential to human rela-

tionships and to a fulfilled humanity. It is the path to enlightenment and indispensable to the creation of a just economy and peaceful global community.

*Courtesy: Unitarian Universalist Fellowship,  
Christchurch, NZ (July, 2011 Newsletter).  
Published in The Beacon September, 2011.  
Journal of the Melbourne Unitarian Peace  
Memorial Church.*

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## **THE DENISOVAN EVOLUTION**

### **Dennis Morris**

A 30,000 year old fossil was found in Denisova Cave in southern Siberia in 2008, a bone fragment that likely came from a fingertip of a young girl. It was discovered along with microblades, small stone blades used as tools, body ornaments of polished stone and a molar shaped very differently from that of Neanderthals and modern humans, resembling that of a much older human species, such as *Homo habilis* and *Homo erectus*. The tooth and the finger bone apparently came from different members of the same population.

After an international team of researchers sequenced the DNA from 40 milligrams of bone they removed from the fossil, they found the "Denisovan" (deh-NEESE-so-van) shared a common origin with Neanderthals but was genetically distinct, apparently descending from the same ancestral population of Neanderthals that had separated earlier from the ancestors of modern humans.

"Its amazed me that we found other extinct groups of humans," evolutionary geneticist Svante Paabo at the Max Planck Institute of Evolutionary Anthropology at Leipzig, Germany, told Live Science. "When we got this little finger bone from Siberia, I was totally expecting it to be either Neanderthal or modern human. When it was something else, that was totally surprising and shocking to me."

Surprisingly, their analysis found that genetic material from this sister group of Neanderthals matched four to six per cent of the genomes of modern Melanesian populations. This suggests interbreeding took place between Denisovans and the ancestors of Melanesians, just as Neanderthals appear to have interbred with the ancestors of all modern-day non-Africans.

"Instead of the clean story we used to have of modern humans migrating out of Africa and replacing Neanderthals, we now see these very intertwined story lines with more players and more interactions than we knew of before," said researcher Richard Green of the University of California, Santa Cruz.

"The fact that this extinct branch of the human family tree was discovered in Siberia but contributed gene sequences to modern humans in Southeast Asia suggests it might have been widespread in Asia during the late Stone Age", said researcher David Reich, the evolutionary geneticist at Harvard Medical School who led the new population genetic analysis.

It remains uncertain whether this genetic material might have persisted in Melanesians because it provided an evolutionary edge of some sort. "We have a hard

enough time learning what effects gene sequences might have when it comes to the genomes of modern humans, such as disease susceptibility—to do that with an archaic group is even harder,” Reich told Live Science.

#### **When we met the Denisovans:**

These findings are adding to the complex picture of the evolutionary history of modern and our extinct relatives that has recently emerged, one where interbreeding has left its legacy in our DNA.

The researchers suggest an ancestral group left Africa between 300,000 and 400,000 years ago and quickly diverged, with one branch becoming the Neanderthals who spread into Europe and the other branch moving east and becoming Denisovans. When modern humans left Africa roughly 70,000 to 80,000 years ago, they first encountered the Neanderthals, with remnants of their DNA making up one to four per cent of the genomes of all non-Africans. Another group of modern humans later came in contact with the Denisovans.

The living humans are to be found in Papua New Guinea and surrounding islands. They still have traces of Denisovan DNA and non-Africans have some Neanderthal DNA. It's these startling findings published in the journal, *Nature*, which are changing our view of human evolution. It is beginning to emerge that several types of humans co-existed alongside our own *Homo sapiens*, but why did these others die out? We simply don't know, but it is likely to have something to do with us. It was shortly after we emerged from Africa that other humans became extinct, but for a while there were many others who walked the earth with us.

*Dennis is an author and a past president of HSWA.*

## **SCIENCE IS THE ONLY GAME IN TOWN**

### **Marius Benson**

Australian science is taking a bow this week with ANU astrophysicist Brian Schmidt becoming just the 12th Australian scientist to win a Nobel Prize.

The win and the acclaim that comes with it stands in contrast to the battering science has been taking from some quarters recently.

Galileo, if he were to return to earth, nearly half a millennium after he helped demote the planet from its status as the centre of the universe, would be filled with surprise and curiosity.

But in one area he might find himself at home. That's in the current debate on science itself.

The climate change debate has dragged the world of science and its white-coated inhabitants out of the lab and into the klieg light of political debate. Suddenly that quiet hum of investigation and assessment has been replaced by the roar of approval on one side and abuse and accusations of fraud on the other. Science has always been a bit worldly, not entirely an ivory laboratory, but this is somehow new.

Suddenly, scientific evaluation is just opinion, the scientific method just one way of understanding the physical world.

Well, that is not right. There is plenty of room for debate on the issue of climate change. The course of action that should be taken on the basis of science involves real doubts and ambiguities.

What you can say about science and climate change is what is often said. There is an overwhelming consensus among scientists working in the field of climate that the planet is warming and that the human-generated increase in concentration of CO<sub>2</sub> and other greenhouse gases in the atmosphere is contributing to that warming. There is no major national scientific body which dissents from that view. All major scientific bodies—the CSIRO here, Britain's Royal Society, the AAAS in the United States and others—share the view.

Dissent comes from a small minority of scientists working on climate and a larger number who have no qualifications or publications in that field.

But the white heat of the climate change debate has brought not just climate scientists but science itself in for public questioning.

So it is worth restating a simple and unambiguous fact. There is one and only one way to understand the physical universe, that is through science, by applying the scientific method

You cannot understand the world or the rest of physical reality by conducting a focus group, by lining up the numbers in a political party, by opinion polls, by prayer, by invocation, by assertion, by rhetoric. Above all you cannot establish the nature of physical reality by relying on that sometime friend, common sense.

What evidence, shared by our common sense, shows us that the world is round. What common sense insight would allow us to know we are revolving around the sun and not the sun around us? Certainly, what are now self evident truths eluded human society through millennia of flawed observation.

Science is the only tool for understanding the physical universe.

Not everyone shares that view. The historian, Geoffrey Blainey, writing in the *Australian Literary Review* insert in *The Australian* stated, “Global warming is seen by most people as a technical topic on which the scientist must have the final say. But it is wider than science. It is a topic for economists because they are summoned to guess the likely cost of acting or not acting. It is a topic for historians because global warming has happened before, there is a long history of global warming. The present tendency is for scientists to imply that history is irrelevant.”

This is muddled thinking. Certainly, go to economists, but not to understand global warming. You go to them to determine the most cost effective ways to counter it.

Likewise, historians are not experts on climate or climate change. The expertise on the planets physical history lies with paeleoclimatologists, not historians. The historians may have anecdotal accounts of the “Little Ice Age” or the “Medieval Warm Period” but they don't have the level of information needed to chart climate change. They are working in a different discipline, studying documents and sifting records, not examining ice cores and other sources needed to track climate.

The informed scientific view is that climate change now is not the recurrence of something from the past.

Equating the climate change of the last half century with accounts of colder and warmer times in past centuries is a mistake that results from applying the wrong discipline, history, to the task.

**Science is the only tool for understanding the physical universe.**

Critics, sometimes, warn against putting “faith” in science. That again is muddled thinking. You don’t have faith in science, you just check.

In 1964, the American physicist, Richard Feynman, described the scientific process well, “In general, we look for a new law by following the process. First we guess it. Then we compute the consequences of the guess to see what would be implied if this law that we guessed is right. Then we compare the result of the computation to nature, with experiment or experience, compare it directly with observation, to see if it works. If it disagrees with experiment it is wrong. That’s all there is to it.

Not much room for “faith” there. In fact science is always on the side of the question rather than the adherence to existing answers. There is no happier moment for a scientist than when a theory is demolished. The recent reports that the particle accelerator in Europe had detected some particles, neutrinos, moving faster than the speed of light, did not prompt a questioning of the scientific “faith” because Einstein’s theory of relativity was in doubt. It saw scientists celebrating the prospect of a new breakthrough in understanding—and asking for more tests, more evidence.

Science does not produce guidelines for behaviour, that’s morality. It reveals the laws of nature that determine our physical reality. The laws of physics are not set out with an appeal to the faithful to try to abide by them, to keep the faith. The laws of physics do not require that you treat them with piety. You don’t have to respect the law of gravity, just obey it.

Science is a weak, guttering flame that we hold out to the universe as we try to understand it. But it is the only tool we have to determine the truths of the physical world.

*Marius Benson has been a journalist since the dismissal days of the Whitlam government in 1975, and has interviewed every prime minister from John Gorton to Kevin Rudd.*

*The Australian Atheist.*

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6th October, 2011.

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## CRITICS NEED A LESSON IN TOLERANCE

**Bethany Hiatt**

Religion and education are hot-button topics, but put the two together and you have issues of explosive quality.

Lately we have had a spate of stories about the

religious aspect of what is taught in schools, both public and private.

Early this month, religious leaders criticised the new national history curriculum for allowing students to use the terms Before the Common Era (BCE) and Common Era (CE) to define calendar eras, instead of BC (Before Christ) and AD (Anno Domini).

While there is nothing new about the terms, and no school would be forced to use them, the fact that they would be included in the national curriculum at all had many complaining that it was yet another example of political correctness overruling mainstream thought.

It also emerged last week that many private religious schools have, for many years, been singing an alternative “Christian” verse of Australia’s national anthem.

The verse, which begins, “Christ our head and cornerstone”, and contains other religious references, has never been part of the anthem. In fact, the lyrics were written for a Sydney church choir to perform at bicentennial celebrations in 1988.

Protocol dictates that the anthem should not be changed or the words modified. But there is nothing stopping people from changing the words they sing to the tune as long as they make it clear that they are singing a song called Advance Australia Fair, not the Australian national anthem.

It is not just non-denominational Christian schools that have taught children this additional verse.

WA Catholic Education Office deputy director Mary Retel said its principals were urged to adopt the Christian verse on top of the two official ones several years ago. After a politician raised concerns about schools tinkering with a national symbol such as the anthem, director, Ron Dullard responded in March, 2004, with the following, “The archdiocese has not promoted the third verse, although the chair of the Catholic Education Commission of WA. Monsignor Michael Keating did ask that all Catholic schools in WA consider singing what he believed to be the third verse of the national anthem on suitable occasions. Following your letter, subsequent investigations have found that this verse was not part of the original song Advance Australia Fair on which the national anthem is based.

“Nevertheless, Monsignor Keating and the Catholic Education Commission of WA are of the opinion that the words are most appropriate to sing at the conclusion of the national anthem to reinforce our belief in Jesus Christ. I accept that it is important to preserve our national symbols and I see this can occur by making an announcement such as, ‘Please stand to sing the national anthem followed by a verse which reflects our special relationship with Jesus’.”

Ms Retel did not know how many Catholic schools were using the extra verse, or if they always prefaced it with an announcement like that suggested by Mr Dullard.

Apart from the interesting fact that the commission did not research the origin of the Christian stanza before suggesting that all schools adopt it, there is something slightly worrying about the idea children in religious schools should be taught different words to the national anthem with the deliberate intent of separating them from other Australians.

A national anthem is meant to unify a nation's citizens, no matter their background, not push them into groups who sing different versions.

There are many beautiful hymns that students can sing to reflect a "special relationship with Jesus". But if schools want to persist in singing the extra verse, they must make it clear to students they are singing a different song, not the official anthem.

To round off the month we had the controversy surrounding one WA public primary school's decision to drop its 25-year-old tradition of reciting the Lord's Prayer at assemblies every fortnight. The topic exercised talk-back radio hosts around the country for days and prompted a barrage of hate mail to the school.

Many people seem to be under the impression that most schools still used the prayer, which is far from the truth. In fact, only a handful of public schools still expect children to recite it regularly.

Department of Education policy makes it clear that general religious education should focus on study of different religious traditions, rather than encouraging students to make any personal commitment to a particular set of religious beliefs.

It seems that many people believe firmly that reciting a prayer will somehow expose students in public schools to Australia's rich Judeo-Christian cultural heritage and teach them all they need to know about respect, ethics and values.

But is it fair to expect so much from a few ancient lines?

In reality, public primary schools have a primary focus on teaching virtues such as love, compassion and tolerance, virtues which many critics seem to lack.

Many children learn more in the classroom about good manners and getting along with others than they do at home—or from mouthing the words to a prayer. The worrying thread running through the debate on these issues is the way many people are quick to denigrate anyone who disagrees with them.

All schools—public or private, religious or secular—aim to teach tolerance and respect for other points of view. Perhaps we could all learn a lesson from them.

*The West Australian.*

28th September, 2011.

*Bethany is the WAN Education Editor.....Ed.*

**GENEROSITY WHEN IT'S EASIEST  
ALL VOLUNTARY GROUPS DEPEND ON THE  
GENEROUS SUPPORT OF THEIR MEMBERS AND  
BENEFACTORS.**

**WE ALL HAVE DREAMS OF A STRONG  
HUMANIST PRESENCE IN WA TO MATCH THOSE  
IN VERY MANY OVERSEAS COUNTRIES BUT WE  
ALL KNOW THAT THEY WON'T BE REALISED  
WITHOUT MONEY.**

**THE MOST PAINLESS WAY TO MAKE A  
SUBSTANTIAL CONTRIBUTION WOULD BE TO  
LEAVE A BEQUEST IN YOUR WILL**

**SPONSORSHIP AND/OR DONATIONS WOULD  
BE THANKFULLY RECEIVED.**

## PEOPLE WHO COME INTO YOUR LIFE

### Anonymous

People come into your life for a reason, a season, or a lifetime. When you know which one it is, you will understand.

When someone is in your life for a REASON, it is usually to meet a need, of which you maybe aware or, perhaps unwittingly, not. They have come to assist you through a difficulty, to provide you with guidance and support, to aid you physically and/or emotionally. They may seem to have come out of the 'blue'. They are there for the reason you need them to be. Then, without wrongdoing on your part or at an inconvenient time, this person will say or do something to bring the relationship to an end. Sometimes they die. Sometimes they walk away. Sometimes they act up and force you to take a stand. What we must realise is that our need has been met, our desire fulfilled, their work is done. *Now is the time to move on.*

Some people come into your life for a SEASON, because your turn has come to share, grow and learn. They bring you an experience of peace or make you laugh. They may teach you something you have never done. They usually give you an unbelievable amount of joy. Believe it, it is real. *But only for a season.*

LIFETIME relationships teach you lifetime lessons, things you must build upon in order to have a solid emotional foundation. Your job is to accept the lesson, love the person and put what you have learned to use in all other relationships and areas of your life. It is said that love is blind but friendship is invaluable.

Thank you all for being part of my life,  
Whether you were a reason, a season or a lifetime.

**Dedicated to all on this planet.**

---

## SMALL STEPS FOR SECULAR SCHOOLING

### Rosslyn Ives

The Victorian Education Department has changed guidelines for special religious instruction (SRI), so students who opt out must be given meaningful activities. The Department has also changed the consent forms that ask whether parents want their child to participate in religious instruction. Previously, if a response was not received within 14 days, a child would automatically be put in the RSI class. The new form no longer expressly stated this.

HSV Committee considers these changes are small steps for secular schooling.

Humanists favour well funded, high quality, secular education. While we see a place within school curricular for education about world views and religious beliefs, we have for years objected strongly to SRI being given

within the normal school day. This has permitted representatives from religious groups to come into the state schools and give lessons in their faith.

Only a little over 40% of Victorian primary state school students receive SRI. Of those 96% are given Christian Religious Education (CRE) provided by Access ministries, representing 12 Christian denominations. Not only is this access permitted, but secular education and the separation of church and state is further undermined by government grants, federal and state, to assist Access ministries in its work of SRI and chaplaincy training. To date no other religion or secular group is offered any government funds.

Parents can request that their children not attend SRI classes, this is called opting out. Unfortunately, the opted out children can be discriminated against, by being required to sit at the back of the class, or in the corridor or outside of the principal's office during SRI lessons. Anecdotally, it is known that some opted out students have been actively blocked from doing assignment work or other activities of educational value.

Two years ago an Ethics Course compiled by HSV's Dr Harry Gardner was rejected as an alternative to SRI by the Minister of Education, Bronwyn Pike. Flowing from this rejection HSV initiated a case of discrimination on behalf of parents of students who were opted-out of SRI classes. As we saw it, opted-out students were doubly discriminated against. They were not permitted to be involved in an alternative Ethics Course and they couldn't always do other useful schoolwork in SRI time.

Three parents, including HSV member, Sophie Aitken, are involved in the case before the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT), being handled by a legal team from the firm, Holding and Redlich. The two small changes in operation of SRI programmes, mentioned above, came just before the first hearing in early August. The next hearing is scheduled for December.

Rosslyn is the editor of the Victorian Humanist.

*What investigation has HSWA or anyone in WA carried out? What is the situation or policy in the WA Education Department? Be interesting to find out.....Ed.*

## TIME FOR A SMILE

Leaving Margaret River and heading for Fremantle, a bloke makes a stop at the Gull service station just before the Harvey turnoff and heads straight for the toilet. The first cubicle is taken, so he goes into the second. No sooner has he sat down than he hears a voice from next door, "Hi there, how ya goin'?"

"Fine, thank you."

Not the type to strike conversation in loos, he's somewhat embarrassed. For all he knows, the bloke next door is a homosexual.

"So what are you doing?" the stranger asks.

"Well, obviously I'm in the loo at the moment, then I'm driving to Fremantle."

Whereupon the disembodied voice sounds somewhat flustered. "Look, I'll call you back—every time I ask you a question an idiot in the next toilet keeps answering me"

<<

## THOUGHTS IN VERSE

### REVOLUTION

**Bernard O'Dowd**

Ring loud the joy bells, for the morning is breaking,  
The world from its night of black darkness is waking;  
Its limbs are now filling with life and volition,  
Escaping forever from cold superstition;  
For truth has sprung forth as the light of the morning,  
And all the fair hilltops of earth is adorning.  
Full long the bright earth through the deep mire hath waded,

But now the cold glamour for ever hath faded;  
With haste from the face of the earth it has hurried,  
And now in the depths of oblivion, is buried.

The terrors of hell long poor mortals have frightened,  
Whose burdens the hope of heaven has lightened;  
So racking their minds, and their spirits so tearing,  
That starting in hope they have ended despairing.  
The priests to keep up their effete institution,  
Say prayers for the dead, give the quick absolution;  
Endowed with the firm faith that moveth the mountains,  
And washed in the blood of the deity's fountain;  
Then to the poor sinner, permission is given  
To enter the gates of the orthodox heaven.  
Nor e'er will you now from the trinity sever,  
But sing holy! holy! for ever and ever;  
And deep down below your ethereal station  
May see the lost, tortured in writhing damnation;  
And there you behold, in fierce brimstone, your brother,  
Your sister, your daughter, your father, your mother,  
And turning with joy, when the fires entombed them,  
Give praises and thanks to the god that has doomed them.  
For such is the creed, and in truth is this story  
The orthodox representation of glory.

Hark! Now the joy bells all around us are peeling;  
The wounds of this dark superstition are healing;  
The armies of reason their flags are unfurling,  
And idols of falsehood to darkness are hurling;  
And swift to the vanguard Truth's white steeds are bounding;

While Equity's trumpets loud charges are sounding;  
And o'er the great host, there, with golden light streaming  
The sunform of hope in the heavens is beaming;  
All mankind is cheering with new life returning,  
As false gods and demons in bonfires are burning;  
And when the last embers, their flickers have ended,  
Men's voices in paeans of triumph are blended.

*The Liberator (Melbourne).*  
4th April, 1886.

Sent in by Beacon reader *Nigel Sinnott*.

*The Beacon.*  
September, 2011.

Each king in a deck of playing cards represents a great king from history:

Spades—King David      Hearts—Charlisme  
Clubs—Alexander, the Great      Diamonds—Julius Caesar

## FROM A HUMANIST ANTHOLOGY

### LUCRETIUS (Titus Lucretius Carus)

96 (c.) - 55 BC

#### *On Death*

A tree cannot exist high in air, or clouds in the depth of the sea, as fish cannot live in the fields, or blood flow in wood or sap in stones. There is a determined and allotted place for the growth and presence of everything. So mind cannot arise alone without body or apart from sinews and blood....You must admit, therefore, that when the body has perished there is an end also of the spirit diffused through it. It is surely crazy to couple a mortal object with an eternal and suppose that they can work in harmony and mutually interact. What can be imagined more incongruous, what more repugnant and discordant, than that a mortal object and one that is immortal and everlasting should unite to form a compound and jointly weather the storms that rage about them?

From all this it follows that *death is nothing to us* and no concern of ours, since our tenure of the mind is mortal. In days of old, we felt no disquiet when the hosts of Carthage poured in to battle on every side—when the whole earth, dizzied by the convulsive shock of war, reeled sickeningly under the high ethereal vault, and between realm and realm the empire of mankind by land and sea trembled in the balance. So, when we shall be no more—when the union of body and spirit that engenders us has been disrupted—to us, who shall be nothing, nothing by any hazard will happen any more at all. Nothing will have power to stir our senses, not though earth be fused with sea and sea with sky...

If the future holds travail and anguish in store, the self must be in existence, when that time comes, in order to experience it. But from this fate we are redeemed by death, which denies existence to the self that might have suffered these tribulations. Rest assured, therefore, that we have nothing to fear in death. One who no longer is cannot suffer, or differ in any way from one who has never been born, when once this mortal life has been usurped by death the immortal....

The old is always thrust aside to make way for the new, and one thing must be built out of the wreck of another. There is no murky pit of hell awaiting anyone. There is need of matter, so that later generations may arise; when they have lived out their span, they will all follow you. Bygone generations have taken your road, and those who come will take it no less. So one thing will never cease to spring from another. To none is life given in freehold; to all on lease. Look back at the eternity that passed before we were born, and mark how utterly it counts to us as nothing. This is a mirror that Nature holds up to us, in which we may see the time that shall be after we are dead. Is there anything terrifying in the sight—anything depressing—anything that is not more restful

than the soundest sleep.

*De Rerum Natura* (On the Nature of the Universe),  
Book III, trans. R. E. Latham.

### MENCIUS ( Meng Tzu)

4th to 3rd centuries BC

#### *Truly Human*

The Bull Mountain was once covered with lovely trees. But it is near the capital of a great state. People came with their axes and choppers; they cut the wood down, and the mountain has lost its beauty. Yet even so, the day air and the night air came to it, rain and dew moistened it. Here and there fresh sprouts began to grow. But soon cattle and sheep came along and browsed on them, and in the end the mountain became gaunt and bare, as it is now. And seeing it thus gaunt and bare, people imagine that it was woodless from the start. Now just as the natural state of the mountain was quite different from what now appears, so too in every man (little though they may be apparent) there assuredly were once feelings of decency and kindness; and if these good feelings are no longer there, it is that they have been tampered with, hewn with axe and bill. As each day dawns, they are assailed anew. What chance then has our nature, any more than mountain, of keeping its beauty? To us too, as to the mountain, comes the air of the day, air of the night.. Just as dawn, indeed, we have for a moment and in a certain degree a mood in which our promptings and aversions come near to being such as are proper to men. But something is sure to happen before the morning is over, by which these better feelings are either checked or else utterly destroyed. And in the end, when they have been checked again and again, the night air is no longer able to preserve them, and soon our feelings are as near as may be to those of beasts and birds; so that anyone might make the same mistake about us as about the mountain, and think that there was never any good in us from the very start. Yet assuredly our present state of feeling is not what we began with. Truly,

'If rightly tended, no creature but thrives  
If left untended, no creature but pines away.'

*Kao Tzu*, Book VI, 1, 8, trans. Arthur Waley

**TOLERANCE** is that uncomfortable feeling that the other bloke may be right after all.

## WA SKEPTICS

Meet **usually** on the third Tuesday of alternate months at

*Grace Vaughan House, 227 Stubbs Terrace,  
Shenton Park.*

ALL ARE WELCOME

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**PLEASE NOTE:**

- This will be the last newsletter under this format.
- Refer to "From the President's Desk", P-2 for explanation on what the future may hold.
- Do make the effort to sign on to the HSWA Meetup site. This is where you will keep in touch with events, discussions, articles, and all the requirements to have an efficiently run Society.
- On P-3 there are directions on "How to Get the Best Out of the HSWA Meetup Website".
- "For Your Diary" on P-2 has the detail of the December Get-Together.
- Here's to success for the new committee and the future of HSWA.

**WELCOME TO NEW MEMBERS**

David Frank, Diana Blackie, Peter Lomas.

**We look forward to your company.****THE HUMANIST SOCIETY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA, INC.**

The Society consists of a group of people who seek a rational and constructive approach to all human affairs. Humanism provides a secular, moral alternative to religion and dogmatic creeds. The Society acts to defend freedom of opinion and expression and other civil liberties. It supports, through legislation or any other democratic and constitutional means, attempts to improve social conditions. It seeks to promote the widest conception of education for all people for better understanding and enjoyment of life.

Humanists believe that human conduct should be based on humanity, scientific insight and reason and that people should face their problems using their own moral and intellectual resources, rather than seeking supernatural help. Their concern should be with this present life which all of us should strive to make worth-while for ourselves and others. Humanists make no claims to special knowledge or final answers but regard the search for understanding as a continuing process.