



# VICTORIAN HUMANIST

Monthly newsletter of the Humanist Society of Victoria Inc.

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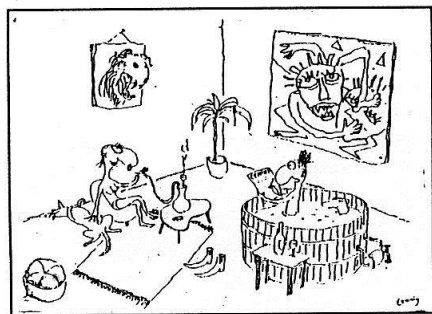
## Boost Census 'no religion' numbers

The Census, to be filled in on 9 August, includes a question on religion. Data from this question guides government funding to religious bodies and is used as a snapshot of numbers in religion and no religion categories. Of concern to many is that this data doesn't match with the lived reality of a secular Australia. For example the 2006 Census shows 'no religion' at only 18.7%, while those with a religion at 69.5% (63.9 Christian + 5.6 non-christians).\* Yet social indicators suggest a much more secular picture.

- Low rate of regular church attendance (under 10%).
- Weak observance of holy days.
- Rising percentage of civil marriages (>60%).
- Increase in non-clergy funerals (>70%).
- Small and aging congregations.
- Sale of churches.
- Low clergy recruitment.
- Surveys showing 50% with a religion, 40% without.

A key reason for this mismatch is the biased nature of the Census question on religion. It asks 'What is the person's religion?' in the same phrasing used to ask for name and address. The assumption being that *everyone* has a name, address and a religion – just tell us yours. Many now non-religious people oblige by marking the religion of their childhood.

The question conveniently includes response boxes for the major religions. This facilitates a quick, often unthinking response, as seen in this Michael Leunig's cartoon.



'We're Church of England aren't we?'

And, unlike the Census question on marital status where 'never married' is the *first choice*, the 'no religion' box is the last choice on the religion question.

Although Humanists have long complained about the bias form of this question, we have not been able to cause any change; hence the campaign to increase the 'no religion' numbers.

Secular groups across Australia are urging the non religious to mark 'no religion'. Join this campaign see help boost the 'no religion' numbers.

For more information go to [www.humanist.org.au](http://www.humanist.org.au)

Rosslyn Ives

\* This question is optional. 11.2% gave no response.

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HSV Monthly  
Public Lecture  
THURSDAY  
28 July

7.30 for 8.00 pm

Meeting Room  
Balwyn Library

336 Whitehorse Rd, Balwyn  
(Melway map ref. 46 E8)

Jacques Boulet  
(Borderlands Co-  
operative) on

**'Living fearful  
lives: the price of  
individual freedom  
and relational  
poverty'**

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## Submissions and to letters to government authorities

1. In a letter to the Prime Minister we made the following points on same-sex marriage. Copies sent to 13 MPs.

- Humanists support same-sex marriage and regard equality and universality in the application of the law as essential human right.
- It is incumbent on governments to ensure that all people are treated equally and fairly under the law: this is currently not the case.
- MPs are obliged to represent the views of their constituents. Recent opinion polls show that a majority of Australians support the principle of same-sex marriage
- In our modern, plural society your government has the moral and legal obligation to shed archaic and discriminatory traditions. A campaign of public education against homophobia would remove vestiges of objections and would testify to our more enlightened, modern times.
- We call on your government to legalise marriage for same-sex couples as the present ban contradicts the Universal Declaration of Human Rights with Australia a signatory for over sixty years.
- Prime Minister, it's time for change.

Stephen Stuart, Geoff Allshorn

2. In a letter on Anti-discrimination exemptions to Victorian Attorney-General, MPs and newspaper editors we made the following points:

- We seek clarification on the proposed anti-discrimination legislation which proposes to allow religious organisations to discriminate against certain groups and individuals.
- HSV is repeatedly on record in support of human rights, racial and religious tolerance, respect for diversity and against bigotry.
- Discrimination is wrong because:
  - a) It violates Australia's commitment to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other human rights covenants to which we are signatory.
  - b) It condones abuse of human rights for different people in the name of religion.
  - c) It creates different classes of human rights for different people in our community.
  - d) It is a retrograde step in our efforts to foster a cohesive society with equal opportunities for all.
- We asked for details of any proposed changes to the Victorian anti-discrimination legislation.
- We expect that as Attorney-General you will ensure that the law provides full and equal opportunities for all Victorians at all times.

Geoff Allshorn, Stephen Stuart

3. To the inquiry into the Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities we made the following main points in answer to questions.

- We support the addition of rights regarding the child, economic, social and cultural rights, the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women and all other rights stated in international covenants and conventions.
- Rights to self-determination, in particular for Australia's First People and the autonomy of the person.
- There should be mandatory annual auditing of public authorities for their human rights compliance and the reports should be published.
- We support a system of complaints procedures, restorative justice practices and compensations upon violation of human rights, such remedies to be available to all regardless of their financial or social status.
- We support a code of human rights conduct which is binding on State and local governments and on statutory authorities.
- Public education about human rights has been inadequate so far, and this should be remedied.
- "Commercial-in confidence" claims often shield abuses of human rights and we urge that scrutiny and transparency be requested from the private sector.

Stephen Stuart

4. In a letter to the Victorian Attorney-General we made the following points on seeking community opinion on sentencing.

- Self-selected online polling by a newspaper will attract extreme views and therefore produce biased results.
- A random selection of respondents for polling will credibly gauge public opinion, though this may not be well informed.
- Genuinely informed opinion requires preparation of a discussion paper by legal experts, followed by calls for submissions.
- Decision-making on sentencing is best dealt with by legal experts.

Rosslyn Ives , Stephen Stuart

### Receive your VH by e-mail

Please advise Dan Kerr [victorianhumanist@gmail.com](mailto:victorianhumanist@gmail.com) and Marie Hodgens [hmhodge@netspace.net.au](mailto:hmhodge@netspace.net.au) if you'd like to receive future VHs by e-mail.

# Religious cults and Humanism

HSV public lecture by Michael Bachelard (*The Age*) on 26 May 2011 at Balwyn Library

Report by Jennie Stuart

Michael stressed that he spoke as a journalist on this topic, not as an expert. In 2008 his book *Behind the Exclusive Brethren* was published, outlining the activities and rising influence of this cult.

Statistics are not available to indicate whether adherence to cults is growing in Australia. However, according to Census data, as the congregations of denominations like the Anglican Church dwindle, there has been drift towards more charismatic, evangelical communities, some of which are cult-like.

## What is a cult?

Not all cults are religious and there is a world of difference between mainstream religions and religious cults. The latter misuse the ideas of the former to draw people in. However it is the actual practices of the cult that are usually damaging, not the beliefs espoused. Once inside there is an intense level of control, often described as 'mind control' or 'brainwashing', which ends by stripping people of their links with 'the outside world' and sowing suspicion towards all outsiders.

Cults promise a perfect life, a pathway to heaven or higher knowledge, if only the individual surrenders his or her self and submits totally to the service of something. That something might be a set of ideas or psychological techniques, a set of money-making strategies, a charismatic individual or a god-figure. Central to a cult is the 'total war' approach, whether the context is religion, sales or therapy.

The intensity of the demands within a cult gives a sense of security and comfort – within is trust and love and a sense of knowing something that the rest of the world does not. Furthermore, all are absolved from the responsibility of thinking for themselves, as the answers are unequivocally given by the leader or the 'good book', frequently the Bible.

## Doubts, punishment and lies

Human nature is essentially susceptible to ethical lapses and misdemeanor. Cult leaders cannot tolerate such deviations and punishment is swift. Even worse, excommunication may result. Once outside the group the individual faces a psychological wasteland, often abandoned by family and any contact with other cult members. Consequently indoctrination by fear is the norm within cults: on the one hand, fear of falling short of the standard expected and on the other, fear of leaving. As a survival mechanism many people become

adept at pretending to do the right thing, or even outright fabrication.

Anyone who has heard a cult leader speak in defence of their doctrine will recognise a liar. To keep the doctrine safe they are prepared to lie, break the bonds of family and even prescribe drugs without a good medical basis in some instances.

Such pressures erode morality, and there are numerous examples of antisocial acts emanating from cults – mass suicide, theft, rape, fraud, murder. Most cult members are not bad at the outset, merely seeking greater fulfilment of some kind, but the abrogation of moral autonomy has the potential for drastic consequences down the track.

## Humanism

While cults subordinate the right to self-determination to the dictates of a leader, humanism respects the rights of the individual and believes that it is an individual's responsibility to help create a better world. While humanism has a flat management structure, cults are rigidly hierarchical, and while humanists are free-thinkers, cult members inhabit a mental prison, constructed by others for them and maintained by fear and guilt. Humanists are able to derive morality in the exercise of empathy with others, while within cults morality is handed down as doctrine from a leader.

## What can be done?

Rather than attempt to differentiate between a cult and a religious organisation by enacting new legislation, Michael argued the case for making cults and their leaders accountable where evidence of harm can be demonstrated.

The Model Criminal Code committee is considering a nationwide revision of criminal law, which is under the jurisdiction of each state at present.

In 1998 the committee recommended that all states and territories extend their laws in relation to assault to incorporate the 'mental integrity of the victim'. Submissions were specifically invited on whether cults or other high-pressure organisations would be brought under the umbrella by this amended definition. Scientologists immediately mounted an elaborate letter-writing campaign urging that religious organisations be exempted on the grounds of religious freedom. The committee disagreed and has recommended that it should be a criminal offence, incorporated into the Crimes Acts of all states, to cause 'harm to a person's mental health, whether temporary or permanent'.

## Have your say

Contributions to *VH* newsletter, most welcome. Send to *VH* editor c/o PO Box 1555, Melbourne Vic 3001 or email [rosslyn@netspace.net.au](mailto:rosslyn@netspace.net.au)

## Letters

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### Religiosity of the past

I READ with interest the Richard Norman piece, from his book *On Humanism*, (June *VH*). I know it's polite to have something nice to say about someone, but I'm afraid I can't totally share RN's views on this. Where he says that religion "has inspired social and political movements to improve the lot of human beings" I'm afraid I nearly choke. Slavery pre-dated Christianity. It was over 18 centuries before Wilberforce mustered enough common decency and indignation to lead the movement to have the barbaric practice banned, and then only in the part of the world Britain had stolen from the original inhabitants; and after she had made an absolute pile from the trade.

I'm not sure the passages of the Quran justifying slavery and how slaves must be treated have been revised in the holy scripture, but if they have, good for them.

RN then quotes the civil rights movement as an example of inspiration. Surely the question to ask is: where was the religious inspiration when segregation was installed as a way of life in the US South a hundred years previously? And you would be excused for asking how many good people of the congregation were hidden under the hoods of the KKK?

The great medieval cathedrals are certainly an inspiration. But where are the great medieval hospitals, halls of scientific learning?

And RN may well have inquired of the source of the gold and silver adorning those medieval cathedrals and bishops' palaces. From my memory Europe was not renowned for gold and silver mines. We know Catholic Spain enslaved the Incas to mine some of its gold and silver and Protestant Britannia pirated hers from the Spanish Main.

I agree that to present religion in a wholly negative light would be hopelessly unbalanced, but sadly the facts speak for themselves; and the balance is hopelessly negative.

It can be argued that the religion of the times reflected the attitudes and values of the times. Equally, it can be argued that religion enforced the attitude and values of the times. If the former were true, the various religions would be leading the community and the body politic in the reform of archaic notions on such things as homosexuality and population control. That they're not suggests they're firmly stuck in the religiosity of the past. Hopefully that's where we can one day leave them.

John Mosig, Kew

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### Politics

The punishment we suffer, if we refuse to take an interest in matters of government, is to live under the government of worse men.

Plato

Dear Stephen,

I WANTED to thank you for the continuing excellent work of HSV and, in particular, its role in responding to various government inquiries where a humanist perspective can usefully be injected. In each newsletter, I read the summaries of submissions with interest and find myself almost always agreeing with the positions put.

I'd like to comment on the recent submission to the Victorian Government Inquiry into Education of Gifted and Talented Students. I read the summary and full submission and agreed with most points. My concern is with the statement: "We believe that such students should be placed in mainstream setting and not in segregated areas which would be detrimental to both talented and the ordinary in terms of self-image and concepts of society."

The merits of mainstream teaching versus special programs for gifted students is an issue that relies on research and evidence i.e. on the educational outcomes for students in different settings. There is some research on this, and it strongly suggests that targeted programs such as selective programs and selective schools can be of great benefit to gifted students, including in building their self-esteem and social skills. To suggest that such programs be discontinued is a large step without compelling evidence that such programs harm other students.

In terms of equity, such programs can be seen as analogous to targeted programs for those with learning difficulties where it is difficult for a mainstream environment to meet their needs. I attach a submission by the Gifted Support Network which gives an idea of the boredom, frustration and disengagement from learning that can result when gifted children are taught in mainstream settings without sufficient understanding of their needs, including their social and emotional needs.

For background, I have a daughter who has been assessed as gifted and have been involved in a parent support group for families of gifted children in the northern and western suburbs. I have read some of the research in this area to educate myself. I should have offered to share some of this but I hadn't realised that HSV would be making a submission to this inquiry. I know that HSV has an open process for preparing submissions and I could have come along and presented my views if I'd been paying attention!

I just wanted to share this because it is a difficult road to help a gifted child through the education system. I have been relatively lucky, but I know families who have found it very difficult indeed. For some of them, it has been the programs for gifted children which have been the lifesavers: places where gifted children can go and be accepted for who they are. I just wanted to put this perspective.

Melissa Conley Tyler, Brunswick

## Amending the Education Act 2006

In a much-appreciated private comment on my article under the above title in June *VH*, HSV member, V.M., wisely cautioned me against involving my family in the campaign.

Of course I would prefer to speak to my MPs only on behalf of the HSV, but alas I also want to say something, which goes beyond our stated position regarding special religious instruction (SRI). I think that even the phrase “general religious education” (GRE) in section 2.2.10 of the Act still has too much religion in it. If we were successful in getting SRI either shifted to after school hours or made opt-in, the religionists in the community would then push for control of GRE, to be delivered by theological graduates and financed totally by the State.

It seems to me that the spirit of secular education is therefore better preserved by having an inclusive title such as “general worldview education”, which would include secular life philosophies of today such as Theravada Buddhism and Humanism, along with Epicureanism and Stoicism of antiquity.

So coming back to my grandson, if one visits an MP the MP wants to know what one’s interest is. When I said that I was an aggrieved grandfather it obviously made a good impression, judging by the wry smiles sometimes followed by the story of them personally wrestling with the problem on behalf of their own kids. It makes sense to an MP that instead of staying at home and battling off Alzheimer’s, a granddad takes to the streets and the MPs office to battle on behalf of a grandchild.

So what is to be requested by the HSV in any future amending of the Act: “general religious education”, or “general worldview education”?

Harry Gardner

## Ismism

A noble and astute student of human nature toiled most of his long life in search of a system that would bring peace and justice on earth. Every ism he studied had at one time or place led to a power struggle which in turn created injustice or war. In desperation he advocated anti-ismism. It was exactly what the world was ready for. All isms became politically incorrect. With nationalism gone, borders went. Without capitalism, communism or socialism common-sense prevailed. Theism changed to compassion. The death of racism, feminism and masculinism resulted in equality. All 7341 isms faded away without a struggle. In the year 2060 a disagreement developed into the great anti-ismism schism and the age of scepticism was born.

Supplied by Rudi Anders

## Humanist friend in USA

Mira Peck, our Humanist correspondent from New Jersey, USA sent the May 2011 issue of *Freethought Today* published by the Freedom From Religion Foundation Inc (FFRF). This tabloid size magazine features a “come out of the closet” campaign where non-believers in all walks of life are urged to post their name, photo and godless message on-line.

Among the many posted so far re prominent public figures including Richard Dawkins and Peter Singer (though I did not think they were ever in the closet). Messages range from the sarcastic – “How come God talks only to Lunatics?” to “I believe in GOOD not God” and “Faith in god(s) is simply ignorance elevated to a virtue”. Dawkins’s message compares religion to the smallpox virus but harder to eradicate.

The FFRF organisation claims many victories where their complaints to authorities that “Government prayer is unnecessary, inappropriate and divisive” resulted in changes in various establishments where prayers were replaced by moments of reflection. They have also issued a challenge against the National Day of Prayer which was established in 1952 by a congressional act and requires the president to issue an annual proclamation exhorting citizens to pray. In this campaign they posted 180 adverts on buses in Washington and four dioramas in metros.

This busy organisation has over 16,500 members and is the largest agnostic/atheistic association in the USA.

Halina Strnad

### On history

To remain ignorant of what happened before you were born is to remain always a child.

Cicero (106–43 BCE)

Think Inc. Conference  
18 September 2011

Speakers include: Neil deGrasse Tyson,  
Christopher Hitchens, Tim Flannery,  
Michael Shermer, Shane Koyczan, Josh Thomas,  
Fr. Bob Maguire, + others!

Australian Humanists are official promotional partners of  
Think Inc. Conference.

For bookings and more information go to  
<http://www.thinkinc.org.au/edm>

Global Atheist Convention  
Melbourne 13-15 April 2012

The Atheist Foundation of Australia’s next convention  
“A Celebration of Reason” will feature Richard  
Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris and Christopher  
Hitchens (health permitting).

[www.atheistconvention.org.au](http://www.atheistconvention.org.au)