



HUMANIST Viewpoints

Are We Alone?

Also in this issue...

- CaHS debrief
- Solstice Symbolism
- Dutch turn their back on Multiculturalism

2013/14 Society Memberships due 1st July

HuVAT 2013

You are invited to the Humanist Viewpoints Afternoon Talk held 4pm on the 2nd Sunday each month. Please join us and socialise over light refreshments.

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| Jul 14 th | Philosopher, Bertrand Russell - Dr. Victor Bien |
| Aug 11 th | Perspective on HIV/AIDS prevention & treatment - Angela Ketcher |
| Sept 8 th | AGM - Notice of meeting will be sent separately |

Follow us on our website www.hsnsw.asn.au and Facebook



Special Message from the President

Make a Donation

This year, please consider making a donation of \$5, \$20, \$50 or whatever you can to protect and sustain the NSW Humanist Society. Your donation will sustain the diverse range of activities the Society undertakes.

Consider Making a Bequest

Please also remember us in your Will. All bequests contribute to the longevity of the Humanist Society of NSW and Humanism.

Thank You,
John August

Editor's Comments Frank Gomez

Book Room

A shout out to the fantastic work being done by Gillian in the book room. I have become an e-book junkie but many members continue to appreciate physical books.

So if you have any Freethought or Philosophic books in your collection then consider donating them to the Society's library. Please call Gillian on 9660 9658 if you would like to donate.



Save paper by getting Viewpoints electronically

This newsletter is also available electronically as a PDF in vivid colour. Members who would like an additional electronic colour version by e-mail at no extra cost can contact me directly at frankgomez@me.com.

Some members have indicated they would be interested in only receiving the electronic copy for future editions to assist the Society in reducing costs and the unnecessary printing of paper. If you are happy to forgo the receipt of the printed version and just receive the electronic version then please make that clear in your email. It is entirely optional and your decision doesn't affect the manner in which you receive all other communications from the Society.

Correction

The last edition should have stated April, May, June 2013 on the front cover.

Member News Membership Secretary

Memberships for 2013/2014 must be renewed soon or you will lose your continuance. Please continue to be involved in Humanism and your Society. If you are unsure of your membership status you are welcome to email me at abraxas@tpg.com.au.

Welcome to new members Lyndon Storey, Richard Berling and Justin Abrahams.

Vale. Member Bill Leslie died recently. He was a union stalwart, having been active in the NSWTF (Teacher's Federation) and in the overseas aid function of the union movement. He had also served as the paid co-ordinator of People for Nuclear Disarmament NSW in the late 1980s, when it was a large organisation. He was also a personal friend, a humorous and gentle person.

Words & Music



"Words and Ideas" by David Tribe is available for \$15 for the total benefit of the Humanist Society of NSW. A very popular piece of literature which is selling fast so send in your order with your cheque or money order.



"Love is Born" CD is composed and the lyrics are written by Dennis Morris (past President of HumSocWA). The songs are English interspersed with Zulu, and are highly relaxing.

"You Can't Stop the Revolution" CD includes chanting and humming by singers performed in 1988 when Nelson Mandela was in prison for 25 years

The \$15 is totally for the benefit of the HumSocNSW so please send in your order with your cheque or money order.



CAHS CONVENTION 2013

Awards Dinner

There were 60 attendees at the dinner who enjoyed the venue (Rydgges Hotel), the food and the singers: George Eynon (especially his finale of Maori songs) and Talia Nicolitsis who surprised so many having such a voice so young. Of course the highlights were: past CAHS President Rosslyn Ives awarding Fred Flatow the Outstanding Humanist Achiever 2013, newly elected CAHS President Paul Zagoridis introducing our Patron Robyn Williams AHOY 1993 who awarded Jane Caro AHOY 2013. Jane passionately expressed her annoyance with the incompetence of politicians of recent times regardless of their party followed by Robyn's equally passionate tirade at religious abuse especially that which has been covered up.



Our other Patron Dorothy Buckland Fuller was in charge of thanking the speakers and as the CAHS Convenor unfortunately I cut her short as she was in the middle of sending her message of love to one and all. For that I give sincere my apologies.



We were honoured to have Lee Rhiannon MP, Senator for NSW sitting with our NSW President John August, Victor Bien, Ken Wright (CAHS Treasurer), Mary Bergin (CAHS Secretary) and their families and friends. Sitting with Dorothy, Robyn, Jane and her husband Ralph Dunning was barrister Michael MacHugh and his wife Cat Davey.

Unfortunately, our other guests Mr. and Mrs Ellicott QC had not been able to attend last minute. Victor is to be thanked for the painstaking job of producing the copies of CD copies of Dennis Morris music which we sell for profit for HumSocNSW and we also made some profit from David Tribes booklets, which



Rosslyn Ives awarding Fred Flatow the Outstanding Humanist Achiever 2013

we sold and raffled – thanks David and Dennis. We raised \$160 for the raffle which had first prize the original artwork I donated and the booklets and CDs for 2nd and 3rd prizes. Also thanks to the winner of the first prize, Sturt Duncan, who purchased the second original Affie artwork for \$200, making a total of \$360 for us on the night from the raffle.

Our Editor Frank Gomez who was our guest, with Marco Fabiani, received a round of applause as acclamation for his production of Viewpoints.



Marco Fabiani and Frank Gomez (right)

Sunday: Manly Ferry was the chosen tour and a group lead by Fred Flatow including John August, Victor Bien and his wife Silvana, Ian Bryce, Rosslyn Ives (Vic), and Justin Millikan to name a few, went sightseeing and lunch in Manly experiencing our Sydney Harbour on the way.



Monday: CAHS SEMINAR - State Parliament Theatre

GLAPD (Africa) (Great Lakes Agency for Peace and Development) Dr. Nadine Shema (pictured below) lead a Panel discussion including Theophile Elongo – General Director, Dr. Nadine Shema - director of PR and Jessica McGowan – Director of Programs.





Jane Caro & CAHS President Paul Zagoridis

Ethics Education Initiatives in Australia

Ian Bryce convened a panel of outstanding leaders in the field: St. James Ethics Centre – Simon Longstaff AOM Executive Director and Teresa Russell General Manager Ethics Classes; John Kaye - Greens MP, John Russell (Social Worker Humanist Society Vic), Dr. Victor Bien – originally member of Fed. of P&C Assoc commissioning (2005) St James Ethics Centre instigating ethics classes .



The seminar though poorly attended, was excellent with and outcome of two resolutions summarised here as:-

1. that we ask CAHS to support GLAPD with resources for their work.

2. that we ask CAHS to lobby for legislation that ethics classes be included in the school curriculum.

I am pleased to advise that I have sent these off to CAHS and HumSocNSW has already joined as an organisational member of GLAPD and I am the delegate. I hope all the other States will do likewise to help them with their work. It costs \$100 for the annual organisational membership.

Multiculturalism

I received this email which is a discourse happening at the moment which raises concern for many of us and so I decided to offer it for publication in Viewpoints with a view to opening a dialectic for our members.

The Netherlands , where six per cent of the population is now Muslim, is scrapping multiculturalism.

The Dutch government says it will abandon the long-standing model of multiculturalism that has encouraged Muslim immigrants to create a parallel society within the Netherlands .

A new integration bill, which Dutch Interior Minister Piet Hein Donner presented to parliament on June 16, reads:

"The government shares the social dissatisfaction over the multicultural society model and plans to shift priority to the values of the Dutch people. In the new integration system, the values of the Dutch society play a central role. With this change, the government steps away from the model of a multicultural society.

The letter continues:

"A more obligatory integration is justified because the government also demands that from its own citizens. It is necessary because otherwise the society gradually grows apart and eventually no one feels at home anymore in the Netherlands .

The new integration policy will place more demands on immigrants.

For example, immigrants will be required to learn the Dutch language, and the government will take a tougher approach to immigrants who ignore Dutch values or disobey Dutch law.

The government will also stop offering special subsidies for Muslim immigrants because, according to Donner;

"It is not the government's job to integrate immigrants"

The government will introduce new legislation that outlaws forced marriages and will also impose tougher measures against Muslim immigrants who lower their chances of employment by the way they dress.

More specifically, the government will impose a ban on face-covering, Islamic burqas as of January 1, 2013

Holland has done that whole liberal thing, and realized, it may be too late, that creating a nation of tribes will kill the nation itself.

READERS NOTE:

Muslim immigrants leave their countries of birth because of civil and political unrest "CREATED BY THE VERY NATURE OF THEIR CULTURE."

Countries like Holland and Australia have an established way of life that actually works, so why embrace the unworkable? (relayed by Harry Polymeris)



I've recently been reading some books from our library. While there's some interesting content in contemporary books by prominent atheists - Christopher Hitchens and the like - going back far enough, there seem to have been analyses of interesting character and depth, something we have since lost sight of. Recently I've read *"The Paganism in our Christianity"* by Weigall and *"The Rise of Christianity"* by Kalthoff.

There's a lot you can push back with on Christianity once you have the background. Equally, rather than just applying the usual string of adjectives to religion - wrong, stupid, etc., you can actually see the influences behind how it took shape. I hope to open up our library in meetings to come, and trust you'll take a look at what there is to offer.

In this report, I'll reflect on two things - the motivation for religious beliefs, perceptions of how religion fits into the world along with prerogatives of Government. It's how things seem to me - though I need to acknowledge I'm not qualified in psychology.

While some say Christians are motivated by a fear of death, this is a gross distortion at best. The promise of eternal life is used coercively by some Christian sects in the US. However, many people who are converted seem to be searching for a purpose, without any concern for their mortality.

Having said that, we're not talking about a supernatural phenomenon - rather one rooted in human psychology. Somehow, by imagining something else outside of yourself - call it God, but that's just a label - it could be anything - giving it attributes, and then talking of yourself in negative terms - and pushing responsibility for your life, for your behaviour, for your morals, for your purpose - onto that external concept - somehow, it yields psychological power, and lets some people lead more effective lives. It's known that some people conquer an addiction as a side effect of a conversion experience.

This is another religious driver - nothing to do with a fear of death. Perhaps you've heard some stories along these lines yourself. We need to be aware of it, and not build up a straw man of what religious conversion is like.

Compared to the "bolt of lightning" conversion experience, there's a secular experience I've had ... Maybe you've experienced something similar. It's a slow burn, but over time you can develop an appreciation of the world. You mix in evolution, evolutionary psychology, economics, game theory, ethical philosophy (in particular, the humanist viewpoint), and some life experience too ... and world starts to "make sense". We've haven't been put on earth by something else for a purpose, there's no life after death, but the world starts to ... make sense. And there's some inner warmth in that. Maybe not the same

warmth as believers have, but still the serenity that understanding brings.

Changing pace, let's look at Government and religion - and how things get twisted. Long ago we had the "Defence of Government Schools" case. There's the religious hour in schools, with its origins going even further back in time - something we wrote about in our submission to the NSW State Government. More recently, we've had Government funding of Church activities - and school Chaplains.

We see separation of church and state and the limitation of religious privilege as important - but it seems it is all lost on a large proportion of Australians.

I've become aware of the DOGS case; I've become aware of the Lyon's forum, a Christian force behind politics in Australia; there's also prayer groups; Howard's intervention into the NT Voluntary Euthanasia laws, something he only just managed to get past our constitution - with the original cross-party cooperation spearheaded by Tony Burke; tax laws that promote Christian-preferred family structures.

In the recent Chaplains case, rather than respecting the principle of separation of Church and State, the Federal Government focused on what it could "get away with".

There's frequently a tension between "worthy principles" and the things that, for what seem to be worthy reasons, we need to do now. The fallacy of "lip service" is to give a nod to some worthy set of principles, and then outline a proposition that runs contrary to those principles ! You do see it from time to time.

Augustine once said "make me good, but not just yet". Paul Volcker said, "[I recall] sitting in my office then, as President of the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, thinking what this country needs is a first class bank failure to teach us all a lesson. But please, God, not in my District." We adopt certain UN resolutions, but avoid their consequences. And so on. And on.

Politicians of either side have not been scrutinised. They have not been asked - "Just what does the separation of church and state mean to you, and what should it stop you from doing" ? Sad to say, politics is rarely about principles, but rather about the apparent soundness of the propaganda you weave. It's apparent in many areas.

If any politicians did stop to think about it, their own notions would be quite woolly, and trumped by the political concerns of the day. Yes, separation of Church and State is important, but we need to do this. It is left for the High Court to make its convoluted interpretations - parting company with what makes sense to the man in the street. In fact, the people behind the DOGS case say the original intent of the founding fathers was for a strong separation of Church and State - but they never thought an unambiguous word would be subject to such legal argy-bargy.

The Federal Government saw fit to push through the funding of Chaplains, and when the High Court some administrative obstacles in its way, rather than taking stock of the fact that it was over reaching - went about working its way around those new hurdles.

And yet, with all this in the background, you will find people who think that "we've got pretty good separation of church and state in Australia", being blind to all the tensions beneath the surface. Nor will they agree that these principles are as important as we think they are. To be fair, strident articles pop up in the papers and elsewhere from time to time - but they need to compete for mindshare with the many other - admittedly valid - concerns about the world we live in.

So, our concerns are not appreciated by the broader community, not to mention some Christians who will be in complete denial. They are not the only concerns out there - there are other problems with our society and government - and to be sure, we need to acknowledge that we get enough things right that we can notice the things that are wrong. But it is a very reasonable choice to focus our energies on these particular problems - one that I hope we'll all be able to move forward on.

John August

President
NSW Humanist Society

Letters to the Editor

Intolerance Seminar leaves out non-religious

In President John August's report in Humanist Viewpoints for April - June, he referred to the statements made by Jesuit priest and Prof Frank Brennan at a meeting at the Opera house.

Prof Brennan apparently had the gall to assert that atheists have no values. He also claimed that his church would co-operate fully in matters of law relating to paedophilia.

On the latter issue I'll confine my comments to suggesting that it's about time; and that the Catholic Church's rigid adherence to its canon law remains a critical impediment to any such professed cooperation.

In matters of universal social import, the churches internally administered canon law shouldn't be permitted to take precedence over the rule of the land.

As the Prof Brennan's contention that atheists have no values, perhaps readers may be interested in the following letter I wrote to Prof Brennan who was a key participant in the seminar referred. He did not respond.

John Dillon, Blackheath.

Dear Professor Brennan,

I recently read with interest 'The Chronicle' (Canberra) article of 17th May advertising the seminar about tackling intolerance 'in Australian society'.

It stated that the seminar was to do with 'encouraging acceptance and friendship'.

However, the seminar was also reported to be a forum solely for religious representatives. The only references to secularism were your own assertion of frequent media suggestions of a predominantly secular society, and that you were pleased at the presence in our community of 'a lot of (unspecified) secular elements'.

Perhaps, given the stated compass of the forum discussion, secular representatives (humanist, atheist) should have been included.

After all, the religious elements cordially invited to attend are, in official terms, seriously at odds in the recognition and interpretation of belief sources and the implementation of the said interpretations.

I suggest that any progress in the amelioration of relations between religious groups, and any toleration of secular elements, is the direct result of advances in science, education and democracy - all under the aegis of just laws. And aspects of such progress raise questions concerning the inflexible beliefs and practices of centuries past.

I further suggest, with all due respect, that the divisive differences of opinion among religious indicate something less than divine origins and authority - even for any perception of an ultimately unifying cause and result.

Surely both historic and modern scholarship, combined with rational and honest assessment of evidence, give abundant cause to reappraise the alleged validity of belief in things supernatural.

For your possible consideration I enclose copies of my letters to certain of your colleagues; with the suggestion that tolerance, like the proverbial charity, begins at home.

With appreciation of your attention, Yours sincerely,

JOHN DILLON

Letters to the Editor *continued*

Enlightenment Discussion

Victor Bien (Vpts Apr-Jul 2013) rightly identifies the Enlightenment as the start of the modern age, and cites attributes identified by Kieron O'Hara. I'm glad CAHS, with an accepted amendment, approved Victor's motion.

In *Words and Ideas* (2009), under the Enlightenment I listed atheism, deism, pantheism, rationalism, empiricism, liberalism, skepticism, cynicism, humanism, classicism, formalism and cosmopolitanism. While only 'cosmopolitanism' is common to the two lists, I imagine the implications of both are very similar.

Victor asks 'what is special about Humanists?'. He regrets that we come across as negative by 'opposing religion as our core object; 'quaint, redundant, woolly and "hobbyists" with respect to societal issues', and without a 'plausible conceptual basis... to do with the civil society, economy, environment, non-human animal life, the arts and aesthetics'.

The trouble with the 'positive' program he advocates is that it isn't distinctively Humanist. Today many religionists and nothingarians would support it, at least in theory. At the end of the day, it's our rejection of religion as the supposed basis of the rule of law and moral authority that provides our *raison d'être*.

From its inception (but maybe not today) the British Humanist Association devised a number of 'positive' motherhood statements for its advertisements in The Observer. These reached their fatuous acme in 1970 with a statement that Humanists are 'for humanity' - as if

anyone (or anyone likely to join us) would be against humanity.

Nevertheless, Victor's proposal for an embracing one-sentence definition of Humanism is a good one. May I suggest:

Humanism advocates a non-theistic approach to all questions of law reform, civil liberties, social justice and conflict resolution.

I don't believe the arts and aesthetics should have ideological labels.

The other items in the same Viewpoints caught my eye. I knew about, but was depressed to read Charles Murray's personal account of, the sad but inevitable collapse of the Cooperative movement, which I lectured for sporadically while living in London in the 1960s.

In the same place and time, I opposed the introduction of ethics classes (moral education or ME), although, as David Zyngier observes, they're clearly better than compulsory religious instruction (now euphemised to religious education). An appreciation and implementation of moral behaviour and understanding of multicultural beliefs should permeate the school community. If exams were held to gauge student's progress in ME, the school cheat or bully might walk off with first prize.

David Tribe

News in Brief

Catholic 'Mafia' in Newcastle Police

Detective Chief Inspector Peter Fox and child-abuse whistleblower told an abuse inquiry on 7 May that a "Catholic Mafia" within the ranks of Newcastle police colluded with church leaders to cover up sex abuse in the Maitlands-Newcastle diocese.

In her opening address, Commissioner Cunneen said that the Maitland-Newcastle diocese "has had a very troubled history regarding issues of child protection and the sexual abuse of children".

Majority doubt 'Ministers of Religion' on ethics and honesty

The latest Roy Morgan 'Image of Professions' published in May showed nurses as the most trusted profession by Australians. Unsurprisingly state MPs and Car Salesmen scraped the bottom of the barrel.

Only 44% considered Ministers of Religion to be honest and ethical (up 1% from 2012) but still well below 51% in 2011.

Buddhist image of peace rocked by violence

Muslims have been the targets of Buddhists earlier in the year. In Sri Lanka Buddhists have called for sanctions against Halal practices and in Burma violence escalated with 40 dead after clashes, some spearheaded by Buddhist Monks.

The clashes have shaken the Western perception of Buddhism as a religion of peace. BBC journalist Alan Strathern opined that Buddhists are increasingly concerned about radical Islam and that tolerating the intolerant is no longer an option for them.

Solstice and the lack of symbolism in Australia

Frank Gomez

The Church's appropriation of many pagan festivals has left an important gap in the northern hemisphere - the summer solstice. In Australia, due to the reversal of seasons, the summer solstice has been conflated into Christmas, leaving the winter solstice somewhat stranded.

The word "festival" is now reserved for occasions when people who are young, or would like to be, huddle together in a field to listen to music in baking sun or rain and get inebriated.

Some 1,500 years ago, Anglo-Saxon, Celtic and other European peoples celebrated regularly to mark the passage of the seasons that governed the natural world around them and the cycle of the sun, which gave them light and warmth.

Life being nasty, brutish and short, they made the most of these moments of hope and plenty. Like most religions, pagans had festivals such as Yule, and the spring fertility festival, Eostre, not to mention Beltane, Lammas, Samhain and so forth.

The arrival of Christianity meant that people had to give up sacrifices and the more sexually adventurous forms of celebration. But in return, the new religion offered an increasing roll call of saints - each of whom was owed their day of partying.

The pagan holidays were recycled as Easter and Christmas. Shrove Tuesday compensated for the rigours of Lenten fasting, and gave a great excuse for a festival from Basel to Brazil via New Orleans.

At the end of summer came the harvest. All Souls' Day, also known as Day of the Dead in Mexico, on 2 November, was the day people remembered and celebrated their dead. Halloween is the commercial remnant of that in the USA and increasingly popular here in Australia.



Australia: Winter Magic parade in Katoomba.

The closest thing to an Australian appropriation of the winter solstice has been the idea of Christmas in July, though it's astronomically incorrect by one month and has failed to match the popularity of the traditional holidays.

But the Church's appropriation of pagan festivals left one rather important gap in Australia. I am talking about midwinter, the winter solstice, which this year fell on 21 June. Unless you are living in Katoomba, or are one of the 24,000 Australians who identified themselves as pagan in the census, you are highly unlikely to take any notice whatsoever of midwinter.

The Blue Mountains town of Katoomba celebrates a Winter Magic festival on the weekend closest to the winter solstice which has become a popular community event (see picture) and even has local Christian churches participating in what is a notionally pagan festival.

Many countries around the world mark solstices rather well. Sweden does midsummer in the most elaborate fashion, with the midsommarstang maypole and dancing, and flowers in the hair. Norway's midsummer rituals entail bonfires, preferably out in nature, near a fjord or river.



Sweden: Midsommarstang.

Finns and Danes also go for the fire, underlining that midsummer is a festival of light.

I would not for a moment suggest that we revert to the liturgical calendar, let alone to paganism. But I believe that we are poorly served when it comes to festivals and celebrations. Our working lives are broken up only by public holidays, for parents and children the school holidays, increasingly secularised and commercialised Christmas and Easter, and the New Year fireworks.

Alain de Botton, in *Religion for Atheists*, proposes that "those of us who hold no religious or supernatural beliefs still require regular, ritualised encounters with concepts such as friendship, community, gratitude and transcendence".



[Non-religious people] still require ritualised encounters with concepts such as friendship and gratitude”

Alain de Botton

I'm not suggesting we should be worshipping anything supernatural. But wouldn't it be good, if we could get together at regular intervals, with family or with friends, to take stock and reflect?

At midwinter, we could celebrate the shortest day, and look forward in hope to the coming of the warmth and longer days. At the spring equinox, it's the time to be thinking of fresh starts. The end of summer brings harvest, a moment of thanks for what the earth has given us. And midsummer should be a celebration of light and growth.

The sociologist Robert Mclver writes that "the healthy being craves an occasional wildness, a jolt from normality, a sharpening of the edge of appetite, his own little festival of Saturnalia, a brief excursion from his way of life".

As humanists we may also draw inspiration from the idea of the return of the sun as symbol of the light of reason or enlightenment in what can often feel like dark times.

Do me a favour. Do something different for midwinter next year. Light a warming bon-fire.

Frank Gomez

India: Hindu devotees worship the sun god on Makar Sankranti, a Hindu holy day marking the winter solstice when the sun transits from the astrological zone of Sagittarius to Capricorn

If by this he means we need some better festivals, I rather agree with him. When I look at other cultures, I feel a strong sense of festival envy.

De Botton mentions the Buddhist Tsukimi ritual, when people gather to view the harvest moon, and the Jewish festival of Birkat Ha Ilanot, which marks the first blossoming of spring. In Japan too, the seasons are celebrated with parks full of people picnicking and admiring the cherry blossom.

One reason that I like the idea of festivals is that they give rhythm to the year. Without regular and repeated moments, 365 days can just become a whirl, our busy lives offering no moments to pause and reflect.

Anti-vaccine parents urged to join sham church

The Daily Telegraph reported that controversial anti-vaccination campaigner Meryl Dorey has been encouraging parents to join "sham" churches to exploit a loophole in the government's tough new vaccination policy.

Under new laws introduced in May, unvaccinated children are banned from childcare centres unless their parents can prove immunisation was against their religion or would cause a dangerous medical reaction.

Ms Dorey, who founded the Australian Vaccination Network, has urged her followers on social media to join the "Church of Conscious Living" as a way of avoiding the vaccination laws.

Health Minister Jillian Skinner was yesterday forced to answer questions in parliament about the loophole in her new laws, but admitted her hands were tied.

"The NSW government is not legally able to prevent people practising a religion or following religious beliefs," Ms Skinner said.

The Church of Conscious Living was founded by Jane Leonforte and Adriano Regano in Queensland in 2008, with the express purpose of creating a front for vaccination exemptions. In a letter sent by the "church" to their followers, Ms Leonforte and Mr Regano admit "we have decided to create a 'religion', so, amongst other things, we can claim 'religious exemption', if the need ever arises, for ourselves and our children."

It costs \$25 to become a member of the "church", which believes the "body is a sacred space" and preaches "the rejection of orthodox vaccination, for both adults, children and animals".

Are We Alone in the Universe?

A Conversation with Jill Tarter

Astronomer Jill Tarter is the holder of the Bernard M. Oliver Chair for SETI and is a fellow of the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry. She is one of the few researchers to have devoted her career to hunting for signs of sentient beings elsewhere. The Jodie Foster character in the movie "Contact" is largely based on this real-life researcher.



It terms of milestones for a career, I'd say it ranges from starting the nonprofit SETI Institute, to developing a research home for not only SETI ... and the launch of the Kepler spacecraft 25 years ago after the first technical paper of the transit technology got published as the result of SETI.

Having Kepler launch in 2009 is phenomenal. The fact that we now have from Kepler found almost 3,000 exoplanet candidates is incredible. We now know where to look. We know where planets are. This is a huge paradigm shift for SETI. We've left behind findings that were based on stars that we thought might make good homes for extraterrestrial civilizations and we're now specifically looking where there are stars.

The Kepler project seems to have found a bunch of Earth-like planets recently. Is that because technology is advanced enough now for us to discover these planets, or is the news media just talking about it more?

That tells you what people are interested in, right? The holy grail for Kepler is a planet in a habitable zone of a solar-type star. That is what Kepler is trying to find. That's what people are really interested in. Earth 2.0 will definitely be the next big milestone. We haven't found it yet, but many of my colleagues who work on Kepler are pretty sure that it's just around the corner.

How close are we?

There are candidates that are being followed up on, and eventually some of these may provide the detection and confirmation of an Earth-sized planet in the habitable range of the solar-type star, the very thing we're looking for.

You sound optimistic.

A whole bunch of scientists are working on the Kepler project, all of whom are optimistic. As time goes on, as we add together more like her, and we get more and more sensitivity, we're finding smaller and smaller bodies, and small planets seem to be a lot more frequent than the giant planets (which is something we didn't know, at least within the orbital parameters that we've studied so far). You see that with time, you get the opportunity to find planets farther away from their star. And if the star is like the sun, then the habitable zone is something like one astronomical unit.

The former long-time director of SETI (Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence), Dr. Tarter has arguably turned the institute into the final authority on searching for extrasolar worlds. She was the director of Project Phoenix, a ten-year survey of about 800 stars. She is the senior scientist for the Allen Telescope Array located in a Hat Creek, California field that will soon include 350 satellites to monitor for extraintelligent signals 24/7.

Dr. Tarter is also on NASA's Kepler mission team, analyzing data gathered from the Kepler telescope as it surveys 100,000 stars simultaneously—So far, Kepler has found 2,740 candidates. It is NASA's first mission capable of finding Earth-like planets that orbit around a solar-like star in the "Goldilocks" zone, neither too close nor too far from its star to support liquid water.

She spoke on the 30th June 2013 at the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney about the ongoing search and what it means.

The following are excerpts from a recent interview with her courtesy www.culturebomb.com

Are you an alien hunter?

Just as a matter of style, we tend not to use the word, "alien," because it has a number of negative contexts. But you know, I'm not losing any sleep over it.

Looking back on your career now that you have retired, and since we haven't made contact with any extraterrestrial intelligent civilizations, I'm curious to know what advancements have we made?

It takes a planet something like a year to orbit around that star, and to get multiple transits, you need many years. Kepler is just approaching that threshold. So it couldn't have found an Earth analog in the first year of life because we require at least three transits to confirm a planet.

It's quite a bit of lag time. What if the civilization isn't even there anymore?

So the question is: If we find something, does that mean that they're still there? And the answer is, no, we don't know that, at least not at first. We might just find their machines and not the technology. But if you find the signal, you're going to infer that other intelligence technology existed at least at some time. I, for one, think that there's a reasonable chance that they still exist. But we can't know that, and nobody can know that until we find the signal and do research.

Is that a gut feeling that you have that intelligent life exists out there?

It has to do with numbers. Think about the size of the Milky Way galaxy. It's 100,000 lightyears across. That means that a signal traversing the entire galaxy could take 100,000 years. And that sounds like a long time to you and me, but 100,000 years isn't very long in cosmic time. So if the signal is lifted 100,000 years ago, and it's just now getting here, the probability is that it's still there. 100,000 years is the blink of the cosmic eye. Really, it's not that long.

Say we discover something within our lifetime. What would that mean for us?

It changes just about everything. It indicates that a lot of chemistry and physics throughout the universe acts in such a sequence to produce intelligent life and technological life somewhere else. So that, number one, even if all we ever detected is a dial tone—no information contact—just an artifact that indicates they were there,

that answers this very, very old human question about whether we're alone. And more to the point, again we go back to arguing numbers. It actually fundamentally shows up that we, humans, can have a long future. Why do I say that? Because if detection is successful, it means that there has to be multiple technological civilizations not only close enough within the galaxy so that they have the sensitivity to find one another, but they have to exist as a technological civilization for a long enough time so that the transmitter and receiver line up along the ten billion-year history of our galaxy.

I really see SETI as an investment to our future. If we can get people around the world participating in SETI, actually thinking about and doing SETI in some way, then if you wish, it's kind of a benign, nonthreatening practice for the kinds of global collaboration and cooperation we're going to need to tackle these situations that are transnational.

In the end, that's what SETI is all about. To take a belief and turn it into a scientific exploration. We have for millennia listened to humans of math and priests and philosophers and other groups that we think are wise. And every answer that we've gotten is based on someone's solar system. We are now trying to use the tools of the astronomer to transform the active verb. To go away from "believing" to "exploring".

In the 1997 movie Contact, Jodie Fosters's character, Ellie Arroway, was based on you and your work. (The film is adapted from Carl Sagan's book, Contact.) It takes a more scientific look at what would happen if aliens make contact with Earth.

Would you like that kind of trip to happen for yourself?

Would I go on such a transportation system? The answer is: In a heartbeat. I want to go; I want to figure it out. I've been asking this question forever. I want to know if there's a way to get more answers.



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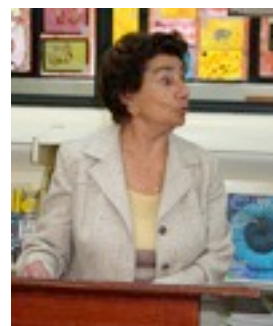
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