



HUMANIST Viewpoints

World Humanist Day 21 June 2014



Also

- Secular Meditation
- Outstanding Humanist Award
- 'Enlightenment Heroes' Symposium in Sydney

HuVAT 2014

Jul 13 - Affie Adagio - Who decides when you die

Aug 10 - Gillian Ellis - Women of the Enlightenment

Sep 14 - AGM

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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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

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.



Thank you all for your well wishes, having woken up with some chest pain from my recent quadruple bypass heart operation. Sadly this life-saving procedure caused me to miss our most prized pioneer **World Humanist Day Australia Symposium: Enlightenment the Roots of Humanism** which Victor and I nurtured from a seed of a concept and which our generous member/past President Mollie Campbell largely financially contributed to so that we were able to pay for return airfares for Symposium speakers.

Wed night 25/6 I was visited by the main members of the cardiac operating team that saved my life - Dr Kumud Dhital (Cardiothoracic & Transplant Surgeon) and Dr Alisdair Watson (Cardiothoracic & Transplant Registrar) to modestly say they were pleased with my progress since the operation on 19/6 and I would be probably free to go home on Friday 27/6/14 at the rate of recovery that was taking place now. Nurses John Ponce and Ruth Li saw me through the late hour shifts with the most outstanding bedside manners which I must add make all the difference to a sick person.

How can I thank these modest heroes enough for their amazing achievement (I live to tell the tale today because of their availability, knowledge and expertise in a split second and I 'hear tell' through the 'grapevine' it was touch and go for me at times! How do I help you understand that I can feel even a fraction of what you - my family, friends, supporters and anyone connected with my moment - must have been going through - especially co-Convenor Dr. Victor Bien/My Humanism Mentor who had an hypertension attack a day before the Symposium.

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.



Honorary Secretary Comments Affie Adagio

Victor's talent lays in the field of intellectual property whereas mine is in the strength of organisational choleric skills - so being left 'high and dry' in such a way at such a time was horrendous for him. I am thrilled that we, Australian Humanists, had the right to experience in Sydney State Parliament House for the first time in 10 years such a stupendous intellectual global celebration. I imagined Victor glowing with the light of 'Imagination in full bloom' at the thought of this dream come true. I was fully aware the huge shock caused to all and sundry as to whether my bleak outcome would be the 'wet blanket' as any such bad news would be and not because I am anyone so special!

I missed not only enjoying the storytelling of so many modern day philosophers and furthermore the introduction through film to the old master philosophers but also the opportunity of, say, seeing my dear friends once more in 14 years Dr Ian Ellis-Jones, David Tribe, and Dennis Morris who was awarded Outstanding Humanist Achiever 2014 by CAHS President, Paul Zagoridis (my son).

Dennis mind you had one of his beautifully composed Zulu chants become part of the national anthem during Nelson Mandela's time (amazing what we Humanists have achieved).

How can I help you understand the huge double bind I have experienced knowing I faced Death and said NO emphatically whilst missing such an amazing opportunity to be at a moment in time which some of you had - MIND YOU NOT TOTALLY MISSED because thanks to the wonderful generosity of time and expense by HSSA President Justin Millikin and his partner Hon Sec Janette Menhemet (newly HSSA State setup) we have the Symposium taped on YouTube).

I hope you all had the opportunity to hear but also connect with 'newbies' like Meredith Doig (Rationalist Australia President), Prof Frank Stilwell (Sydney Uni), Chrys Stevenson (Qld Writer/Social Activist), Erwin Swasbrook (HSWA Treasurer/Symposium Panel Member), Sam Mason Smith (HSV/Symposium Panel Member), recent friends: Dr. Victor Bien, Symposium Co-Convenor/Humanism Mentor (HSNSW Treasurer) and wife Silvana, Anne Bowen (HSV Treasurer), Mary Bergin (CAHS Hon Sec), Ian Bryce (HSNSW Symposium Panel Member/Ethics Classes Sydney Project Convenor), Fred Flatow (HSNSW Vice President), Gillian Ellis (HSNSW Committee Member/Bookshop Manager/ Feminist Symposium Host), Angela Drury (HSNSW Asst.Sec. Extraordinaire), Fay Love (HSNSW Committee Member), Murray Love (HSNSW Committee Member/Humanist NSW MEETUP GROUP Convenor), Sturt Duncan our WEA Life Member /Delegate and John August (HSNSW president and author responsible for update of booklet -Introduction to Humanism (free to members, \$5 for non members) which is our important piece of literature.

So I think I have relayed to you all emphatically the picture as I see it of the huge events describable only as the fireworks surrounding Australia's pioneer celebration of World Humanist Day Australia 2014 - couldn't have planned it better if you tried - what 'BIG BANG'; what 'PEZZAS'. If you missed it WHAT HUGE LOSS TO YOU (and unavoidably me and sadly my people as they fretted over my situation); fortunate were those who were there and a huge THANK YOU for that and for making it what it became.

I hope those who attended enjoyed the knowledge and experience that you were there rubbing shoulders with 'movers and shakers' who made that moment in time in that special place. THANKS MUCH TO STATE PARLIAMENT HOUSE for making the venue available gratis to CAHS (Council of Australian Humanist Societies) for World Humanist Day Australia to celebrate for the first time by holding a Symposium: Enlightenment the Roots of Humanism (Bien/Adagio CAHS AGM '13)

Also to our local member member Alex Greenwich MP for Sydney who sponsored our event in State Parliament. Our thoughts went out to Aunty Tranter who was unable to be present to do the Welcome to Country due to family obligations which we hope worked out for her in the end. The indigenous input was badly missed.

Civil Celebrant's Fee Rise

Finally it is important I highlight two benefactors whose contribution featured at the beginning of the decision-making process in this crisis period for which we Humanists need to offer huge thanks. The Hon Bob Elliott QC and Michael McHugh (defamation and constitution specialist Barrister in Bob's Chambers). As Founding Chairperson for Caretaking Committee for HCN (Humanist Celebrant Network 2000 which was under the HSNSW auspices originally more so than now) I approached our *pro bono* benefactor Barristers for an appointment to be guided as to the Celebrant Federal Fee being imposed on Commonwealth Officers (Civil Celebrants) whilst this is not on religious Ministers.

This fee is indirectly costing couples getting married by civil celebrants. Legislation was slipped in by the Federal Govt with no consultation. A case of 'talk to the hand'. So my appointment with our 'learned' friends and I meant that with much honour and respect for their valuable gratis time for HCN because our CoDA (the Civil Celebrants 'organising body') had become, in my opinion, a toothless tiger and we, Humanist Celebrant Network, needed to become proactive in the sense that CoDA should be. We have the formidable Dally Messenger III as the President of HCN now who is busy writing his latest amazing marriage book which will be a global best seller, no doubt.

Dally worked along with Lionel Murphy at the founding stages of the civil celebrancy movement (Murphy's Law 2012).

Then there is Charles Foley, Psychologist/Civil Celebrant/Humanist Chaplin (Canberra Hospital) and Gail Everard, Civil Celebrant (ex Public Servant of senior level experience) extremely articulate in government language who is our Liaison Communication Person with the Attorney General's Department and other government officials (as I understand it). These proactive talented people are now in place as Office Bearers to formalise the HCN into a powerful lobbying mechanism representative of the civil celebrancy movement which is a much needed vital commodity today.

Life and Death

So I was the only one close enough (Charles - Canberra, Gail - Melbourne, Dally with writing team out bush) with these amazing contacts for HCN for a Monday noon appointment. Sunday I felt a strange pain in chest and arms - suspicious to the severity of it? I found out Bob and his wife Colleen were planning to go away in the next few days so he had squeezed an appointment in with Michael to see me together for said time!

Dilemma: cannot postpone - will meet with them then go straight to St Vincent's Emergency after that, if necessary - sounds like a safe plan. Walked down from parking my car in Macquarie Street to Bob's Chambers - pain not unusual for me. Good sign. Met with Bob and Michael and get an understanding of what HCN can or cannot take action perhaps - if there are enough willing plaintiffs to participate for community justice for the civil celebrancy movement - Michael will email info (it's not an opinion just advice) and I can pass that on to Dally, Charles and Gail (which actually took place). I had a planned appointment with my excellent diagnostician GP for Tues at 2.30 - it made better sense to wait and see her.

When I did Misaki's ECG showed nothing to worry about with my heart but she suggested a blood test so 2 hours later she phoned me advising I was 'at risk' and to get off to St Vincent's Hospital Emergency. I advised family and friends which is what I thought to be true that I had a minor heart attack possibly requiring a stent so as to not worry them. I fed the pets, made last minute arrangements for them to be taken care of, packed, delegated tasks for the Symposium and headed off the the hospital with my Chihuahua (Pepi) in tow to hand over to my son to care for. Also along with me was a very caring neighbour friend, Connie, who was too upset to stay behind, not knowing what was happening to me, I agreed she could come along for company. There were badly blocked arteries so stent was not possible.

Thursday 19/6 with great concern to all those connected with me I had a quadruple bypass heart operation followed by 4 days drug induced coma - no 'near death experience', no 'light at end of tunnel', no 'Saint at Pearly Gates' asking me if I was ready to go? - nothing like that - each time I've faced Death (so to speak).

I just came away a little angry that I could have died without knowing it! (sounds to me, as a therapist trained, more like a power/control frustration issue). My loved ones told me they survived the turmoil by remembering my worldview which is that we die when we are ready to not live and love anymore. Furthermore I had planned to receive the Monarch's 100 birthday letter and continue on past that. So my loved ones clung onto that through the worst times. I am strong, recuperating well, receiving visitors, no longer a cranky, egotist, with a huge ATTITUDE OF GRATITUDE for the chance at a healthy life, a chance to say thank you to everyone for being there for me, for the success of our wonderful **World Humanist Day Australia Symposium**, and for the Humanism garden showing a promise to bloom in Australia.



President's Report John August

John August,
President
NSW Humanist Society

Affie has had bypass surgery. My thoughts and those of the committee go out to her and Paul Zagoridis her son, and we hope Affie recovers soon.

The National Schools Chaplaincy Program has been very much in the news. Senator Pratt took the opportunity to speak in Parliament (Hansard, Tuesday 17th June), noting how this scheme has been used to reinforce discrimination against LGBT students, prompting some of them to self-harm - when they're facing a difficult enough situation as it is.

However, a positive note has been that the High Court challenge against the Government funding of religious schools has been upheld. I've seen the internet running hot about it. Of course, there's a difference between the mainstream press and the internet - my internet is filled with a lot of people of similar views to me - but it nevertheless feels enriching. Perhaps things will yet turn around and secular concerns will become "mainstream" - something people generally are aware of.

We recently held the Symposium on Humanism and the Enlightenment at Parliament House. It was good to see a few members we rarely see at regular meetings who turned up for this event.

Many of the institutions around us have their origins in the Enlightenment, an historical move away from religion. Of course, there are other influences from the ancient Greeks and Romans. Justin Millikan from South Australia drew attention to the fact that the notion of "Humanitas" was coined by the Roman statesman Cicero. Further, the Enlightenment is a mixed heritage - at the time of the Enlightenment (and since), people used Enlightenment ideas to justify both good **and** bad things. For example, while Frederick the Great, Prussian King, supported the publication of the "Anti-Machiavel", a rejoinder to "The Prince" by Machiavelli, he also ran a ruthless military campaign, which led to the loss of countless citizen's lives.

Nevertheless, the narrative of '**a lot of worthwhile things we see in the world today come from the Enlightenment, a shift away from religion**' is an important counter-point to the notion that we our society is dominated, and draws much from, its Christian heritage.

While the details remains to be worked out, I see this a worthwhile intellectual endeavour, and congratulate Victor and Affie on being the driving forces behind bring the Symposium about.

We've seen plenty of examples of child abuse pushed under the carpet by various religious institutions. Now, no denying that some people look back to positive influences from religious institutions. The strange thing is how so many religious institutions are in denial about what has been happening - not just a mistake but a consistent record of deliberate denial - and saying "don't look over there ...".

The most recent institution has been the Salvation Army, which has come under scrutiny for how they have reacted to child abuse in their ranks. Aletha Blayse has initiated the "White Shield Appeal" - see <http://whiteshieldappeal.org/> - in particular drawing attention to a piece on Radio National's background briefing posted on the 25th of May - "The Salvos: a matter of trust".

On other Australian matters, our colleague in South Australia has shown a video by the Uniting Church in South Australia showing that their SRI hour is to bring children to a relationship with Jesus - something that the SA Uniting Church has been so upset about that they have made legal threats against Justin Millikan, the President.

That's to be contrasted to the NSW Uniting Church, which we've mostly had good relations with, and have endorsed ethics classes in NSW Schools.

Tim Dean, in his blog Occam's Beard, recently drew attention to Westermarck's 1932 book 'Ethical Relativity', with its explanation for why Christianity is more anti-gay than other religions. This is because early Hebrews were keen to distinguish themselves from other religions and cultures, and it just happened that the Canaanites practiced homosexuality. So, by considering homosexuality as an unnatural sin which defiled the land of the Lord, they provided themselves with a way of distinguishing themselves from others which - as wrong as we might see it as being - served to both effectively bind the early Hebrews together and distinguish themselves from cultures which were otherwise similar. Of course, there's potentially many factors at work - but it is an intriguing notion - a politically pragmatic "accident of history" was set into religious stone for a few thousand years - and we're seeing its consequences now.

An article "**Atheism explodes in Saudi Arabia, despite state-enforced ban**" (appearing in the Global Post and Salon [June 12]), detailed the increasing number of Saudis who nowadays identify as atheist. The article notes :

"... the greater willingness to privately admit to being atheist reflects a general disillusionment with religion and what one Saudi called 'a growing notion' that religion is being misused by authorities to control the population. This disillusionment is seen in a number of ways, ranging from ignoring clerical pronouncements to challenging and even mocking religious leaders on social media."

Religion can, of course, bind people together and do good. But it is just as likely to reinforce the position of a self-serving elite. It is not something that can be hidden forever, and eventually people will wake up to it ... as they have done in Saudi Arabia. It is heartening to see what I would perceive as a universal trend taking hold in one of the most (notionally) religious of nations.

Finally, on a lighter note, the Sydney Morning Herald on June 8th noted that a barrister has been struck off the roll after taking secret notes into an "ethics for barristers" exam. Not to be taking advantage of other's misfortune, of course ...

In fact, looking around, there certainly are things to get depressed about - but for a change, we can also see much to celebrate. The world seems to be becoming more interesting - and in a positive way!



Victor Bien, Paul Zagoridis, Affie Adagio and Ian Bryce in Adelaide at the CaHS Convention dinner on 10 May. 2014

World Humanist Day Australia Symposium

What a shock: Dr Victor Bien opened by telling us that Co-convenor of, and dynamo behind, this national event, our inimitable Dr Affie Adagio, had undergone a quadruple bypass operation! She was still unconscious! We could not convey the depth of our gratitude - then or later.

World Humanist Day has been formally celebrated every year on June 21 since the 1980s, but not in Australia. This northern summer solstice opportunity for humanists and humanist organisations to publicise the positive values of Humanism and to share the global concerns of the Humanist movement was now, for the first time, being turned into a winter solstice event in Australia. It was celebrated one day earlier, however, because of the availability of the oldest parliament house in Australia as a venue, thanks to our parliamentarian host: City of Sydney MP, Mr Alex Greenwich. He also opened the event.



Alex Greenwich

High on the agenda of such functions is the growth of the secular community and the propagation of the ethical values of humanists. And so it proved in this Symposium.

Victor continued with comments on excerpts of the BBC film: Heroes of the Enlightenment. These include Isaac Newton, Dennis Diderot, the Marques de Pombal, Erasmus Darwin, Marqui de Condorcet, Thomas Jefferson and Frederick the Great. Not all were shown. Victor added to

the visuals and audio with his 'Short Critique' of Ian Ellis-Jones' 2004 publication Humanism – Religion or Life Stance? A Critical and Provocative Analysis of the Official Declarations. These statements ranged from Humanist Manifesto I (1933), via ... II, (1973), ... 2000, to ... III (2003) and intermediate documents, including A Secular Humanist Declaration (1980) and the Amsterdam Declaration. Fascinating in Victor's analysis was the evolution of modern Humanism from the distinctly 'religious' first manifesto, via the decidedly secular second one, to the essentially nonreligious, but less stridently so 'philosophy of life' and 'life stance' of number III.

Acclaimed, long-standing, Humanist author David Tribe then presented his densely argued, memorable talk 'The Enlightenment – who is criticising it and why.' Using and critiquing the 1990 Encyclopaedia Britannica Micropaedia definition of the Enlightenment, Tribe distinguishes the different expression of this intellectual movement in the 17th and 18th centuries – the former being its association with British empiricists, the 18th-century Age of Reason belonging to Franco-German rationalists. 'Empiricism relies on observation, comparison, experimentation and a *posteriori* (inductive) thought; rationalism depends on intuition, reflection, conceptualisation and a *posteriori* (deductive) thought' he said.

Commenting on the argument that the longevity of the Roman Catholic Church was a reason for its truth, Tribe said: 'It's often assumed the RC Church is always on the side of right-wing, quasi- or overtly fascist regimes. The truth is that survival is the name of the game and the Church is happy – or at any rate content – to coexist with regimes of any and every ideology as long as they permit, and hopefully finance, its proselytising activities, especially among children.'

Then followed a stride through the centuries, the Protestant Reformation, empirical science based on natural laws (implicit pantheism and deism and less need for the Bible and its interpreters, the priests), explicit deism and some atheism, followed by a range of revolutions: France 1789, Europe 1830, 1848, 1870, 1905, and 1917, then colonial and post-colonial ... - a tour de force. Tribe concluded with Thomas Paine's well-known declaration in Rights of Man (1791): 'My country is the world and my religion is to do good.'

Queensland writer and social activist Chrys Stevenson then convinced us admirably with her deeply researched presentation: 'Christian Nation? Nonsense on Stilts! How Jeremy Bentham's humanism shaped Australia.' Not having kept detailed notes, on the understanding that they were contained in the folders available at day's end, I await the information promised electronically. It will be well worth reviewing. Meanwhile readers are strongly encouraged to look at Chry's blog: 'Gladly, the Cross-eyed Bear.'



Chrys Stevenson

Rationalist Association of Australia President Dr Meredith Doig delighted us with her thoughtful presentation entitled: 'Reason vs Emotion: key drivers in the history of moral progress': "Historically, Reason was assumed by the ancient and by medieval philosophers to be superior to Emotion – it was what made humans human. These days, however, Emotion seems to have been elevated over Reason – one only has to think of the endless portrayal of anger, greed and sex in Hollywood films, the psychology driven tricks of spin-doctors in the political game or heart-wrenching efforts of marketers soliciting for the philanthropic dollar."

Enlightenment philosopher David Hume famously asserted that 'Reason is the slave to the passions.' Modern neuroscience is now showing that, in essence, he was right. But does this mean that we should just give in to our emotions? What is the role of Reason in moral progress?" Those were the issues and topics that kept the audience spell-bound.

After lunch Sydney University's Emeritus Professor of Political Economy Frank Stilwell intrigued us with 'The Enlightenment, Political Economy and Modern Society.' This was followed by Dr Ian Ellis-Jones': 'A Rational Faith: Humanism, Enlightenment Ideals and Unitarianism.' Ian is a Unitarian Minister and past president of both the Council of Australian Humanist Societies (CAHS) as well of NSW Humanists. His paper deserves detailed comment in a future issue of Viewpoints.

The final session, chaired by CAHS President Paul Zagoridis, introduced Dennis Morris – Humanist Society of NSW Outstanding Humanist Achiever 2014, outlining his life and his many and varied achievements down the years, including several books and two CDs of African music. These latter are available from the NSW Humanist Society, as is David's splendid HumSocNSW Book Words and Ideas. Dennis had been flown in from Perth by the Society and was generously hosted and feasted next day, together with myself, by Vice-President Fred Flatow. Dennis' acceptance speech is elsewhere in this issue.

The final session turned into a panel comprising all the speakers of the day as well as individuals from States and the ACT (me). Under discussion was the Resolution from the CAHS Convention AGM 2013: 'That the Australian Humanist movement adopt the defence and promotion of the values of the Enlightenment as an overarching concept for organising our aims, objectives and programmes.' These were spelled out in the day's agenda, still available on the Society's website. 'Non solo sed etiam' (Not only, but also) was my impression of the outcome.

Some 40 persons attending are very much indebted to the organisers and particularly Affie, who had to miss out on the outcome of her hard work. When I spoke to her some 15 hours ago and she asked me to do a write-up post-haste, how could I say: No? As I answered her text message advising of her potential forthcoming release from hospital and overnight write-up of her experiences: 'You are unbelievable, Affie! One moment your life hangs in the balance, the next you are balancing the world around you again!"

Dierk von Behrens

The Rationalist Society of Australia updates its official definition of 'Rationalism'



There are two main interpretations of the word "rationalism". One is historical and the other is more contemporary. The historical meaning of rationalism is essentially a philosophical concept, which holds that the nature of Reality can be established by thinking alone. Rationalist philosophers in this sense include Plato, Spinoza, Leibniz and Descartes. This approach to philosophy is usually contrasted with Empiricism, which holds that we must use our senses to know and understand the world around us.

Perversely, the more modern interpretation of Rationalism owes more to philosophical empiricism than to philosophical rationalism. While still committed to the importance of reason and logic, it took a more worldly turn by focusing on opposition to supernatural beliefs and the unaccountable power and influence of the church. In this sense, Rationalism became a political movement, committed to the political philosophy of secularism.

These days, we could say there are three main pillars to the philosophy of rationalism:

1. **Naturalism:** the idea that the natural world is the only world there is. A direct implication is that there is no such thing as heaven and hell, and no life after death.

2. **Humanism:** the idea that humans create their own meanings in life. A direct implication is that the "meaning of life", such as it might be, does not derive from any supernatural being or belief.

3. **Rationality:** the idea that in forming our beliefs, humans should rely on empirical evidence, logic and the scientific method, not on obedience to authority, blind faith or uncritical assumptions. A direct implication is that we should strive for genuine critical thinking.

The Rationalist Society of Australia was formed back in 1906, when a few young students, inspired by the publications of the Rationalist Press Association (RPA) in London, got together at Ormond College at Melbourne University and decided to establish a branch of the RPA in Australia. They took the original definition of rationalism from the RPA, viz:

"The attitude of mind which unreservedly accepts the supremacy of reason, and aims at establishing a system of philosophy and ethics independent of all arbitrary assumptions or authority".

Over the decades, there has been discontent within the RSA with the idea of "unreservedly" accepting anything and with the idea of the "supremacy" of reason in an age where modern neuroscience has established the intimate connection between the emotional and the intellectual in the workings of the human brain. Eventually this led to a revision to the definition of rationalism in the RSA, and this now forms part of the official constitution of the Society:

"Rationalism is the principle that all significant beliefs and actions should be based on reason and evidence, that the natural world is the only world there is and that answers to the key questions of human existence are to be found only in that natural world."

By Dr Meredith Doig
President, Rationalist Society of Australia Inc.

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.

Heroes of the Enlightenment

Victor Bien



My presentation at the World Humanist Day ('WHD') Symposium was a selection from a two part documentary series issued by the BBC covering the Age of Enlightenment. We have purchased the right to show these within the Society environment for our internal education purposes. They may make suitable material to show on some film occasions.

The first part covered the power of knowledge and the second how society changed under its impact. The persons covered in the first part are Isaac Newton, Dennis Diderot, the Marques de Pombal and Erasmus Darwin, grandfather of Charles Darwin. The ones in the second part are Marquis de Condorcet, Thomas Jefferson and Frederick the Great.

Limited by time constraints of about a quarter of an hour, I had to make a selection! I briefly introduce the first part and spend most of my coverage on the second because its subject matter are closer to what Humanism is about, not that the subject matter of the first, knowledge and how humanity acquires sure certain knowledge or epistemology, is irrelevant to our interests.

The introduction by the compere in the first part admirably sums up the key achievements of the Enlightenment in these words, "What are the things we value most about our modern world? To argue, and discuss, to express our views, to find things out, to read and write and the science and technologies that make these possible. None of this happened by accident. These freedoms were won with courage and good vision; an extraordinary period of human history. It began in 17th century Europe. It was called the Age of Enlightenment".

The second part looks at how the power of the church was pushed back and generally considers the exercise of power, i.e. politics. My presentation focused on Frederick the Great who was a mixture of enlightened rule and appalling self-serving pursuit of power. It illustrates the great power achieved by the Enlightenment, shows how that power could be abused and also we can see the constraints the natural world would limit what we humans can do as our impact grew greater and greater, as we

know today, but which the thinkers back then did not foresee except perhaps for Thomas Malthus. For us Humanists, this puts the struggle against religion, which historically has been our main focus, within a broader struggle for the proper exercise of power and the assertion and maintenance of secular moral values.

Frederick the Great worked closely with Voltaire for a considerable period and they jointly wrote a book called the Anti-Machiavel, a chapter by chapter rebuttal of the Prince by Machiavelli. To me that makes that book a must read. Like many works published in this period which to me are extraordinarily exciting because of their implicit great fertilities for the advancement of ideas. So many to read and my life is so short!

Through Frederick and Voltaire, Chinese Confucian philosophy became incorporated into the thinking of the West! To me this whole period laid out the nature and form of modern Humanism. Its depth and breadth should be appreciated by modern Humanists and non-religious people generally. Appreciating this breadth and depth provides a rich tapestry for us with varying particular interests to unify under a broad umbrella in our struggles against people who would seek to twist and distort the values of the Enlightenment, or straight out deny it, for their own narrow self-serving interests.

Humanists in 2013 agreed it informs an on-going program for Humanism which I see as belonging to the top level of thought in the polity; this in turn informs lower levels of thought such as deciding particular courses of action or strategies or political policy making.

The story of Frederick the Great illustrates a key object lesson and that is the tendency for "cherry picking" which is to pick and choose ideas from the Enlightenment according to ones vested interests and ignoring those which are inconvenient. We call that "spin" these days. The syndrome exemplified by the way FTG behaved was picked up in the talk by Emeritus Prof Frank Stilwell who suggested that perhaps the world needed a new Enlightenment. This aspect of the Enlightenment, relating to our resolution to make it the root of Humanism as an "on going process for organising our aim, objectives and programs", is why it was only reluctantly accepted in the vote.

The 2013 cAHs resolution also points to scope for the Humanist movement to aim for a much bigger profile in the top level arenas in the contest of ideas, namely for us to aim to become a think tank of a similar public standing as other well-known think tanks have.

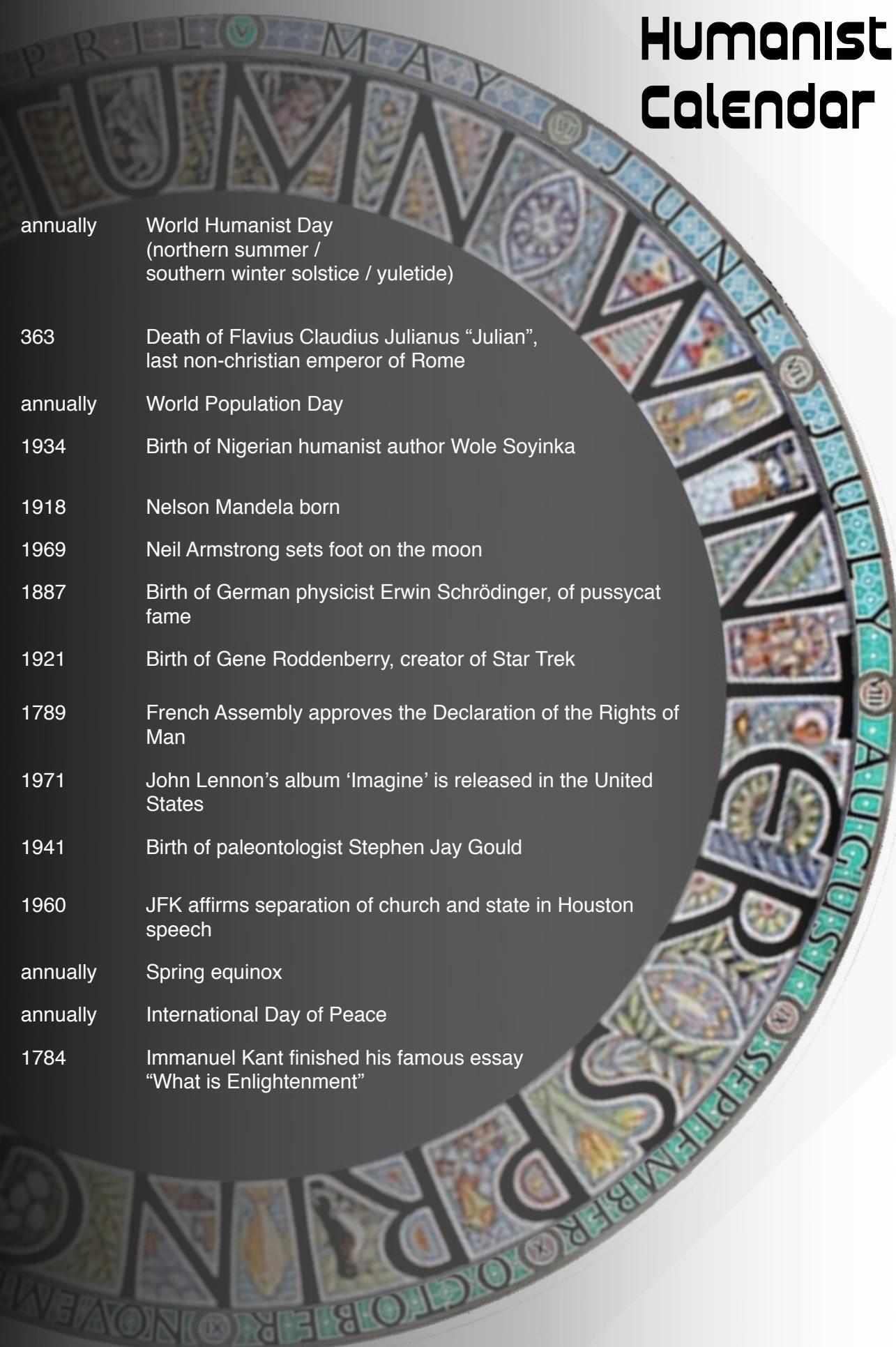
The occasion was videoed and at this writing three of the talks are accessible from our website, see elsewhere in this magazine for the URL. I expect all five talks will become available in due course. My talk will not be available due the copyright nature of the material.

Member News Membership Secretary

Welcome to new members Vivienne Weidler, John Ryan , Valerie Barnes and Dr M Kilborn.

Reminder to all members that your membership renewals for 2014/15 are due 1st July - except for those members newly joined . Please send membership renewals in promptly.

If unsure of membership status please ring membership secretary Angela on 93614021 or email abraxas@tpg.com.au



The Humanist Calendar

21-Jun *	annually	World Humanist Day (northern summer / southern winter solstice / yuletide)
26-Jun	363	Death of Flavius Claudius Julianus "Julian", last non-christian emperor of Rome
11-Jul	annually	World Population Day
13-Jul	1934	Birth of Nigerian humanist author Wole Soyinka
18-Jul	1918	Nelson Mandela born
20-Jul	1969	Neil Armstrong sets foot on the moon
12-Aug	1887	Birth of German physicist Erwin Schrödinger, of pussycat fame
19-Aug	1921	Birth of Gene Roddenberry, creator of Star Trek
26-Aug	1789	French Assembly approves the Declaration of the Rights of Man
9-Sep	1971	John Lennon's album 'Imagine' is released in the United States
10-Sep	1941	Birth of paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould
12-Sep	1960	JFK affirms separation of church and state in Houston speech
21-Sep*	annually	Spring equinox
21-Sep	annually	International Day of Peace
30-Sep	1784	Immanuel Kant finished his famous essay "What is Enlightenment"

* varies

Mindfulness + Secular Meditation

Greta Christina

A lot of atheists, humanists, and other nonbelievers are leery or dismissive of meditation and mindfulness. Some see it as an irretrievably religious or spiritual practice, and want no part in it. Others are put off by the faddish, overused, buzzword quality of the practice and the terminology. And I can understand that. For years, I stayed away from trying this stuff out, for exactly those reasons. I was interested in the practice—I had friends who did it, and who seemed to get a lot out of it. But I couldn't find anyplace to learn that didn't base their teaching on Buddhism or some other religion. And I'm too ardent an anti-religionist to "take what you need and leave the rest," the way many nonbelievers do with religion. After all, I literally wrote the book on angry atheism. For me, trying to learn meditation in a Buddhist center would be like trying to learn meditation in a room full of fingernails scraping on blackboards.

But these practices are being increasingly secularised. It's certainly true that many meditation techniques and approaches originated with Buddhism and other Eastern religions, and have been refined by these religious traditions over centuries. But the version I've been learning—mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR)—is evidence-based; its techniques have been researched, and continue to be researched, using good, rigorous scientific methods, examining which effects these practices actually do and don't generate. It's commonly taught in medical settings, presented not as a method for spiritual enlightenment, but as a set of physical and mental techniques that can produce specific physical and mental effects. (Much in the way that, say, physical exercise is considered.) MBSR has been shown to help alleviate depression, anxiety, anger, high blood pressure, and other symptoms of extreme or prolonged stress—and can also improve focus, concentration, pain management, self-esteem, the ability to consciously respond to life's events instead of reflexively reacting to them, and some other effects.

In my experience—which, admittedly, has been brief (as of this writing I've been practicing MBSR for about six months)—the secularized version of meditation and mindfulness is not just vaguely compatible with a humanist outlook. It is, in many ways, humanist to the core.



When I was learning MBSR (I took an eight-week course—shorter courses are also available), the instructor taught us basic techniques of meditation: directing our awareness to some focal point in the here and now (such as our breath); noticing when our attention had been pulled away from this focus by some distraction; accepting this distraction without judgment; and gently returning our awareness back to its focal point. He didn't just teach us how to do this in a meditation session: he taught us how to carry these techniques and philosophies into our daily lives. We learned ways to approach eating, driving, conversation, boredom, the experience of joy and sorrow, and so on with a more focused awareness on the here and now, and with less mind-drifting or perseverating into plans and worries for the future, or guilt and resentment over the past.

'The secularised version of meditation and mindfulness is not just vaguely compatible with a humanist outlook. It is, in many ways, humanist to the core.'

And it struck me: experiencing this life, each moment as richly and thoroughly as we can—this life—this very moment, and then the next moment, and then the next—being all that we really have... the purpose simply being the living of it, and helping others with their living of it...

Gee, I thought, that all sounds really familiar! Learning this meditation and mindfulness practice has been like a practical course in an intensive, highly focused version of a core humanist philosophy: the philosophy that this life is all there is. It's an intensive practical course in creating one's own meaning. It's an intensive practical course in fully experiencing life, in small moments as well as big ones: recognising that most of our lives are made up of mundane, undramatic experiences, and seeing all of it as an opportunity to embrace the magnificent improbability of being alive.

There are other things that are humanist about this practice as well. Certainly there's a long humanist tradition of taking the good stuff that religion offers—community, social support, rites of passage, seasonal celebrations, and such—while extracting the religious or dogmatic elements out of it. Taking the supernatural out of meditation and transforming it into a secular technique for mental and physical healthcare isn't that different from taking the supernatural out of christenings, confirmations, and bar/bat mitzvahs, and transforming them into secular baby-naming and coming-of-age ceremonies. Or, for that matter, having a Christmas tree without going to church.

In addition, the body-centered versions of this practice—the ones that involve focusing your awareness on your breath, or on different parts of your body in gradual succession, or on the feel of your legs and feet as you walk slowly and deliberately, or on your whole body in movement-based meditations such as gentle yoga—serve as a powerful reminder of the essential physicality of our lives and our experience. For someone like me, with a strong tendency towards abstraction and living in my head, a daily return to the reality of my body brings me back to the materialism that's at the core of secular humanism: the understanding that everything we are, and everything that everything else is, is entirely made up of physical matter, physical energy, and empty space.

Plus, the whole aspect of consciously responding to life's events instead of reflexively reacting to them—that's a very

humanist concept as well. A big part of the humanist philosophy has to do with accepting responsibility for our own lives and our own actions, and taking responsibility for how we choose to give our lives meaning and purpose. Making decisions with more awareness and less impulse, based more on our genuine values and less on our adrenaline-fuelled lizard hindbrains, feeds right into that philosophy.

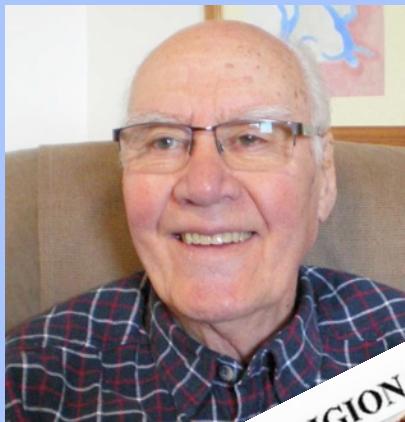
And the philosophy of accepting the realities of life, rather than letting ourselves be entranced by a delusion of some hypothetical perfect other life, is very humanistic as well. When I let myself simply sit with discomfort or sadness or anxiety or restlessness or grief or guilt or itchiness, instead of constantly fidgeting and tinkering under the delusion that my life is somehow perfectible, I'm not just practicing mindfulness. I'm practicing humanism. And indeed, when I accept the reality that

my brain is going to drift into distracting thoughts—that distraction and perseveration and fidgeting is an inevitable part of how my brain works—and when I accept this reality without judgment, and move on from it, I'm not just practicing mindfulness. I'm practicing humanism.

I'm not proselytizing for the mindfulness-based stress reduction technique. I've found it useful for me; I have no idea if it would be for you. But I was surprised at how consistent this practice was with my humanism, and how naturally they folded together. I'd hate to see nonbelievers stay away from a set of techniques that they might find valuable and meaningful, simply because they see it as religious. Food for thought.

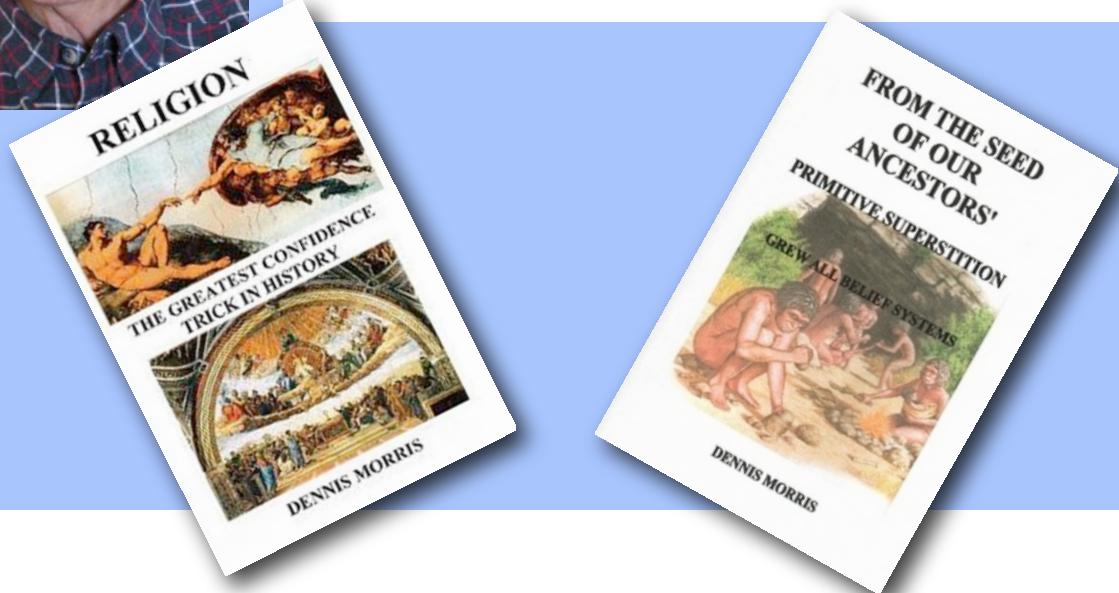
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Outstanding Humanist Award (“OHA”)



We are pleased to advise that our generous donor Dennis Morris (pictured left) has not only been awarded by CAHS the OHA for 2014 but also further donated for fundraising to HumSocNSW the proceeds of his latest books the updated **"Religion the Greatest Confidence Trick in History"** and **"From the Seed of Our Ancestors"** which can be purchased online from www.lulu.com. Use the "search book" function on the home page to locate.

He is also an artist and has sent over 20 pieces of his artwork. We are now in the process of finding a curator and Auction House so we may sell them appropriately to raise funds. If you can assist please contact Affie or Victor.



Stop inviting cranks onto science programmes

The BBC Trust is officially putting a respect for facts over an "over-rigid adherence to impartiality." Some things, like vaccinations, GMOs, and climate change, can no longer be divided into believe in/don't believe in without sacrificing scientific debate for facile pandering.

We applaud BBC's step towards returning to hard-hitting scientific journalism and debate — and urging CNN to do the same. Impartiality is about an absence of unfair bias, not about pretending scientific fact and what someone wants to believe operate on equal scales.

Please, join us in calling on CNN to follow BBC's lead and commit to the "Stop Inviting Cranks" pledge at the following website or search "watchdog bbc"

<http://act.watchdog.net/petitions/4808?n=78237650.OSQfRG>

News in Brief

European Court upholds French face covering ban

The European Court of Human Rights has upheld a ban by France on wearing the Muslim full-face veil - the niqab. A case was brought by a 24-year-old French woman, who argued that the ban on wearing the veil in public violated her freedom of religion and expression. The court ruled that the ban "was not expressly based on the religious connotation of the clothing in question but solely on the fact that it concealed the face". The Strasbourg judges' decision is final - there is no appeal against it.

France was the first European country in modern times to ban public wearing of the full-face veil. Belgium adopted a similar ban in 2011. In Spain, the city of Barcelona and some other towns have brought in similar bans, as have some towns in Italy.

The French government argues that the ban has wide public support. The authorities see the full-face veil not only as an affront to French secular values but also as a potential security risk, as it conceals a person's identity. In the past, the European Court has sided with French secularism - it also ruled in favour of the government's ban on headscarves in schools.

Twitter blocks 'blasphemous' tweets in Pakistan

MICROBLOGGING site Twitter has blocked dozens of tweets and accounts in Pakistan after officials asked for access to "blasphemous" and "unethical" content to be stopped.

The Pakistan Telecommunications Authority (PTA) submitted at least five requests from May 5 to 14 asking Twitter to block access to specific tweets and accounts for users in the Islamic republic. Most of the offending material concerned anti-Islam accounts and an annual online competition to draw caricatures of the Prophet Mohammed, but the accounts of three US porn stars were also listed.



High Court rules school chaplaincy funding unconstitutional

On 19 June 2014 the High Court unanimously decided that legislation enacted by the Commonwealth Parliament in respect to a funding agreement between the Commonwealth and Scripture Union Queensland ("SUQ") to provide chaplaincy services at schools in Queensland was invalid.

In December 2010, Ronald Williams brought a proceeding in the High Court challenging the payment of money by the Commonwealth to SUQ for SUQ to provide chaplaincy services at the state school Mr Williams' four children attended. In 2012, the Court held that the funding agreement between SUQ and the Commonwealth, and the payments made under it, were not supported by the executive power of the Commonwealth under s 61 of the Constitution.

Soon after the Court made orders, the Parliament amended the Financial Management and Accountability Act 1997 (Cth) ("the FMA Act") and the Financial Management and Accountability Regulations 1997 (Cth) ("the FMA Regulations") to provide legislative support not only for the making of agreements and payments of the kind which were in issue in the first proceeding, but also for the making of other arrangements and grants.



Mr Williams then brought a fresh proceeding in the High Court against the Commonwealth, the relevant Minister and SUQ, challenging the validity of the relevant provisions of the FMA Act and FMA Regulations inserted by the FFLA Act. He challenged the validity of those provisions both generally and in their particular operation with respect to the payment of money by the Commonwealth to SUQ under the then funding agreement. Both the agreement and the payments made under it were said to be made under the "National School Chaplaincy and Student Welfare Program".

The Court held that, in their operation with respect to the challenged funding agreement and the challenged payments made under that agreement, none of the challenged provisions is a valid law of the Commonwealth.

Couples forced to pay more for a civil service with a marriage celebrant

From July 1, Commonwealth-registered marriage celebrants will be required to pay a once-off \$600 registration fee and a \$240 annual charge to be able to preside over a couple's wedding day. But the charges will not apply to Ministers of any of the more than 100 religions recognised under the federal 1961 Marriage Act.

Civil celebrants, who are now performing almost 72 per cent of marriages in Australia, have accused the federal government of being unfair and warned they will be passing on the new charges to couples headed for the alter.

Australian Marriage Celebrants vice president Gail Nagel said that with a much large number of religious Ministers authorised to perform wedding services, it was "discriminatory" for the Commonwealth to require registered marriage celebrants pay an annual fee.

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Humanist of the Year 1993, Member of the Order of Australia 1988, a talented actor, science journalist and broadcaster, Robyn, presents Radio National's Science Show, Ockham's Razor and In Conversation. Robyn has written more than 10 books and received an Honorary Doctorate in Science from the Universities of Sydney, Macquarie and Deakin.



Dorothy Buckland-Fuller AM, MBE

Mother, bilingual sociologist, peace activist. Dorothy is also an environmentalist, a feminist and committed to the cause of reconciliation with indigenous Australia. As founder of the Ethnic Communities Council Dorothy was, and is still, a vital influence in the ethnic communities.

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