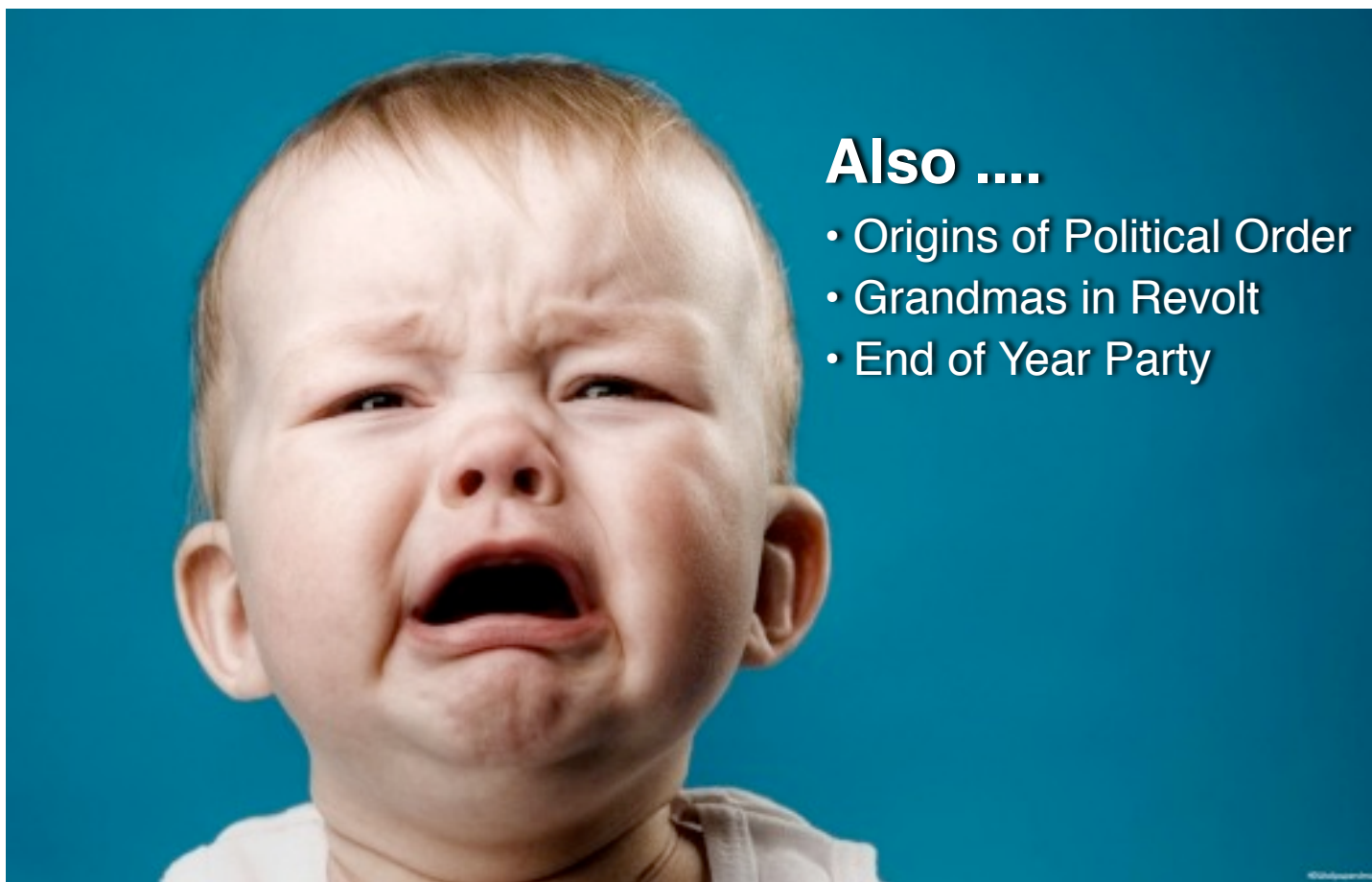




HUMANIST Viewpoints

Is it time to cut the cut ?



Also

- Origins of Political Order
- Grandmas in Revolt
- End of Year Party

HuVAT 2015

Jan 11 - Rudiments of a History of Humanism
Murray Love

Feb 8 - Charles Darwin Day: Human evolution: the transition from biological to cultural evolution
Dr Victor Bien et al

Mar 8 - Motions for CAHS Convention

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.

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



Special Message from the Society

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

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.



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.



Member News Membership Secretary

Thank You to the majority of our members who have renewed their membership for 2014/15 (due 1st July).

A warm welcome to new member Juanita Rossello.

Thank you for generous donations to renewing members including D Clifford, B. Malligan, C Samundsett, D Schama, D & R von Behrens, I Warwick.

VALE Lola Archer, a long time member and former committee member, who many of you will remember fondly. She died recently at an advanced age. She left a generous bequest to the Humanist Society of NSW.

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.

Society now accepts donations & membership fees by PayPal

Pay to accounts@hsnsw.asn.au and send an email to that address stating the purpose of a payment. For other payment options see back page.



Ian Bryce
President
NSW Humanist Society

President's Report Ian Bryce

Our monthly HuVAT talk for November was a Panel discussing the Israel-Palestine problem, which causes tremendous suffering and has no solution in sight. On the one hand some speakers described Israel's unnecessary discrimination against Palestinians which worsens their desperate plight, and others said that when one side is continuously trying to murder civilians then Israel is entitled to defend itself.

Our December event was the end-of-year party, with our lively musician and singer Sam Pelligrini.

The quarter saw several overseas visitors. We held discussions with Roy Brown, delegate from IHEU to the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, and his wife. He lamented the fact that the HRC has largely lost sight of human rights, and simply votes along faction lines with Islamic nations often blocking or canceling hard-won reforms.

I met with a group of visiting Laiques (a prominent type of secularist in France) and compared the freethought movements of the two countries.

I attended the Australian Skeptics International Convention, making contact with many leading overseas Skeptics and Humanists. These included Kendric Frazier, who was (and is) for 40 years editor of the Skeptical Inquirer journal (and its predecessors). A group of Humanists and Rationalists took the opportunity to meet him for an afternoon, for a relaxed lunch, some in-depth discussions, and a tour of the Cockatoo Island ex-naval dockyard.

I attended the annual Awards event of the Australian Human Rights Commission, and made or renewed many contacts.

A presentation has been developed, titled *Fundamental Physics and the Big Questions of Philosophy*. It is intended to show how science illuminates the world, shedding light on many questions including free will, morality and human rights, supporting many of the stances of humanism.

On the IT scene, the Presidents Welcome on the website has been updated, and a new Google Group has been set up to facilitate committee communications. And the Committee is to trial alternating business meetings with activism meetings.

Members are invited to send their comments to:
ianbryce@gmail.com

Grandmas in Revolt

Long time Humanist and activist Vicki Potempa, despite her 92 years, is on the "warpath" again!

Distressed by the genocidal antics of the IS, and by nuclear posturing over Ukraine, she recalls events in the lead up to WW1 and WW2 and fears that the world is once again on the brink. The recent re-embroilment of western armed forces in Iraq can only contribute to foreshadowing widespread endless belligerence.

Vicki is particularly distressed at the attraction of Muslim youth in Australia to support and join the death cult ISIS, and also the possibility of more young Australian soldiers being deployed to die in the middle east.

Vicki says "the 4th August (was) the anniversary of the declaration of WW1 leading to more than 4 years of slaughter and mayhem. We are coming near a state of another great war which some maniacs are creating for the world in the name of personal beliefs and fantasies.

Old people of my age recall the years between 1934 and 1939 with continuous agitations involving young people and the taking of some lands and countries by the fascists of the day. We recognise the signs".

She has devised a campaign to enrol grandmothers, who know the price of life, in an effort to stop their grandsons engaging in warmongering. With help from other women, she is embroidering bibs with peaceful slogans in various languages for the old women to display or wear to illustrate their commitment to life. Vicki's campaign has been featured in her local newspaper!

This is the poem she wrote to accompany the bibs.



*Save our Grandsons
by
Grandmas in Revolt*

*Do not judge us as sweet and senile
But hear us now, we have turned feral!
We use our bibs as international flags
To stop your preaching and hateful bile.
On war, religion, and patriotic morals we gag.
In lurid death there is no glory!
To rob grandparents of simple pleasures
of embracing our loving living treasures.*

(Written by Angela from Vicki's notes and conversation)

Drilling deeper into the Enlightenment and before...

As much as the Enlightenment shaped the world today, especially the West, which I think we all should be much more aware of as a major landmark of how our political order of today came about, Fukuyama points out that many of the basic ideas such as the rule of law and the state which Enlightenment thought moved off from were already in place centuries before. So we need a bigger or deeper view of history than the Enlightenment!

Origins of political order and considerations of political order generally will be our theme for our prospective World Humanist Day (WHD) symposium, around next 20 June. This is the theme Affie and I came up with when we started planning for WHD 2015. The idea was prompted by my reading of Francis Fukuyama's *Origins of Political Order* (Profile Books, 2011. ISBN 978-1846682568).

Fukuyama is well known for his book *The End of History* which he now repudiates or at least diminishes. He was a Neocon when he wrote it but now he has split from the Neocons and apparently he's broken off relations with Paul Wolfowitz with whom he had good relations earlier.

My interest in the Enlightenment led me to this book, urged on me by a Facebook friend from Queensland. She said it was enthused about by Phillip Adams when it came out in 2011. After re-ordering my reading priorities I'm pleased to be reading this book.

Fukuyama is a political scientist but having got into this book he's given me an entirely new much larger appreciation of what "political science" is! His political science is really solid science! It links deeply into anthropology, archaeology, biology, evolution as well as history and the social sciences. On my Facebook page where I have made postings about this book and from which I have drawn snippets for this article I had cause to write, "I remarked that he is a scientific polymath historian. I likened him to astronomer scientists but he himself sees his project as an extension of biology including concepts from the theory of evolution. He recounts a story of an older woman remarking, after listening to a lecture by Stephen Hawking, that the turtle supporting the world are supported by other turtles "all the way down"! Like Richard Dawkins he seeks "satisfactory" explanations. #

So I wrote "... he is a scientific polymath historian. With further reading I should specially draw out one element included in "polymath" and that is philosopher; so that makes my description of him as scientific philosopher, historian, polymath."

That bit about evolution has actually informed me what to talk about at the next Darwin Day in February. I've been keeping my eyes peeled for a reference which links, fills in the gap between, the view of humans as a biological species, out of Africa about 50 thousands years ago etc., to when human civilisation was clearly underway via the ancient philosophers: Socrates, Plato, Aristotle etc. So in between we have band-level groupings, evolving to tribal-level groupings, invention of agriculture, early large scale human settlements then states or (Hobbes' Leviathans)...

Fukuyama demonstrates his thinking is closely connected with the thinkers from the Enlightenment by discussion in some detail comparing and contrasting three of the early ones in the Age of Enlightenment: Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and Jean Jacques Rousseau who gave contending accounts of human nature which is at the root of political and social life and notions of the sort of political order that should be

pursued. Depending on which view one adopts quite different political programs suggest themselves.

The book informs deeper more mature views about the cooperative/competitive debate, the separation of religion and state, the status of women and the significance and influence of religion on the rule of law specifically but more generally the formation of whole Leviathans. As he contends only a rich multifaceted cross comparison of a variety of different cultures and polities allows one to formulate criteria for making judgements about important facets of states (Leviathans, polities).

The thesis of this book is large. You'll need to read the book to gain a full account of what is said. The rest of this article will be a brief summary of what I've read so far. I may write a fuller account for our national magazine the Australian Humanist down the track.



Francis Fukuyama

He argues human ethical or unethical or social or anti-social values do not come from nowhere. They emerge from pre-human life. There have never been solitary individuals abstractly coming up with a set of codified ethical values. Humans and pre-humans have always lived in relations to other humans and non-humans where some "values" inevitably must arise.

He considers chimpanzees to a level of detail but does not discuss bonobos which may be a shortcoming. Chimpanzees are violent whereas bonobos are not; they use sex to resolve tensions.

Be that as it may, the breeding pairs of humans like chimps quickly exhibit the beginnings of politics; we might call that pro-politics. The breeding pairs band together to defend territory, cooperate to help catch prey etc. So we get "band-level" groupings. Band-level groupings evolved into tribal-level groupings. The next step of evolution to state-level polities or Leviathans was a really big step, very difficult to achieve and maintain, and is a big part of the thesis of this book.

With this view it can be clearly seen that cooperation/competition gets an in-group/out-group aspect from the beginning. Members within bands cooperate but fight against members of other bands or rather sometimes! fight. Depending on external factors bands may fight or cooperate.

Studies show that China was the first body of peoples (in tribal groupings) to create a Leviathan. There were other bodies of people around the world which Fukuyama does not

discuss, probably for brevity reasons, but one of these would be the Egyptian civilisation which formed about the same era of pre-history.

A major conclusion from studies of Leviathan formation is that invariably violence is involved. That is despite the propensity of peoples to cooperate at the band and tribal levels. Fukuyama systematically considers the other factors that plausibly may have given rise to states including the control of water, population density, geographical environment circumscription of peoples, charismatic leaders. He finds none of them separately or in some combination can sufficiently account for state formation without coercion/violence.

Role of religion

Religion was invented by human populations to cope with the challenges of both physical and social life. Not all religion conceives of a God - some authoritative being. Many band-level and tribal groupings conceived of a supernatural realm to account for the existence of ancestors who are dead and ones which are not yet born. Ancestor worship exists to this day. China's political character today is shaped by ancestor worship which is a minimalist religion. The religious story is not just Confucianism. What is interesting about Chinese ancestor worship religion is that Chinese religion never developed the notion of some supervening being who demanded obeisance like the Christian and Judaic God or the Islamic Allah. The supernatural view that developed was only a minimalist extension of our individual (and that of one's immediate next of kin's) self awareness would continue somehow after death. This was not universalised in any logical way.

The religion India developed, which was in turn shaped by the prehistoric power relations they happened to have arrived at, is sort of a half way house between the Chinese and the Abrahamic religions. Their religion did come to a notion of a supervening metaphysical structure. That structure led directly to the caste system they have today and particularly the gross human rights violating belief about the "untouchables" now known as the Dalits. The IHEU (International Humanist and Ethical Union) has an ongoing campaign to push back on the gross injustices perpetrated daily, as if things are just normal, against the Dalits.

These three types of religions with varying levels of authoritarianism can be put on a spectrum. This character of the religious background of the polities of the world profoundly shaped the notions which were codified during the Enlightenment in the West which arose from the Christian religion. To adapt cultures which do not have a background in Christianity will require more "statecraft" or sensitive state building than within the West looking forward into the future.

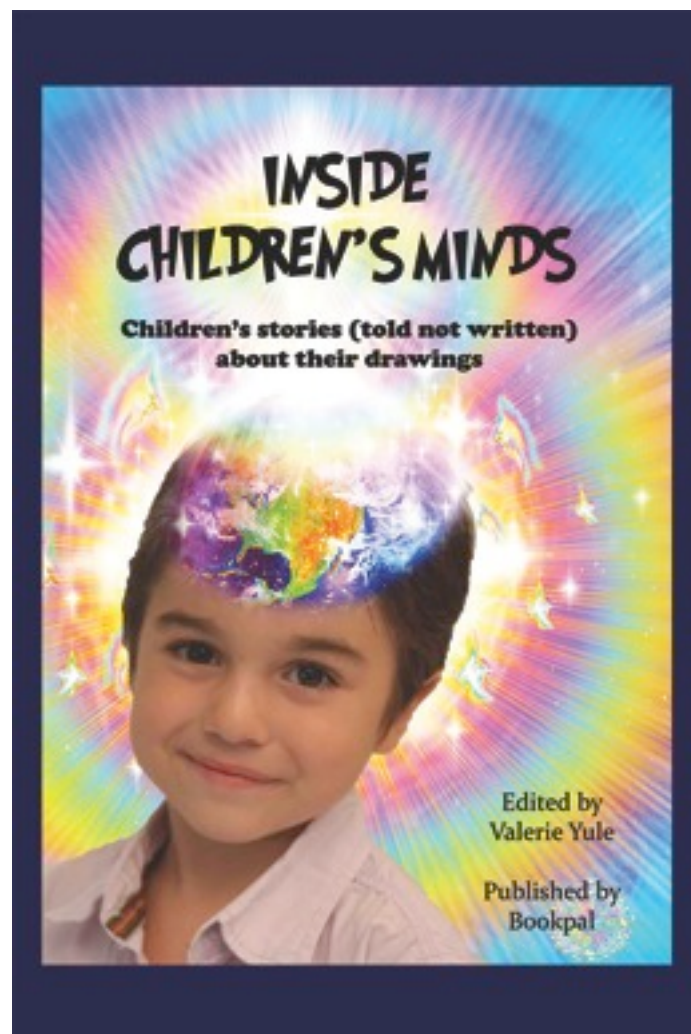
One of the flat-earth views in pre-scientific times envisaged earth sitting on a turtle. As the story goes of the encounter the woman had with Hawking that is the answer she gave when on complaining to him that the world sat on a turtle and he asked in response what it was sitting on? Fukuyama has picked up on this and started using "turtles all the way down" in a whimsical way on modern science! This is not inappropriate because the structure of modern science can be seen in an allegorical way as turtles all the way down! Just a quick review of some science: we are biological beings; our bodies are composed of cells; cells are composed of biochemical species; these species are assembled under the control of DNA; DNA is composed of certain types of atoms – carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, nitrogen, phosphorus, sulphur etc.; atoms are comprised of protons, neutrons, electrons; these are comprised of sub-atomic particles; one of these sub-atomic particles is the Higgs Boson. That's just chemistry and physics. A similar turtle series can be seen in political science, anthropology etc.

Book Review

INSIDE CHILDREN'S MINDS

Edited by Valerie Yule

Children's stories told – not written - about their drawings.



This book is for the general public, psychologists, educators, and literary specialists. It tells how children see the world, the symbols they use, the effects of physical and mental disorders, delinquency, rejection and despair, their imagination about war in fantasy and experienced in reality, their re-telling of fairy stories, and includes research on language and differences in stories by gender.

It is a selection with their drawings from the thousands of stories told to me by children, when I was a clinical child psychologist and schools psychologist, and took their stories down in shorthand.

Are there psychological differences between girls and boys according to their social condition? What leads delinquents to their antisocial ends? Why do adults act against their own interests? What different pictures of the world do children bring to adulthood? What insights are there to Theodore Dalrymple's Life at the Bottom?

The stories in this book show the world as children see it, and how they can imagine things they cannot see - a world of work and play, fairy-tales and space adventures, success and

failure, war and ways of living. The differences between the stories told by fortunate children and those who are disadvantaged reveal the impact on the imagination of a child of stresses, in economic circumstances, war, family breakdown, physical and mental disabilities, and learning difficulties. As adults try to meet children's physical needs and cope with their behavior, they may see only the outward life and actions of a 'problem child', missing the vivid imaginative life that can hold the key to the child's future.

The life themes a child develops may be expressed in their stories through symbols such as fire, snow, sinking ships and repetition of disaster. Many stories seem to foreshadow their teller's adult prospects, and a child of six may already be preparing to hope or give up.

While violence and suffering continue amid Western affluence, we must listen to children, because so many already seem destined to be the villains and victims of the next generation. Psychiatrist Russell Gardner observes, 'We use stories about ourselves to guide our every action'

"These stories not only give the reader much delight but also a rare and special insight into how children think." Dr Dorothy Rowe.

"Your spirited treasury is full of delights and wisdom, as I'd expect," Marina Warner.

"I'm immensely impressed by the range and detail of the material. This must surely be a work of value to educators and psychologists ." Dr June Factor.

The book is the fruit of 40 years of research during the author's work as a clinical child psychologist, schools psychologist and academic, in Australia, Scotland, England and Belfast.

Queensland: Bookpal. Illustrated, 470 pages, \$31.95.
ISBN 13: 9781742844299 ISBN 10: 1742844294.

Available from Bookpal, online booksellers and Australian bookshops

Dr Valerie Yule, M.A., Ph.D, Dip.Ed., M.B.Ps.S. Academic positions at Melbourne, Monash and Aberdeen Universities in departments of Psychology and Education; Teacher at all levels, from preschool to adult and migrant literacy; Clinical child psychologist at the Royal Children's Hospitals, Melbourne and Aberdeen; Schools psychologist chiefly but not only in disadvantaged schools, Present research on imagination and literacy.

Speech at the World Humanist Symposium

Dennis Morris

Good afternoon everyone, and thank you Paul for those kind words.

Thank you for presenting me with such an amazing award.

As I said to Mary Bergen, when I got the Email telling me that I had got the award, I was "Gob Smacked". It was the last thing I expected.

I want to say thanks to Affie for proposing me and to Victor for seconding me and to the President of the Humanist Society of NSW, John August and all the members, and last but not least Paul Zagoridis, President of CAHS.

When I asked Affie what I should say, she said, "just talk about yourself", but I won't. There are much more interesting things to talk about.

I would just like to say something about the Council of Humanist Societies Inc., that is, they contribute a fair amount of money to the Dalit Villages. Please give as much as you can.

When Brahmanism was introduced into Hinduism, the Brahmins, in one fell swoop, created the caste system and the doctrine of reincarnation, by teaching that Lord Brahma had from his head created the Brahmins – the highest caste, the priests and intellectuals, hence themselves. From his arms he created the warriors. From his stomach he created the farmers. From his feet he created the labourers to perform menial tasks. Then there are the untouchables "Dalits" who are not even worthy of inclusion into the caste system. They think that they are the lowest of the low.

They taught that one has to remain within the caste that you are born into. If you perform your duties well within your own caste, you may in a future life rise to a higher caste. However, if in this life you attempt to do that which is to be performed by a higher caste, then in the next life you will be born into a lower caste than you now enjoy. Therefore, you must stick to your own caste and marry only within your own caste. Even though it is a man made system of suppression, the Hindus have been indoctrinated for thousands of years to believe that Lord Brahma created the system.

It is the environment within which a child lives that is responsible for objectionable behaviour in childhood and later

life. Life has wonderful opportunities. Life can be a lovely, long, learning experience. Remember every failure, is a stepping stone to success.

Love life. Love all. Go gently through life.

Live life to the full.

Time is a scarce resource in human life.

This is not a halfway house or a rehearsal. THIS IS IT!

True freethinking includes pure observation without indoctrination.

Surely indoctrinating our children, or if anyone still chooses to allow them to be indoctrinated, into the narrow superstitious confines of religion, they are not only limiting their children's full potential, but are also guilty of mental abuse. Children need education, not indoctrination. They need to be steered away from intellectual laziness. We should not associate what is popular, with what is right, and thereby accept the status quo.

It is time to turn away from the ancient dogmas and doctrines of the past and reach out to a new future. Using science, reason and freethinking, blended with empathy and caring, we can achieve a new stage of human development.

There is something that I want to say, it is about 2 books, namely *Religion the Greatest Confidence Trick in History* and *From the Seed of Our Ancestors*. These are books which I have written, the proceeds of the sale of them will all go to the Humanist Society of New South Wales, so if you are on Facebook and Twitter, you could help the promotion and sales by recommending them to friends and family, who in turn can help the sales. The second book is less confronting for religious readers!

The books are available from Lulu.comBooks then search for the title required.

Thank you ever so much for sharing this time with me.

News in Brief

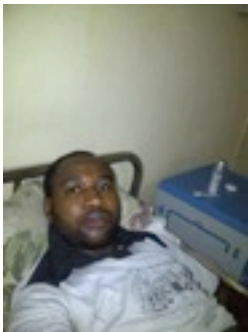
Christian group files lawsuit against science classes

JA group with the deeply Orwellian name Citizens for Objective Public Education (COPE) have lost their lawsuit to stop the Kansas State Board of Education teaching evolution.

If this sounds familiar, it is because we have been here before. Quite a few times, actually. However, in defiance of their ideology, creationists keep evolving new approaches in response to the courts' determination that you can't will away a mountain of scientific evidence based on your interpretation of a single ancient book.

COPE's novel argument was that evolution promotes atheism, whose teaching violates the separation of the church and state. How this squares with the more frequent claim that the Intelligent Design is not religious, since the "designer" does not have to be God, is unclear. John Calvert, an attorney for COPE is also founder of the Intelligent Design Network.

Atheist detained in Nigerian psychiatric ward



This summer, IHEU reported on the case of an atheist, Mubarak Bala, detained in a psychiatric ward because he was an atheist, and wasn't afraid to say so. Mubarak Bala is a Nigerian national who renounced Islam. For that he was beaten, drugged and imprisoned in the secure psychiatric wing of Aminu Kano Teaching Hospital by his own family.

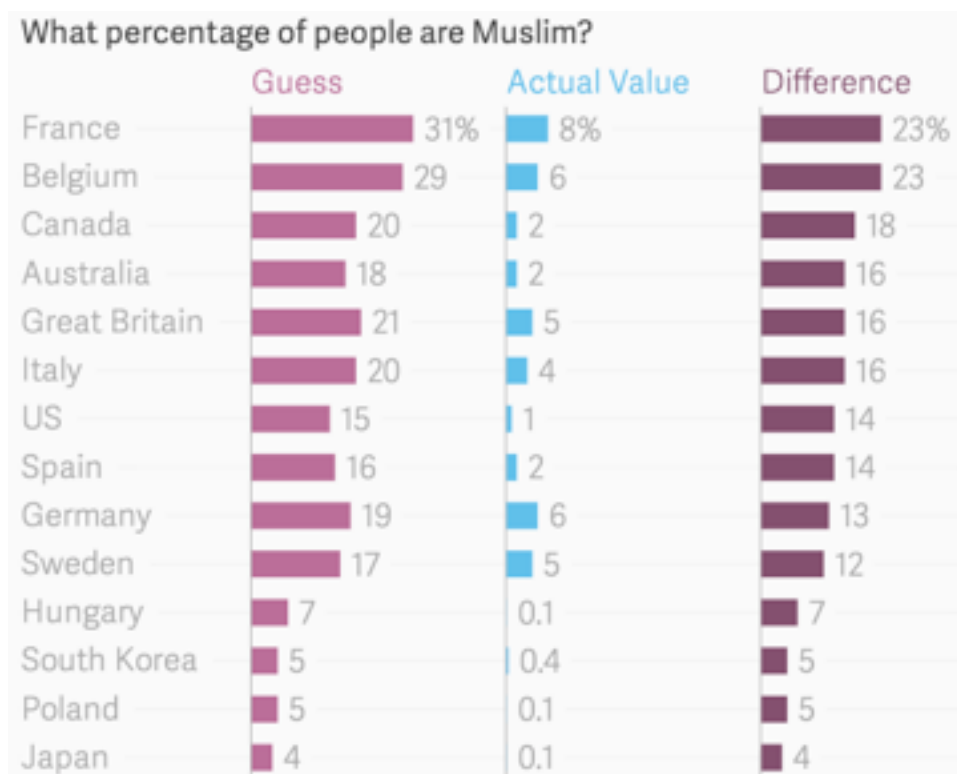
A small group of individuals around the world started the #FreeMubarak campaign on Twitter and enlisted the aid of the International Humanist & Ethical Union (IHEU) to create publicity to assist in his release.

Left: Mubarak Bala from his bed in Aminu Kano Teaching Hospital

Survey shows most over-estimate Muslim populations

Around the world, people have a pretty good sense of the life expectancy of their country's inhabitants. When it comes to most other social statistics, they have no idea.

That's the conclusion to be drawn from a study of public perception in 14 countries by Ipsos MORI, a UK-based market research firm. Ipsos polled over 11,000 residents in total about a range of social factors—from immigration to teen pregnancy to religious demographics. People were prone to overestimating the number of Muslims in their country.



The Humanist Calendar



1 Jan	1802	Thomas Jefferson first uses phrase "separation between church and state"
2 Jan	1920	Birth of science fiction author , 1984 Humanist of the Year and former hon.president of the American Humanist Assoc., Isaac Asimov
3 Jan	106 BCE	Birth of Cicero
7 Jan	1696	Thomas Aitkenhead becomes the last person to be executed for blasphemy in Britain.
8 Jan	1642	Death of Galileo Galilei
1 Feb	1865	13th amendment of US Constitution prohibits slavery
12 Feb	1809	Birth of Charles Darwin and annually celebrated as Darwin Day
19 Feb	1600	Giordano Bruno burned at stake
24 Feb	1871	Darwin's Descent of Man is published
6 Mar	1927	Bertrand Russell delivered his address "Why I am Not a Christian" to the South London Branch of the National Secular Society.
14 Mar	1879	Birth of Einstein
21 Mar*	annually	Autumn Equinox (Souther Hemisphere) Earth Day
25 Mar	1811	Percy Shelley expelled from Oxford for writing 'The Necessity of Atheism'
26 Mar	1941	Birth of Richard Dawkins

* varies

The religious culture wars have a new battleground. Is male circumcision a harmless ethnic signifier or the infliction of genuine harm on a child?

Every so often, a piece of cultural dogma is thrown up to public scrutiny and found to be wanting. As a result, society is forced to re-interrogate its atavistic assumptions and, collectively, we decide to make a change. Often this change is painful. There is resistance, sometimes violent; cries of heresy go up. Then the change becomes received wisdom and humanity moves on. We call this progress.

The practice of slicing off the foreskins of young boys is threatening to become just such a flashpoint. For the past few weeks, ever since a regional German court equated circumcision with criminal bodily harm, the media has been swamped with warring pundits proffering their reasons for why the practice is either a barbaric human rights abuse or a fundamental and inoffensive religious rite. In a sense, it is both, which is part of the problem. Compared to, say, Female Genital Mutilation or public death by stoning, circumcision is hardly our worst bequest from ancient times. But analysed objectively, it is increasingly beginning to look like a somewhat dubious tradition.

It is a tradition I have been a part of. When I was eight days old, my foreskin was removed by a well-meaning religious practitioner known as a mohel. A toast was raised, backs were slapped and my cock was changed for ever. I'd been born, and remain, a secular Jew, with all the contradictory, race-or-religion, pick-'n'-mix baggage that this apparently simple statement carries; and, despite their love of shellfish and shrugging irreligiosity, my secular Jewish parents were in no doubt as to the importance of this ritual. Without it, I wouldn't be a proper Jew. My penis would be the hangdog penis of a gentile.

Thirty-three years later and recently married (to a non-Jew, as it happens), I raise the prospect of not circumcising a hypothetical future son. The reaction is one of outrage. These people, my beloved, liberal family, are deeply troubled by the idea. My father doesn't even want to talk about it. My mother asks: "But don't you want your son to look like you?"

My sisters, both of whom were parentally pressured into having their own, non-hypothetical boys circumcised by a mohel and were, by their own admission, traumatised by the event, suddenly succumb to amnesia. One says I'm right to eschew the religious ceremony but should get the boy trimmed in hospital; the other wonders, gravely, how I'm to explain to the poor child the reasons for our penile disparity. My protestations that he may have different eyes or hair fall on deaf ears. My wife, having already caused paternal consternation by choosing to retain her surname, wisely keeps out of it and mumbles something about hoping for a girl.

There is an implication in the air, above the urge for tribal markings, filial genital sympathy, the hallowed aesthetics of the Jewish penis. The implication is a question: Did we do something wrong? My rejection is interpreted as an accusation. If I don't want my son circumcised, what does this say about the decision of my mother, and my sisters, to carry out the infant surgery on theirs? Surgery? Now he's calling it a surgery! Never underestimate the power of guilt in the Jewish mother.

Long before the German ruling – and my own domestic confrontation – I'd been interested in circumcision, having spent the past year researching the subject for a documentary. It didn't take me long to realise what a minefield the subject is. The recent ruckus has not emerged from a vacuum. On the one side, there is a swelling chorus of human rights activists and health professionals, compiling an increasingly compelling case against the practice. On the other side, religious leaders demand tolerance and clamour for their traditions to be left alone. This is both the case in the Islamic community, although circumcision isn't mentioned in the Koran, and for Jews, whose own Holy Book, the Torah, is unequivocal about the matter: "God said further to Abraham, 'Now as for you, you shall keep My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: every male among you shall be circumcised.'"

The neurotic hectoring in the Ineffable One's tone underlines the importance of the deal: this is the sacred contract between (Jewish) man and (Jewish) master. (Women, naturally, are kept out of it.) Brit milah is the first, and most durable, sacrifice; the primary ethnic marker. Hence the apoplexy of Britain's Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, in reaction to the ruling of the German court. In an impassioned article in the Jerusalem Post, having first dropped in a couple of obligatory references to the Holocaust, Sacks concluded that it was "hard to think of a more appalling decision" and cited Spinoza to argue that "circumcision itself [has] the power to sustain Jewish identity through the centuries." The reasoning sounds irresistible – who would wish to deny Jews their identity, especially in Germany? – until we pause to consider that circumcision isn't exactly unique to Jewish culture. If everyone else is getting it done too, where does this leave the special covenant?

In fact, around a third of the global male population is currently circumcised. Along with Jews and many (although not all) Muslims, communities familiar with the practice include much of the population of North Africa, as well as secular society in America and Canada, where the procedure tends to be confined to hospitals. It is also becoming increasingly popular across Central and Sub-Saharan Africa, where it is believed that the operation might halt the spread of AIDS.

Despite this laudable reason for getting snipped, medical science remains rather more sceptical about the matter. Harking back to biblical times, circumcision is habitually passed off as "cleaner" than its laissez-faire alternative, but statistics about the spread of disease in roundheads versus cavaliers are inconclusive. The British Medical Association states that "the evidence concerning health benefits from non-therapeutic circumcision is insufficient for this alone to be a justification." Although the World Health Organization has found "compelling evidence" that the practice can reduce the risk of transmitting HIV, this claim has been disputed by various studies and was recently savaged on the Oxford University Practical Ethics blog, which concluded that it was based on "bad science".

There is another explanation for the popularity of the ritual lurking in the annals of religious folklore. There are those who argue (incontrovertibly) that circumcision leads to decreased sensitivity in the end of the penis and (more controversially) that this causes a reduction in male sexual pleasure. Whether or not this uncomfortable thought is actually true, it is interesting to note that the practice has, over the millennia, been upheld by various religious sages as beneficial precisely because of this belief. According to the great 12th-century Jewish philosopher Maimonides: "With regard to circumcision, one of the reasons for it is, in my opinion, the wish to bring about a decrease in sexual intercourse and a weakening of the organ in question." In effect, no foreskin meant less focus on the penis and more focus on God. Could it be that all forms of genital cutting – and not merely female ones – have their origins in the desire to control and temper human sexuality? Either way, 800 years later, the Victorians were in agreement, convinced, in a world before Portnoy's Complaint, that circumcision prevented boys from masturbating. It was partly this quaint supposition that spread the practice across Britain and America. Indeed, it was only when a cash-strapped nascent NHS decided to remove the service in 1949 that the British started leaving their children's penises alone.

Now, well into the 21st century, Britain's circumcisions are largely confined to the religious establishment and thus tend to take place in domestic environments. For Jews, this involves the attentions of dedicated and well-trained mohelim, but in other communities things are less straightforward. Islamic tradition, for example, tends to rely on inexperienced family members – for example, an uncle or a cousin – to carry out the operation. It is thus unsurprising that there have, in recent years, been a number of cases of young boys from Muslim and African communities requiring serious treatment for complications following the procedure.

A shocking 2010 report in *The Journal of Public Health* found that, in a sample of 29 Muslim children circumcised at an Islamic school in Oxford, 45 per cent ended up developing

medical problems as a direct result of the surgery. Then there was the recent case of 28-day-old Angelo Ofori-Mintah, who bled to death in February of this year after a circumcision in Queen's Park, London – a tragedy echoed by that of Goodluck Caubergs, an infant who died in similar circumstances in 2010 following the cut. While the fatal haemorrhaging of Ofori-Mintah was ruled a “tragic accident”, the midwife responsible for Caubergs, Grace Adeleye, was charged in April of this year with manslaughter. She is currently awaiting trial.

Around the world, the story is depressingly similar. The Times of Israel reported on a two-day-old Muslim boy having his penis entirely severed in a catastrophic circumcision in the Galilee – the second bungled cutting reported at the same hospital within a month. And then there was the recent case in Germany at the heart of the current controversy. It was only after a four-year-old Muslim boy was taken to hospital with complications following circumcision that the matter came up in a Cologne court and the practice was declared illegal. Although the doctor responsible was cleared of medical error and acquitted, this was only on the basis that he had been acting under “unavoidable mistake of law”. As the country as a whole awaits legal clarification on the matter, and Chancellor Angela Merkel seeks to dampen the flames of umbrage, Germany is in circumcision lockdown.

These tragic examples are more than unfortunate, isolated episodes. For every extreme case that gets reported in the media and debated in the courts, hundreds of nasty little incidents sink without a trace. For certain hospitals in Britain, the practice of patching up circumcision botch jobs is said to be appallingly routine. Largely, these interventions go unrecorded. The infant is simply stitched up and sent home. The perpetrator is not reported. Censure is not issued. Cultural sensitivity trumps child protection. One wonders if, say, the parents of a newborn suffering from skin lesions following a clumsily administered home tattoo would get off the hook so lightly.

Britain's NHS is, at least, gradually waking up to the problem. In 2011, following a wave of botched circumcisions in Muslim communities in the Manchester area, the Greater Manchester Safeguarding Children Partnership – a joint arm of the NHS and Social Services – was concerned enough to set up a new quality assurance programme, including a self-assessment leaflet.

I spoke to a representative of the initiative, Helen Gollins, Speciality Registrar in Public Health at Stockport Primary Care Trust. “We’re there to make sure the process is as straightforward and stress-free as possible,” Gollins told me. But as the programme remains voluntary, there is only so much it can do. “We don’t know who’s doing what away from the programme,” Gollins admitted. While her team is valiantly “trying to put measures in place to record what is happening”, the fact remains that, without proper regulation – something Gollins describes as “impossible due to the sensitivity of the issue” – this will never be adequate.

Regulation is likely to be particularly resisted in the Jewish community, which prides itself on the skill of its dedicated mohelim: circumcision experts who perform thousands of these procedures over their career. But this isn’t to say that the Jewish cutting table hasn’t had its own share of scandals.

In June, New Yorkers were aghast to read about infections apparently spread by the custom of metzitzah b’peh – a tradition, still prevalent in certain Hasidic sects, that involves the mohel attempting to salve the child’s wound by sucking blood from the tip of his penis. The New York Times reported that, between 2000 and 2011, eleven newborn babies in the New York area had contracted herpes simplex virus following circumcision, and in over half of these cases there was definite proof of metzitzah b’peh having taken place. The consequences of the infection were appalling. Ten of these infants were hospitalised, two suffered brain damage and a further two died. The response by the New York City health department was notably pussyfooted. A proposal was put forward for Orthodox Jewish parents to sign a consent waiver before performing the rite. A statement was also issued “strongly urging” that metzitzah b’peh be avoided.

Britain has also had its own tragedies in the Jewish community. Notwithstanding the fact that Angelo Ofori-Mintah was circumcised by a rabbi, the most famous recent case

involved the Jewish infant Amitai Moshe, who in 2007 turned blue and started bleeding minutes after his circumcision in Golders Green, North London. Moshe died in hospital a few days later. Although there was no question of misconduct on the part of the mohel, Rabbi Moshe Perry, and the inquest later recorded a verdict of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (or cot death), the incident nevertheless remains grist to the mill of anti-circumcision campaigners. There is even a website – CIRP – dedicated to listing deaths around the world caused by or following circumcision.

Most people, however, prefer to turn a blind eye. Conservatives disdain regulation; liberals worry about cultural sensitivity. But this is an interesting time for these debates to be had. Ours is not a society noted for its blasé attitude towards its children’s genitals. And these are just the health concerns.

During my own delving into the world of genital paring, I came across the disturbing phenomenon of circumfetishism. It’s hard to say exactly how many people occupy this erotic niche, but, at least to this vanilla mind, there appears to be no shortage of groups and fora swapping stories and pictures and gruesome erotic footage of foreskin amputation. One of these is the Gilgal Society, a London-based pro-circumcision group which markets itself as a medical education publisher. Gilgal has been circulating an explicit circumfetish video featuring an adult male getting the snip and later masturbating to fruition. It has also faced accusations of circulating child pornography. Earlier this year the man in charge of Gilgal, Vernon Quaintance – also, as it happens, a sacristan and server for the Roman Catholic Order of Malta – was found guilty of possessing child pornography and given a 40-week suspended sentence.

The sordid details of Vernon Quaintance and Gilgal may be just a sensational sideshow but they throw up important questions about our relaxed attitude to circumcision. They remind us of the fact that the invasive surgery remains legally and freely permissible to be carried out on children by unqualified laymen in the home. And they remind us how unregulated the practice remains.

Times, however, may be changing. Even aside from the Cologne case, there has been a growing backlash against the practice. In California last year, proposals to enable local governments to ban circumcision made it onto ballots in several cities, including San Francisco. Also last year, the Royal Dutch Medical Association (RDMA) spoke out against the practice, calling for it to be discouraged. In March 2012, in Finland, MP Vesa-Matti Saarakkala of the rightist Finns Party demanded circumcision be criminalised. The Finnish Green League also recently voted in favour of a resolution to phase the procedure out. And, as Germany awaits legal clarification on the matter, the governor of Vorarlberg in Austria has instructed state-run hospitals to abandon non-therapeutic circumcision until a similar legal consensus has been achieved.

It is currently unlikely that any country will outlaw the practice entirely. Nor would that necessarily be desirable. Despite everything I’ve just written, I don’t know how comfortable I’d be with such a restriction to cultural freedom. There are many things it would be nice to do away with if we were able to rip things up and start again, but revolution isn’t always the way. The outrage that any such decision would provoke is likely to do more harm than good. And, as experience has told us with everything from prostitution to abortion to drug abuse, criminalising such practices doesn’t stop them: it merely makes them more dangerous.

But it’s time for us to have an adult debate about where to go from here. Firstly, we all need to question whether it’s necessary to circumcise our boys. If we are able to talk about this openly, perhaps, over time, social mores will phase the practice out in the way legal intervention never could. Secondly, we need to decide whether it’s time to stop continuing these procedures in the home. As religion has constantly demonstrated over the centuries, it is not immune to compromise. Women can be vicars. Observant Jews can cook on Saturdays. With God, too, there is such a thing as progress.

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Happy New Year for 2015.

Our **END OF YEAR PARTY** was well attended and Sam Pellegrino, our entertainer and Connie (his wife), had everyone up with the Twist, Rock n Roll, and various other dances. We had an enjoyable time eating the delicious supper and drinking punch (among other beverages). What a great way to end the year with our Humanist friends.



WORLD HUMANIST DAY SYMPOSIUM 2015

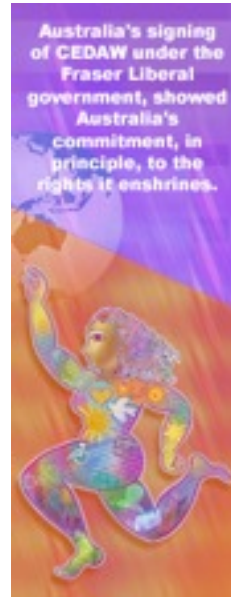
Victor Bien and I are co-convenors of this national event. We have decided for this to take place on Monday June 22nd 9.30-3.30 as the actual date is 21st which is a Sunday and again we need to have the State Parliament House as the venue. The Topic is another extremely interesting one – *Origins of Political Order*. More information on this symposium in the next edition of Viewpoints but please also mark this whole day event on 22nd in your diaries so you don't miss out.

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY 2015

We are looking forward to seeing you, our members and friends, at the March 9 UNIWD Seminar in the Waratah Room, State Parliament House, Macquarie St. at 2.30-5pm (registration 2pm). As you are aware by now, this is the fourth year we have convened this partnership event between Humanist Society of NSW and the UN Association of Australia (NSW)

If you RSVP by Feb 28 it will enable us to know the numbers for catering, also in the case we need to obtain a larger room. Looking forward to seeing you.

The Topic is: **Update on the outcome of CEDAW (the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women 1981).**



CEDAW gave birth to the Committee on the Elimination of All Discrimination Against Women which had the role to monitor the implementation and progress of CEDAW introduced two decades ago. We have several very interesting speakers one of whom, Faye Coombe was assisted through consultation with representatives of the UN to start a principality in NSW (originated by women). The actual date of UNIWD is 8th but we will celebrate it on Monday 9th because we are able to use this prestigious venue gratis on weekdays.

Please mark it in your diaries and come to support us. The entry fee will be \$15 and includes afternoon tea.

HuVATs (Humanist Viewpoint Afternoon Talk)

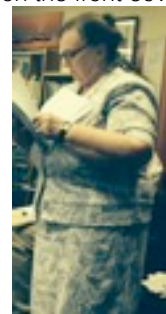
These are held on the 2nd Sunday of the month 4pm with speakers and supper.

These have also been well attended and our speakers for last year were, to name a few, Ian Bryce; Gillian Ellis (Women in Enlightenment); Victor Bien (philosophers' bios and Darwin Day); Zoe's Law Panel: Margaret Kirby (WAAG), Fay Love et al; Roy Brown (IHEU rep UN); Israel Palestine Panel: Vivienne Porzsolt, Valerie Weekes and Prof Clive Kessler; and myself (Humanities).

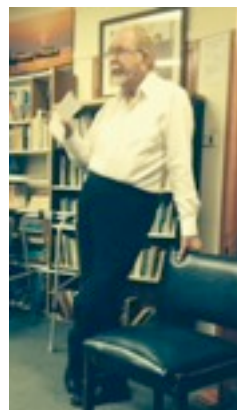
Details of upcoming HuVATs on the front cover.



Vivienne Porzsolt



Valerie Weekes UNAANSW



Roy Brown IHEU



Prof Clive Kessler

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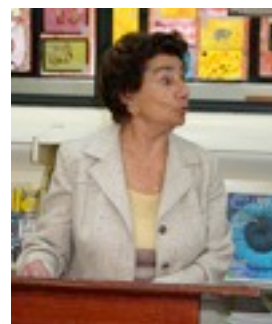
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Dorothy Buckland-Fuller AM, MBE

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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