

# Humanist Viewpoints

NEWSLETTER OF THE HUMANIST SOCIETY OF NSW INC



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## **PETITION TO REMOVE SAME SEX DISCRIMINATION**

The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission has launched its report into same sex equality, and the Attorney-General has tabled it in Parliament.

Now the onus is on the Federal Government to respond adequately to its recommendations and legislate to remove same sex discrimination from the 58 laws in which it is entrenched.

Over 70 per cent of Australians support the call to give same sex couples the same legal rights as heterosexual de facto couples, as does every State and Territory and most of the developed world. But the Federal politicians still sit on their hands and do nothing.

This issue is a matter of simple fairness - giving all Australians their due entitlements regardless of the nature of their relationships.

Please click on the following link and sign the petition today to ensure equality for all of us!

<http://www.getup.org.au/campaign/EqualBeforeTheLaw&id=29>

John Goldbaum

**Secular Party of Australia**

**SOCIETY MEMBERSHIP RENEWALS  
ARE DUE IN JULY. PLEASE RENEW YOUR  
MEMBERSHIP!**

## **CHURCH AND STATE DEBATE**

*Viewpoints* Editor, Max' Wallace, will be the secular half of a debate on church and state to be held on Thursday, 12 July, at the Sydney Mechanics' School of Arts at 6pm. The questions to be addressed are:

*Should there be a clear separation of church and state? Are implied or actual threats of formal church disapproval or even exclusion going too far?*

Humanist Society members are encouraged to attend. At the time of going to press a religionist speaker has not been finalised. Each speaker will have 15 minutes and 5 minutes to respond to the other speaker. The debate will then be opened to questions from the floor.

The Sydney Mechanics' School of Arts is at Level 1, 280 Pitt Street, Sydney. Ph 9262 7300.

## **BLACK FELLAS DREAMING MUSEUM**

A wide variety of distinctive aboriginal art is available for purchase from two Humanist Society members, Elaine and Gordon Syron. It is known as The Black Fellas Dreaming Museum.

Selected pieces are now for sale. Contact [elainesyron@hotmail.com](mailto:elainesyron@hotmail.com)

## **HUMANIST SOCIETY of NSW WEBSITE**

<http://www.hsnsw.asn.au/>

**SUBSCRIPTIONS ARE DUE BY THE 1ST OF JULY EVERY YEAR** as follows:

Single \$30, Double \$40, Pensioner/Student \$15, Viewpoints only \$20

Please send to Humanist Society of NSW Inc., 10 Shepherd Street, Chippendale NSW 2008

Meg Wallace

**We need death with dignity legislation.**



It has now become a fact that relentless treatment, futile resuscitation, endless agony and lack of respect for a patient's wishes means that modern medicine often imposes an inhuman end on life that is oppressive.

Where a person has a terminal illness, and full medical treatment with the aim of prolonging life is considered unacceptable, there are two options:

**1 Death with dignity:**

- *Refusing life-prolonging treatment:* by a patient who can make decisions; or
- *Withholding or withdrawing treatment from a patient who is unable to make decisions* when it will not cure or improve the person's condition; this is distressing, and only serves to prolong the dying process; or
- *Provision of adequate relief of pain or distress:* Morphine and other drugs may be given to relieve pain and distress even where it is expected that this will hasten death. Hastening death must not be intended, but only consequential.

**2 Euthanasia**

- *Assisted suicide:* Assisting the person to self-administer lethal medication; or
- *Homicide:* killing the person by administering lethal medication or other means.

Only the first option is lawful in Australia. The fact that a person may be agreeable to assisted suicide or lethal medication, and even beg for it, cuts no ice with the law –assisted suicide is a crime, as, of course, is murder. Even providing

information about how one can end one's life through electronic or other written advice is also a crime.

Unfortunately, although death with dignity is lawful in Australia, and happens every day, there is much confusion, uncertainty and secrecy about end-of-life treatment. There is no clear legislative statement that ensures that those involved in providing the means for death with dignity will not be prosecuted, or at least subject to criminal investigation. Those providing palliative care are divided and unsure of their ethical and legal position. Decisions are made behind closed doors, with no requirement for accountability to the law. Many of those decisions may in fact be illegal. Recent studies have shown that more than a third of surgeons have given doses of pain relief that they perceived to be greater than required to relieve symptoms with the *intention* of hastening death. More than half of these (a quarter of all those surveyed) had never received a clear request for a lethal dose of medication. Ironically, this and other studies show that 'Australia had a higher rate of intentional ending of life without the patient's request than the Netherlands.' This is reason for concern. It shows that doctors are making decisions that involve both of the above options and consider these justifiable as ethical by medical profession standards. Such decision making involves lack of consent in many cases, and these decisions, whether justifiable or not, are hidden and unquestioned.

How can we know what is going on, and how can we, as patients, feel in control of our lives?

Clear legislation should be enacted so that even the simple, humane provision of death with dignity is more upfront, available, clear and accountable.

Some European countries that do not allow euthanasia as I have described it, give official recognition to groups that advocate death with dignity, and have legislated to facilitate this. Both candidates in the recent presidential elections in France explicitly expressed their support of the right to die with dignity. On 11 February, Nicolas Sarkozy (elected President)

said (my translation) 'One can't stand helpless in that face of the suffering of our compatriots who call for it to end.' What is *our* Prime Minister saying?

In 2005 the French Association for the Right to Die with Dignity (l'ADMD) was authorised by the Minister of Health to sit on hospital administrative bodies dealing with patient care – this pro-euthanasia group was thus at the heart of the administration of hospitals. Passed unanimously on 22<sup>nd</sup> April 2005, a French law on dying with dignity was passed, establishing the right to be 'allowed to die'. It established in law the right to die with dignity as set out above.

I think those who believe assisted suicide should be available to the terminally ill should first work to achieve the first step towards achieving this: *acceptance of the right to die with dignity*. Currently those who are terminally ill can't even be assured of that. We need to start with campaigning for death with dignity legislation.

- It is **acceptable** to the majority of the population, even mainstream religion;
- It is **achievable**: simply requiring legislation stating the current law;
- It is **affordable**: no extra medical expenditure is required: in fact there would be less expensive, unwanted or futile death-prolonging treatment.
- It is **accountable**. By being subject to legislative oversight, decisions would not be made behind closed doors, causing relatives or others to question what is going on. Decision-making would be clear and consistent, according to a general law applying to all.
- It would **educate**, in that it brings to public awareness the issues surrounding death and medical treatment.
- It would **promote discussion and questioning of current practices** of the medical profession (and the law). The influence of religion and other personal ideologies, and the hypocrisy of prohibiting the option of assisting the terminally ill to choose a means and time of their death, would become apparent.

## PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

The Committee of the Humanist Society has unanimously resolved to suspend the membership of Ann Young and Steve Maxwell, for actions prejudicial to the interests of the Humanist Society. Ann and Steve are respectively the President and Secretary of the Rationalist Association.



This has been a decision taken with great reluctance and only after a lengthy process of deliberation. Ann Young has previously made a valuable contribution to the Humanist Society as both past President and committee member.

As I outlined in the last issue of *Viewpoints*, in **2005** the merger between the Humanist Society and the Rationalist Association of NSW was approved unanimously by our AGM of that year and with only one dissenting vote by the Rationalists at their AGM. Ann Young was at the time Public Officer of the Humanist Society and a member of our governing Committee. Steve Maxwell was elected as a member of the Humanist Committee. At the Committee's suggestion, to facilitate the amalgamation process, Ann also nominated and was elected as President of the Rationalists.

At the last AGM of the Rationalists in **2006** Steve Maxwell and Ann both spoke *against* proceeding with the amalgamation. This was not well received by other Rationalists. A number of members tried to pass a resolution to 'amalgamate forthwith' but this move was opposed by the executive and narrowly lost on Ann Young's casting vote.

In an effort to get the amalgamation back on track, in early **November 2006** the Committee of the Humanist Society, including Ann, invited the Committee of the Rationalists to a joint meeting on **13 January 2007** to see if any objections could be overcome. A number of us cut short our

holidays and/or made special travel arrangements to attend. However, two days before the scheduled meeting, Ann Young sent an e-mail to the Committee stating that she and the other Rationalists would not be turning up.

In later response to questions as to what the status of the amalgamation process was, Ann informed the committee that the Rationalists were 'still considering the issue'. The Committee was unable to question Steve Maxwell in regard to any of these issues as he had not attended any Humanist Committee meetings since his election.

The Committee subsequently came into possession of a letter dated **14 December 2006**, circulated to Rationalist members under the signature of Steve Maxwell, in his capacity as the Rationalist Secretary. It said in part:

*'At first I supported the merger of the Rationalists and Humanists, but during the year [2006] I realised that the process was being rushed without time to consider other options. The Humanists are not militant atheists and tend to water down commitment to atheism .. There are those in the Humanists who have loss [sic] our confidence. We have had problem [sic] within the Rationalist [sic] with major office holders that live in a post box. We simply do not trust such people. Another long-established Humanist has a track record of white-anting the Humanists ...*

After discovering the circulation of this letter, the Humanist Committee formed the view there were serious contradictions between assurances of possible amalgamation on the one hand and total denial of amalgamation on the other.

In response to the Committee's request that they explain their actions, Steve did not respond and Ann sent a letter dated **2 June 2007** which said in part:

*The official position of the Rationalist Association is that they are still considering the merger. This is as true today as it was when I said it the first time ... [the Association] is still in the process of considering the merger ...*

This claim is also hard to reconcile with Ann's earlier comments in the new Rationalist magazine *The New Liberator* of **Jan-April 2007** that she was:

*'excited' [to be] 'relieved of the burden of work I used to do for the Humanist Society' ... being 'free [of the Humanist Society] is 'so exhilarating, I just might let them do without me. At the end of the day it seems they need us but we absolutely do not need them.'*

It was on the basis of these conflicting views and the history of events that the Committee determined that both Steve and Ann had acted in a manner prejudicial to the interests of the society and voted to suspend their membership under section 10 of the Constitution 'until the amalgamation of the Rationalist and Humanist Societies'. In doing this it noted that the original special resolution of the Rationalists to amalgamate still stands until, and if, it is rescinded at their next AGM.

If, as Ann has claimed to the Committee, the Rationalists are still considering the amalgamation, then this suspension will of course be for a very short period.

Contrary to their stated views above, Steve and Ann have subsequently challenged their suspension by the Committee and appealed to a General Meeting of the Humanist Society, as is their right under our constitution.

A General Meeting will be held at Humanist House, 10 Shepherd St Chippendale at 1.30pm on Sunday 22 July 2007 for the members of the Humanist Society to decide whether or not to support their Committee's decision. As a member of the Society, I invite you to attend and form your own judgment.

**Richard Howard.**

## MEMBERSHIP NEWS

Angela Drury

### Member News

A warm welcome to NEW MEMBERS Ian Bryce, Barbara Hilliard, Justin Scowen, Reiner Wierling, Tony Bliss, Carl Lehman, Tarrant Dawsom, John Paterson, Robert Bizjak, and Robert Lane. Welcome back to Hugh Dolan who is re-joining.



Thank you to all who have purchased Vicky Potempa's autobiography *Off My Shoulders* - still available from Humanist House for \$35 as a fundraiser for the Humanist Society of NSW.

## OFFICE BEARERS

**President:** Richard Howard.

**Vice Presidents:** Affie Adagio, David Duffy.

**Treasurer:** Victor Bien.

**Public Officer:** Meg Wallace.

**Committee:** John August, Anthony D'Angiolillo, David Duffy, Sturt Duncan, Gillian Ellis, Fred Flatow, Harry Giann, Robin Hall, Ian Jones, John Markovina, Max Wallace, Meg Wallace.

## HUVAT

**July HUVAT Sunday 8 July at 4.30pm.** To be advised.

**August HUVAT Sunday 12 August** will be replaced by the Annual General Meeting of the Society. Members will be advised of the AGM by letter.

**HUVAT Sunday 9 September at 4.30 pm** will feature John August on 'alternative economic theories.'

**HUMANIST SOCIETY  
MEMBERSHIP RENEWALS ARE  
DUE IN JULY. PLEASE RENEW  
YOUR MEMBERSHIP!**

***THE U.S. RELIGIOUS RIGHT AFTER  
FALWELL: LESS VISIBLE BUT  
MORE POWERFUL THAN EVER***

*Americans United for Separation of Church and State, Thursday, May 17, 2007:*

### **U.S. Fundamentalist Political Movement Today Is Savvy, Well Funded And Influential**

The May 15 death of Moral Majority founder Jerry Falwell marks a point of passage for the Religious Right, but it does not mean that politically active fundamentalist Christians are in decline or that their movement is waning.

The new breed of Religious Right leaders has learned from Falwell's mistakes. Falwell's rhetoric was often intemperate. While it made for lively television, his over-the-top remarks probably alarmed more people than they attracted. Even in his home state of Virginia, polls showed Falwell with high negative ratings.

Falwell also failed to truly cultivate the grassroots. By the time the Moral Majority collapsed, it had become apparent that the group was essentially a large mailing list with little local presence. By contrast, groups like the Christian Coalition saw the value in local organizing. The Coalition, founded by TV preacher Pat Robertson, at one time had viable chapters in most states and even some at the county level.

The Christian Coalition emphasized working within the Republican Party to achieve its goals. The group paid attention to local races as well as national ones. Employing a political model that stressed activity at the party precinct level, the Christian Coalition achieved great success in influencing the Republican Party and making certain that candidates seeking the presidency met rigid ideological litmus tests. While the Coalition



has followed the Moral Majority into eclipse, the fundamentalist voting bloc in the GOP [Good Old Party-Republican]ensures that its theocratic agenda still has enormous power.

**Religious Right Image Makeover:** The Religious Right has changed its public relations approach in the years since Falwell launched the Moral Majority. Movement leaders today are less likely to seek the kind of media notoriety that Falwell relished. Some Religious Right leaders, such as Colorado-based powerhouse James Dobson, shun almost all mainstream media interviews, using their own broadcast channels to spread their views. Other organizational spokespersons have toned down their public rhetoric especially when speaking to general audiences through the mass media.

The emphasis is often on non-threatening terms like "family values" and "traditional values." Arguments are made that all these groups want is "a place at the table." They have let up on the triumphalist rhetoric and often couch their arguments in terms of "religious freedom." Thus, today's Religious Right is much more sophisticated.

**Dr. James Dobson's Focus on the Family:** radio/publishing outfit brought in \$137 million in fiscal year 2005. Dobson sat in the front row at the White House May 3 and was personally welcomed by President George W. Bush during a National Day of Prayer observance. Republican presidential candidates seek Dobson's endorsement, and Republican leaders in Congress fear him. (Former House Speaker Newt Gingrich went on Dobson's radio show to profess repentance for moral failings in his marriages.)

**Tony Perkins' Family Research Council:** serves as James Dobson's beachhead in Washington, D.C. The FRC, with a budget of \$10.8 million in fiscal year 2006, lobbies for the Religious Right agenda in the nation's capital. Later this year, the group is sponsoring a mass gathering to vet Republican presidential candidates and mobilize evangelical voters in preparation for the 2008 elections.

**The Rev. Pat Robertson's Christian Broadcasting Network:** took in \$236 million in contributions in fiscal year 2005. It claims

nearly a million daily viewers. Robertson uses CBN to spread his often shrill religious-political message nationwide, and right-wing politicians and Republican political candidates are often showcased on his "700 Club" program.

**The Rev. Donald Wildmon's American Family Association (AFA):** targets "anti-family" forces in America. He rails against gays and launches boycotts of companies with gay-friendly policies. Based in Tupelo, Miss., the AFA has a limited Washington presence, and thus operates beneath the mainstream media radar. However, Wildmon oversees a radio empire of more than 170 stations, and his AFA revenues reach \$17 million annually.

**The Southern Baptist Convention (SBC):** is firmly in the grip of far-right fundamentalists, and its leadership pushes a Religious Right agenda. The SBC is the largest Protestant denomination in America with some 16 million members. SBC top lobbyist Dr. Richard Land acts as a powerbroker in the Republican Party, declaring which presidential candidates are acceptable to evangelical Christian voters.

**The Rev. Louis P. Sheldon's Traditional Values Coalition (TYC):** is a specialized Religious Right operation. While it takes stands on a wide range of issues in Washington and in its California home base, it is known for its strident attacks on gays. In fiscal year 2005, it operated with an annual budget of \$6 million. TYC is typical of an array of smaller Religious Right organizations that influence public policy.

**The Religious Right's Reach In The Courts And Other Government Venues:** The Religious Right's influence reaches deep into all three branches of government. In the courts, Religious Right legal groups press their views on a range of social issues, arguing for more religion in public schools and against church-state separation, abortion rights and legal protections for gay people.

The Alliance Defense Fund, an Arizona-based legal group founded by Dobson, Wildmon and other Religious Right figures, has an annual budget of \$18 million. Pat

Robertson's American Center for Law and Justice (ACLJ) pulls in \$14.5 million every year. The ACLJ is so powerful it has helped vet the Bush administration's Supreme Court nominees.

This crusade often comes with assistance from the Justice Department, which has a special-unit devoted to "religious liberty" concerns. The Supreme Court is increasingly stacked with right-wing appointees, thanks to a decades-long pressure campaign by Religious Right operatives.

Robertson's Regent University contains a law school and claims to have 150 graduates working in the Bush administration. (Former Attorney General John Ashcroft teaches at Regent.) Falwell's Liberty University has a Bible-based law school as well. Meanwhile, in Congress a Republican-sponsored Values Action Team meets weekly with Religious Right leaders to coordinate and strategize.

**Influencing Both Political Parties :** The Religious Right's role in the Republican Party is now secure. During primary elections, its activists make up such a large percentage of GOP voters that candidates ignore them at their peril. Recent events bear this out, as candidates like John McCain, Mitt Romney and Rudy Giuliani have adopted more conservative stands to appeal to social conservatives. While Religious Right leaders have yet to identify a presidential favorite, their influence in the race is undeniable. McCain, after identifying Robertson and Falwell as "agents of intolerance" in 2000, appeared as the commencement speaker at Falwell's Liberty University last year. Romney is scheduled to appear at Robertson's Regent University this year.

Recognizing the movement's power, even some Democrats have sought to court the evangelical Christian bloc. Democratic advisers increasingly stress the importance of reaching out to "people offaith." In 2006, one top party adviser even told candidates not to use the phrase "separation of church and state" because it might turn off church-goers.

**Religious Right Goals:** There are no signs that the Religious Right is moderating its agenda. The movement seeks to scale back church-state separation and bring in a government that

reflects "Christian" values. In keeping with fundamentalist theology, activists seek to ban all abortions, deny civil rights protections for gays, fund religious schools and other ministries with tax dollars and teach the Bible and creationism in public schools.

At Religious Right conferences to rally the faithful, the speeches and tactics are as controversial as ever. The crowd is treated to generous amounts of gay bashing alongside attacks on Democrats, liberals, legal abortion, public education and the church-state wall. At last year's Family Research Council "Washington Briefing," one preacher referred to gay people as "sissies," "faggots" and "sodomites." Another speaker urged church members to use deceptive phone bank techniques to win votes for favored candidates.

So-called "moderate evangelicals" are a hot media topic right now, but there is precious little evidence that this movement has clout or that it even exists in significant numbers. While many evangelical leaders cringe at the shrill rhetoric from leaders like Robertson, few have taken a public stance against Religious Right extremism. In addition, many moderate evangelicals tend to layer a few issues like global warming on top of a very anti-church-state separation, anti-choice, anti-gay agenda: To the extent that moderate evangelicals exist at the organizational level, their movement is dwarfed by the political influence and money of the Religious Right.

**Conclusion:** Jerry Falwell's death marks the passing of an era. He was a member of the Religious Right's founding generation. But Falwell was merely one midwife of the crusade to blend ultraconservative politics and fundamentalist religion. He was not the entire movement; indeed, the Religious Right he helped shape left him behind some years ago as it matured.

***GREENS MLC ALLEGES  
CHRISTIAN TAX RORTS***

Greens MLC, Dr John Kaye has made serious allegations about the Redeemer Baptist Church in North Parramatta in the Legislative Council on the 21<sup>st</sup> June.

Among other matters John Kaye alleged the church's Christian school was used as a mechanism to benefit teachers by paying them about 20 per cent of a normal teacher's wage and then loading fringe benefits into their salary package to minimise tax. He said this was done by the provision of free housing, cars, mobile phones, child care, private health insurance and travel.

Back on 27 February 1998 *The Australian* reported that

The Australian Taxation Office is preparing a major crackdown on high and average income earners who are repackaging their salaries to avoid tax. The tax office is also investigating non-profit groups such as schools, churches and sporting clubs.

The then Tax Commissioner, Mr Carmody, was quoted as saying that the exploitation of salary-sacrifice arrangements by non-profit organisations including churches had gone too far. On 25 August 1998 *The Canberra Times* reported that

the Federal Government told churches and charities yesterday to stop using loopholes to reduce tax for their senior staff. Many benevolent institutions were loading fringe benefits such as expensive cars into salary packages, Treasurer Peter Costello said. 'The churches can't have it both ways ... they can't say on the one hand we stand for a tight tax system against avoidance but on the other we don't want any of our fringe benefits brought into the tax net.'

Now it is 2007 and John Kaye is alleging that 'to date, both levels of government have failed to even interview former teachers of the school to collect statements, despite numerous complaints that have been made to various agencies. The question that needs an answer is why government has failed to act when they raised the issue of unreasonable fringe benefits packaging.

A possible answer is that the teachers at the Redeemer Baptist School are all ministers of religion. When the Fringe Benefits Tax was reformed ministers of religion were excluded from the reforms. Believe it or not, ministers of religion are not always considered to be 'employees' of religious organisations. An important 1999 Industrial Relations Commission decision has found they may instead 'serve God'. As they are not employees the Fringe Benefits restrictions may not apply to them.

So why were ministers of religion excluded from the Fringe Benefits Tax reforms? No journalist or Federal Opposition politician has ever asked that question because there are no journalists or Federal politicians who either understand the issue or think it worthy of investigation. Good on you, John Kaye.

## CONSCIOUSNESS

*John August*

### **Brain and Mind**

The study of consciousness has a long history in philosophy, and more recently in neurology. The explanation of our consciousness in naturalistic terms is one which Humanists would embrace.

For the sake of discussion I'll define consciousness as 'the activity we experience while we're awake'. That includes awareness of our sensory input, an ability to have thoughts about thoughts, and an ability to make plans, among others.

Our brain has evolved. We have a multi-function 'front end' (that includes visual awareness) followed by some specialised units elsewhere in the brain to assist in survival and finding a mate.

We can separate the brain into right and left brain, short term and long term memory, and so on. Antonio Damasio, a worker in the field, speaks of the self in stages: First, the 'proto-self', a primitive consciousness; second, the 'core self', which is re-created each time the self interacts with an external object; and lastly the autobiographical self,



generated through accessing working and biographical memory.

We can see these functions in the way the brain develops an incredibly detailed picture which is then reduced to a concise summary. Some people with autism or Asperger's syndrome are aware of this detailed picture, but at the cost of the 'social summaries' or contextual understanding.

Rather than being a coherent whole, the brain is a collection of interacting discrete components which seem to be a whole because they are so well coordinated. We see this when a neurological deficit means some interaction no longer happens. For example, with 'capgrass syndrome', people think their friends and associates have been replaced with robotic replacements. This is the result of a particular part of our brain not evoking a feeling of familiarity.

Consciousness normally means we are aware of what is going on around us, but there are cases where we can be influenced without being aware of it. One example is when we cannot see something well enough to identify it, and feel we are guessing when asked to identify it - but we nevertheless guess accurately. This shows that our brain has 'influence pathways', but we're not always aware of that influence. For example, people have had information played to them while asleep. While they were not aware of the sounds, it was possible to find evidence of the effect of the information.

How much consciousness do animals have? Advanced primates including chimps and elephants can identify their reflection in a mirror, which indicates some sense of self. Shared attention where you know yourself and another animal are observing the same thing is useful in cooperation and the development of language. It is also behind the ability of animals to hunt in packs, which suggests that dogs and other animals have a sense of self. Is this 'awareness' or a 'bundle of instincts'? I think it is awareness, but it underlines difficulties with describing and relating this awareness to consciousness.

Returning to the workings of the brain, the unified field of vision is an illusion. In fact, we

are only visually directly aware of a few things, and movement or change draws us to them. If we change parts of the scene without triggering our 'change detector', we will only notice the difference through manual search. There's a 'cost' to operate the brain, and this effect is evidence for a shortcut evolution took to try to do more with less, taking advantage of correlations in the environment.

There is an analogy here to computers. Some consider HOTS (Higher Order Thoughts) to be fundamental to consciousness. A related idea is 'beliefs about beliefs' - we need these reflections to be able to lie or deceive.

We have other 'assurance signals'. These are 'indicators' that something is 'logical' - often violated in dreams.

There is also a phenomenon called 'blindsight' where we are not aware of something in our vision, but can 'guess' what it is correctly. We're 'blind' to it, but we can access the visual information without the 'extra signal'.

### **Determinism vs Free Will**

When philosophers first started thinking about consciousness, they imagined there was a 'real us' (the 'hormunculus' seated inside our brain, watching a 'theatre' of what goes on outside. Of course this has the problem of whether there's another hormunculus seated inside that hormunculus! Many determinists say that everything is causally determined, denying free will. However, humanists, I suggest, endorse a compromise position between a naturalistic causal universe and free will.

In my view, our conscious thoughts are able to influence the further development of the brain. We have an *overall* 'willed' cycle - where our symbol processing' awareness can influence the part of the brain which does the actual initiation.

In order to understand our brains, one possibility is to just observe the thoughts within ourselves. This is called introspection. It has been criticised as lacking objectivity, because it is not independently measurable. However, if we are to explain

consciousness, something personal and perceptual, we need to consider what our thoughts 'feel like'. But we do need to be able to communicate such concepts without being lost in jargon. As a thought experiment, is possible to review some of my our observations of my our own brain, sitting and watching it tick over.

We observe sequences of thoughts, the stream of consciousness. Normally, each thought triggers the next. However, at times the chain of thoughts runs out of steam, there is a brief gap, and then a new thought spontaneously jumps to mind. These 'spontaneous' thoughts could be anything, but there is a bias towards more recent events and issues of importance to us.

We can also see some 'priming'. Once, I was walking through the room while someone else was watching TV. Half an hour later, a thought sprung into my head which was related (not directly) to what was on the TV. It seems thoughts have varying 'strength' and that one thought can increase the 'strength' of associated thoughts so they have more chance of triggering themselves spontaneously later.

Normally, if you are asked a question the answer just 'pops' into your head. Similarly successive ideas 'pop' into your head. However, you are not explicitly aware of the connection between the different thoughts, and by reviewing them after the event, you can see the connections.

### **The Subconscious**

There is a subconscious processing behind the generation of each conscious thought. We have a boundary between conscious thoughts and the processes which yield the conscious thoughts.

When we 'realise something' (what psychologists call an 'aha!' experience), this can be the result of us bringing thoughts into our head because they have something in common, where we discover something *else* they have in common. This is a way of sifting through all your life experience and looking for lessons we can learn from it. The more we understand the nature of consciousness the more we will begin to understand the phenomenon of what is called 'religion'.

*Victor Bien*

I have added to links to our web site about problems that non-religious parents have had with religion in schools.

Just a bit of background to refresh our memory: around the time Charles Darwin published his book the *Origin of Species* Henry Parkes in NSW made a historic agreement with the churches about how to handle religion in the burgeoning public schools which took over much of school education which historically was delivered by the churches up to that time. Other states soon followed. The agreement involved one period a week where a religious teacher nominated by a church could visit a school to teach religion primarily to children belonging to that faith. No other formal activity could be delivered in that 40 minute time slot so children whose parents did not want their children to attend a class could only go say to the library to do their own activities. (See more on this in an article by Jane Caro in *Australian Humanist* No. 84 Summer 2006).

This arrangement colloquially has been called 'scripture' classes. Formally it used to be called 'religious instruction' but in more recent times it has been changes to 'religious education' which of course we think is a gross misnomer.

This arrangement like any arrangement has (social) evolutionary consequences. In schools where the preponderance of parents are religiously inclined they influence the school principals and the school's culture under what is like 'market pressure' to cater only for religious classes and discourage parents from withdrawing their children from any class by tacitly putting a stigma on doing that. Children who are notwithstanding withdrawn from any such classes may suffer a severe social disadvantage by being stigmatised by the other children and may become the target of ridicule and bullying.

Additionally, schools within this social context tend to adopt other religiously inspired activities such as holding prayers in

school assemblies. Parents in these schools who object to these activities invariably raise the ire of the school community.

Because of this background the Humanist of Society of Queensland, after several years work getting the right groundwork with respect to anti-discrimination, succeeded in persuading the Queensland Government to amend their Education Act to broaden the religious education time slot to allow secular 'scripture' classes. This would give formal recognition to secularism as a position of no religion and allow parents of secular persuasion to enroll their children in those classes rather than their just doing personal activity in the library if they could not accept their being enrolled in some religious class.

However, in the middle of last year when the amendment was a soon to be voted on in Parliament every Christian and their dogs came out of the woodwork to kill the move! They ran a scare campaign saying such things as that the amendment would open the door to things like 'satanism' being introduced to schools! They claimed this despite that the legislation included provisions for the Department of Education to vet proposed courses. Amongst the Federal politicians involved in this scare campaign included Julie Bishop Minister for Education and the disgraced Santo Santoro then Minister for Ageing. The campaign was so vicious and traumatic for the Beattie Government that they cancelled the amendment! So much for keeping state and religion separate.

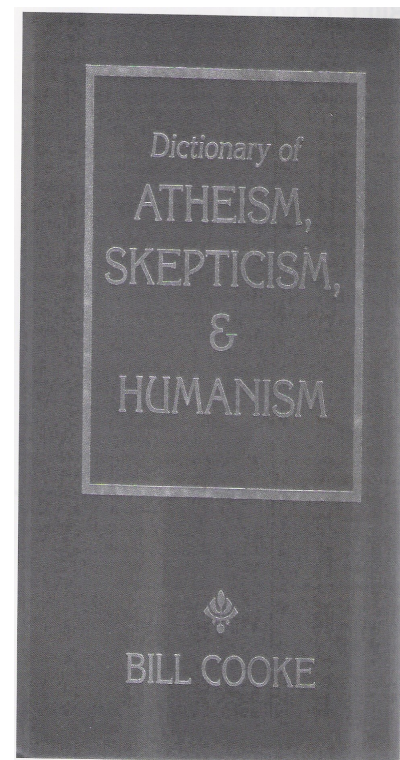
The internet makes it much easier than before to access documentation of what has happened in the past. Generally one can say that now and then there will be social explosions about religion in schools. Our website has links to two articles on the web. One is a NSW Parliamentary report about a furore in Como West over school prayers in 1996. The second is a compilation of incidents researched by the Atheist Foundation.

A recent incident in New Zealand, which has similar provisions in their education act to ours, was published in the Winter 2006 issue of *The Open Society* magazine. I will get a copy of this onto our website soon. If you don't have personal internet access I suggest you go to a local library or an internet cafe and access our website from there.

To get to the articles and perhaps print them out go to: <http://www.hsnsw.asn.au> click on Articles in the left hand navigation column, scroll half way down the page that appears and click on the link: 'Problems that parents have had with religion in schools'; links in that page bring up the respective articles.

### **DOUBLE BOOK LAUNCH AT NZARH**

On Sunday 24 June our colleagues across the Tasman, the New Zealand Association of Rationalists and Humanists, launched two books. Both are significant contributions to secular literature in their respective ways. Unfortunately, one of the authors, Professor Jim Dakin died in 2005. He was 97. His painstaking analysis of the story behind the Catholic Church's long drawn out campaign to achieve state aid in secular New Zealand has been published as *The Secular Trend*. It was edited by Bill Cooke, the author of the other book launched, a major endeavour, *The Dictionary of Atheism, Skepticism and Humanism*. Both books are available from the NZARH. Jim Dakin's book is a bargain at NZD\$15 plus NZD\$10 for postage. Bill Cooke's *Dictionary* is priced at NZD\$90, add NZD\$20 for postage. Write to the NZARH, Rationalist House, 64 Symonds, St, Auckland, NZ.



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<b>Peace &amp; Environment</b>	Ron Leverett 9869 7006
<b>Blue Mts. Group</b>	John Dillon 4787 5786
<b>Canberra Group</b>	Joan Vaughan-Taylor 4751 4941
<b>Newcastle Group:</b>	Dierk von Behrens 6254 1763 Jim Bright 4942 5197
<b>Humanist Celebrants Network</b>	Charles Foley 6297 9596
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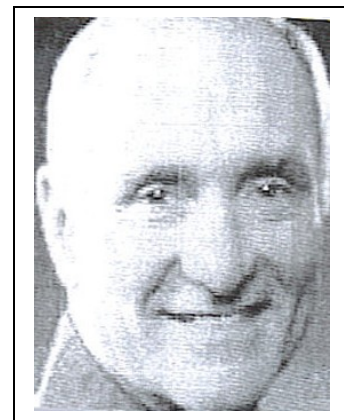
## VALE

### LYDIA HIRSHMAN

The Society notes with regret that Lydia Hirshman, the wife of former Humanist Society of NSW Patron John Hirshman, died on 20 June 2007.

This was exactly one year to the day of John's death

## OUR PATRON



### *Robyn Williams AM*

*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.*

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