It’s a New AAI World!

In this issue:

Editorial

President’s Letter

Things Theists Say

Science Corner/ Your say

Around the Globe: India

Moral High Ground?

Sword of Reason

Religious Education

Applying Logic to the God Proposition

Restrictions on Religious Symbols

Ammunition and Jokes
Editorial

OK, I got the photo down from the attic where, like the picture of Dorian Grey, it has been failing to preserve my youthful appearance! I’m your new Editor - it’s very nice to meet you. The first thing for me to do is to thank my predecessor, Rustam Singh, for many years of sterling service in this role. Rustam is going on to lead our very important project promoting the teaching of Critical Thinking in schools in Central India. He has our best wishes. There’s an interview with him here: https://tinyurl.com/y9chkycs

Next, I want to explain what is meant by the Headline of this edition: It’s a New AAI World! This refers to the fact that we have been undergoing a year long revitalisation. We have new cost-effective office systems, new staff with new ideas, our own youtube channel and a stunning new website! Go here to see it: https://www.atheistalliance.org

Much of this is thanks to the energetic leadership of our Vice President, Bill Flavell, under the guidance of our illustrious President, Gail Miller, with the support of our Board of Directors who act in a refreshingly co-operative and collegiate style.

My antennae are picking up thoughts from Theists who might be reading this; they’re thinking, “It’s a religion!” Well, no, our mission is not to impose our favourite belief system on the entire population of the planet. We don’t want to pressurise anyone into submitting to a non-evidential deity whom we claim to be chosen to represent. We don’t wish to force you to conform to our standards of dress or hairstyle. We don’t demand that you should regard certain foods as taboo and we have no desire to stick our noses into your genitalia!

We just want to normalise ‘atheist’ as an alright thing to be. We are sad that non-believers around the world still suffer denigration, ostracism and victimisation in 2018. We are horrified every time we hear of someone who has been killed for their lack of belief. There’s no other word for that than ‘inhumane’. Imagine if we were to execute everyone who ceased to believe in Santa or the Tooth Fairy and you will see what malignant nonsense faiths are. We think the way to achieve this aim is to give people the ability to think critically and to have respect for evidence. We are teachers, not preachers...

So I am introducing articles on science links to other resources (AAI does not claim to be the only font of wisdom) and discussions of what role beliefs should play in our lives. Most of all, I want this to be interactive. Wherever you are on planet Earth, please join in!

Many thanks for reading.

John Richards
Letter from the President

“Dead at 25 but you live to 75”. 

That’s how one atheist described his life in a Muslim country. He was living a life where he could not express his opinions freely; where he lived in fear of being identified as an atheist and persecuted; where he could not even tell his own family. This is the situation that, increasingly, more and more people are experiencing in Muslim countries. They go to school and university and along the way they start to question their religion. Eventually they realise they are atheists. Imagine what that must feel like. Many live in countries where being an atheist is punishable by death. Then there’s your family to worry about - if the Government doesn’t arrest you, your family may kill you. Your only option is to live your life as a lie, in self-imposed isolation.

At AAi, we’ve wrestled with how to help these people. It takes a lot of resources to raise their cases to ‘western’ Governments in hopes of getting them out. Earlier this year, the Board debated about dropping our Asylum project. It was felt we were raising the expectations of people in desperate situations with little or nothing to offer them. But the requests for help kept coming in. We also had to consider that to be a truly international organisation, which is our goal, this must include all the atheists in Muslim countries needing our help.

So we are developing a new program that can provide information and advice on resources and options. We also want to look at ways to make their lives better in their home countries. At AAi, we don’t want to wait for the cases that go public, we want to help as many as we can before they get arrested or worse things happen to them.

Gail Miller
I attended a debate on Creationism recently. The Answers in Genesis speaker adopted the statistical criticism of evolution. This claims that the odds against organisms, or even against complex organs like eyes, evolving by chance are enormous and the likelihood of it happening is therefore remote. If that were how evolution worked I would have to agree with them, but it’s not.

Chance alone is NOT the mechanism for evolution. Suppose I have ten dice and I wish to get ten sixes. The dice bring variation to this challenge, so there is an element of chance, but there are two ways I could attempt this task. I could throw all the dice at once and hope they all come up six together. The chances of that occurring are one in sixty million, four hundred and sixty six thousand, one hundred and seventy six. If it doesn’t happen the first time and I try again, the odds against don’t get one less; so it’s never likely to happen by chance alone. The other way would be to throw all the dice and take out any that come up six, then throw the rest again, take out any sixes and repeat. You would soon get ten sixes in your separated pile that way. That’s selection: ‘Natural Selection’ Darwin called it. It’s not like buying a single lottery ticket and hoping to win first time.

Occasionally, a new book appears on the shelves but it has little impact on the overall pre-existing content of the library. The new book is a mutation; its arrival doesn’t initially matter a great deal, what really determines communal knowledge and understanding is the selection of books that are withdrawn. If that new book does get taken out a lot, then it might change society but, first, it has to be selected.

Tiny changes accumulate, they do not even have to be beneficial initially, they must simply not be fatal. Eventually they can add up to something that gives its owner an advantage. Complexity can arise in stages that may not have a linear progression to the end point; there is no intentionality. Alterations may provide a different interim adaptation that gets changed to the final functionality at a later stage. Evolution is about modifying existing structures, not about starting with a blank sheet and ending up with something complex in one fell swoop - that would be design.

In the Q and A, I addressed the Creationist Pastor and asked, “I expect you would agree that science has made a lot of discoveries?” He nodded and I continued, “Given that every mystery solved by science has turned out to have a mechanism as the explanation, can you tell us what mechanism god used to do creation? How did he make Adam for instance?” He said, “From dirt.” I went on, “And Eve, was she made from Adam’s rib?” He said, “Well, from his body.”

I said, “So, she had male chromosomes then. It was Adam and Steve!”
revealed the Denisovans to be more closely related to Neanderthals than to us, and just like their Neanderthal cousins, they also interbred with early members of our species, leaving their genetic fingerprint in the genome of modern humans.

Estimates are that some 6 percent of contemporary Papuans' genomes come from Denisovans. Australian aborigines and those from Southeast Asian islands also have traces of Denisovan DNA. Meanwhile, East Asians have about 2.3 to 2.6 percent Neanderthal DNA, while people from Western Europe and Asia have retained about 1.8 to 2.4 percent. African populations have virtually no Neanderthal traces because their ancestors did not mate with them. The data is now so specific that we can pinpoint genetic variants inherited from Neanderthals that may contribute to some modern diseases. Neanderthal Genes seem to have played a significant role in shaping some modern humans in numerous ways. It is highly likely that the new arrivals from Africa tens of thousands of years ago also benefitted from interbreeding episodes with their ancient cousins who were already in Europe and Asia.

Apparently the Denisovans bequeathed the genetic variant, EPAS1, to Tibetan people which helps them handle low levels of oxygen. Thanks to this mutation, they can cope with air that has
40 percent less oxygen than most of us inhale, which enables them to live on a 4,000-metre-high plateau where lowlanders would struggle. More recent genetic research suggests that modern humans may have interbred with Denisovans more than once. So essentially, what we have discovered is that we were not always the only human species on the planet. We once shared the planet with at least 3 or 4 others and we interbred with them. It seems Europe and Asia did not have the monopoly on these archaic dalliances: Africa has its fair share of contemporaneous hominins and this is not surprising.

I find these discoveries unimaginably exciting and fascinating; the human family survived against the odds. This should engender a sense of kinship and the wish to carry the torch forward into a world that all the descendants of the few who escaped extinction can cohabit harmoniously.

Science Contributor Tavian Oladapo

Your say

This is not just an opportunity for me and my mates to have a rant; we want to hear from you too! One innovation we are introducing is a 21st century version of ‘Letters to the Editor’, so please email:

secularworld@atheistalliance.org

This being a digital world, you can send your words, your pictures, your audio files or your videos and we will consider publishing them through one of our media outlets - youtube, website, facebook, twitter, this magazine or as a printed book or kindle file. We particularly want to hear from you about the situation in your locality: how are atheists treated? Are there any issues, like education or government being driven by a religious agenda? What’s going on - is there any campaigning for secularism? And how did you escape from faith? You are our eyes and ears and we need your feedback.

Go on, now’s your chance!
Around the Globe: India

“What is the point of an atheist conference? Do you guys just meet to discuss about things you don’t believe in?”

That was the first comment I received from my circle of friends when I told them I was going to the World Atheist Conference this January. I identify myself as a rationalist so I try to justify my choices and actions, yet this question is as popular as saying you’re spiritual but not religious, whatever that means.

Broadly put, conferences such as The World Atheist Conference offer several reasons for attendance.

Firstly: representation. Lifestyle choices, beliefs, customs and practices exist because society as a whole considers them appropriate, or practitioners exist in numbers large enough to not be subdued by the mainstream population. Atheism deserves equal representation, if not more in areas of public decision making, the law making process, morality debates, human rights issues and issues of personal liberties.

Secondly: publicity for the cause of atheism. Perhaps my nationality is forcing a bias here when I say that in nations under stricter religious laws such as India, discrimination and serious human rights violations deserve a priority in media coverage. Usually the public debate is about taking a side between two religions, but the fact that a ‘neither’ solution also exists is demonstrated by such events.

Thirdly: it disseminates the movement from a privileged few to the masses. Instead of atheism being a rich white male movement, events like these promote inclusion, and shatter discriminatory social structures.

Fourthly: it normalizes being an outspoken atheist, the voice of reason, science and skepticism. Such events significantly help remove the stigma associated with being atheists, especially in places like India. Whether it’s the paperwork paraphernalia, media publications, or advertisements for the same, the event marked a distinct conversation opener for closeted atheists to reach to their circles if they chose to. It makes agnostics and religious folk consider an option, a luxury that’s often denied in a social
circle with limited or no access to the internet.

The World Atheist Conference was held on 5th January, 2018 in the city of Tiruchirapalli (also called Trichy informally) in the state of Tamil Nadu in south India, a different venue from the last two conferences attended by me. The first visible reaction for me was the large attendance compared to the last two events. Back in 2014, the crowd was barely a hundred, and now here I was - a part of about 500 rationalists and skeptics who claimed to be good without god.

Titled “Atheism – Hope of Humanity” the event was jointly organized by Dravidar Kazhagam, Atheist Centre, Vijayawada and The Rationalists’ Forum in the quiet town of Tiruchirapalli, Tamil Nadu in south India. The welcome address was spoken by V Anburaj, general secretary of the Dravidar Kazhagam. This was followed by a presidential address by Dr. K Veeramani, the president of Dravidar Kazhagam and Dr. Lakshman Tamil from the Periyar International, USA. Soon after, Dr. Vijayam, the executive director of the Atheist Centre in Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh spoke about the conference theme. The general message of the introductory speeches talked about success in establishing an egalitarian-free society free from the belief of non-existing god motivated by atheist organisations and philosophers.

Ammunition for Debating Theists

ROLL-UP! ROLL-UP! ROLL-UP!

If I told you "I'm a magician" and you came to see my show...

There I am on stage and I pull ....nothing.... out of a hat, with an assertion that there, at the end of my bunched fist is a kicking rabbit - surely you'd be a bit skeptical?

- Would the burden of proof then be on YOU to prove I DON'T have an invisible rabbit by its ears?

- Would the crazy people be the ones who say “I see no rabbit and I don't believe this trick is real”?

![South Africa Correspondent Michael Smorenburg](image)

Imtiaz Mahmood’s Joke Spot

Happy Ramadan to Muslim brothers and sisters!

This month, lunch is on me!
Moral High Ground?

For centuries, it has been claimed that religion makes people moral, but in the past fifty years a grotesque wave of sex crimes by clergy – the most religious of all people – casts doubt on this claim. The scandal became a sensation in the 1980s when lawsuits and police charges accused Catholic priests of molesting small altar boys.

It spread across America, then to Ireland, England, France, Germany, Belgium, Australia and elsewhere. Altogether, around 3,000 priests were identified as sex criminals. Many of them went to prison. The National Catholic Reporter says more than $4 billion has been paid out to victims in N. America. Australia reported $1 billion more.

Parents who put their most precious possessions in the care of churches were devastated. Families were shattered. Many victims later suffered troubled lives, and some committed suicide. Meanwhile, Protestant clergy sex crimes have been equally repulsive, but drew less world spotlight.

One of my friends, Annie Laurie Gaylor of the Freedom From Religion Foundation, wrote a 1988 book titled Betrayal of Trust: Clergy Abuse of Children. Much of it was drawn from the

“My first ‘Religious Experience’ was at the hands (and other appendages) of a master of hypocrisy, a deacon of the church and the Dirty Old Man prototype. It’s anybody’s guess how many youngsters – babies, really – this pious old pervert ‘deflowered’ in his time, telling them if they spoke of it to anyone, God would rend them asunder and send the pieces directly to hell to burn forever. He raped me when I was five. I know I wasn’t the first. Seven years after this initial ‘baptism by fire,’ we left the little Iowa town and settled in Peoria, Ill., where, within just a few short months, I had my second ‘Religious Experience’. The pastor said he wanted to ‘have a talk’ with me, a private talk, after services, in the rectory. We are no longer talking about a dumb, frightened five-year-old here. I let him get his pants down, all the way down, around his ankles. And then I ran like hell.’

Later in life, Matulis was named a “Humanist Heroine” by the American Humanist Association.
Some other examples of faith in action:

* Tony Alamo became a big-money Pentecostal evangelist with a coast-to-coast string of churches. When his wife died, he kept her body on display, awaiting her resurrection (without success). Alamo was charged repeatedly with tax fraud – then convicted in 2009 of ten counts of taking teens across state lines for sex. He died in prison in 2017.

* Evangelist Mario Leyva Jr. held tent revivals across the South, constantly recruiting teen boys as helpers. He was convicted of sodomizing the boys, and died in prison in 2005.

* The Rev. DeVernon LeGrand recruited teen-age ‘nuns’ who collected money for his Brooklyn church. He was convicted of raping one of the girls, then of murdering two other girls at his Catskills farm, finally he was convicted of murdering two former wives.

Hundreds of such ghastly episodes have occurred. I once listed dozens in a Penthouse magazine report that was reprinted in my 2007 book, Honest Doubt. Ministers have more religion than anyone else. Obviously, it doesn’t make all of them morally superior.

Jerry Coyne is a critic of creationism, theistic evolution, and intelligent design, which he calls "the latest pseudoscientific incarnation of religious creationism, cleverly crafted by a new group of enthusiasts to circumvent recent legal restrictions". He is concerned about a disconnect between what the public believes about evolution and what scientists believe about evolution. He states the value of studying evolution is in the true story of our origins and its value in restoring wonder in people.

USA Correspondent

James A. Haught

Wikipedia
What’s so great about the Sword of Reason?

There are two ways in which we can try to influence the beliefs of others:

(i) We can use reason. We can provide scientific and other evidence to support beliefs, subject them to critical scrutiny, reveal contradictions and inconsistencies, and so on.

(ii) we can appeal to such mechanisms as peer-pressure, emotional manipulation, reward and punishment, humour, sarcasm, repetition, fear (especially of uncertainty), tribalism, censorship, vanity, and so on.

Now, we free thinkers put a lot of emphasis on (i) rather than (ii), don't we? Why is that?

I suggest the answer is: because reason is truth-sensitive. Try to make a well-reasoned and well-evidenced case for believing the Earth's core is made of cheese, or that the Antarctic is populated by ant-people, or that George W. Bush is an alien lizard in disguise. You are going to find it very, very difficult. Apply the filter of reason - under which I include the scientific method - to incoming beliefs and only those with a fairly good chance of being true are likely to get through. That's why we favour the filter of reason. We want to believe, and want others to believe, what's true. The mechanisms listed under (ii), on the other hand, can just as easily be used to instil true beliefs as false beliefs. They are truth-insensitive.

Cults, advertising salespeople, and so on tend to favour the latter mechanisms in order to try to get people to believe. Applied consistently and systematically, they can be very powerful mechanisms. Religious schools have traditionally relied primarily upon such mechanisms for inculcating religious belief in young people. Religious schools are traditionally tribal; they apply: peer pressure, fear of hell, hope of heaven, rose-tinted versions of belief in which the less attractive parts are airbrushed out or ignored, endless repetition of key dogmas, positive images of saints, Popes, imams and rabbis, and scary images of the world of the unbeliever and all its terrifying uncertainties. Political parties also exploit these mechanisms very effectively.

So, if we want to believe what is true (and I do) applying reason is a very good idea.

But that’s not to say that the other mechanisms are not important. Yes, no one with an interest in promoting a concern with truth should rely wholly on the latter, truth-insensitive mechanisms. However, the fact is, reason alone will likely fail in many cases to persuade. A cogent argument is often far less persuasive than a few emotive anecdotes, for example.
Compare statistics on alternative medicine with a few well-chosen tales of astonishing 'cures' - the latter will emotionally trump the former, and sit more easily in the memory, every time. Tabloid front pages almost always lead with anecdotes rather than dry data, and for good reason - juicy, personalised tales sell, statistics and charts do not.

So, it's not that we free-thinkers should shy away from using humour, emotive anecdotes, peer pressure, and so on. These mechanisms should form a part of our arsenal. But the bottom line is, they should not be the foundation. Our foundation should always involve applying reason as far as it will go. Once we lose that foundation, we're no better than the cults or advertising agencies ourselves. And of course, when people accuse the free-thought-movement etc. of being a cult, of being just another 'religion', and so on, we can now explain why we are not.

We free thinkers always reach for the sword of reason. It is a double-edged sword. It cuts both ways. It favours not the 'teacher's' view over the 'pupil's' but the truth. It's a weapon that the pupil can just as easily and effectively use against their 'teacher'. Which is why many so-called educators prefer to either downplay the role of reason it or avoid it altogether. They rely instead on those other mechanisms which do, always, favour the view of the teacher over that of the pupil, irrespective of what's actually true. Trouble is, the result is not education, but indoctrination.

Richard Dawkins is an atheist, and is well known for his criticism of creationism and intelligent design. In The God Delusion (2006), he contends that a supernatural creator almost certainly does not exist and that religious faith is a delusion. Dawkins has been awarded many prestigious academic and writing awards and he makes regular television, radio, and Internet appearances, predominantly discussing his books, his atheism, and his ideas and opinions as a public intellectual.
Religious Education: in the UK

The UK Government, breaking a manifesto commitment, has announced that it will keep the 50% cap on religious selection by new religious ‘free’ schools in England. This is a move that is welcomed by Humanists UK, which has led the campaign against efforts to abandon the cap.

The Government’s announcements come after 20 months of steady campaigning from Humanists UK for it to retain the 50% cap. It means that all new and existing religious ‘free’ schools must continue to keep at least half of its places open to all children, irrespective of their religious or non-religious backgrounds. Humanists UK led the campaign to retain the 50% cap on religious selection in schools. On the downside, in a concession to religious lobbyists, the Government has signalled it will be making new funding available for religious groups to open fully selective faith schools outside of its ‘free’ schools scheme.

“If this vision is to be fully realised, then attention must now turn to preventing new, fully segregated schools by another means, which the Government has now unwisely created. The need for the Government to save face, or to appease a handful of religious organisations and their unreasonable demands, should not be prioritised over what’s best for children and society. Today’s u-turn makes clear that fully segregated school intakes are anathema to an open, diverse society, but the Government should now recognise this throughout the education system and not create new segregation.”

Humanists UK will be doubling down on its efforts for a fully inclusive education system, challenging new faith schools applications as they arise.

Humanists UK CEO
Andrew Copson

and in New Zealand

Religious instruction remains in many NZ schools despite clear evidence of the harm it does to children. The Churches Education Commission goes to great lengths to suppress any suggestion that children are taught about hell, an eternal torment that 'unbelievers' will supposedly suffer, and we are expected to believe that religious teachers will refrain from communicating such nonsense to pupils.

The reality is that children have been seriously affected by religious instructors in the past. In one case a young girl was
told by her teacher that she had to pray hard for her father, who had cancer, or he would die. Her father subsequently passed away and she blamed herself for not praying hard enough. Now grown-up, the scars have stayed with her.

Unfortunately there is no legal requirement for schools to either inform parents about these classes or to seek their permission. Often the first thing parents know about it is when their kids come home talking about God.

The morals and beliefs of fundamentalists are all too typical of the kind of messages evangelical Christians teach our kids. It is hard to blame people for having views they were given in the schools they grew up in but perpetuating these beliefs have consequences. The Human Rights Commission receives an avalanche of complaints on this subject.

In 2013, 40 per cent of New Zealand state primary schools ran some form of religious instruction while about 40 per cent of the population were non-religious. Numbers are not yet out from this year’s census, but if the decline of Christianity follows the straight line trend, we will be close to seeing Christians in the minority. Yet Christianity has almost exclusive access to New Zealand state primary schools. We are allowing them to waste valuable learning time so they can instil Christian doctrine in our children.

An ex-RE teacher’s view

I’m in the throes of attempting to streamline a stand-up comedy show sufficiently for the purpose of taking it to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. It’s a show largely dedicated to the business of teaching Religious Studies and draws on my own experience of doing precisely that. A real bonus of rehearsing the show for the ‘Skeptics in the Pub’ has been the extent to which I’ve been able to connect with individuals with a similar philosophical orientation and this, combined with my regular attendances at the local Humanist meeting, has strengthened the way I feel about the teaching of religion.

I spent four years at university on a Religious Studies course where we were instructed to teach along the lines of ‘Learning about Religion’ (six world religions primarily) and ‘Learning from Religion’ (moral and spiritual issues). Despite this directive, having sat in on any number of other individual’s lessons, I have observed the tendency to teach from a place of personal conviction, mostly unawares, sometimes not.

And that’s where things get worrying. Since I left the profession, there has been a terrific increase in the number of schools that have been transformed into academies (opted out of local authority control), and the implications
are there is Religious Studies provision that varies from the very good, via the wishy-washy, through to the non-existent.

One only has to look at an academy’s website to note that while some retain the name ‘Religious Studies’ and even go as far as to incorporate ‘Philosophy’ in certain instances, others are opting for a more lets-soften-the-blow approach (“Beliefs’ anybody?) that straddle a sort of no-man’s land somewhere between PSE and Religious Studies; and subsequently end up all the more toothless for it. And that’s before we even get to those schools with no provision at all.

On top of that, one also has to take into account the notion that the curriculum has to go some way towards satisfying the academy sponsor(s) - be it overtly or otherwise - and the prospect for a non-aligned intellectually rigorous approach to the teaching of Religious Studies becomes even more remote.

Then there are faith schools...

The current government is actually considering a proposal that would result in the further proliferation of faith schools, whereby the focus is on ‘Confessional RE’ and admissions and staffing are determined by an adherence to a required faith. It ought to be obvious straight away – before even looking at any wider societal implications - what sort of impact this is likely to have on children in relation to matters such as sex education, and ethically divisive subject matter such as abortion, contraception and marriage.

The larger concern – for me - is that through a combination of poor provision at the academy level and a rise in the number of faith schools, it’s possible to imagine a state of apathy and ignorance with regard to faith communities and their practices on the part of the majority on the one hand and pockets of intense marginalised fervour on the other.

I would like to see a standardised inclusive subject, say ‘Religion and Philosophy’ which attempts to teach children about the world of faith and belief and the socio-cultural implications contained therein, combined with an open-ended approach to teaching pupils about the world of ideas and ethics. I would prefer to see the subject taught from a secular humanities perspective without any imposition of personal beliefs on the part of the teacher. Teach ‘em how to think, not what to think.

If an individual wants to study a faith in more depth, then why not do so at the respective place of worship? Surely, that’s where the responsibility resides. Not within an education system to seeks to be inclusive, non-discriminatory, and – above all – forward thinking.


Kevin Precious
Applying Logic to the God Proposition

Aristotelian logic uses three types of syllogism: Deduction, Induction and Abduction. All are thought; that is, they are in the Conceptual Realm and so, they have no necessary or automatic correspondence with Natural Reality. Consequently, logical inferences require testing for veracity by observing for a match with nature. If such evidence is gathered, the inference becomes a conclusion; if not, it remains just a thought.

Deduction merely rearranges what we already know, so Inductive Logic is the most useful for discovering new information. However, inductive arguments cannot be certain since they are generalisations from specific examples and therefore lack a complete data set. This means we can’t be sure of the veracity of the premises and, consequently, the soundness of the inference which, therefore, is probabilistic. And that means the outcomes are candidates for mathematical analysis.

Dr Richard Carrier has kindly given permission to publish a series of articles, based on his refutation of 10 popular arguments for god using Bayes Theorem, which is a mathematical model for empirical reasoning. The simplest way to put it is this:

\[
\text{The Odds a Claim Is True} = \text{The Prior Odds on the Claim Being True} \times \text{The Odds of the Evidence on the Claim Being True Rather Than False}
\]

Definitions:
Prior Probability: What has typically been the case before? In other words, is the claim being defended typical, or unusual, or even highly unusual, or indeed otherwise unprecedented? The more unusual, the lower its prior probability. And the lower its prior probability, the more evidence you need to believe it—according to the Rule of Evidence… (Carl Sagan said, “Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence”)

Rule of Evidence: How likely is all the evidence if the claim is true? How likely is all that same evidence if the claim is false? The difference between those two probabilities is the strength of the evidence for or against the claim. It’s strength for the claim, if the evidence is more likely if the claim is true than if it’s false; or against the claim, if the evidence is more likely if the claim is false than if it’s true.

Dr Carrier begins by tackling The Cosmological Argument: “Everything that begins has a cause” and “all existence began” and “only disembodied minds can precede the beginning of time” are all hypotheses. Not one of them ever proven likely. We don’t know
if time is the sort of thing that can even have a cause; the notion is not even intelligible. If it began, time seems necessarily causeless, since a cause is by definition what precedes an effect in time. Many other things may well be causeless, too. We only know how the things that we’ve seen in this universe, within time, behave. We cannot infer from that how things might behave outside this universe, or outside time.

Similarly, we only believe, by extrapolation, that this universe began. But we have no evidence that this universe is everything that exists (and theism already presupposes that it is not), or that time itself began with our universe. And we don’t even have any evidence that disembodied minds can exist, much less that they could exist before time began, any more than anything else could. And if we suppose God created time simultaneously with the beginning of time rather than ever existing before time began, then anything could do that, even something with a body or without a mind.

In other words, reduced to hypotheses, cosmological arguments get us nowhere, other than up the ass of random guessers pretending to be scientists, without a single iota of relevant data. Except that the only causes we’ve ever confirmed for anything for hundreds of years now, have been godless physics. Which leaves us with extremely high prior odds that that’s what it is all the way down the line. Only evidence can change that conclusion.

Historian Dr Richard Carrier

Restrictions on Face-Coverings & Religious Symbols

Several countries or regions have adopted laws restricting the wearing of face-coverings or religious symbols. Probably the principal concern motivating such legislation is security, as face-coverings are obviously useful as disguises. Stemming the tide of fundamentalism, especially Islamism and its extreme misogyny, is also a major concern. Certainly the main face-coverings targeted by such laws are the most extreme versions of the Islamic veil: the niqab, which leaves only the eyes exposed, and the burqa which obscures even the eyes behind a concealing net or grille.

The ban on religious symbols in Turkey dates from the early 20th century, corresponding to the end of the Ottoman Empire and the Islamic Caliphate, and the founding of the Republic of Turkey. This is not only the oldest such ban of which I am aware, but it also stands out as a major, concerted modernization effort under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, to end centuries of religious obscurantism in that country. The fight against Islamic
misogyny was a major component of that effort.

Most other bans are from the early 21st century, with security concerns probably dominating, corresponding to the rise of political Islam and its aggressive campaign to extend its influence as widely as possible. However, terrorism, being the most spectacular of Islamist strategies, is only the tip of the iceberg. The simple promotion of the veil, attempting to impose and normalize its presence anywhere and everywhere, is just as important. Again, Turkey is a bellwether in this regard, because its modernization, begun almost a century ago, have recently been compromised by the election of an Islamist political party and, in particular, by the repeal in 2013 of the ban on hijabs for public servants.

**Court Challenges**

There have been court challenges to various religious symbol bans. For example, in 2012, Belgium’s Constitutional Court ruled that Belgium’s ban on the full veil did not violate human rights and refused to invalidate it.

In 2014 the European Court of Human Rights rejected a complaint from a French Muslim woman of Pakistani origin, upholding the French ban on the full veil. In July, the same Court upheld the Belgian ban on face-coverings, considering it necessary in a democratic society to protect the rights and freedoms of others.

In March 2017, the Court of Justice of the European Union ruled on two cases, involving two hijabis working in the private sector, one in France, the other in Belgium. The Court decided that an enterprise may legitimately adopt an internal rule forbidding the wearing of political, philosophical or religious symbols by its employees. However, in the absence of such a rule, an *ad hoc* restriction could be considered discriminatory.

The above decisions validated bans in Belgium and France. However the situation in Canada is very different. Only weeks ago (2017-12-01), responding to a request by the Canadian Civil Liberties Association (CCLA) in collaboration with the National Council for Canadian Muslims (NCCM), Quebec Superior Court suspended legislation which (weakly) bans face-coverings in public services.

**The Nature of the Islamic veil**

To achieve an appropriate balance between the two poles, it is important to understand the nature of the article most often targeted by the legislation. The Islamic veil in its various forms (hijab, tchador, burkini, niqab, burqa, etc.) can be described as a tool with five purposes:
1. the promotion of political Islam and Islamofascism;

2. the subordination of women, a manifestation of the extreme misogyny of fundamentalist Islam;

3. to brand and segregate Muslim women, marking them pure, exclusive property of pious Muslim men.

4. a religious symbol, or more accurately a politico-religious symbol;

5. a barrier which hinders communication and identification and is a threat to security, especially the face-covering niqab and burqa.

Furthermore, the niqab and burqa are extreme versions of the veil and thus extreme forms of Islamofascist propaganda, proselytism and misogyny, better characterized by replacing the word “subordination” by “enslavement” in point 2 above.

Given its meaning and purpose, the Islamic veil, especially the niqab and burqa, deserves to be banned in any situation where it constitutes a threat to the dignity of women and humans in general, or infringes on the freedom of conscience of the citizenry. Allowing a representative of the state – police, judge, public service employee, etc. – to wear a partisan religious symbol while on duty is unacceptable because it violates the freedom of conscience of users who must interact with that representative. It would be unthinkable to allow commercial or political advertising on, for example, police uniforms; to allow religious advertising is just as improper. If the face is obscured, then even allowing users of public services to wear it inadmissible, for why should public resources be wasted by adding to security and communication costs in order to deal with a barrier whose purpose is to promote an ideology contrary to the public interest?

**Do Not Capitulate to Islamofascism!**

No discussion of banning religious symbols would be complete without denouncing the foolishness and irrationality of those who systematically oppose any ban on the Islamic veil. Such individuals and organizations, such as the CCLA, are guilty of a cowardly capitulation to Islamofascism and an unconscionable betrayal of Enlightenment values. They represent what has become known as the “recessive left.”

Remember recent developments in Turkey: the deterioration of democracy, the deepening influence of Islamism, the erosion of the Republic’s secular foundations, the reintroduction of the hijab in state institutions. Those who oppose all bans on the wearing of religious symbols, some of whom even claim, hypocritically, to be secularists, have much more in common with Erdogan than they do with the atheists and secularists of *Charlie Hebdo*.

David Rand, President
Atheist Freethinkers,
Montreal, Canada
Vacancies

AAI has opportunities for volunteers in many countries:

volunteer@atheistalliance.org

Suitable Candidates may be considered for a Directorship

secretary@atheistalliance.org

Would you like to write for Secular World or our Website?

secularworld@atheistalliance.org

Google Adwords and Analytics Experts

vicepresident@atheistalliance.org

Join Us!

Visit our website Membership page:

https://www.atheistalliance.org/membership/

or click on the red join us buttons on the website pages