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Editorial

It is my pleasure to welcome you to the first edition of this new-look quarterly Newsletter to be produced by the Rationalist Society of Australia.

It has been a tumultuous year for the RSA, and the committee knows all too well that our members have been left somewhat in the dark with respect to our circumstances, our campaigns and our activities, since ceasing production of our quarterly publication, *The Australian Rationalist*. It is the aspiration of the committee that this newsletter will go some of the way to filling that void, offering you latest news, announcements and events as well as occasional papers and essays.

We kick off the issue with an update from our President, Meredith Doig, who provides some context and background into the current situation of the RSA, as well as her plans for the future and how you can get involved. This is followed by an essay by Chris Stedman, Interfaith Fellow from the Humanist Chaplaincy at Harvard University and author of the forthcoming *Faithiest: How An Atheist Found Common Ground With The Religious*. The RSA was proud to partner with the Humanist Society of Victoria and InterAction (a local youth-focused interfaith organization) to sponsor Stedman's recent Australian tour which coincided with the 2012 Global Atheist Convention in April.

While in Australia, Chris spent time in Sydney, Canberra and Melbourne, participating in a range of speaking engagements hosted by a variety of different groups, including the Canberra Atheists and the Freethought Student Alliance. His tour culminated with a forum at the University of Melbourne, hosted by the RSA's own Meredith Doig, which also featured popular science blogger PZ Myers and Australian resident but US-born writer, ethicist and commentator Leslie Cannold. Centered on the schism that has developed in the

atheist community between so-called 'confrontationists' and 'accommodationists', or as both camps prefer to be labeled, 'firebrands' and 'diplomats', the event was titled *'The Road Less Travelled: Can Believers and Atheists Work Together for the Common Good?'*.

Sparks flew in front of 200 people at the packed Elisabeth Murdoch Theatre, for what turned out to be an impassioned debate. A video recording of the event is available on YouTube (go to <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZsqqFpWh7m8>), and an audio podcast is obtainable from the RSA website. It is essential viewing/listening for those unlucky enough not to have witnessed the spectacle live.

Continuing the theme of atheist-interfaith cooperation, local Melbourne man and newly signed up member of the RSA, Rod Bower, offers his experience representing the atheist viewpoint within the City of Monash Interfaith Gathering (MIG).

Finally, our cartoon featured in our inaugural edition is from the independent online comic strip series 'Flim-Flam', created by Melbourne writer and entertainer (and newest addition to the RSA board) Simon Taylor.

I hope you enjoy reading this newsletter as much as I enjoyed editing it. Please send your feedback, comments, suggestions or letters to letters@rationalist.com.au - a selection of which will be published in the next issue.



Jason Ball - Rationalist Society of Australia board member

From the President...

May I add my own warm welcome to this, the first of a new set of quarterly newsletters to keep RSA members informed.

Many of you will be aware that the esteemed Editor of our journal, Kevin Childs, decided to retire last year; to write a book, to smell the roses, to rest his back. It was a bittersweet farewell to a long term friend of the rationalist movement, and it has proven very hard to replace him. But we hope this newsletter will begin to fill some gaps ...

I am aware that many of our longer term members will be wondering what's been going on at the Rationalists. Let me explain.

I will begin with a bit of background, then explain the current situation. Finally, I'd like to invite you to contribute to how our future evolves.

BACKGROUND

The Rationalists are the oldest free thought group in Australia. The first informal meeting was in 1906 at Ormond College at Melbourne University, and the Rationalist Association was formalised in 1925. A history of the Rationalists (which we're preparing for publication) shows there has been much *sturm und drang* over the last one hundred years, and the last twelve months has added another interesting chapter to that tumult.

Since 1925, the Rationalists have had a two tier organisational structure: the Society (RSA) has been the membership-based operational arm of the movement, while the Association (RAA) was the formal legal structure that managed the money. The money came from 100 years of bequests and donations, and was managed by a board that comprised current and former office-holders of the Society. Over the last year, this has changed.

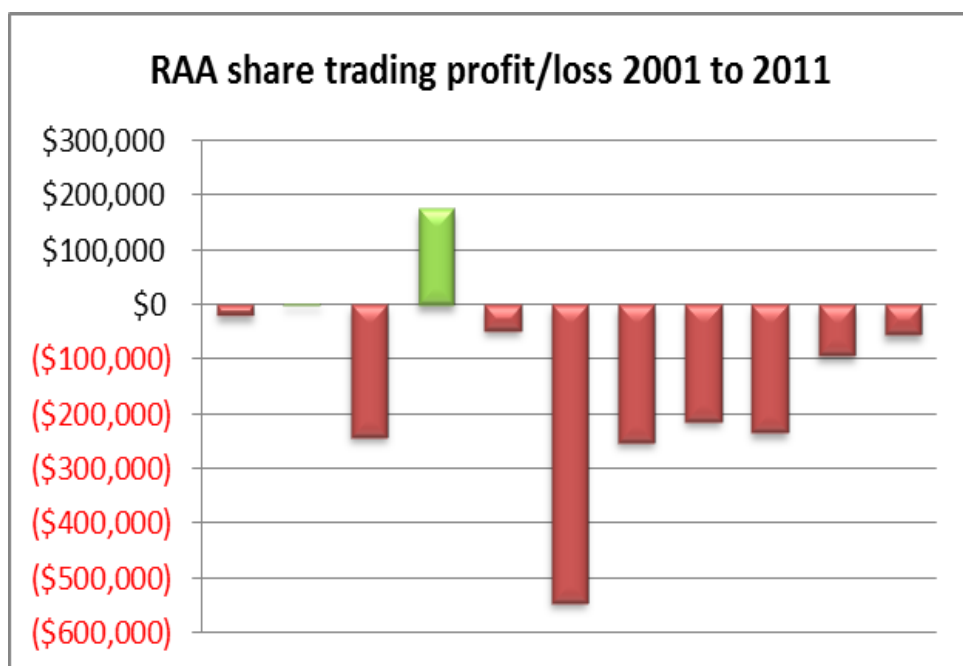
From July 2011, there has been a major dispute within the board of the RAA regarding the appropriate investment strategy for the Rationalists money. For the past twenty years or so, the Investment Manager ran an 'active' investment strategy, buying and selling shares at the speculative end of the market, sometimes multiple times per

day. This was justified on the basis that higher returns were needed to fund Rationalist activities (such as the journal). But as we all know, higher returns only come with higher risk. Between 2001 and 2011, the RAA lost \$1.4M on risky or poorly managed investments.

This finally came to an end when there was a resolution to change to 'passive' investment, a more appropriate strategy when dealing with 'other people's money'. There was some strong resistance to this change, to the extent of calling a purported AGM to remove from the board those Directors who were advocating change and to install in their place Directors who aligned with the existing regime.

The challengers tried to resolve the ensuing dispute firstly by mediation, and when that failed, by calling on all actual or putative Directors (some of whom were disputed by either side) to come together in the interests of organisation and get on with business. This also failed.

To cut a long story short, things 'went legal' and lawyers became involved. After some months of negotiation, a Deed of Settlement was signed the day before Christmas 2011. It was agreed between the parties that the Society would incorporate (until this time, the RSA had been an unincorporated association), that the RAA assets would be transferred to RSA Inc. and that the RAA would be wound up. We are now in the final stages of implementing these agreements.



Source: ASIC Annual Accounts of the Rationalist Association of Australia

CURRENT SITUATION

Having acquired the RAA cash and shares, RSA Inc. has set up an Investment Committee of commercially experienced and financially qualified people and is pursuing a prudent investment strategy with the remaining assets. The Investment Committee is appointed by the RSA Committee but operates independently of it. Full financial accounts will be presented to members at the AGM and will be placed on the Rationalists website.

Unfortunately, the value of the assets has been severely depleted due to the past poor investments. We now have in place a proper investment policy, which you can read on the website, designed to 'live off' the income of the investments while protecting the core assets. We believe this honours those donors who entrusted their funds with us for the benefit of the rationalist movement.

So where are we now? We have a committee with some great younger members; our admin and finances are back in order; we're brimming with ideas ... and we need more hands to implement them.

THE FUTURE

This is where you, our members, come in. We're keen to ensure we do what our constitutional objectives instruct us to do: have an impact on the wider society. All community groups face the risk of getting too caught up with internal squabbles to the detriment of their true purpose. We want to make sure we spend most of our time on campaigns – to promote the use of science and evidence in public policy, to expose exploitation and quackery by bigots and charlatans, to secure a *genuinely* secular society where religious institutions have no more privileges than any other group.

We are conscious that members deserve to know what's going on and should have the chance to become involved if they want to.

Question: What sort of communication do you want from your committee? Do you want to see a return of the journal? A refreshed website? More information via emails? More of these newsletters?

If you want to contribute, how would you like to do this? Face to face meetings? Help out with organising events? Write for us on a blog or social media? Help draft up submissions to change public policy? Redesign our website?

The last 12 months' dispute has drained a lot of time and effort, but now is the time to refocus on building rationalist campaigns.

WE NEED YOU!

Please contact us with your ideas.

Email info@rationalist.com.au,

or write to RSA Inc., PO Box 1312, Hawksburn, Vic. 3142.



Why This Atheist Still Needs His Former Pastor

by Chris Stedman

It felt good to pick my own pastor.

He was young—so much so that nearly everyone called him “Pastor Doogie”—gracious, eloquent and kind, with a biting sense of humor that showed he didn’t take anything too seriously (besides the love of God). After meeting and working with him on a Teens Encounter Christ retreat, I loved Pastor Matthew so much that my friend and I decided to become members at his church.

For our first act as official church members, we participated in a 30 Hour Famine, raising money to give food to those in need and fasting for 30 hours so that we might intimately know the experience of hunger. The event also served as a church retreat where they screened *The Passion of the Christ*; to the shock of my tear-streaked friends, I fell asleep in the middle of it. That my response to a visual depiction of the crucifixion was to take a nap may have been a sign of things to come; just a couple of years later, I stopped believing in God.

Raised in a secular Minnesota household, I converted to a fundamentalist, nondenominational form of Christianity at 11 years old following a traumatic change in my family dynamic and after reading books like *Hiroshima*, *The Diary of Anne Frank* and *Roots*, which exposed me to some of the world’s most devastating injustices. The born-again Christian congregation I joined provided both a supportive community and an ethical framework that promised justice. But after years of a desperate, dehumanizing struggle to reconcile my sexual orientation and my conservative religious beliefs, I eventually made my way into more progressive Christian communities, where I met Matthew.

Matthew became a pastor, a mentor and a friend; he prayed with me, helped me with my college applications, and consoled me when my first boyfriend and I broke up (after his conservative religious parents discovered our relationship). Most importantly, Matthew came to symbolize a dedication to serving God by serving others that I hoped to embody someday; when I was accepted into a Lutheran college, I told him I wanted to major in religion and eventually become a pastor like him.

I thought that my negative experiences—all those years of believing that God was ignoring my pleas to be rid of the burden of being gay, the years I spent hating myself for who I was—were God’s way of helping me understand the experience of suffering. Just as the 30 Hour Famine was intended to help participants empathize with the hungry, I understood these struggles as preparation for pastoral work in solidarity with the marginalized and disenfranchised.

What I didn’t fully understand then was that my desire to help others existed apart from the theological claims of Christianity, which never sat as easily with me. After I was encouraged by my college professors to critically examine the underpinning desires that initially propelled me into Christianity, I left the church. At first being an atheist meant rejecting religion and all interpersonal discussions of it; but, years later, I realized I was missing opportunities to learn from and with those who saw the world differently than I did. Deciding to give religion another look, I moved to Chicago to get a master’s degree and began to work for the Interfaith Youth Core as an atheist and interfaith activist, hoping to build bridges of understanding and cooperation between the religious and nonreligious. I then moved to Massachusetts to expand on this work at the Humanist Chaplaincy at Harvard as their inaugural Interfaith and Community Service Fellow, where I now coordinate the first ever atheist-led interfaith community service program, Values in Action. It was through this work that I had a surprising opportunity to rebuild one such bridge.

“It’s been a long time, Tiffer,” he said through one of his characteristically gigantic grins.

“It sure has, Doogie”.

As an espresso machine rattled and steamed from across the room, Matthew informed me that he had recently left a call in parish ministry and was now in Massachusetts working for an organization called Outreach Inc. – Kids Care, which organises meal-packaging events for churches and conferences that want to give back. In addition to coordinating these events, he donated his Sunday mornings to traveling around New England and preaching at churches, hoping to inspire them to get involved in the fight against hunger. I asked if he’d be interested in expanding his partnerships beyond churches and Christian conferences and working with an atheist organisation on an interfaith program. He didn’t even hesitate.

It’s funny because, when he first asked me to get coffee, I hesitated. “What will he think of the work I do now?” I asked myself. “Will he feel like he failed me as a pastor? Will he want to debate theology? Will he try to bring me back into the church?”

Such hesitance was unmerited; he sat and listened as I updated him on my life, smiling and nodding as I described how I’ve come into my own as an atheist, an interfaith activist and a young man. Now, Matthew and I have a better and more honest relationship than we ever did in my youth.

It's been a more productive one, too: in less than six months, we've mobilized hundreds of people to come together in interfaith coalition and donate their time and money to package more than 30,000 meals for food-insecure children in Boston. Most recently we held an event (planned with Boston University's Interfaith Council) called HUNGERally, where more than a hundred student representatives from eight Boston-area colleges and universities spent a Saturday night learning about the problem of hunger and pledging to work together across lines of religious difference to address it.

All of this is the direct result of a partnership between an atheist and his former pastor. In light of this, I cannot help but wonder what the world would look like if we were more willing to forge unconventional alliances. What would happen if we were more radical about whom we saw as our collaborators? What would happen if we took the risk of reaching out to the unfamiliar? If atheists and Christians started seeing one another as necessary partners in making the world a better place, what might we come to understand about each other? What might we come to better understand about ourselves? What might we accomplish together?

The issues that afflict our world—disease, economic disparity, access to clean water, systemic hunger—don't discern our religious differences. They don't divide people into camps before they ravage; they don't care about our designations of "us" and "them," "religious" and "secular," "the right ones" and "the wrong ones." In fighting these issues, neither should we. Our work opposing these common enemies can also transform us into allies in the fights against bigotry and fundamentalism; they can show us that the divisions between "those who are like me" and "those who aren't" are less significant than our shared humanity.

An Atheist's Exploration of Interfaith

Rod Bower

After attending the recent GAC 2012 fringe event "*The Road Less Travelled: Can Believers and Atheists Work Together for the Common Good?*" I was asked by a few people to describe my own recent experience working with Interfaith in Melbourne.

I have been concerned since I started playing in the social media, as an atheist, at how many atheists and religious people have a poor level of understanding of the others' beliefs and points of view. Without improved discourse and understanding I believe there will be a lot of unnecessary pain on all sides before the transformation (to a fully pluralistic, secular society) that I envision, is complete. With this in mind I have been looking for ways to improve the understanding in both directions. Getting involved in Interfaith was an option I looked at.

More than a billion people on the planet don't have enough food, including one in six Americans. It will take more than just Christians or just atheists to solve this problem. My work with Matthew and other interfaith and hunger activists in Boston is putting a very small dent in hunger, but it is a start. I am so glad I took Matthew up on his invitation to catch up.

"Remember how you told me you had a call to ministry?" he asked as I took a sip of black coffee.

I laughed, nearly spitting it out. "I work for an atheist organisation now, so I think it's safe to say that I was wrong about that one."

"Oh, see," he said with a smirk, his eyes darting mischievously, "I was going to say that it's really nice to see you've realised your call."

I never did become a pastor, but by working with one, I've been able to do the work of helping others all the same. I call it service, he calls it ministry; though our words are different, our values and our work are the same. Because we don't let different words get in the way, we've been able to make that little dent just a little bit bigger.

It felt good to pick my own pastor; it feels even better to pick the fight against hunger over the religious-secular culture war.

In early 2010 the City of Monash Interfaith Gathering (MIG) ran an "Inaugural Interfaith Forum" where the guest speaker was Professor Joseph Camilleri from the Latrobe University Centre for Dialogue. The talk included statistics on the religious demographics of Australia and worldwide, and the trends of change.

However the talk on Interfaith then completely ignored the 30% of our population who do not identify with a "faith community". I subsequently approached MIG to see whether they would be interested in having an atheist join their group who could offer some insight into the missing 30% - in the interests of fulfilling their aims for a harmonious, respectful multicultural society.

I attended a meeting as an observer first so I knew what I was getting into, and so they had a chance to assess me as a person before I put on my atheist 'badge'. When I suggested joining the group, I pointed out that I had no mandate from any particular organisation and did not claim to represent all, or any, atheists other than myself. I also suggested we should both consider my involvement as an experiment.

I was pleased when the group accepted the proposal and welcomed me on board. Over the next 18 months I was involved in committee meetings and decisions, attended events like Muslim Iftar dinners, Interfaith prayer/reading breakfasts, and a state-wide gathering at the Melbourne Town Hall. Later, I was the volunteer bus driver (and a full participator) in group tours to multiple places of religious worship and learning in or near the City of Monash. In 2011 the committee decided in my absence to dedicate part of the regular meeting time to talks given by invited members describing their faith background, their beliefs, worship places and patterns, and relationship to society. To my surprise and delight they had included a date for me to give a talk on this basis, as much as atheism would fit the framework. It was an exciting experience for me in several ways, and my talk was well received by the group. The purpose was not to convince anyone of the 'rightness' of atheism, but to have them see that, as an atheist, I was not someone to be afraid of. I was not without morals, purpose or meaning in my life, and was open to respectful discussion and to learning about their values and understanding of life, as well as further exploring my own. In that respect I think I was at least as successful as a Muslim or Hindu addressing a typical Interfaith audience.

I left MIG at the end of 2011 because I moved out of the municipality. I had made some friendships and contacts which I value and still hope to keep up with. I received many thanks for my participation, and was delighted when the chair advised another attendee (and cc'd me) that my *"departure is a loss to our group as he's a clear thinker and knows how to get things done. In an interfaith group this is a real asset as he doesn't have to worry about the politics of religion!"*. Importantly, the group rewrote its own membership rules when forced to clarify them because of an impending formalisation of the relationship with local government. I was told by the committee that they had broadened the rules to ensure atheists ("your lot") could be members without meeting the previous requirement to represent a 'faith community'. Although some purist atheists might object to the use of 'belief' where atheism is concerned, I was happy to see 'various faiths' become 'various faiths and beliefs' as a gesture of inclusiveness.

While I was more than satisfied with the mutual understandings that I believe developed from my involvement, I don't know whether this will change the

world in any major way. The group I joined is still relatively new in Interfaith terms, but is making good progress in deciding its role in the municipality and how it will operate. However at the very least I know there are now people involved with the City of Monash who can inform their own faith communities that not all atheists are either 'militant religion haters' or 'depressed purposeless failures', and that in fact atheists can be interested (and hopefully interesting) people to talk to. They also know at least one person they can come to for more information, or to request support if they need to address a perceived problem with non-believers. I believe they would readily accept another atheist into the group given the chance. However, at a meeting I attended where several Interfaith groups were exploring ways to work together, it did appear that MIG was the only one that had an atheist member, and one person from another group did express some concern at the idea.

From my own perspective, the Interfaith experience has given me a better understanding of the beliefs and backgrounds of some of the religions in Australia that I'd had no contact with, and this has broadened my own outlook on what it means to promote and support pluralism and freedom in our society. I have also gained contacts in those religions whom I know I could go to with questions or concerns.

I would encourage any atheist who is interested in improving dialogue between atheists and believers in this way to have a go. I would also be glad to assist in getting them started.



Keeping in Touch

A guide to what's going on and how you can get involved.

FAITH TRAINING IN AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS

RSA members will no doubt be aware of the controversy that surrounds the provision of 'faith training' in Australian government schools, the history of which goes back to the 19th century¹.

In Victoria, both Labor and Coalition governments have defended the provision of such training, despite the *Education and Training Reform Act 2006* explicitly reiterating the State's commitment to secular education:

... education in Government schools must be secular and not promote any particular religious practice, denomination or sect [section 2.2.10].

The RSA and other freethought groups have fought against religious indoctrination for decades but the religious influence of Catholics in the Labor Party and Anglicans in the Liberal Party have always held sway². Now, however, there's an even more insidious force infiltrating our political scene and our schools.

In America, the rise of religious nationalism is gathering pace, and it's using the legal courts rather than the court of public opinion. The Alliance Defense Fund is 'a Christian legal alliance defending religious liberty, the sanctity of life, marriage and the family'³. Among other things, the ADF supports legal challenges to the strict separation of church and state that exists in America. This is well documented in Katherine Stewart's book *The Good News Club: the Christian Right's Stealth Assault on America's Children*.

In Australia, the religious organisations that supply faith trainers and religious chaplains, Access Ministries and Scripture Union, are now dominated by people who have committed themselves to the Lausanne Movement. The Lausanne Movement was founded by Billy Graham in the 1970s and its mission is to 'evangelise the world', particularly through children⁴.

In Victoria the RSA has sought but failed to obtain access to the faith training syllabus used by Access Ministries. We know that it *assumes* the existence of God (the Christian God); that it urges young kids to 'let Jesus take control of your life', undermining the goal of developing confident, independent learners; that it implies that choices made without God's help are unwise choices. These and other ideas should not be allowed to go unchallenged. The Access syllabus should be subjected to professional evaluation for alignment with the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians.

What next?

Members interested in ending the increasingly divisive practice of faith training in Government schools should come along to a public forum *No Evangelists in State Schools: Reforming Ethics and Religious Education in State Primary Schools*.

When: Sunday 24 June from 2pm

Where: Village Roadshow Theatre, State Library, La Trobe St, Melbourne, Entry 3.

1. For a brief description of the history of Special Religious Instruction in Victoria, see <http://religionsinschool.com/sri-the-facts/>
2. See our submission "Assuring Secularism in Victorian Government Schools" on our website.
3. See <http://adfmedia.org/>
4. See *Evangelisation of Children*, http://www.lausanne.org/docs/2004_forum/LOP47_IG18.pdf

Freethinkers Group Growing Rapidly

There was hardly a chair free at the second meeting of the Central Victorian Atheists and Freethinkers Gathering on Wednesday, 21 March 2012. More than 40 people crowded into the upstairs room at The Albion Hotel, Kyneton, to share a meal and to hear guest speaker, RSA president Dr Meredith Doig.

The Central Victorian Atheists and Freethinkers Gathering is a monthly meeting of freethinkers, atheists,

humanists, rationalists, agnostics and skeptics from all parts of Central Victoria, including Bendigo, Castlemaine, Heathcote, Maldon, Kyneton, Woodend, Gisborne, Sunbury, and places in-between.

Dr Meredith Doig introduced the topic *Ethics Without Religion* and led an animated exchange about the issues afterwards. "It was a great night" she said later. "There was lots of lively discussion, so it seems this group has really hit a nerve with those who live in the area."

The RSA is interested in setting up more of these groups in all areas where rationalists would like to meet, but we need member help to organise them.

If you would like to see a meeting in your area, please get in touch with the Management Committee via

secretary@rationalist.com.au
to get the process started.

Calendar of upcoming events

24 June	Title	Reforming Ethics and Religious Education in State Primary Schools
	Event Type	Panel discussion chaired by RSA Vice President Lyn Allison
	Location	Village Roadshow Theatrette, 179 La Trobe Street, Melbourne
	Time	14:00-17:00
	Contact	John Russell on 0407 314 558
28 June	Title	For a Prosperous Victoria
	Event Type	Humanist Society of Victoria monthly lecture – by Kenneth Davidson
	Location	Balwyn Library, 336 Whitehorse Road, Balwyn
	Time	19:30 onwards
10 July	Title	What Atheism Means to Me and What it Does Not Mean
	Event Type	Talk with Nigel Sinnott, former editor of <i>The Freethinker</i> in the U.K.
	Location	Unitarian Church Hall, 110 Grey Street, East Melbourne
	Time	20:00 onwards
	Contact	David Miller 03 9467 2063
19 July	Title	Australians and Modern Slavery
	Event Type	Talk by Roscoe Howell of Slavery Links Australia
	Location	Wheeler Centre – 176 Little Lonsdale Street, Melbourne
	Time	12:15 – 13:15
20 July	Title	Human Rights 2012
	Event Type	Castan Centre for Human Rights Annual Conference
	Location	1 Spring Street, Melbourne
	Time	08:00 – 17:00
	Contact	03 9905 3327 <i>Please note: registration fee of \$220 applies</i>