

A publication of Atheist Alliance International & Atheist Alliance of America

# Secular World

A Positive Voice for Atheism

July-September 2011

This is an edited version of *Secular World* Magazine. The full version of *Secular World* is available to Atheist Alliance International and Atheist Alliance of America members. Join online at [www.atheistalliance.org](http://www.atheistalliance.org) or [www.atheistallianceamerica.org](http://www.atheistallianceamerica.org)

**Maryam Namazie:**

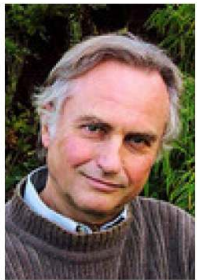
**The Coming Islamic Inquisition is Already Here**

محاكم التفتيش الاسلامية الآتية، موجودةٌ هنا بالفعل

**Coverage of the World Atheist Convention, & More**

# Atheist Alliance of America National Convention

## Featured Speakers will include:



Richard Dawkins

Michael Shermer

PZ Myers

Eugenie Scott



Victor Stenger

Sean Faircloth

Elisabeth Cornwell



Dale McGowan

Matt Dillahunt

Margaret Downey



Todd Stiefel

Darrel Ray

& More!!!



- 3 full days of national and international speakers, live music, fantastic food, drinks, interactive panels, and great conversations.
- This will be a family friendly event, with a secular parenting workshop, a Mini Camp Quest, educational child care for the kids & much more.
- In addition, Secular Students of America will be conducting leadership workshops.

Hyatt Regency Houston 1200 Louisiana St. Houston

Join US in Houston, Texas for the  
Atheist Alliance of America National Convention  
in conjunction with the Texas Freethought Convention

# October 7-9, 2011

The official launch of the newly-restructured AAA organization  
And what a GALA EVENT — & MORE — IT WILL BE!

Registration @ [www.AtheistAllianceAmerica.org](http://www.AtheistAllianceAmerica.org)

---

# Nigerian Humanist Movement to Hold 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Conference in Abuja

**Date: September 22-25, 2011**

**Venue: Vines Hotel, Durumi, Federal Capital Territory, Abuja**

**Theme: Humanism as the Next Step**

**Sub-themes: Humanism and Nigerian Politics, Humanism as an Alternative to Religion, Superstition and the school system, Critical thinking and educational reform, Leaving Religion, Combating Religious Fundamentalism, Tackling Ritual Killing and Human Sacrifice etc**

By Leo Igwe

In September, humanists from across the Federation will be gathering in Abuja for their national convention. This event, to be held at Vines Hotel Durumi, will be the first of its kind at the nation's capital. It promises to be the largest gathering of nonreligious people in the history of Nigeria. The convention marks the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Nigerian Humanist Movement (NHM). Founded in 1996, NHM provides a sense of community to nonreligious people who often identify themselves severally as atheists, agnostics, freethinkers, skeptics, rationalist or brights. In the last 15 years, NHM has worked to ensure that the voice of nonbelievers is heard and that the humanist perspective is brought to bear on issues of national importance. NHM has been the rallying point for those who do not have a religion, those who renounce their religion and those who criticize religions. NHM has provided social space for all Nigerians who seek to lead a meaningful life free from the tyranny of religious, the orthodoxy of superstition, of belief in god or dogma.

In a deeply religious society like Nigeria, organizing humanism has not been an easy task. In a country plagued by religious extremism, intolerance and bigotry, promoting humanism could be a dangerous undertaking. This convention will be a celebration of success and survival of the growing nonreligious community in the country. Incidentally, there are still many Nigerians out there who are humanists but who do not know. Many Nigerians do not understand what humanism means. They do not know that there is an alternative to religion and that humanism is an alternative to religion. Many Nigerian humanists do not know that a humanist group exists for them in the country. This convention will provide a platform to promote public knowledge and understanding of humanism and to strengthen organised humanism in the country.

The theme of the convention is **Humanism as the Next Step**. For three days humanists and human rights activists will be exploring why humanism is the next step for Nigerians. Participants will discuss different sub-themes of interest to humanists and the Nigerian public, including tackling religious crises, realizing a meaningful dialogue among Nigerians of different religions or beliefs, how nonbelievers are treated in Nigeria, faith and superstition-based human rights abuses, witch hunts, ritual killing and human sacrifice, the rights of religious minorities including humanists, and more.

This convention will be used to register our humanist solidarity with all like-minded individuals who are suffering and are forced to live in the closet due to religious hostility and antagonism.

At the event we shall pay tribute to all humanists across the country who have, in spite of the risks, spoken out openly and publicly in defence of the humanist outlook. We shall use the platform to remind the government of Nigeria of its duties to protect and defend all Nigerians of different faiths and none; to maintain neutrality in matters concerning religion; to stop privileging Christianity and Islam; to guarantee the equal rights of Nigerians despite the religion or belief and to urgently address the recurrent cases of religious crisis and rein in Islamic militants and jihadists who are terrorizing innocent citizens in northern Nigeria.

Prominent scholars, intellectuals, politicians and activists are expected to attend, to make presentations, and to lead and contribute to the debates, discussion and exchange of ideas.

**Lodging: We have special room rate 10,000 naira (\$70) for conference participants at Vines Hotel**

[www.vineshotelng.com](http://www.vineshotelng.com) Rooms are available at Chelsea Hotel [www.chelseahotelabuja.com/conference.php](http://www.chelseahotelabuja.com/conference.php) and Reiz Continental [www.reizcontinentalhotels.com/](http://www.reizcontinentalhotels.com/) The conference venue is a 30-minute drive from Nnamdi Azikiwe Intl Airport Abuja

**For more inquiries or donations The Organizer, National Humanist Convention, P.O. Box 25269 Mapo Ibadan Oyo state  
Tel 234 8024796227, 8033861053 Email [lordjim4start@yahoo.com](mailto:lordjim4start@yahoo.com), [youth4humanism@yahoo.com](mailto:youth4humanism@yahoo.com)**

---

# Secular World

Volume 17 Issue 3 July-September 2011

- 5 From the Editor: The Importance of Being Earnest, and a Few Other Editorial Things
- 6 Message From the New **AAI** President    7 Message From the New **AAA** President
- 11 Kamloops, British Columbia Conference a Rousing Imagine No Religion Success
- 14 The State of Organized Freethought in Canada by Justin Trottier
- 20 The 2011 World Atheist Convention    22 Welcome! by Michael Nugent
- 25 Dublin Declaration on Secularism & the Place of Religion in Public Life
- 26 Convention Round-Up, From the Irish Point of View by Joe Armstrong
- 30 In Dublin's Fair City (or How I Learned to Stop Worrying & Drank 12 Pints of Guinness) by Richard Honess
- 36 AAI & AAA, Transitions & Beginnings by Nick Lee & Tanya Smith
- 38 **The Coming Islamic Inquisition is Already Here** by Maryam Namazie
- 46 A Science-Based Analysis of the Errors in the Koran by Raji Al Munir
- 51 Kenya Convention Round-Up by Wendy Nyokabi & Boaz Adhengo
- 53 Australia Gears Up for GAC2, With State Support! by David Nicholls
- 56 AAI & AAA Affiliates Contact Info, Phone Numbers, Websites
- 58 Padding the Convention    58 Closing Remarks, Tanya Smith, AAI President



Cover photo by Reza Moradi

For a Secular Europe Campaign Conference: London, England, Sept. 10; March & Rally, Sept. 17

## LONDON FOR A SECULAR EUROPE



**AAI Vision:** To transform society into one that understands and respects atheism; that supports and respects a worldview based on the values of reason, empiricism and naturalism; and that respects and protects the separation of religion and government and the constitutional and human rights of atheists as members of society in free, democratic and open nations. **AAA Objective:** The objective of the Alliance is to promote, strengthen, and preserve strong atheist groups, and to coordinate the activities of autonomous, self-governing and democratic member societies.

# **Secular World Magazine is a member benefit of Atheist Alliance International & Atheist Alliance of America**

Editor-in-Chief **Tom Melchiorre**  
(Tom.Melchiorre@AtheistAlliance.org)  
Co-Editor **Lee Holmes**

*Secular World* Podcast Host **David Driscoll**  
Bible Studies Editor **Robert M. Price**  
Book Review Editor **Kenneth Krause**  
Printing Services **Cedar Business Printing**  
**St. Paul, MN**  
**ISSN 1530-308X**

#### **Contact Information**

Phone: 1-866-HERETIC  
Outside US & Canada: 001-866-437-3842  
General Questions or Comments:  
Info@AtheistAlliance.org  
Website: Webmaster@AtheistAlliance.org

**Address Changes/Reprint Permission**  
Email **SecularWorld@AtheistAlliance.org**

**Article Submissions & Advertising**  
See **www.AtheistAlliance.org/secular-world/submission-guidelines**

See **www.atheistalliance.org/secular-world/advertising-rates**

Atheist Alliance International Board  
Officers

**Tanya Smith (Australia), President**  
(President@AtheistAlliance.org)  
**Bill Ligertwood (Canada), Vice-President**  
Kamloops Centre for Rational Thought  
**Stuart Bechman (USA), Treasurer**  
**Shelley Mountjoy (USA), Secretary**  
Atheist Alliance of America

Other Directors

**Lee Holmes** (Australia, Atheist Foundation of  
Australia) - *Secular World* Rep  
**Victor Franco** (Australia) - Individual  
Member Rep  
**Boaz Adhengo** (Kenya, Jahwar Amber Hu-  
manist Fund)  
**Carlos Diaz** (Argentina, ArgAtea)  
**Rene Hartmann** (Germany, IBKA)  
**Kirumira Mpagi Michael** (Uganda, Atheist  
Association of Uganda)  
**Justin Trottier** (Canada)  
**Leandro Yampolsky** (Argentina)  
**Rupert Young** (United Kingdom, Atheism UK)

Atheist Alliance of America Board  
Officers

**Nick Lee, President**  
(President@AtheistAllianceAmerica.org)  
**Conor McGrath, Vice-President**  
**Kay Dickey, Treasurer**  
**Shelley Mountjoy, Secretary**

Directors

**Patty Guzikowski** Individual Member Rep,  
**Bobbie Kirkhart, Terry McDonald, Shelley  
Mountjoy, Tanya Smith, Jesper Vind**

AAI/AAA

Advisory Board of Leaders & Experts (ABLE)  
**Richard Dawkins, Christian Eyschen,  
Bobbie Kirkhart, Taslima Nasrin,  
Robert M. Price, Julia Sweeney**

© 2011 *Secular World* Magazine. All rights reserved.  
Neither this publication nor any part of it may be repro-  
duced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any  
form or by any means mechanical, electronic, recording,  
photocopying, or any other method currently available or to  
be developed in the future, without the prior permission of  
Atheist Alliance International & Atheist Alliance of America.

## **JOIN Atheist Alliance ONLINE @ www.AtheistAlliance.org/support-aai/membership**

**Annual Membership (with SW Ezine)**

- Individual \$30 USD (approx. €21, £18)  
 Household \$40 USD (approx. €28, £24)  
 Supporting \$50 USD (approx. €35, £30)

**Additional Years (paid at same time)**

- Individual \$25 USD (approx. €17, £15)  
 Household \$30 USD (approx. €21, £18)  
 Supporting \$30 USD (approx. €21, £18)

**Ezine & Print**  USA add \$15/Year  Canada & Mexico add \$20/Year USD  
**Premium Package**  Outside North America add \$25/Year USD ( approx. €17, £15)

**FT Student Rate:** \$15 USD/Year (approx. €10.4, £9; ezine only) Age 25 or younger.  
Photo ID from accredited educational institution required.

**I want to become a member of:**  Atheist Alliance of America  Atheist Alliance International

### **Membership by Mail**

Title: \_\_\_\_\_ First Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Last Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City/Town: \_\_\_\_\_ Province/State: \_\_\_\_\_

Country: \_\_\_\_\_ Postal/Zip Code: \_\_\_\_\_ Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

**Mail Check (in US\$ only) to: ATHEIST ALLIANCE, 1777 • T Street NW • Washington, DC 20009-7125 • USA**

# The Importance of Being Earnest

By Tom Melchiorre

*“It is sad. One half of the world does not believe in God, and the other half does not believe in me.”*  
Oscar Wilde

With the new AAI officially open for business, and the new AAA functionally up and running, you may notice some changes in the magazine in coming issues. One that you’ll find with this issue is language. We print in English, but with all the variants of English around the world a standard had to be set for uniformity and consistency to avoid the various problems of spelling, grammar, punctuation, and the confusion resulting from a mishmash of dialects, slang, and formats. As we print in the USA, and the majority of our members were/are American, I chose American English as the standard, and would convert all submissions to American English, spelling, punctuation, grammar, etc.

Not any more. *Secular World* will print submissions in the English language of submission. Spelling will remain whatever English dialect articles are submitted in, and you’ll notice this issue has American, Australian, British, Canadian, Irish, Kenyan, and Nigerian English variants, along with two submissions by Middle Eastern-born contributors. Where dialect or slang might confuse other readers, I’ll provide an explanation.

## 19 What is the person’s religion?

- Answering this question is **OPTIONAL**.
- Examples of ‘Other - please specify’ are: SALVATION ARMY, HINDUISM, JUDAISM, HUMANISM.
- If no religion, mark the ‘No religion’ box.
- Remember to mark box like this:

- Catholic
- Anglican (Church of England)
- Uniting Church
- Presbyterian
- Greek Orthodox
- Buddhism
- Baptist
- Islam
- Lutheran
- Other – please specify


- No religion

# From the Editor: The Importance of Being Earnest

What won't change is punctuation. The differences, even among the many English dialects that lean toward British English, are so many that to use everyone's standard of punctuation would prove to be way too confusing for all readers, no matter what English dialect you might use. Thus, for punctuation, I'll continue to use the American English style.

We also welcome submissions from non-native English writers, contributors whose first language is not English, and even those who don't speak English (I'll work on the translation). Email me at [tom.melchiorre@secularworld.org](mailto:tom.melchiorre@secularworld.org) with your ideas for article topics and we'll go from there.

*"When people agree with me I always feel that I must be wrong."* Oscar Wilde

The above question 19 is from the upcoming Australian Census. Like many censuses going on around the world, it specifically asks your religion. Atheists are being asked to mark that they are atheists, to stand up and be counted as having no religion, no faith, no superstitious belief, and not to put their forced religion of birth. Why? Quite simply, Census results are used to allocate government funding, and many governments directly fund religious institutions from your taxes based on the percentage who state what specific religion they are. The more people who check "no religion" or write in "atheist" or both, or however the specific country's form words the question, the more atheists will be counted as a percentage of the population and the less taxpayer funds the religious will get.

It also wakes up the politicians to the fact that we are legion, to use a phrase from their book.

The recent census results in Ireland showed an unofficial but approximate 20 percent increase in those who marked no religion or indicated atheism/atheist/nonbeliever/nontheist, officially bringing the Irish atheist population up to about 5 percent of the total population, technically the second highest group in the country behind the Roman Catholics. If the Catholic atheists had chosen to mark their forms truthfully, there is no doubt the percentages of atheists in Ireland would be in the double digits.

The British 2001 Census recorded a 23 percent nonreligious result. Their March 2011 Census recorded even more gains, with unofficial surveys putting the nonreligious population at 65 percent. How many of those actually are atheists, and the age groupings, remains to be parsed, but even at the 2001 levels atheists were higher in numbers than nearly every religious group in the United Kingdom. Another just released survey found that only one out of 20 British churchgoers attend for reasons of faith. Extrapolated, that means 95 percent of churchgoers have no faith, hence are nonreligious. Could it be that 95 percent of churchgoers in the UK are really atheists in pews? Boggles the mind.

Canada is having its census soon as well, which Justin Trottier details in his piece starting on page 10. Canadian atheists and secularists have made many gains in the past few years, but they've also seen a rising tide of fundamentalism and evangelicals taking center stage, including in their highest political offices, not to mention an influx of Muslim nationals to a country that has had a fairly open immigration policy. Atheists need to step up and mark no religion or atheist, however they can, to make their voices heard. To make themselves known.

The more we come out of the closet, the more we will gain.

*"Missionaries, my dear! Don't you realise that missionaries are the divinely provided food for the destitute and underfed cannibals? Whenever they are on the brink of starvation, Heaven in its infinite mercy sends them a nice plump missionary."* Oscar Wilde

**SW**

# Kamloops Kan-Do

## Yes to **No** Religion: Imagine That

By Tom Melchiorre

That PZ Myers. He turns up in the remotest of places. Like Kamloops, British Columbia, Canada (with no direct flight to the city, it takes 42 connections to get there; okay, a slight exaggeration) for the May 6 and 7 *Imagine No Religion* Conference. Along with a stellar cast of Canadian and American speakers, the First Annual Kamloops Conference was a resounding success, and as you see from the photo below PZ spoke for everyone with a slide from his second of two presentations.

Sponsored by the Kamloops Centre for Rational Thought, an Atheist Alliance International affiliate, KCRT Director (and AAI VP) Bill Ligertwood opened the event Saturday morning with “It’s great to be in the presence of 120 of the smartest people in the world.” Actual attendee count was closer to 140 for the Saturday Conference, with the Friday night special presentation — the first PZ attack, er, talk, titled *The Intelligent Design Fraud* — clocking in over 150 separately-paid people, not including the several dozen who slipped through the doors without paying.

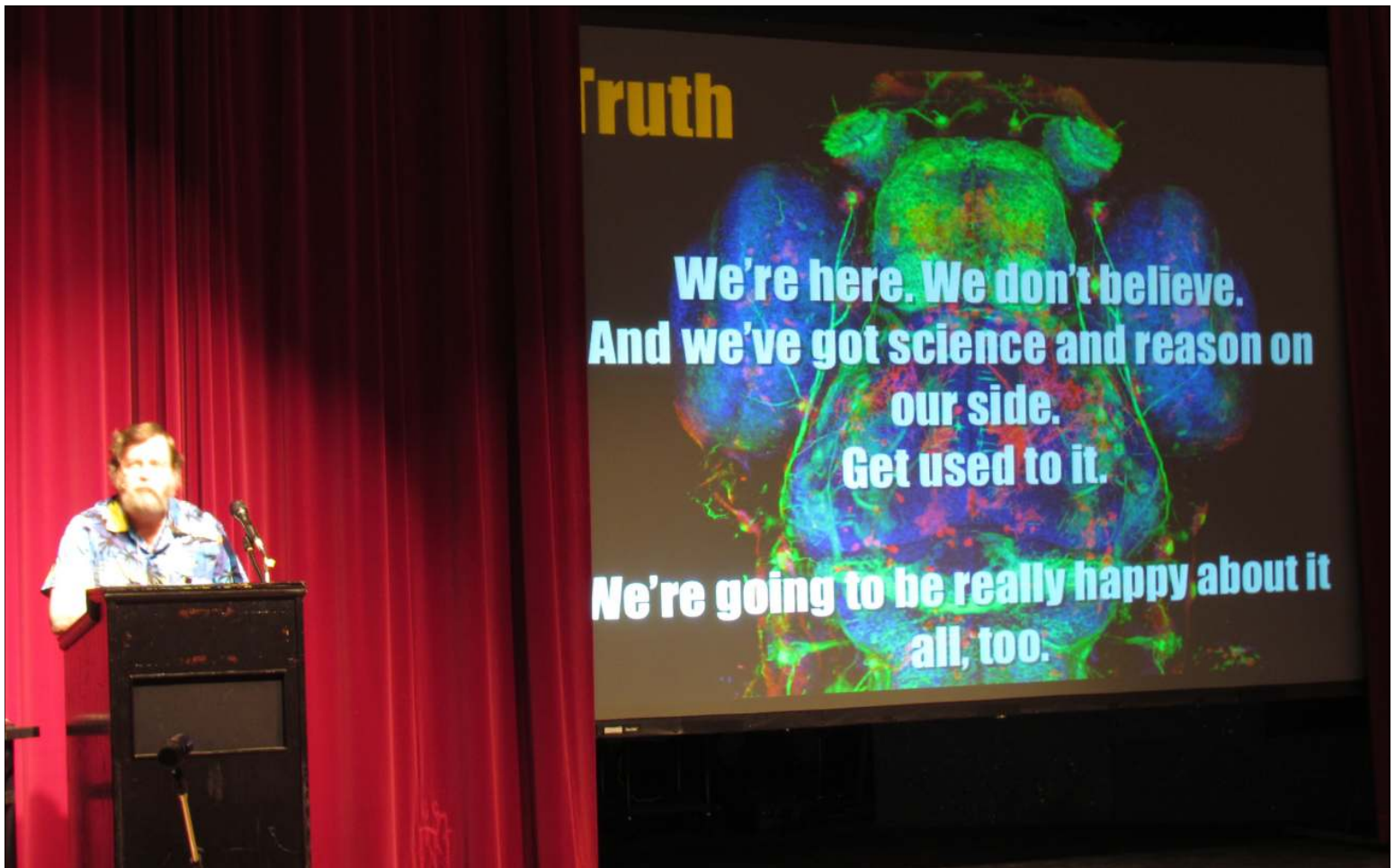
Inside the Friday event, PZ gave an excellent presentation

on the subject, and then took questions. This is one time I’ve seen PZ when he didn’t forewarn creationists in the audience not to challenge him with their stupid ideas or, to coin a phrase, he’d rip them a new one. You have to wonder if it would’ve made a difference, as many creationists were in the audience (not known is if they paid) and waiting to pounce.

Or so they thought.

Of the several who asked questions, one was a mother who said she raised two daughters under creationism and they’re productive, intelligent citizens, adding in a lot of other “facts” to try to support her statements, or perhaps to justify them. PZ listened politely, and when she was done and standing at the mic waiting for his response, she got one. PZ dissected her statements, essentially calling her views stupid and she did her children a great disservice. When she sat down, she said nothing more.

And that was just the beginning of the weekend. A former public school teacher and ardent creationist stood up with a multi-page list of 10 questions/statements/facts to support crea-



PZ Myers with a slide from his *Dancing on the Graves of the Gods: How Science Kills Faith*. (Photos by Fred Bremmer)





**Bill Ligertwood**



**Nate Phelps**



**Chris diCarlo**

tionism that he “knew” PZ couldn’t refute. Poor chap didn’t have a chance.

Refute PZ did, debunking the only one the “teacher” chose to ask. At the gathering afterwards, said “teacher” still tried to convince anyone who would listen, including PZ, who thoroughly debunked his false facts, improper statements, and totally untrue quotes from renowned scientists. For several hours.

Some people just don’t give up.

But it wasn’t all about PZ. That stellar line-up Saturday started with a invigorating and emphatic presentation by Justin Trottier, National Executive Director of the Center for Inquiry Canada, on atheism and young people, the need for Canadians to mark no religion or atheist on the upcoming national Census, and a host of planned events and programs, including one Nate Phelps is wearing in the photo above. Read the transcript of Trottier’s talk that follows this review, and get involved.

Nate Phelps told his life story to an

enraptured crowd that was stone silent while he detailed the abuse and torture of growing up the son of Fred Phelps, demented pastor of the Westboro Baptist Church. Nate began telling his story just a couple years ago, after a chance meeting with a reporter he picked up while driving a cab for a living. He’s now working with CFI Canada out of Calgary, spreading the secular worldview. Hearing him speak is a moving, very emotional experience for everyone. At the end of his presentation, he received a well-deserved standing ovation.

Jen McCreight, who blogs about atheism, feminism, science, and sex at Blag Hag, [www.blaghag.com](http://www.blaghag.com), spoke on those subjects as to why are women more religious than men when most religions are so anti-woman. She talked about the paradox and made the case for why it’s time for women to leave religion. She and Trottier stated that atheists need to have greater social outreach for atheists ones so women can leave the “safety net” of religion.

Dr. Chris diCarlo, a philosopher for science and ethics, spoke on the Big Five Natural and Supernatural Responses to Life’s Biggest Questions: 1. What can I know? 2. Why am I here? 3. What am I? 4. How should I behave? 5. What is to become of me? A

powerful speaker who, if you don’t know his style, doesn’t look the part of shock doc in his sometimes choice of words, but effective all the more-so in making his point.

His response to those who ask him, as an atheist what’s it like to believe there is nothing after you die: “Well, do you remember what it was like 50 years before you were born? It’s like that.”

diCarlo’s presentation was based on his new book, *How to Become a Really Good Pain in the Ass: A Critical Thinker’s Guide to Asking the Right Questions*. He firmly believes that it’s how the different cultures have chosen to answer the Big Five that has gotten the world in so much trouble throughout history. If you see him scheduled nearby on his upcoming book tour, go see and hear him talk. Well worth the time. (And buy his book, too!)

Stuart Bechman, former AAI president and now its treasurer, spoke on the European Enlightenment revolution and how many people actually spoke out against religion, which the religious try to negate, avoid, deny, undermine, counter any way they can, as they well know the powerful effects this thinking had, and still has, in undermining religious belief and power. One of the most valuable weapons that nontheists have today to defend and promote secularism, he said, is to know and understand the underpinnings of this revolution and how it has created the world we live in today.

Mr. Deity deemed it worthwhile to visit Kamloops and, after a technical glitch on his computer, which, really, he should have been able fix with a mere thought, he



**Nate Phelps, a very affable fellow in spite of all he’s been through, enjoys a coffee break and chat with several attendees**

showed a TV ad for Christian dating that said “Find God’s Match for You”. It never made it to air because the show’s lawyers said it wouldn’t run it because they couldn’t prove that statement.

He then proved himself out of existence with another slide that stated: All things that exist have a cause. The god of Abraham does not have a cause. Therefore the god of Abraham doesn’t exist.

Then he disappeared. Some say it was to the food tables.

We started, literally, at this conference with PZ Myers, and we ended with his second presentation—Dancing on the Graves of the Gods: How Science Kills Faith.

Starting off he said he’s gleaned a consensus of the atheism movement over the years and has concluded “We got the attitude I like.” He noted that the buses in nearby Kelowna are the only ones in the entire atheism bus ad campaigns around the where vandals professionally removed the skins from the buses without damaging the buses, and no one or cameras caught any of it. Very suspicious, and the authorities deny everything.

“We’re coming up with new ways to get the word out,” PZ said, “and the Christians are upset.

“They’re not happy people. They celebrate nailing people to trees.

“When people tell you you’re going to hell and they’re praying for you,” he continued, “laugh in their face. Literally go in their face and laugh. Tell them what you think. Ridicule and mocking are great weapons.

“Science is what makes us dance on the graves of the gods. Science,” he stated, in the way only PZ can, “kills faith.” **SW**

The middle & bottom screen shots are from PZ Myers’ first talk, where he pulled out historical figures left and right who concluded there was no god long before Darwin developed his views on evolution and proved such scientifically. At top is the 10-Point-List creationist who thought he could take on perhaps the most well-read and noted biologist in the atheism movement. Beside him is Jen McCreight, who, like many, watched and enjoyed the show as PZ rip the guy apart “fact by so-called fact.”



# The Intelligent Design Fraud

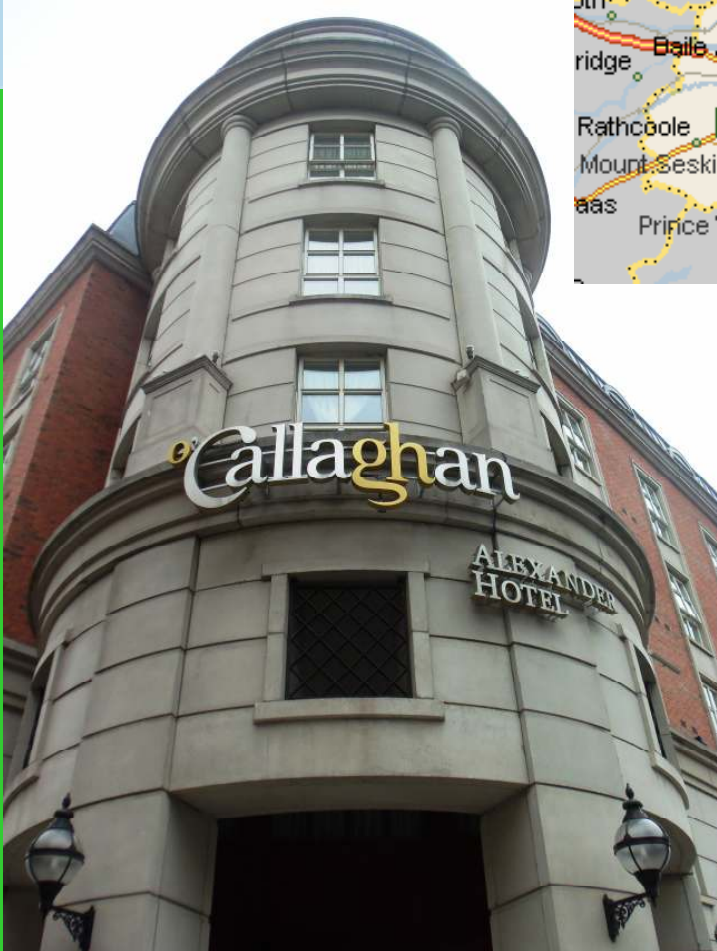
PZ Myers  
University of Minnesota Morris

Thus from the principles of that reason to which you so rashly appealed as the ultimate arbiter of our dispute, have I shown that the popular arguments in favour of the being of a God are totally destitute of colour. I have shown the **absurdity of attributing intelligence to the cause of those effects which we perceive in the Universe**, and the **fallacy which lurks in the argument from design**. I have shown that order is no more than a peculiar manner of contemplating the operation of necessary agents, that **mind is the effect, not the cause of motion, that power is the attribute, not the origin of Being**. I have proved that we can have **no evidence of the existence of a God from the principles of reason**.

Percy Shelley, 1814

# World Atheist Convention

# 2011

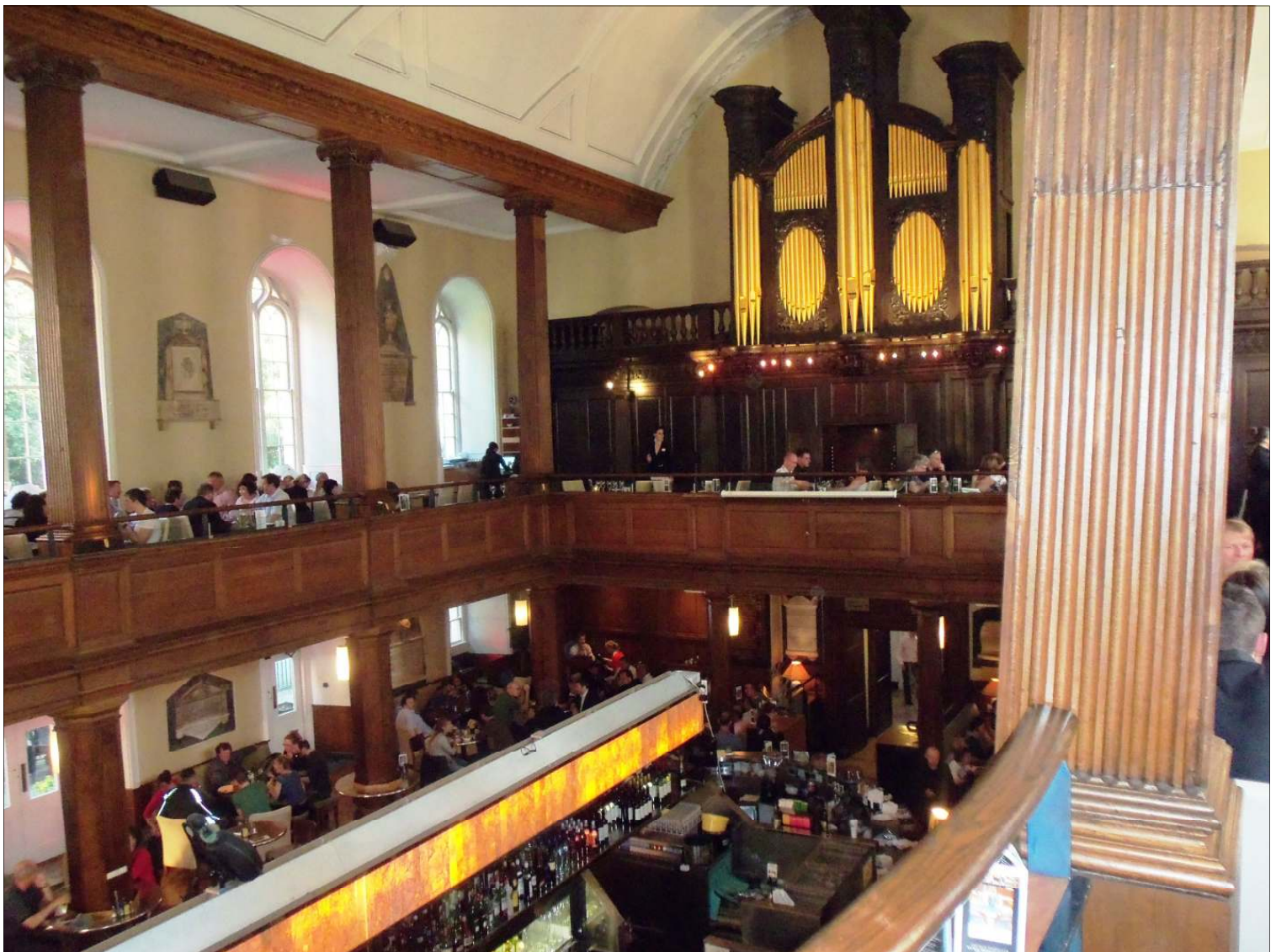


# In Dublin's Fair City (or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Drank 12 Pints of Guinness)

By Richard Honess

In early June 2011 I set off from my humble abode in London and three trains and a ferry later I was arriving in Dublin, Ireland's capital city, to attend the World Atheist Convention that was being held at the O'Callaghan Alexander Hotel. I was first struck by the general "laid-backness" of the city, and by how sunny and warm it was (however I have been subsequently assured by the locals that this weather was simply freaky!).

This would be my fourth Atheist Alliance International Convention, having previously attended Burbank, Copenhagen and Montreal, and as a result I knew that I was going to be amongst friends, and it seems that those who know me





seem to increase exponentially. Indeed one convention goer described the Atheist Community at conventions as a “second family”, and to some of my American friends who have very religious families and have been ostracised or at least alienated by them, often the only real family they have. Now whilst living in the UK and having a very close and loving family I have no such negative issues (I consider myself lucky in that regard) but I still feel an amazing sense of community, and I think that this must be similar to the community building that religions already have built into them and so easily provide people, that I considered that this may be one of the reasons why many people don’t give them up!

In this case that feeling of inclusion was almost immediate when one of the conference organisers, who is a Facebook friend but had never actually met in the flesh before, recognised me as soon as I booked in, and almost right away I was lending a bit of a hand with fetching, carrying and testing the IT. It was during this that I first met and had a productive chat with the incoming president of the newly-restructured AAI, Tanya Smith, from Australia. She definitely had a can-do, let’s go get ’em attitude that I immediately warmed to! A good start!

So the night before the big day, the organisers had, erm, organised (again via Facebook, all praise to Facebook) a meal and a drink in The Church, which is a bar and restaurant that had been converted from... a church! A conversion I fully support and approve of. Over 40 conventioners attended and I was able to chat with, and have a few pints of the black stuff, a few of the speakers, including Michael Nugent of Atheist Ireland, Rebecca Watson from Skepchick and the Skeptics Guide to the Universe, Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor from the Freedom From Religion Foundation, to name just four.

Friday began with registration where all conventioners were issued with a very attractive orange lanyard, and the convention kicked off with an open meeting of the newly-restructured AAI with an opening address and a review of the work AAI had been doing so far in countries in the third world, such as Uganda. The new board was also elected. This was very efficiently handled by our new president. The meeting was scheduled to take place between 2 pm and 4:30 pm, we were done by 2:30! In fact some people were entering the room to come to the meeting as we were leaving!

However the real business of the convention began at 5 pm with an opening address from Atheist Ireland chairman Michael Nugent. Now if you have never heard Michael talk before it is well worth seeking him out on YouTube or seeing him live if you can. He is an incredibly funny man with a cheeky sense of humour and dry delivery. He was addressing

**Above, during the first panel discussion, on *Weird Science vs. Weird Religion*, panel members DPR Jones, Lone Frank, and Steve Duggan watch as Richard Dawkins dissected a Muslim attendee who thought he could trip up Dawkins. Not happening. At left is the Church bar and restaurant, where many gathered Thursday eve before the convention to chat, have communion with friends, and wish Michael Nugent a happy birthday. At right, Rich’s First Pint of the Conference: The first pint of Dublin’s finest, sampled as part of a serious experiment to find out if it is indeed better in Dublin (it was!). (Photos by Richard Honess)**





**And lo it was decreed that on the first day of atheists gathering, Jesus sent us pizzas! 11. You'd think he'd send 12. Below is the Women's Atheist Activists panel with (from left) Paula Kirby, Bobbie Kirkhart, Anne Marie Waters, and Tanya Smith. (Photos by Eibhlin Seoighthe)**

questions asked of him about the arrogance of atheists, or the arrogance of the belief that the universe was not created for our benefit, and the comparison with not believing in god to not collecting stamps. All I'll say is that our philatelist (thanks to Dan Barker) convention was going to be fun. This was followed by a keynote speech by Senator Ivana Bacik, the only member of the Irish Parliament who is a member of Atheist Ireland. She gave a great impassioned speech and warned of creeping fundamentalism within society.

Unlike all of the other conventions that I had been to, which usually consist of several set piece presentations by one speaker and with Q&A if there's time, the plan was to have mostly panel discussions with lots of Q&A for the audience to get involved, and the first panel was entitled *Weird Science versus Weird Religion* and featured YouTuber DPR Jones, Danish science journalist Lone Frank and some bloke called Richard Dawkins. The discussion took in some people's apparent psychological need for religion and the rather depressing view that people will always believe nonsense. However this, of course, should not mean we should stop trying, indeed perhaps we should redouble our efforts. During the Q&As for this it became apparent that there were a group of Muslims in the audience. One of them got up to ask a question of Richard Dawkins. The response to this question is now all over YouTube and the Internet so I

don't really need to elaborate on Richard's response except to say that Christopher Hitchens has the Hitchenslap, well, we now have the Richslap! The discussion was interrupted by a pizza delivery, ordered by a loon calling himself Jesus Christ who had been bombarding the organisers and the hotel with crank emails; fortunately we know where he lives and the pizza companies will be billing him later! It ended on a very positive note, mainly a comment from Richard Dawkins that we should challenge, confront and when necessary ridicule faith.

This was then followed by a brief handover of the AAI from outgoing president Nick Lee (who takes over the newly-formed Atheist Alliance of America) to Tanya Smith. As a member of an international affiliate I am certainly looking forward to working with the New AAI.

After a very nice buffet we were then treated to a comedy show by local comedian Abie Philbin Bowman who was work shopping his latest show *Pope Benedict: Bond Villain*. To give you an idea of his work his previous shows include *Jesus Christ the Guantanamo Years* (which apparently he performed in Pakistan) which was about the problem Jesus had during the second coming getting past US Immigration, and *Eco-Friendly Jihad* about environmentally considerate suicide bombers.

The next day kicked off with a panel on *Secular Education & Human Rights* with Jane Donnelly of Atheist Ireland,



**PZ Myers discusses religion with the same Muslims who challenged Dawkins, Namazie, and anyone who talked to them. They did no better with PZ, as if anyone thought they would. (Photo by Eibhlin Seoighthe)**



Thomas Prosser of Trinity College Dublin and the aforementioned Annie Laurie Gaylor. Examining the rights of children not to be indoctrinated and the very clear difference between the education systems in the U.S. and Ireland (the system of the UK seems to

fall somewhat between the two). This was followed by a panel on *Speaking Out Against Blasphemy Laws* with Michael Nugent, Anne Marie Waters of the One Law for All Campaign and David Nash a historian and blasphemy expert from my own alma mater Oxford Brookes University. The main point I got from this is if your blasphemy law is repealed (as they all should) be careful what hate crime legislation they may put in its place.

After this everyone's favourite PZ Myers gave a keynote speech. His style of delivery and message is certainly one that appeals to me and many of the convention goers. His talk is bound to make it onto YouTube very soon (if it has not already by time of publishing) so I'm not going to spoil it except for the comment that accommodationalists are like people that have rolled in a pool of bull's excrement to get rid of the smell of skunk spray (I shall say no more!).

The next panel was bound to be a bit controversial. Paul Kirby, Tanya Smith, Bobbie Kirkhart (former AAI President) and Anne Marie Waters were discussing *Women Atheist Activists*. The conclusion of the panel was that women have to do more to put themselves forward into positions of leadership and speak out on atheist issues more. The big controversy was that the panel said that they had not suffered any sexism within the atheist community and that this isn't really much of an issue, a view not shared by Rebecca Watson (and others!) in a later panel where she revealed some of the more *interesting* emails she receives from time to time. I have also been informed by a reliable source (PZ Myers) that Tanya was later informed of some of the issues and has reassessed her position; who would have thought it, an atheist changing their mind when given more information! Let's hope we can all learn from this.

Sadly there was not much time for discussion in the next panel, *Religion: Accommodate or Confront*, due to time overruns which was a pity as it was a topic that I am particularly interested in as my own group was formed due to a lack of confrontation in the nontheistic

**Tanya Smith, new president of the new AAI, and Nick Lee, former president of AAI and the new president of the new AAA, Atheist Alliance of America. (Photo by Richard Honess)**





**René Hartmann (with Gabi Bokeloh, both IBKA) & Dan Barker (Freedom From Religion Foundation) of the panel *Religion: Accommodate or Confront* with Richard Green (AtheismUK) & Author/Activist Aroup Chatterjee. (Photos by Eibhlin Seoighthe)**

community in the UK. However Dan Barker, Richard Green (of my group Atheism UK), and René Hartmann of IBKA, Germany, agreed the answer was — confront! Sadly, just as we were about to start discussing how to deal with the *I'm an atheist butterfly*, which rears its head whenever we decide to confront, time was called.

The last panel of the day was on *Communicating Atheism* and consisted of YouTuber AronRa, Rebecca Watson, editor Tom Melchiorre, and that Dawkins fellow again! The main take home was, let's communicate in any way we can!

Sunday, often a bit of a graveyard shift, started a bit later than other conventions (is this a case of lessons learned?) and began with a panel subject of *Building Secular Coalitions* which, on its face, might seem a little dull, but produced an entertaining and interesting discussion. Nick Lee spoke about how he was able to build coalitions with religious groups who also see the value of secularism, a representative of the IHEU (whose name escapes me at the moment) spoke about the build-up of secular and humanist groups around the world, Maryam Namazie from One Law for All spoke about when working with people ensure that they share your goals and never compromise on your secularism, and Mark Embleton (president of AtheismUK), once he had finished cracking jokes about experimenting with comparing the taste of Guinness in Dublin with that back in London (the conclusion, by the way, is that we need more research!), spoke about the problems of trying to build coalitions with other nontheistic groups (if you are reading this you know who you are).

There then followed a brief extract of a speech that was due to be given by Kirumira Mgapi Michael from Uganda who, sadly, and once again, had been denied a visa to give a speech at an AAI Convention. AAI past president (and now treasurer) Stuart Bechman read the extracts, which brings home why an atheist worldview and atheist activism is so important. I can only hope that Kirumira can make it soon because if his talk has even half of the passion that the extract contained I'm sure we would all feel privileged to hear him.

There then followed a discussion on the Dublin Declaration of Religion in Public Life. This was a Declaration from the conference setting out our principles and goals with relation to how religion should be treated in the public arena. The original draft had been circulated many weeks previous and had been subject to numerous online discussions. This had led to a second draft, which although framed differently (and in the opinion of some in the room negatively) was much more tightly focussed on specific issues. The room was split about which to adopt until Maryam Namazie came up with an inspired idea to combine the two. This was later done and a far better Declaration produced. What I will say is that no matter



***Communicating Atheism* panelists (from left) YouTube Vlogger AronRa, *Secular World* editor Tom Melchiorre, Skepchick blogger Rebecca Watson, and, according to Richard Honess, that other bloke, Richard Dawkins. (Photo by Eibhlin Seoighthe)**





The Spire, a gathering spot at the center of Dublin for old and new convention friends, was built to represent the old round towers that dot the Irish countryside to replace the old Nelson's Column, which was bombed during the 60s.

Left: The requisite, and eagerly expected, Darwin photo. Rich manages to find at least one each convention. One can only imagine the menu. (Photos by Richard Honess)

what you thought of the second document it really stimulated an excellent discussion from the conference floor which had an influence on the final draft and was adopted unanimously by the conference. I only hope that we as individuals, affiliate groups and as a worldwide organisation act upon it.

Roger Lepeix from the International Liaison Committee of Atheists and Freethinkers in France gave a short talk on the formation of a new international freethought confederation; followed by the final keynote speech of the conference: An impassioned speech by Maryam Nazmie who spoke about the injustices of Sharia Law, of which there are many, and a call to arms (intellectually speaking) to de-religionise society. She was simply the star of the conference. Her experiences, her campaigning work and the suffering she has seen in the name of religion should send a clear message to those who call themselves atheists and prefer to attack Richard Dawkins and the other Gnu Atheists for being outspoken when the real enemy is unreason, superstition and religion; and that to criticise religion is not racist, it is not intolerant, the only intolerance is that of intolerance itself, one of the root causes being religion. One of the Muslims at the back tried to accuse her of being as aggressive as the mullahs she criticises and stated that some academics had stated that Sharia Law had been a great blessing on society. Maryam gave this short shrift stating that they would never need to fear for their personal safety when leaving a secular conference, yet she has feared when leaving meetings in areas like Bradford. No atheist is going to physically assault them or execute them for not conforming, or for changing their minds, and to claim that we atheists would do that was a disgrace. She told the conference to ask them about the stoning of gays and apostates and the fact you would never get a straight answer from them. This earned her a standing ovation from the conference and a feeling that we would be going back to our communities with a renewed vigour to stand up and do what must be done!

All in all this was a fantastic convention, with more audience participation and energy than I

had ever experienced before. I can say I am a convert to the panel discussion (although I admit I do like the big set piece speeches as well). A big thank you must go out to Michael Nugent and all those in Atheist Ireland who made this a convention to remember. All I ask is, of those that attended, be motivated to act and speak out and we can make the world a better place. **SW**



*Richard Honess is the International Liaison Officer for AtheismUK, a public servant and ex-primary school teacher from London with interests in musical theatre, collecting DVDs, distance running and had just taken possession of a new 12-string guitar. He thinks the Guinness IS better in Dublin, and that probably has something to do with the Liffey water!*



# The Islamic Inquisition

By Maryam Namazie

Sunday Keynote Address at the World Atheist Conference

June 5, 2011

In this day and age, Islam matters because of Islamism. Islam per se is fundamentally no worse than any other religion.

The tenets, dogma, and principles of all religions are equal. I don't believe in good or bad religions; in my opinion all religion is bad for you.

Religion should come with a health warning like cigarettes: "Religion Kills."

But even so, today — as we speak — there is a distinction to be made between religions in general and Islam in particular, but for no other reasons than that it is the ideology behind a far-Right regressive political movement that has state power in many places, with Sharia law being the most implemented legal code in the world.

Islam matters to us today because we are living through an Islamic inquisition and not because it is becoming more "popular" as its proponents like to argue. They call it the fastest growing religion. I'd personally like a count of how many people are leaving it, or would like to leave if they could without being killed.

Islam's appeal has not grown amongst the general public; in fact it's the opposite. Its record in political power speaks volumes for itself: Stonings, honour killings, amputation of limbs, child "marriages," sexual apartheid, decapitations, public hangings, bombs in discotheques and on buses, the slaughter of entire generations in the Middle East and North Africa...

It is the difference between Christianity today and one during the Inquisition.

A religion that has been reined in by an enlightenment is very different from one that has political power and is spearheading an Inquisition. That's why anything from downloading information on the status of women in Islam by Perwiz Kambakhsh in Afghanistan, publishing caricatures of Muhammad in a Danish newspaper, to the name of a teddy bear in the Sudan, become matters of life and death (often with Western government complicity).

Under an Inquisition, "Islamic feminism," "liberal and humanitarian Islam," "Islamic reformism," "Islamic democracy," "Islamic human rights," and moderate interpretations of Islam are impossible.

A "personal" religion is impossible under an Inquisition. You can't pick and choose as you'd like. Islamists will kill, threaten or intimidate anyone who interprets things differently, thinks freely or who transgresses their norms by living 21<sup>st</sup> century lives.

One of the characteristics of an Inquisition is a total ban on freethinking and policing of thought. Censorship is rife so that one can face the death penalty for reading a book or visiting an Internet site. Giordano Bruno was burnt at the stake for heresy in 1600; today there are numerous examples of people being killed for similar reasons. Some of those killed just this year by the Islamic Republic of Iran, which has 130 offences punishable by death, by the way, include Ali Ghorabat for apostasy and Jafar Kazemi and Mohammad Ali Haj Aghaie for enmity against god.

Under an Inquisition, torture is the norm. According to their handbook at the time, Inquisitors were instructed not to find any accused innocent under any circumstances. The same applies under Islamism. You are guilty. Full Stop. Guilty for laughing, guilty for listening to music, guilty for wearing jeans, for driving, for loving, for thinking and for breathing.

The purpose of the so-called Sharia justice system is to elicit a confession. In Iran, for example, even its media outlets are involved. Press TV, which is based in the UK, has had a documented role in forcing tortured prisoners to "confess" to their crimes on television. Most recent cases are Maziyar Bahari and Sakineh Mohammadi Ashtiani.

Under the Inquisition, you were killed even if you confessed. A confession would just mean that you would be stran-

gled before being burnt to death rather than being burnt alive. The same applies for Islamism. It's a killing machine.

Sharia law is designed to teach the masses the damnable nature of dissent. Moreover, under the Inquisition, once you were baptized, it could not be undone. The same is true with Islam. You are just not allowed to leave.

Of course, there are distinctions in the practice of Islamism as in every phenomenon but it is a question of degrees. A little less vile is still repugnant. The misogyny and inhumanity behind a law that stones people to death in Afghanistan and Somalia are the same as one that denies women the right to divorce and child custody in a Sharia court in Britain.

Have expectations been so lowered that — after all we have seen and heard — there are still those who will say that a reformist, liberal or a softer version of Islam or political Islam is possible and tolerable? These notions would have been ridiculed by the avant-gardes of the enlightenment.

It is an insult to humanity.

Religion in general and Islam in particular can only be considered liberal and reformed (at face value at least if even that is possible) when it has been pushed in a corner and out of the public space — when it has been forced to run soup kitchens rather than courts and Islamic Assemblies.

If you look at Christianity for example, it's not that the tenets, dogma, and principles have changed; it has not become more humane since the days of the Inquisition and witch burnings. What has changed is its social and political influence in today's society, in people's lives, in its relation with the state, the law and educational system. To the degree that it has become undermined and weakened, that is the degree that people have managed to free themselves from the clutches of religion, and in having happier lives and a better society. Progressive human values have been achieved at the expense of Christianity and religion.

The same has to be done with Islam and Islamism.

And it is being done but mainly by the people living under Islamic laws or those who have fled them and sought refuge in the west.

During the anti-Christianity Enlightenment the raging debate against religion was raised by elites and intellectual giants, which eventually filtered down to popular culture. Now it's the other way around — it is bubbling from below whilst many intellectuals and elites are either in bed with the Islamists or excuse it as “people's” culture.

After all, whose culture are we talking about?

Sakineh Mohammadi Ashtiani's culture (educated until 5<sup>th</sup> grade) who “wants to live” or that of the Islamic regime of Iran that wants to stone her to death?

Whose?

Sakineh's 22-year-old transport worker son, Sajjad, who writes open letters to the people of the world despite threats and intimidations asking for help in saving his mother's life or the regime that has already flogged his mother twice — once in front of his very eyes when he was only 17?

Given the havoc that Islamism is wreaking worldwide, concepts such as “Islamic reformism” and “Islamic liberalism,” and labels such as “Islamic societies” or “Islamic communities” deliberately or inadvertently become part of the effort to Islamicise societies and communities and hand them over lock, stock and barrel to regressive and parasitical Islamic organisations, imams and states.

After all, there are innumerable characteristics that define people and that people define themselves with but in this day and age we are increasingly being identified only by religion. This has a lot to do with the rise of Islamism and a new world order that has pushed back concepts of universalism and citizenship. Within this context, labelling people as Muslim and Muslim alone is actually part of the process of constraining them in order to feign “representation” and limiting their rights.

Any attempt to promote “good” versus “bad” versions of Islam and Islamism also does the same.

If you want a “cuddlier” version of Islam, then get rid of Islamism.

That does not mean that there are not many Muslims or those labelled as such who have humanist, secularist, moderate, feminist, atheist, liberal, socialist and other viewpoints, but this is not one and the same with Islam in power being as such.

After all, not everyone is a Muslim or an Islamist for that matter. There are innumerable political parties, civil society and social movements with various beliefs and values and classes. By boxing people into a homogeneous community of Muslims, it shrinks the space to breathe and move.

And it ignores the fact that Muslims, or those labelled as such, are the first victims of Islamism and at the frontlines of resistance. It ignores the slaughtered generations of the Middle East and North Africa buried in mass graves, hacked and stoned to death and hung from cranes in city centres, and it ignores the resistance taking place day in and day out against Islamism.

Nowhere is opposition greater against Islamism than in countries under Islamic rule.

Condemning Islamism and Islam is not a question of judging all Muslims and equating them with terrorists.

There is a distinction between Islam as a belief system and Islamism as a political movement on the one hand and real live human beings on the other. Neither the far-Right nor the pro-Islamist Left seem to see this distinction.

Both are intrinsically racist. The pro-Islamist Left (and many liberals) imply that people are one and the same with the Islamic states and movement that are repressing them. The far-Right blames all immigrants and Muslims for the crimes of Islamism.

(It is important to note here that Islamism was actually brought to centre stage during the Cold War as part of U.S. foreign policy in order to create a “green” Islamic belt surrounding the Soviet Union and not concocted in some immigrant’s kitchen in London; moreover many of the Islamists in Britain are actually British-born thanks to the government’s policies of multiculturalism and appeasement.)

Both the far-Right and pro-Islamist Left purport that Islamism is people’s culture and that they actually deserve no better, imputing on innumerable people the most reactionary elements of culture and religion, which is that of the ruling class, parasitical imams and self-appointed “community leaders.”

Their politics ignores the distinction between the oppressed and oppressor and actually sees them as one and the same. It denies universalism, sees rights as “western,” and justifies the suppression of rights, freedoms and equality for the “other.”

Civil rights, freedom and equality, secularism, modernism, are universal concepts that have been fought for by progressive social movements and the working class in various countries.

As a result of such politics, concepts such as rights, equality, respect and tolerance, which were initially raised vis-à-vis the individual, are now

more and more applicable to culture and religion and often take precedence over real live human beings.

Moreover, the social inclusion of people into society has come to solely mean the inclusion of their beliefs, sensibilities, concerns and agendas (read Islamism’s beliefs, sensibilities, concerns and agendas) and nothing more.

The distinction between humans and their beliefs and regressive political movements is of crucial significance here.

It is the human being who is meant to be equal, not his or her beliefs. It is the human being who is worthy of the highest respect and rights, not his or her beliefs or those imputed on them.

It is the human being who is sacred, not beliefs or religion.

**(Photo by Reza Moradi)**



**(Photos by**





Richard Honess)

The problem is that religion sees things the other way around. And this is the main reason why religion must be relegated to being a private matter.

More importantly than the fact that it divides, excludes, denies, restricts and so on is the compelling fact that when it comes to religion, it is not the equality, rights, freedoms, welfare of the child, man or woman that is paramount, but religion itself.

This is precisely what is wrong with multiculturalism. It gives precedence to cultures and religion rather than people and their rights and lives. And it says that human beings — depending on how they are pigeon-holed — are fundamentally different, and should be treated as such. The idea of difference has always been the fundamental principle of a racist agenda, not the other way around.

And within this context any criticism of Islam and Islamism are deemed to be racism and Islamophobia. This is nothing but political scaremongering in order to silence criticism against Islam. The term is used to shield Islam and Islamism from criticism and so everything from opposing executions in Iran to demanding an end to Sharia courts in Britain are deemed racism by Islamic lobbyists and their supporters, including from within the Left, like the Socialist Workers' Party in the UK.

It has become politically incorrect to criticise Islam. But Islamophobia does not refer to the fear of a certain people. It refers to the fear of a certain religion. And what is so wrong with that? Shouldn't we have the right to be critical of Islam — especially given its practices, its record? The term takes its cue from xenophobia and homophobia, but it an entirely different thing.

Targeting a belief, religion or Islam is actually fair play and legitimate given the world that we live in.

In the face of this onslaught, secularism, universalism and values worthy of 21<sup>st</sup> century humanity have to be defended and promoted unequivocally.

At a minimum, we must have the complete separation of religion from the state, the law and educational system. The promotion of secularism is therefore an important vehicle to protect society from religion's intervention in people's lives, especially in the face of religion's rising access to power.

Of course nowadays, secularism is often portrayed negatively. Religious groups and many others equate secularism as the other extreme of religious fanaticism. But this is untrue.

Religion excludes whilst secularism is inclusive and ensures that a sect or group does not impose its beliefs on all. That a person's religion is a private affair.

Faith schools must be abolished. Religion in general and Islam more so because of the rise of Islamism, indoctrinates children — often violently. Religious schools by nature must teach the superiority of their belief system and the baseness of nonbelievers and kafirs. Unfortunately, the debate on faith schools has for too long focused on scrutiny, monitoring, and changing admission codes and employment practices rather than that they are fundamentally bad for our children. This is because they are more concerned with the inclusion of religion — the religion of the child's parents — than the inclusion, well-being and educational needs of the child. Schools and faith are antithetical to each other. Education is meant to give children access to science, reason and the advances of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is meant to level the playing field irrespective of and despite the family the child is born into. It is meant to allow children to think freely and critically — something that religion actually prohibits and punishes. Education can only truly be guaranteed by a secular educational system and by ending faith schools once and for all.

Religious symbols in schools and public institutions must also be prohibited. What secularism does is require that, at minimum, govern-

**An attendee reads Namazie's book *Sharia Law in Britain*. Sharia is currently an alternative legal system authorized as legitimate in the UK. Download it free at [www.onelawforall.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/New-Report-Sharia-Law-in-Britain.pdf](http://www.onelawforall.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/New-Report-Sharia-Law-in-Britain.pdf) (Photo by Eibhlin Seoighthe)**



ment offices and officials from judges, to clerks to teachers to doctors and nurses are not promoting their religious beliefs and are instead doing their jobs. In the same way that a teacher can't teach creationism instead of evolution and science in the classroom; a pharmacist can't refuse contraceptive pills to a woman because of her beliefs; a male doctor can't refuse to treat a woman patient or vice versa. We are seeing this happening more and more as religion gains influence in society.

Banning religious symbols is sometimes portrayed as restrictions on religious beliefs or freedoms and religious intolerance but again this is not so. One's religious beliefs are a private affair; public officials cannot use their positions to impose or promote their beliefs.

Moreover, when it comes to the veil, much more needs to be done than banning the burqa and neqab and the veil from public spaces. The veil is a symbol like no other of what it means to be a woman under Islam — hidden from view, bound, and gagged. It is a tool for restricting and suppressing women. Of course there are some who choose to be veiled, but you cannot say it is a matter of choice because, socially speaking, the veil is anything but. There is no "choice" for most women. In countries under Islamic rule, it is compulsory. Even here, in Britain, according to a joint statement about the veil from "Muslim groups, scholars and leaders," including the Muslim Council of Britain, Hizb ut Tahrir and Islamic "Human Rights" Commission, it is stated that the veil "is not open to debate." The statement goes so far as to "advise all Muslims to exercise extreme caution in this issue since denying any part of Islam may lead to disbelief."

As I have said before, take away all the pressure and intimidation and threats and you will see how many remain veiled.

When it comes to the veiling of girls in schools, though, child veiling must not only be banned in public institutions and schools but also in private schools and everywhere.

Here the issue extends beyond the principle of secularism and goes straight to the heart of children's rights.

While adults may "choose" veiling or a religion, children by their very nature cannot make such choices; what they do is really what their parents tell them to do.

Even if there are children who say they like or choose to be veiled (as some media have reported), child veiling must still be banned — just as a child must be protected even if she "chooses" to stay with her abusive parents rather than in state care, even if she "chooses" to work to support her family in violation of child labour laws or even if she "chooses" to stop attending school.

The state is duty bound to protect children and must level the playing field for children and ensure that nothing segregates them or restricts them from accessing information, advances in society and rights, playing, swimming and in general doing things children must do.

Whatever their beliefs, parents do not have the right to impose their beliefs, including veiling, on children just because they are their own children, just as they can't deny their children medical assistance or beat and neglect them or marry them off at 9 because it's part of their beliefs or religion.

Children and under-16s must be protected from all forms of manipulation by religions and religious institutions. Cultural and religious practices or ceremonies, which are violent, inhuman, or incompatible with people's rights and equality, must be banned. Any kind of financial, material or moral support by the state to religion and religious activities and institutions must be stopped. All religious establishments must be registered as private enterprises, taxed.

The same applies to Sharia courts for so-called minorities, something that was successfully opposed in Canada and is now being promoted in the UK as a way to promote "minority rights." Aside from the fact that Sharia law is inherently unjust, it is discriminatory and unfair to have different and separate systems, standards and norms for "different" people. The concept of an Islamic court adheres to a principle of separate but equal similar to that promoted by the former Apartheid regime of South Africa. It was clear then as it is clear now that separate is not equal. In fact it is a prescription for inequality and discrimination. It makes a group of people forever minorities and never citizens equal before and under the law.

Today, also more than ever, we are in need of the de-religionisation of society, not as a private affair but against the religion industry, which is above the law, unregulated and never held accountable for its fatwas, murder and mayhem.

And we need an acknowledgement of the Islamic Inquisition and real solidarity with and a strengthening of the anti-Islamic enlightenment bubbling from below that despises Islamism and Islamic morality, scorns the clergy, and rejects an ordained social hierarchy, not more of the same attempts at rescuing Islam and Islamism over the dead bodies of our beloved.

Let me end with a quote from the late atheist and humanist Mansoor Hekmat:

*"I realise that the interests of some require that they rescue Islam (as much as possible) from the wrath of those who have witnessed the indescribable atrocities of or been victimised by Islamists. I also realise that the extent of these atrocities and holocausts is such that even some Islamists themselves do not want to take responsibility for them. So it is natural that the debate on 'true Islam' vis-à-vis 'practical Islam' is broached over and over again. These justifications, however, are fool-*

*ish from my point of view ... and from the points of views of those of us who have seen or been the victims of Islam's crimes. They are foolish for those of us who are living through a colossal social, political and intellectual struggle with this beast. The doctrinal and Koranic foundations of Islam, the development of Islam's history, and the political identity and affiliation of Islam and Islamists in the battle between reaction and freedom in our era are too obvious to allow the debate on the various interpretations of Islam and the existence or likelihood of other interpretations to be taken seriously.*

*"...In Islam, be it true or untrue, the individual has no rights or dignity. In Islam, the woman is a slave. In Islam, the child is on par with animals. In Islam, freethinking is a sin deserving of punishment. Music is corrupt. Sex without permission and religious certification, is the greatest of sins. This is the religion of death. In reality, all religions are such but most religions have been restrained by freethinking and freedom-loving humanity over hundreds of years. This one was never restrained or controlled. With every move, it brings abominations and misery.*

*"Moreover, in my opinion, defending the existence of Islam under the guise of respect for people's beliefs is hypocritical and lacks credence. There are various beliefs amongst people. The question is not about respecting people's beliefs but about which are worthy of respect. In any case, no matter what anyone says, everyone is choosing beliefs that are to their liking. Those who reject a criticism of Islam under the guise of respecting people's beliefs are only expressing their own political and moral preferences, full stop. They choose Islam as a belief worthy of respect and package their own beliefs as the 'people's beliefs' only in order to provide 'populist' legitimisation for their own choices. I will not respect any superstition or the suppression of rights, even if all the people of the world do so. Of course I know it is the right of all to believe in whatever they want. But there is a fundamental difference between respecting the freedom of opinion of individuals and respecting the opinions they hold. We are not sitting in judgement of the world; we are players and participants in it. Each of us are party to this historical, worldwide struggle, which in my opinion, from the beginning of time until now has been over the freedom and equality of human beings..."*

Mansoor Hekmat, *Islam and De-Islamisation*, January 1999: [www.hekmat.public-archive.net/en/3140en.html](http://www.hekmat.public-archive.net/en/3140en.html)

**SW**

*Maryam Namazie is spokesperson of the One Law for All campaign and Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain. For more information, go to [www.maryamnamazie](http://www.maryamnamazie) or [maryamnamazie.blogspot.com](http://maryamnamazie.blogspot.com), or email [maryamnamazie@gmail.com](mailto:maryamnamazie@gmail.com).*



(Photo by Eibhlin Seoigthe)

# “Celebrating the Success of the 1<sup>st</sup> Ever Atheist Conference on Kenyan Soil”

By Winnie Nyokabi & Boaz Adhengo



The June 4 Jahwar Amber Humanist Fund Conference 2011 coincided with the launch date of Atheist Alliance International at the World Atheist Convention in Dublin.

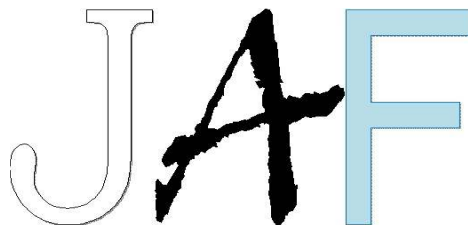
The theme for our conference was “Philosophy, Sexuality and Atheism” — a remarkable mix of intellectual discoveries that kept the participants walking in and out of the two conference rooms that we had booked.

To our aid, we had the Kenya Human Rights Commission, Minority Women in Action, Artists for Recognition and Acceptance, Kenya Association of Humanists in Aid of Women Atheists and the JAF On Campus members. The conference was a breed of expectations and none wanted it to end. So, we had to do one long meeting to involve activities in one dais.

A number of papers were discussed, including: “Ethics without God,” “The Lesbian Economy,” “Life of the Sexual Minorities,”

“Human Rights and LGBTI,”

“Separation of Church and State,” and,



Jahwar Amber Humanist Fund

in great length, “Opportunities and Threats of Secular Practice in Kenya.”

One of the reasons why the “JAF

Conference on Philosophy, Sexuality and Atheism” took place was to interrogate in great detail the Kenyan constitution and involve the public array into a possible support for sexual democracy within our own private orientations. The publicity that the JAF Conference 2011 gathered has resulted in me (Boaz) being laid off a consulting organisation that I have been working with. They said that my atheism is a bad image for their business and I might scare the clients. Wow!! In this time of the year... Wow!!

Atheism is properly legal in Kenya, but the rate of superstition among the citizens makes business owners put aside those who openly declare themselves as atheists. You will be surprised that one-third of JAF membership still write in their resume that they are Christians, just so that you get a job. Wow...am so hurt!

You will be surprised that most of the participants know nothing about Atheist Alliance International, and when I was introducing the donors, they stuck at Skepchick’s and were asking me why Rebecca [Watson] did not come. I had to explain lots and lots. Now that they know







of AAI, SSA and Skepchicks, these participants want us to do more projects jointly, and we are meeting later to share our mission statements and objectives and possibly to make the Jimlizer Declaration, which is our way forward on issues of sexuality.

Our exhibition table had copies of Freethought literature, magazines and books from Prometheus Books, and the participants can't believe that an atheist and sexual conference is taking place in Nairobi despite what the media has broadcasted on local TV over the past few days.

The conference was amazing... our security detail was great... but our venue turn out was 67, a little low than the 100-150 expectations. At the dinner dance, we got 170 participants. All the same, we managed to educate lots of the participants on their rights. The lawyer from Kenya Human Rights Commission explained that it is not illegal to be a homosexual in Kenya, but rather, it is illegal to be found in the act of homosexuality, which is kind of impossible given that there is right to privacy. So, it is a matter of educating many on these rights and how freedom can be gathered the secular way. All they need to know is how to play around with the different articles. The chal-

lenge is illiteracy and the need for forums on this, which is beyond our budget and capability. This conference gave them hopes that we might not be able to tackle on our own.



You just can't miss this, it was the greatest thing ever, the first ever atheist conference in Kenya, in the history of free government and in the entire history of the nation, nothing like this has ever happened. The media only wrote

newspaper articles as our security did not allow them a live broadcast for we feared the public might storm the venue. So we only allowed newspaper reporters, and they took photos. That was it. I hope this was right, but we had to protect our guests.

Just that you know, the conference, during the paper on Lesbian Economy, understood the problems that lesbians in Kenya undergo, from arbitrary arrest, to drug problems to unacceptance by society... There is just so much follow-up needed to be done. This, I definitely count on AAI, for we discovered much more than we ever knew, and personally, as the founder of organised humanism in Kenya, I never knew people could be so open and free to talk of their problems in a secular fashion. Even with a media that relies on state funds and writes according to state governance.

Great thanks to Atheist Alliance International, Secular Students Alliance and the Skepchicks Foundation for sponsoring us. We look forward to doing this one more time, and to stay connected in outreach endeavours that best promote understanding of atheism in Africa. Thank you so much!! Despite the Catholic obstacles, we made it! Our conference was a success!! **SW**

