

## **FROM CATHOLICISM TO HUMANISM**

### **( A Talk given by Joe Sampson to**

#### **(i) the Atheist Society at the Melbourne Unitarian Church on July 9 2013**

#### **(ii)the Peninsula Atheists on August 27 2013)**

I was brought up a Catholic but at age 16 stopped believing Catholicism. I now , at age 67, consider myself a Humanist and atheist. In this talk I want to discuss my upbringing as a Catholic, why I eventually rejected Catholicism and why I now think that the Humanist worldview is the correct worldview.

In presenting this talk I do not wish to criticise my parents, nor the priests nor nuns nor brothers nor lay teachers, who all genuinely believed in the Catholic religion and believed that they were doing the best for me in raising me a Catholic.

I was born in 1946 to Catholic parents. My father's father was Church of England and his mother Catholic. She insisted that their eight children be brought up Catholic. My mother's parents were Italian immigrants, both Catholic, with nine children. During World War 2 my father fought on the Kokoda trail and my mother was in the air force.

I can remember when I was fairly young, probably about three or four, being told by my parents that there was a God, a powerful man in the sky, who made the world. At that young age I had no reason to doubt my parents.

When I began as a student at St. Joan of Arc's Catholic primary school in Brighton, at age four and a half, I already believed in God so that I was receptive to further information about God from the teachers. The school was run by nuns, the Presentation sisters; there was one lay teacher there.

If my memory is correct I was taught by one nun throughout my seven years at St. Joan of Arc's. I had the nun for prep grade and grades 2 to 7 and a lay teacher in Grade 1. The nun's name was Sister Conleth, a softly spoken person, who could control her students without physical punishment. In contrast, I remember that the lay teacher, Miss Bourke , hit students with a feather duster if they misbehaved. To this day I remember how much the feather duster hurt. The nuns were dressed from head to toe in a black habit, mounted by a white wimple; the outfit was nicknamed by some a penguin suit. After St. Joan of Arc's I went to C.B.C. (Christian Brothers' College) East St. Kilda for 5 years. The brothers wore black suits as did the priests.

I remember that about half our day at St. Joan of Arc's was spent on religious subjects such as Church History and Church Doctrine. I worked hard at the subjects and believed all that I

was told. The school was next door to the church that we regularly visited. At C.B.C. we spent one hour each day on religion.

Right from the beginning of my schooling I was taught about Catholic doctrine from Sister Conleth. A large portion of the time was spent telling stories from the Bible. In addition a lot of time was spent talking about specific Catholic doctrines. I had no reason to doubt anything that I was told as I thought that my parents, priests and teachers were far more knowledgeable than I. I no longer believe in the supernatural or the historical accuracy of what I was told but some of the ethical precepts I still accept.

We were told by Sister Conleth that a long time ago God lived far away in a place called Heaven, which is past all the stars. A number of powerful beings, called angels, lived with him. One day one of the angels, called Lucifer, led a group of angels that rebelled against God and tried to replace God as king of heaven with Lucifer. A group of angels loyal to God, led by St. Michael, put down the rebellion. God punished the rebellious angels by sending them to a place called Hell, which is a place of never ending fire, where the rebellious angels, called the devils, are in constant pain. Lucifer was renamed Satan after being sent to hell. Although the devils are usually in hell, sometimes they roam the earth tempting humans to do evil. Satan is also known as The Devil.

Sister Conleth taught us that one day God decided to make the world. He created the world in six days and rested on the seventh, which was a Saturday. God created a region called the Garden of Eden, a place with rich vegetation. He created a man called Adam and created animals, who lived in peace with Adam. Adam didn't have to work – everything was provided for him. God took a rib from Adam's body, which he turned into a woman called Eve, who became Adam's companion. Adam and Eve were both naked and had no shame about it. God told Adam and Eve that they could eat any fruit in the garden except the fruit from an apple tree. The Devil, disguised as a snake, said to Eve ""why don't you eat from the apple tree: the fruit is tasty". So Eve ate an apple and talked Adam into eating an apple also. Adam and Eve now became ashamed of their nudity and wore fig leaves. When God found out he was furious and made clothes for Adam and Eve and banished them from Eden.

As a result of Adam and Eve's disobedience all humans since then have been born in what is called Original Sin, an inborn tendency to do evil, and they need the Church to combat this tendency. Adam and Eve had sons called Cain and Abel. After a disagreement Cain killed Abel.

Adam and Eve's children had descendants who multiplied and spread over the face of the earth. One of these was Methuselah, who lived to nine hundred and sixty nine years and who was the oldest man who ever lived.

Another descendant was Noah, who was a good man. However, God had decided that most humans were wicked and that he would kill all humans except for Noah and his family plus kill most animals. God told Noah to build an ark (a large boat). God told Noah to take a male and female of every animal and bring them into the boat and to bring plenty of food to feed all on the boat. Noah did as God said and shortly after a flood came which drowned all the earth and killed all living things except those on the boat. The flood lasted several months and eventually the flood subsided and all the inhabitants of Noah's ark left it and over time they had descendants. God promised Noah and his family that he would never send a flood to cover the earth again, with the rainbow being a reminder of God's promise.

Sister Conleth told us that at one stage a group of people, descended from Noah, decided to build a tower in a town called Babel. The tower was to be so tall that it reached heaven, where God lived. At that stage everyone spoke the same language. God was so annoyed about the people building the tower to reach heaven that to stop their building he made each person speak with a different language so that they could not communicate with each other and that's how the different languages originated. The people then spread over the face of the earth.

We were taught that one of Noah's descendants was Abraham, who, with his descendants, was promised by God the land of Canaan, which was occupied by the Canaanites. Abraham had a son called Isaac. We were told of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, and of how evil its people were. God told Abraham that he intended destroying these cities. An angel appeared to Lot, a nephew of Abraham, telling him to flee Sodom, as it was to be destroyed as punishment and not to look back. As Lot and his family fled, Lot's wife looked back and was turned into a pillar of salt.

Abraham and his wife had a son, Isaac. God one day told Abraham to sacrifice his son. Abraham tied up his son and placed him on some wood, which he intended to light. Abraham was ready to kill his son when God told him to stop, knowing now that Abraham was ready to obey God.

We were taught that Isaac had children, one of whom was Jacob. God renamed Jacob Israel. His descendants were called Israelites. One of them, Joseph, Jacob gave a multi-coloured tunic. His older brothers were jealous and came to hate him. One day they ripped off his tunic and sold him as a slave. They dipped his tunic in blood and took it to Jacob, saying that Joseph had been killed by wild animals. Joseph was sold to Egyptians. There he interpreted dreams for the Pharaoh and became powerful.

We were told that a Pharaoh in Egypt commanded that all first born Israelite boys living in Egypt were to be thrown in the Nile. An Israelite woman gave birth to a son. She hid him for a while. When she could no longer hide him she put him in a basket that floated in the water. The Pharaoh's daughter came to bathe in the water. When she saw the baby boy she took pity on him and raised him. The boy was called Moses. One day he saw an

Egyptian beating an Israelite; he was so angry that he killed the Egyptian. Moses then fled Egypt.

We were told that one day Moses saw a bush burning but not being consumed. A voice from the bush said that he was God and wanted Moses bring the Israelites out of Egypt and into neighbouring lands. Moses asked the Pharaoh to free the Israelites but he refused. Moses told God who said to tell the Pharaoh that God will send terrible plagues to Egypt if the Israelites were not freed. This Moses did but the Pharaoh would not relent. God sent ten different plagues. The Pharaoh relented only after the tenth plague. With the first plague the Nile turned to blood for a week. The second plague was frogs swarming the country. The eighth plague was a plague of locusts, destroying crops. The ninth plague was making Egypt dark. With the tenth plague all the first born Egyptian children were to be killed. Moses told the Israelites to each kill a lamb and put its blood on their doors so that when God passes their houses he will not kill their first born. After all the first born Egyptians were killed the Pharaoh ordered all the Israelites out of Egypt. The Israelites then marched out.

We were told that the Pharaoh changed his mind and sent his army to stop the Israelites. The Israelites were camped by the Red Sea. God sent a wind to drive back the sea so that there was a dry bed that the Israelites walked through to land on the opposite side. The Egyptian army followed but the waters returned and drowned the army. Soon bread rained down from heaven, sent by God for the Israelites. The Israelites eventually entered the Sinai desert. They camped in front of a mountain called Mount Sinai. After a few days they heard thunder and lightning and a blast of a loud trumpet. God had appeared on the top of the mountain as a blazing fire. Moses climbed to the top of the mountain, where God gave his ten commandments, written on two stone tablets.

The ten commandments are:

1. I am the lord, your God. You shall have no other gods before me;
2. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain;
3. Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy;
4. Honour your father and mother;
5. You shall not kill;
6. You shall not commit adultery;
7. You shall not steal;
8. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour;
9. You shall not covet your neighbour's goods;
10. You shall not covet your neighbour's wife.

While Moses was on the mountain some of the Israelites made a golden calf which they worshipped. Moses when he came down from the mountain saw the golden calf and in anger broke the tablets. God was offended at the calf worshippers, whom Moses went on

to kill. Moses ordered that the tablets be placed in an ark made of wood and covered in gold. The ark was called Ark of the Covenant.

The Israelites continued their journey, with God promising them that they would conquer the land of Canaan. God told Moses to go to the top of a mountain and see the land promised to the Israelites, the Promised Land. Moses died before the Israelites reached the Promised Land. Joshua took over as leader. God told Joshua to conquer the city of Jericho, which was surrounded by a large wall. Some Israelites sounded trumpets outside Jericho, then all the Israelites shouted. The walls came tumbling down. Then the Israelites conquered Jericho. When The Israelites fought the Amorites Joshua asked God to keep the Sun fixed in the sky till the battle was over; God complied.

Some time later an Israelite named Samson was born, who was very strong because of his long hair. At one stage Samson killed one thousand Philistines with the jawbone of a donkey; the Philistines were a tribe hostile to the Israelites. One day Samson became enamoured of a woman called Delilah. Some Philistines approached her and offered her money if she could find out the secret of Samson's strength. Samson told Delilah that it was his long hair. While he was asleep she let in some Philistines who cut his hair. This weakened him. The Philistines chained him and blinded him. Some months later Samson's hair had grown back but the Philistines had not noticed. In a large banquet hall Samson grabbed some columns and pushed them bringing down the hall killing all the Philistines in it plus Samson.

Some time later the Israelites were being attacked by the Philistines, led by a giant, named Goliath. A young boy, David, threw some stones at him, from a slingshot, hitting him on the head and killing him. David then cut off his head. David eventually became king of Israel.

David's son, Solomon, succeeded him as king. Solomon became known for his wisdom. Once two women came to him with a baby, each claiming to be the mother. Solomon ordered a soldier to cut the baby in half. The woman who was not the mother agreed to it while the mother said not to kill the baby and give him to the other woman. Solomon then gave the baby to his mother.

We were told about Job, a man who thought highly of God. Job was wealthy and had many children. One day Satan met God, who said "Job honours me". Satan replied to God that job honours you only because of his wealth. God decided to test Job's loyalty to him. God told Satan that he could take away his wealth but not harm him. Satan killed Job's children, animals and servants. Job's response was to say: "The Lord has given and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord". God then said to Satan that Job honoured God in spite of his misfortunes. Satan then asked God to let him harm Job and see whether Job still honoured God. God replied to Satan that he could harm him but not kill him. Satan then caused Job to be covered with sores that made him miserable. Job then said to his friends that he did not know why God was afflicting him. God then appeared in a whirlwind and

told Job that he should accept God's decisions without question because God made the world. Job repented. In return God gave him more children and animals.

We were told that King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon took control of part of Israel and took some of its people back to his palace. The king made a golden statue that every subject must worship or be cast into a fiery furnace. Three of the Israelites at his palace, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, refused and were thrown into the furnace. God sent an angel who caused them not be harmed. The king then released them.

Nebuchadnezzar died and his son, Belshazzar, became king. One evening, during a banquet, the king ordered that everyone drink from the gold and silver cups that his father had taken from the temple in Jerusalem. While people were drinking a hand appeared and wrote some words on a nearby wall. The king was anxious at this and asked Daniel, who was an Israelite, what the words meant. Daniel said that God was offended by people drinking from the cups and that Belshazzar's reign would soon be over and his kingdom would be divided between the Medes and Persians. Belshazzar died shortly after and Darius, a Mede prince, took control of his kingdom, with Daniel remaining as an important official. There were officials who were jealous of Daniel and so they asked Darius to make a law that no one could pray to anyone except the king; punishment for breaking the law was to be thrown in a den of lions. The conspirators found Daniel praying to his God and reported this to Darius, who had Daniel thrown in a den of lions. Daniel was unharmed by the lions; Darius freed Daniel and put the conspirators, their wives and their children in the den of lions, who killed them.

We were told about Jonah, who was told to go to the city of Nineveh to preach against its wickedness. But Jonah instead caught a boat to another city. A strong storm threw the boat around. The sailors cast lots to see who was to blame and the lot chosen was Jonah's. Jonah told them that the storm was because he had offended God. The sailors threw Jonah in the sea. The storm then calmed. Jonah was swallowed by a whale. The whale spewed Jonah out on dry land three days later. God then asked Jonah to preach at Nineveh, which he did.

We were taught about a woman, a virgin, named Mary, who was engaged to Joseph, a carpenter. God sent the angel Gabriel to visit Mary to tell her that she would give birth to a son and that the son's father would be God. At that time the Israelites were ruled by the Romans. The Roman emperor ordered that everyone go to their place of birth and register for a census. Joseph, who lived in Nazareth, went to his birthplace in Bethlehem with a pregnant Mary riding on a donkey. They tried to find a room at an inn, but could not as all the inns were full. They were forced to find room in a stall with animals. Mary gave birth to her son and laid him in a manger. Nearby some shepherds were in the fields, minding their flocks. An angel appeared and said that today a Saviour (i.e. one who shall save humanity from their sins) is born and is wrapped in clothes, lying in a manger. A large number of

angels then appeared saying “Glory to God in the highest heaven and peace on earth to men of goodwill”. The angels returned to heaven. The shepherds then went to the manger and saw the baby, whose name was Jesus.

We were told that Bethlehem was part of Judaea, a Jewish kingdom ruled by King Herod. Shortly after Jesus’s birth three Magi, wise men from the East, guided by a star, came to Jerusalem, asking where is the child born to be King of the Jews. When Herod heard about this he was worried as he considered himself to be King of the Jews. Herod asked the priests where the child was born; they replied in Bethlehem. Herod summoned the wise men and told them to tell him where the child is so that Herod could pay homage. The wise men followed the star, which stopped at the place where Jesus was born. The Magi went into the manger and saw Mary and Jesus. They worshipped Jesus and gave him presents – gold, incense and myrrh. The wise men were warned in a dream not to return to Herod and went back to the East.

We were told that Joseph also had a dream in which an angel appeared and told him to flee with Mary and Jesus because Herod intended to kill Jesus. When Herod found out that Jesus had escaped he was furious and ordered that all children in the Bethlehem who were two or younger were to be killed; these children were called the Holy Innocents. Some time later an angel appeared in a dream to Joseph and told him that Herod had died and that it was safe for him to live in Nazareth, where Joseph worked as a carpenter, being helped by Jesus.

When Jesus was twelve he went with Joseph and Mary to celebrate in Jerusalem the Passover, the flight of the Israelites with Moses from Egypt. When the festival was over Mary and Joseph left. After they had travelled a distance Mary and Joseph could not find Jesus, who they had thought was in the travelling group. They went back to Jerusalem, where they found Jesus discussing religion with priests, who were astonished at how much Jesus knew about religion.

We were told that some years later somebody called John the Baptist was standing in the Jordan River baptising people, i.e. pouring water over people’s heads while praying. Jesus asked John to baptise him, which he did. Then God came down in the form of a dove and rested on Jesus. Then a voice came from Heaven and said: “This is my dearly beloved Son, in Whom I am well pleased”.

We were told that Jesus then went into the desert. He fasted for forty days and forty nights. The devil took him to a very high mountain and from there showed him all the kingdoms of the world. The devil said that he would give Jesus all the kingdoms of the world if he would worship the devil but Jesus refused.

We were told that Jesus had some followers, called apostles, or disciples; there were twelve in all, including Peter, Andrew, James and John. They travelled with him through the region

of Galilee as he preached religion and cured people of illnesses and expelled devils from people.

We were told that Jesus and Mary were at a wedding feast in Cana. At a certain time the wine had run out. Jesus told the servants to fill some vases with water. Jesus then turned the water into wine.

We were told that once Peter had been fishing all night but had caught nothing. In the morning Jesus told Peter to spread his nets once more and this time numerous fish were caught.

We were told of Jesus preaching the Sermon on the Mount in which he said: "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth". As a fairly timid child I liked this; but now I do not believe it. We were also told that Jesus said that if someone strikes you on the right cheek offer the other cheek. Again, here is Jesus promoting meekness. We were also said to love your enemy.

We were told that at one stage Jesus and his disciples went on a boat to cross a lake. After a while there was a wind, which caused large waves, which tossed the boat around furiously. The disciples got worried. Jesus then extended his arm and the wind stopped and the lake was calmed. When they got to the other side to the land of the Gadarenes they came across two violent men who were possessed by devils. Jesus then cast out the devils and the devils entered some pigs and the pigs rushed into the water and drowned.

We were told that John the Baptist was arrested by King Herod, the son of the King Herod who had slayed the Holy Innocents. John was arrested because he had criticised Herod's marriage to his Herodias. One day Herod held a banquet at which Herodias's daughter, Salome, danced so well that Herod said to her that he would grant any request up to half his kingdom. Salome then asked her mother what she should request. Herodias told her to ask for John the Baptist's head on a plate. Herod reluctantly had John beheaded.

We were told that at one stage Jesus preached to five hundred people. The disciples told him there was little food for the people: five loaves of bread and two fish. Jesus said that was enough and converted the food into enough bread and fish to feed the people.

We were told that one evening the Apostles were on a boat on a lake. There were waves that were quite strong. Jesus at this stage had been on a mountain. Suddenly the Apostles saw Jesus walking on the water. Jesus told Peter to walk on the water. Peter walked for a while but then started to sink. Jesus told him not to lack faith and caught his hand and they walked on water to the boat.

We were taught that we should have faith in the Catholic religion because Jesus said that faith can move mountains.

We were told that Jesus said to his disciples: “What profits it a man to gain the whole world but lose his soul.” We were told that this meant that it would not gain a man to acquire a lot of wealth but have his soul (the part of the body that we were told survives death) go to Hell. I remember telling a fellow seven year old from St. Joan of Arc school that I thought that I would probably go to Hell. He said that he felt likewise.

We were taught that one day Jesus was on a mountain with some disciples. There Jesus was transfigured, his face shining like the Sun and his clothes like a white light. Two prophets, Moses and Elijah, appeared and began talking to Jesus. Then a bright cloud overshadowed them and a voice said “This is my dearly beloved son in whom I am well-pleased; listen to him.”

We were told that Jesus said that people should stay married for life and not divorce. He said: “What God has put together let no man put asunder.” He said that God had allowed divorce under Moses but that it was now no longer permitted.

We were told about a man called Lazarus, who had been dead several days. Jesus went to his tomb, had the covering of the tomb removed, and brought him back to life.

We were told that Jesus taught the Golden Rule that said that you should treat others as you would have them treat you. I think that one does not have to be a Christian to accept this – this is something that is generally accepted.

We were told that Jesus taught people to say the prayer called the Our Father (or Lord’s Prayer). It’s words are: “Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. Amen.” This is a prayer that we were expected to say regularly both inside and outside the classroom.

We were taught that Jesus said that there will be a Final Judgment Day on which God will come with his angels to sit in judgment of everyone. He will separate people from each other, with the good people on the right and the bad people on the left. The good people will go to Heaven to be eternally happy and the bad people will go to Hell to burn forever. To the evil people God will say: “Begone ye accursed into the everlasting hellfire which is prepared for the Devil and his angels.” This story worried me a lot and I often feared that I would go to hell. Although we were taught about hellfire by Sister Conleth some years later she said that hell is not literally fire but separation from God. She said that although the Catholic Church teaches that some people become saints and hence are in heaven it has never said that some people go to hell – so perhaps no one goes to hell.

We were told that Jesus taught parables. These were short stories to tell messages. One parable was of the prodigal son. A rich man had two sons. The younger son asked for his share of the inheritance. The father divided his property in two. The younger one sold his

half while the older one stayed at home and kept working for his father. After having spent all his money the younger one came home and asked his father whether he could work for him. His father was so overjoyed at the return of his son that he held a banquet for him. The older son was so upset that his father rewarded the son who had wasted his money. The point of the parable is that there is more joy in heaven for a repentant sinner than for the good people.

We were told of Jesus's parable of the talents. Sister Conleth told us that the parable was a play on words: A talent was a valuable Roman coin and a talent also refers to a person's abilities. Jesus told of an employer who gave one servant five talents, another two talents and another one talent, expecting them to manage the money. The one who received five talents did business with it and made a further five talents. The employer was pleased and gave him a promotion. The one who received two talents made a further two talents and again the employer was pleased and gave him another promotion. The one who received one talent just buried it in a hole in the ground. The employer was not pleased and sacked him. The moral of this story is that we are each born with different talents, some with more than the others and we should make use of what talents we have. I think that this is a useful idea and have tried to act on it during my life.

We were told of Jesus's parable of the rich man, Dives, who dressed in fine clothes and feasted every day and of a poor man, Lazarus, who was covered in sores and used to come to Dives's gate, asking to be fed. Dives refused to feed him. Lazarus died and was carried by the angels to Heaven to be with Abraham. Dives died and went to Hell, where he was in agony. Dives cried out to Abraham that he wanted Lazarus to provide him with water because the flames tormented him. Abraham said that it was not possible. The moral of this story is that the evil will be punished forever in Hell.

We were told that Jesus said that you must love your neighbour to obtain eternal life. To illustrate this Jesus told of a man who, while walking on a road, was stripped by bandits, beaten and left for dead. Two Jews walking past ignored him, but a Samaritan (a breakaway sect from the Jews who the Jews despised) bandaged him took him to an inn and paid for him to be looked after. The Samaritan loved his neighbour.

We were told that one time Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey. He entered the temple and overturned the tables of money-changers and seats of those who sold doves, saying that what should be a house of prayer was a den of thieves.

We were told that Jesus knew that he was going to die, as a sacrifice, to appease God for all humanity's sins. Jesus sat down with his apostles to eat his last supper. The chief priests had conspired to kill Jesus. One of the twelve apostles, Judas Iscariot, went to the priests and agreed to betray Jesus for thirty pieces of silver. At the last supper Jesus said to his apostles that one would betray him. Jesus then gave each apostle some bread and told them that this was his body. We were told that Jesus is present in the communion bread

that people receive in church. Jesus told Peter that he would deny Jesus three times before the cock crows. Jesus then went to a place called Gethsemane to pray to God about his forthcoming ordeal. Some men then came with Judas to arrest Jesus. Then all the disciples fled. Jesus was brought before the high priest, Caiphias, who asked him whether he was the Son of God, to which he said yes and that he would soon be sitting at the right hand of God. Caiphias then said that he had blasphemed and the crowd called for his death. Judas then suicided.

Jesus was then brought before Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor. Pilate saw nothing wrong with him. However, because he was concerned that a riot may occur, he had Jesus whipped and a crown of thorns placed on his head. Jesus was then forced to carry a heavy wooden beam to the hill of Cavalry, where he was to be crucified. He was crucified with two thieves; one cursed him and the other praised him. Jesus told the latter that he would be with him that day in Paradise.

Jesus was nailed to a cross, with a sign above him saying "Jesus, King of Jews". As he suffered on the cross Jesus said: "Father forgive them for they know not what they do" and "Father, why hast thou forsaken me?"; I found it puzzling that Jesus would say the latter. When Jesus died the sky went dark and there was an earthquake and many dead people were raised to life and walked through Jerusalem. Among the people at the crucifixion were Jesus's mother, Mary, and Mary Magdalene.. Jesus was buried in a tomb which was dug out from the rock on a hillside. An enormous rock covered the opening to the tomb.

The chief priests went to Pilate and said that Jesus said that he will rise from the dead in three days. They said that to ensure that his followers don't steal his body and say that he's not in his tomb and therefore risen that soldiers should be guarding the tomb. Soldiers went to the tomb. Shortly after an angel removed the rock, surprising the soldiers. Mary and Mary Magdalene, who had gone to the tomb, were told by the angel that Jesus had risen. Shortly after Jesus appeared to the apostles. A short time later Jesus descended into Hell to free all the good people temporarily there because of Adam and Eve's disobedience and then Jesus ascended into Heaven.

We were told that the apostles went on spread Jesus's teaching, were persecuted by the Romans and that Peter, who became the first pope, was crucified upside down by the Romans. One of the people persecuting the early Christians was Paul, who converted to Christianity when a bright light from Heaven told him to stop persecuting Jesus.

We were told of how one of the Roman emperors, Constantine, became a Christian, which guaranteed him victory in a battle and how all the Empire became Catholic. We were told that the Protestants, Luther and Henry VIII, broke away from the Catholic Church, the latter because the Pope would not grant him a divorce. In the Church History subject we were told of how in the Middle Ages Protestants persecuted Catholics, torturing them and

burning them at the stake. We weren't told that the Catholics the same sorts of things to Protestants. It was only in my teens that I found out about the Inquisition.

Each class, at both primary and secondary level, began and ended with prayers, with everybody standing. At the beginning and end of prayers one made the sign of the cross: i.e. one touched one's forehead, chest, left shoulder, then right shoulder and said the sign of the cross prayer: "In the name of the Father, and of the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen." The prayers usually said were the Our Father and Hail Mary. The words of the Hail Mary are: "Hail Mary, full of grace. The Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen." We were expected to write at the top of each page of our exercise books the initials A.M.D.G., which stands for "All My Day for God." At night before the family had dinner my father said a prayer, Grace Before Meals: "Bless us, O Lord, and these your gifts, which we are about to receive from your bounty, through Christ, Our Lord. Amen."

We were told that when a person died he or she went to Heaven, Hell, Purgatory or Limbo. Limbo was for unbaptised Catholic infants – they were not punished but could not see God. All non-Catholics go to Hell. Catholics would go to Heaven if they were in a state of grace, i.e. without sin (a sin being an act forbidden by God). One could have sins wiped from one's soul by going to Confession, which one was expected to do once a month in the Confessional, two church rooms side by side with the priest in one room and the confessor in another. There was a small window, with a grill, in the wall dividing the two rooms. The confessor spoke through this window to the priest. One began one's confession by saying: "Bless me father for I have sinned. It is one month since my last confession and these are my sins." One then listed one's sins, which might have included being lazy, lying, being angry, stealing, etc. At the end of the Confession the priest specified one's penance, e.g. saying two Our Fathers and five Hail Marys. Once one did one's penance one was in a state of grace (i.e. free of sin) and if one died in a state of grace one went straight to Heaven. There were two types of sins one could commit: mortal (i.e. serious) sins and venial (i.e. not so serious) sins. Murder is an example of a mortal sin. If one died in a state of mortal sin one went to Hell forever. If one died in a state of venial sin one went to Purgatory, a temporary Hell. Once one had done one's time in Purgatory one went to Heaven.

We were told that among those who went straight to Heaven when they died are people declared saints by the Catholic Church, e.g. St. Joseph, husband of Mary, mother of Jesus and St. Peter, one of Christ's apostles and the first Pope. We were told that the pope is the head of the church, God's representative on Earth and that sometimes the Pope speaks infallibly.

We were expected to attend Mass, the Catholic Church service, every Sunday plus certain other days, called Holy Days of Obligation (e.g. Christmas Day); non-attendance put a person

in a state of mortal sin. The various parts of the Mass were said by the priest in Latin. We were all expected to own a Missal, a book that set out the various parts of Mass. We were expected to sing hymns during Mass. During Mass one was expected to take Communion, i.e. have a small wafer of bread put in one's mouth by the priest. It was believed that Christ was present in the communion bread. One could not go to communion in a state of mortal sin. We were not allowed to eat or drink anything from midnight before taking communion, which would occur at Mass on Sunday morning.

We were told that God is a trinity, i.e. composed of three persons: God the Father (the God of the Old Testament), God the Son (Jesus) and the Holy Ghost (or Holy Spirit). We were expected to bow our heads whenever we spoke Jesus's name.

We were taught that evolution is false – it contradicts the Bible, which says that we are descended from Adam and Eve, who were created by God.

We were taught that each person has a guardian angel, who accompanies us throughout the day. The guardian angel is horrified if we sin and gladdened if we are good.

We were told that Jesus had to carry a cross and that we all, in a non-literal way, have a cross to bear in our lives

As a child I was an altar boy, who assisted the priest with Mass.

At St. Joan of Arc's school we were taught of how Joan of Arc, after whom the school was named, spoke to angels and saints, who inspired her to lead French armies to victory against the English. She was captured by the English, who burnt her at the stake for heresy, but was subsequently pardoned by the Church and made a saint.

My first year at C.B.C. (Christian Brothers' College) in 1958 with a teacher called Brother Redmond. He was strict, strapping students for the most trivial reason. He regularly talked about Hellfire. He told us about two atheist friends, who ridiculed the concept of an afterlife, including Hell. They agreed that the first to die would contact the other if there was an afterlife. Eventually one died and appeared to his friend in a vision and said; "There is a Hell and I'm in it". Brother Redmond told us that impure (i.e. sexual) thoughts are sinful and could be a mortal sin. We were told that Jesus said that a man who looks at a woman lustfully he has committed adultery and Jesus said that if your right eye offends you then you should pluck it out – better to cut out the lusting eye than burn forever in Hell; Brother Redmond told us that a man did pluck out his eye after looking lustfully at a woman – when I heard this I almost fainted. Brother Redmond spoke out against what he termed smut magazines – i.e. magazines, which in 1958 when censorship was strict, were magazines that showed women in bikinis, which the Catholic Church considered decadent. We were told that sex outside marriage is a mortal sin.

I accepted everything that I had been taught about the Catholic religion for my first ten years of schooling. Although I accepted the Catholic religion I did not like it. I found it oppressive and depressing. The Universe seemed to me a giant prison, with God the chief ruler. I found Mass boring. Nevertheless I took religion seriously and at one point wanted to be a priest because I wanted to ensure that I went to Heaven. In my eleventh year at school, in Year 11, when I was 14, we were taught Catholic Apologetics, i.e. teachings which claimed to prove that God exists, the Bible is true and that evolution is false. I found these arguments unconvincing. I nevertheless went on believing for another two years. At the age of 16, while a Surveying student at R.M.I.T., I decided, as the Apologetics were unconvincing that I could no longer accept the Catholic religion. I did not dare tell my parents – they found out when I was 22, from a brother. I had influenced my four younger brothers away from the Catholic religion. When my mother found out she said to me: “You’ve caused them all to lose their souls”, i.e. we would all go to Hell. I joked, saying “the soles of my shoes are okay”. My mother said no more and accepted our non-religionism as did my father. I did argue occasionally with my father about religion, but not my mother as she would get too upset. Years later I found out that an uncle, one of my father’s brothers, was an atheist: he too had rejected Catholicism; shortly before he died his Catholic son sent a priest to see him on his deathbed – my uncle rejected him, saying “I’m not seeing a skipilot”.

I will now discuss some of the Apologetics and why I found them unconvincing.

The First Cause Argument was supposed to prove that God existed. This argument says that everything that exists has a cause. If from one thing one goes backwards in time through all antecedent causes we come to a First Cause, which is God. The problem with this argument is that if everything that exists has a cause then the First Cause must have a cause, which means that it is no longer a First Cause.

The Argument from Design says that if we saw a watch on the beach we would conclude that because it is so complex that it must be designed by someone. Then consider the eye, much more complex than a watch; it too must have been designed and that designer is God and likewise for the whole world. The problem that I could see with that argument is that we know from personal experience that a watch is designed. We do not know from personal experience that the eye is designed; the eye can be explained by evolution.

It occurred to me that even if these arguments for God’s existence were valid they would not prove the existence of the God of the Bible, only the existence of some god.

We were told that the Gospels must be true because the people who wrote them were genuine. As a 14 year old I could see the fallacy in this argument. One could argue also that the holy books of other religions are true because the authors were genuine. As at most one religion is true this argument fails.

We were told that the story of Jesus's resurrection from the dead must be true because so many people witnessed it. It occurred to me that perhaps people imagined Jesus was resurrected or maybe the gospel accounts were not accurate.

We were told that the theory of evolution must be false because this is akin to a large number of monkeys banging out letters randomly on a typewriter: no matter how much time they had they could not produce the works of Shakespeare. This is not true: given enough time the monkeys would eventually produce the works of Shakespeare.

If I had not learnt the Catholic Apologetics it is quite possible that I might still be a Catholic today.

When I stopped believing in God I started reading books in the R.M.I.T. library about evolution e.g. 'The Riddle of the Universe' by Ernst Haeckel and became convinced that evolution is accurate. Shortly after I stopped believing in God one day while walking down Swanston Street I looked up at the sky as though looking at God and said: "I'm free of you now, you bastard" – I was so oppressed by religion. I used to call myself an agnostic but now call myself an atheist because I think that all the suffering in the world is incompatible with an all-knowing, all-loving, all-powerful God.

After I gave up belief in God at age 16 I started reading books on humanism and rationalism and identified with Humanism. A Humanist is one who (i) rejects the supernatural; and (ii) who has a belief in consideration for others. Humanists believe that science is the best method for gaining knowledge about the world: scientific hypotheses are tested against evidence. The scientific picture of the Universe is that it is billions of years old, not about 6000 years as the Bible implies. Humanists believe that humans are social by nature and that relationships are an important part of a happy life. Humans vary in the amount of empathy they feel, as do animals; this can be explained naturally without invoking God. Corliss Lamont, the philosopher who wrote the book "The Philosophy of Humanism", defined humanism as "a naturalistic philosophy that rejects all supernaturalism and relies primarily upon reason and science, democracy and human compassion."

Some people argue that a person or society cannot be moral without a belief in God. For example, a few years ago a woman who co-owned a fruit shop that I shopped at one day began talking about religion (she was a Jehovah's Witness) and when she found out that I did not believe in God she said: "You're an atheist: you think it's okay to murder people." My reply was that I don't think that it's okay to murder people unlike the God of the Bible, who sent a flood that killed most of the world's inhabitants. Her reply was God made the moral rules and hence he can break them. So God has double standards. The God of the Bible is not a model of morality; as well as sending a flood he killed the first born infants in Egypt, he told Moses to stone a man to death for collecting firewood on the Sabbath, he told Joshua to slaughter all the inhabitants of Jericho and other towns, he killed all the people in Sodom and Gomorrah, he had Lot's wife turned to salt, he had his son sacrificed

for humanity's sins, he sends people to burn in everlasting hellfire for the most trivial reasons; the Bible documents lots of other cruel actions by him. He behaves like a dictator.

Can a society be moral without a belief in God? I will now present and discuss the arguments of some thinkers who argue in the affirmative plus provide evidence that societies without a belief in God are happy societies.

First I will discuss the arguments of British psychologist Margaret Knight in her book "Morals Without Religion", which was originally a series of talks on the BBC in 1954. She said: "I argued at length that the social or altruistic impulses are the real source of morality, and that an ethic based on these impulses has more claim to our allegiance than an ethic based on obedience to the commands of a God who created tapeworms and cancer-cells... I proposed a constructive alternative to Christianity – Scientific Humanism...the moral act, to the humanist, is the act that is conducive to human well-being, not the act ordained by God."

She goes on to say: "At different times very different views have been held about the nature of humans. At one extreme was the view held by the philosopher Hobbes that humans are essentially selfish. On this view all behaviour is self-interested – if we help our neighbour, it is just because we think that it may induce her to help us later on. At the other extreme is the view, of which Rousseau was the chief exponent, that humans are naturally unselfish and cooperative, and that if they behave otherwise it can only be because their natural development has been interfered with. 'Humans', said Rousseau 'are naturally good. Only by institutions are they made bad'. Neither of these extreme views is correct; the truth lies between them. It is natural for us to be to a large extent self-centred and to be hostile and aggressive towards people who obstruct us in getting what we want; and it is also natural for us to co-operate with other people, and to feel affection and sympathy for others. In community life, and especially in the sort of highly organised community life that we lead today it is desirable that the social impulses shall be well developed and the ego-impulses kept to some extent under control...There is one principle which is common to all moral codes, in all types of society, however different they may be;...and that is 'We must not be completely selfish; we must be prepared, at times and within limits, to put our own interests second to those of our own family, or our friends, or of the group or community to which we belong.' This does not mean that we must always be making sacrifices; we have a duty to ourselves as well as others...Why should I consider others? These ultimate questions can be desperately difficult to answer, as every philosophy student knows. Myself, I think the only possible answer to this question is the humanist one – because we are naturally social beings; we live in communities; and life in any community, from the family outwards, is much happier and fuller and richer if members are friendly and cooperative than if they are hostile and resentful."

I understand Margaret Knight to be saying that we get a lot of our happiness from others. If we consider only our own happiness and not the happiness of others we will get hostility in return causing ourselves unhappiness. Even if we acted purely from self-interest we would consider the happiness of others. She pointed out that we don't act purely from self-interest: it is natural to feel some affection for others; she does not mention that perhaps there is an exception in the case of psychopaths. If we were all psychopaths presumably society would not be able to function.

Secondly, I will discuss the views of Paul Kurtz, an American philosopher, who helped set up the Council for Secular Humanism. These views were proposed in his book "Forbidden Fruit: The Ethics of Humanism". He said: "The question is constantly asked: What is the ethics of humanism? Can a society or person be moral without religion? Yes, indeed, affirm secular humanists. Morality is deeply rooted in the 'common moral decencies' (those that relate to moral behaviour in society) and the 'ethical excellences' (as they apply to a person's own life). The common moral decencies are widely shared. They are essential to the survival of any human community. Meaningful coexistence cannot occur if they are consistently flouted. Handed down through countless generations, they are recognised throughout the world by friends and relatives, colleagues and coworkers, the native-born and immigrant, as basic rules of social intercourse. They are the foundation of moral education and are taught in the family and the schools. They express the elementary virtues of courtesy, politeness and empathy so essential for living together; indeed they are the very basis of civilised life itself. The common moral decencies are transcultural in their range and have their roots in general human needs. They no doubt grow out of the long evolutionary struggle for survival and may even have some sociobiological basis, though they may be lacking in some individuals or societies since their emergence depends upon certain preconditions of moral and social development.

The common moral decencies are:

1. Personal Integrity: telling the truth, being sincere, keeping promises, being honest;
2. Trustworthiness: loyal, dependable, reliable, responsible;
3. Benevolence: goodwill, lack of malice; in sexual relations: mutual consent; beneficent, sympathetic and compassionate;
4. Fairness: accountability, gratitude, justice, tolerance of others, cooperation, negotiate differences peacefully, without hatred or violence.

The ethical excellences are:

1. Autonomy (self-reliance);
2. Intelligence;
3. Self-discipline;
4. Self-respect, which is vital to psychological balance. Self-hatred can destroy the personality. We need to develop some appreciation for who we are as individuals

and a realistic sense of our own identities, for a lack of self-esteem can make one feel truly worthless, which is neither healthy for the individual nor helpful to society at large;

5. Creativity;
6. High motivation;
7. A positive attitude;
8. Joyful living;
9. Good health;
10. Happiness (or well-being or exuberance)."

Kurtz sees morality as necessary for the effective functioning of societies. Kurtz sees morality as based not only on how we relate to others but also how we relate to ourselves. He sees morality as partly based on self-interest and partly on inbuilt altruism.

The third thinker whose views that I will discuss is philosopher and mathematician and outspoken critic of religion, Bertrand Russell, as outlined in his essay "The Faith of A Humanist". He says: "Every kind of hostile action or feeling provokes a reaction by which it is increased and so generates a progeny of violence and injustice, which has a terrible vitality. This can only be met by cultivating in ourselves and attempting to generate in the young feelings of friendliness rather hostility, of well-wishing rather than malevolence, and of cooperation rather than competition. If I am asked 'Why do you believe this?' I should not appeal to any supernatural authority, but only to the general wish for happiness. A world full of hate is a world full of sorrow. Each party, where there is mutual hatred, hopes that only the other party will suffer, but this is seldom the case. And even the most successful oppressors are filled with fear – slave-owners have been obsessed with dread of a servile insurrection. From the point of view of worldly wisdom, hostile feelings and limitation of sympathy are folly. Their fruits are war, death, oppression and torture, not only for their original victims but also for their perpetrators or their descendants. Whereas if we could all learn to love our neighbours the world would quickly become a paradise for us all...no supernatural reasons are needed to make people kind and to prove that only through kindness can the human race achieve happiness." Russell is agreeing with Knight that a society based on cooperation is needed for general happiness.

Fourth, I will discuss the arguments of Albert Ellis and Irving Becker, both psychologists, as presented in their book "A Guide to Personal Happiness". Albert Ellis, an atheist, regularly wrote a column entitled "The Happy Humanist" in the U.S. magazine "The Humanist". They say: "Morality, when it is sensible (which it often isn't!), consists of two basic rules: (1) To thine own self be true, or Be kind to yourself, (2) Do not commit any deed that needlessly and deliberately harms others – because you, in being true to yourself, normally live in a social group or community that may not continue to exist, or

to exist in the manner in which you would prefer, if you do harm to others...Social interest, in other words, fuses with self-interest...Because humans are gregarious or social animals, you tend to find happiness when you are relating, both generally and intimately, to others; and although you have the ability to be happy when you are completely alone, you would rarely choose to be for any considerable length of time. You naturally enjoy talking to, being wit, encountering, concerning yourself about, affecting, and having love-sex relations with other humans. Why? Largely because that is your nature: your innate tendency to commune and share.

Once you decide to cater to your gregarious desires you subscribe to a social contract which we call morality or responsibility to others...For group life entails some restrictions and rules of conduct. As a hermit you can fearlessly make all the noise you want or defecate wherever you wish. But not as a member of a family, a clan or community! Nor, when you decide to live with others, are you perfectly free to grab all the food you want, appropriate all the available land, steal any thing in sight, or physically harm or kill your intimates and associates – at least not for very long”. The authors point out that self-interest and social interest are not necessarily in conflict. They do also point out that always putting one’s own interests second to those of others is not conducive to one’s happiness and is therefore not sensible morality.

Fifth, I will briefly discuss a comment by atheist psychologist, Abraham Maslow, in his book “Motivation and Personality”. He says ‘if the release of anxiety causes the patient to become more affectionate and less hostile, does this not indicate that affection is basic to human nature, while hostility is not.’ Maslow seems to me to be saying that when we are at our happiest we are at our friendliest.

Sixth, I shall discuss some comments by Jacob Bronowski, mathematician and biologist, in his book “The Origins of Knowledge and Imagination”. In speaking of science he says: “The scientific enterprise takes its strength from the fact that everybody can believe what everybody else does. You are only allowed to employ perfectly honest means. This...puts you in a position of special trust. And this is a deeply ethical principle...other values derive from truth. There are the personal values – respect, sensitivity, tolerance – without which science could not be carried on. They are... the values of the scientist working by himself or herself. And then there are the communal values, the “ought” values – honesty, integrity, dignity, authenticity – which bind the scientific community together.” I see Bronowski as saying that in order to find out the truth about the world we are bound by certain moral values.

Seventh, I discuss some of the ideas in the book “Individual Morality” by humanist psychologist James Hemming. He was a member of a group working on moral principles that can be accepted equally by Christians and Humanists. He says “The modern choice must be for a democratic society, since only such a society can harmonise individual

fulfilment with social order...The road to personal fulfilment... is not via egocentricity but through the establishment of reciprocal, sensitive, creative relationships in friendship, love, work, play, appreciation.” Like other authors Hemming sees morals as necessary for happiness.

Eighth, I discuss some of the ideas in the book “The Moral Landscape – How Science Can Determine Human Values” by atheist and neuroscientist and philosopher, Sam Harris. Harris is CEO of Project Reason, a foundation devoted to spreading scientific knowledge and secular values in society. In his book Harris says that moral questions can be decided using science. He says: “I believe that we will increasingly understand good and evil, right and wrong, in scientific terms, because moral concerns translate into facts about how our thoughts and behaviours affect the well-being of conscious creatures like ourselves...Taking others’ interests into account, making impartial decisions (and knowing that others will make them), rendering help to the needy – these are experiences that contribute to our social well-being. It seems perfectly reasonable...for each of us to submit to a system of justice in which our immediate selfish interests will often be superseded by considerations of fairness. It is only reasonable, however, that everyone will tend to be better off under such a system. As, it seems, they will.” Harris seems to me to be saying that for our own psychological well-being we need moral rules.

Harris quotes a survey that says that “fifty seven percent of Americans think that one must believe in God to have good values and be moral.” He then goes on to say “...on almost every measure of societal health the least religious countries are better off than the most religious. Countries like Denmark, Sweden, Norway and the Netherlands – which are the most atheistic societies on earth – consistently rate better than religious nations on measures like life expectancy, infant mortality, crime, literacy, GDP, child welfare, economic equality, economic competitiveness, gender equality, health care, investments in education, rates of university enrolment, internet access, environmental protection, lack of corruption, political stability and charity to poorer nations, etc...as societies become more prosperous, stable and democratic they tend to become more secular.”

Ninth, and finally, I discuss the book “Society Without God”, by Phil Zuckerman, a U.S. sociology professor. Zuckerman lived in Scandinavia for fourteen months, interviewing nearly 150 Danes and Swedes. He says “one study reports that only 51 percent of Danes and 26 percent of Swedes claim to believe in a God. Another study found lower rates: only 24% of Danes and 16% of Swedes.” He says: “I argue that society without God is not only possible but can be quite civil and pleasant. This admittedly polemical aspect of my book is aimed primarily at countering the claims of certain outspoken Christians who regularly argue that a society without God would be hell on earth; rampant with immorality, full of evil, and teeming with depravity. Well, it isn’t. Denmark and Sweden

are remarkably strong, safe, healthy, moral and prosperous societies. In fact, a good case could be made that they are among the ‘best’ countries in the world, at least according to standard sociological measures. In an age of growing religious fundamentalism and strengthening ties between religion and politics – in the U.S. as well as in many other countries – this is important information. It is quite crucial for people to know that it is actually quite possible for a society to lose its religious beliefs and still be well-functioning, successful, and fully capable of constructing and obeying sound laws and following rational systems of morality and ethics. Worship of God can wane, prayer can be given up, and the Bible can go unstudied, yet people can still treat one another decently, schools and hospitals can still run smoothly, crime can remain minimal, babies and old people can receive all the care and attention they need, economies can flourish, pollution can be kept at a minimum, speeding tickets can be paid, and children can be loved in warm, secure homes – all without God being a central component of everyday life.”

As Harris and Zuckerman point out, the evidence shows that where many people are nontheists are happy, flourishing societies.

I have looked at a number of what I consider are convincing arguments that societies can be good without God.

I conclude by saying that I believe that the Catholic Church’s picture of the world is false and that the naturalistic ethical one of the humanists is the correct worldview.

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