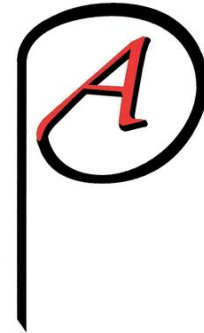


# Progressive Atheists Inc.

Est. 10 Jan 2010 Reg: A0054119U Member of AAI

*"Your participation is PA's future"*



## December 2015

*... we seek to go beyond divisive racial, religious, tribal, and sectarian constructs, and instead, contribute to a universal humanity.*

### Headlines

#### Headlines

- Ω **Conference:** 2015 Victorian Interfaith Networks Conference
- Ω **Event:** An Evening with Maajid Nawaz
- Ω **Event:** An Evening with Sam Harris
- Ω **Event:** Progressive Atheists Inc 6<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration
- Ω **Report:** Constitution and government

### Back Page

- **Membership Renewal Term 2015:** 1 July 2015 – 30 June 2016
- Progressive Atheists Inc. **'Proudly Atheist' T-shirts & Badges**

### MEMBERSHIP

**Term 2015:** 1 July 2015 – 30 June 2016

**\*\*\* ONLY \$20 Annually \*\*\***

**Purchase Membership Online:**

<http://progressiveatheists.org/product-category/membership/>

### CONTACT PROGRESSIVE ATHEISTS INC.

**President:** [president@progressiveatheists.org](mailto:president@progressiveatheists.org)

**Vice President** – Andrew: 0438 043 050

**Secretary:** [secretary@progressiveatheists.org](mailto:secretary@progressiveatheists.org)

**Website:** [progressiveatheists.org](http://progressiveatheists.org)

**Facebook:** [www.facebook.com/ProgressiveAtheistsInc](https://www.facebook.com/ProgressiveAtheistsInc)

**Twitter:** [twitter.com/ProgAtheistsInc](https://twitter.com/ProgAtheistsInc)

Please send articles, news, letters and comments to:  
[editor@progressiveatheists.org](mailto:editor@progressiveatheists.org)

# Progressive Atheist Inc. | Headlines

## **Conference:** 2015 Victorian Interfaith Networks Conference

Kingston City Hall | 22 November 2015

This was the second annual Victorian Interfaith Networks Conference that I have attended. The first time was rather awkward, as I didn't know quite what to expect and took some time to get to understand the nature, motivation and purpose of the conference.

With previous experience, this year I found it easier to fit in to the flow. The conference opened with organ music by Scott Harrison and a Zimcommunity performance of 'Whole world in his hands' and 'Sweet Chariot'. Some young people said a Multifaith Prayer as they stood next to an adult sized Interfaith Globe. Welcome to country was done by an Indigenous women from Queensland with approval from local elders. Chair person, Faith Communities Council of Victoria, Murray Davies, and Chairperson, Kingston Interfaith Network, Genevieve Marie also gave their welcome.

Honoured guests included the Mayor of City of Kingston, Cr Tamsin Bearsley and the Commissioner of the Victorian Multicultural Commission, Mr Chidambaram Srinivasan. The key note address was delivered by Helen Heath OAM who spoke on "The reality of living one's faith in today's Australian society".

One thing that struck me in all these talks was the continued reference to the commonality of God and faith for everyone. Although these references where intended to provide a sense of unity and togetherness for the conference guests, they did in fact cause me as an atheist to feel excluded from the proceedings. Ironical given that one of the main aims of the conference was to bring people of different worldviews together.

Progressive Atheists sent out invitations to the 12 candidates standing for There were 4 workshops available to attend. Workshop 1: Mixed identities, Religious and civic, which had 6 panellists who spoke and then took

audience questions. Workshop 2: Refugee and Asylum Seekers with 4 panellists. Workshop 3: Understanding Head Coverings with 5 panellists. Workshop 4: Skills for Conflict Resolutions facilitated by Dr Siew-Fang from the department of Law at the Victoria University in Melbourne.

Only one workshop could be attended and so I chose to attend workshop 3 on head coverings. The panel included 5 women. One woman a Rabbi of the Jewish faith, one woman who had recently taken Amrit (Sikh Baptism) and become Khalsa (Pure Sikh), one Catholic faith Sister, one woman from the Zoroastrian faith (one of the world's oldest monotheistic religions, founded by the Prophet Zoroaster in ancient Iran approximately 3500 years ago), and lastly one woman of Islamic faith.

Each person gave an account of the history in their faith of head coverings and their own motivation for continuing this custom. Interestingly they all had a commonality of covering the head in reverence or respect for God. But other factors included modesty of dress and practicality for working outdoors. All also talked about the impact of being seen in public as a representative of their faith, and the effect this had on their behaviour. All mentioned that they were reminded of their religious values when dressing in accordance with their faith, which encouraged them to act with the integrity congruent with their faith.

The speaker who stood out as different to me was the Muslim woman, Sarah Sabagh (Youth and Community Worker and founder and Chair of Benevolent Australia), who stated that she had come under fire for wearing the Islamic head covering and asked the audience at the start of her talk to put away any previous views of Islam so that she might introduce her faith with a fresh slate. Although the content of her talk after this point reflected very much on what all the other speakers had said about dress assisting to remind the wearer of living their faith, practising modesty and showing reverence to God.

During the breaks I had personal conversations with a female Rabbi, a male Rabbi, a woman of the Jewish faith, a Catholic Sister, a progressive Muslim activist for human rights, a woman with Indigenous heritage, the Catholic Archdiocese EO for ecumenical and interfaith and an Interspiritual /

Interfaith Minister. These conversations focused on the role of women in a religious setting, the current threat of ISIS and what can be done to assist Bangladeshi bloggers.

One attendee at the conference mentioned their annoyance at combining interfaith with multiculturalism. One question that we might ask as atheists is whether the 22% of Australians who reported having no religion on the 2011 Australian census should be at all represented or included in the 'interfaith' community. This would perhaps involve a redefining of the group to include non-faith, perhaps renaming to interbelief. This proposal might be more than 'interfaith' is capable of extending, which leads to the question, can they then continue to claim to be inclusive of all?

Surely any such group claiming to be inclusive of all, should include people or groups of both faith and non-faith views. The Interfaith network aims to bring Australian communities together in order to promote peace, tolerance and harmony. How can this be done successfully if 22% (and growing) of the population is excluded representation? Interfaith then is simply consolidating a gap between us and them.

Alice Carr

President Progressive Atheists Inc.



## **Report: Constitution and government –**

### **The Freedom of Thought Report 2015**

For more: <http://progressiveatheists.org/campaigns-projects/combating-religious-persecution/freedom-of-thought-report/>

The Australian constitution bars the federal government from making any law that imposes a state religion or religious observance, prohibits the free exercise of religion or sets a religious test for a federal public office. There is no charter of general rights at the national level. Freedom of thought, conscience and religion is protected in various statute laws which follow UN conventions such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the UN Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief. Favours Christianity Although the government is officially secular, it continues to favour Christianity for many public ceremonies. For example, each session of parliament begins with a joint recitation of the Lord's Prayer. Religious institutions enjoy long-standing privileges in being exempted from paying tax and from complying with laws, such as the Victorian Equal Opportunity Act against discrimination and Australian Charities & Not-for-profits Commission Act for transparent governance. Details of religious tax exemption are given in Max Wallace's polemic, *The Purple Economy: supernatural charities, tax and the state* (Aust. National Secular Association, 2007). Individuals who suffer discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief have recourse under federal discrimination laws or through the court system and bodies such as the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission.

Federal laws that protect freedom of religion include the Racial Discrimination Act, the Human Rights Commission Act and the Workplace Relations Act. Public service employees who believe they are denied a promotion on religious grounds can appeal to the public service merit protection commissioner. Education and children's rights The government permits religious education in public schools, generally taught by volunteers using approved curricula. Public schools in New South Wales provide secular ethics classes as an alternative for students who do not attend religious instruction classes.

Are you in favour of requiring the institutions that have failed to protect children from abuse to provide compensation?

In other states, there is no secular alternative to religious education, but non-religious students may opt out of the class. 515 The government's National School Chaplaincy Program, established in 2007, provides annual support of up to A\$20,000 (US\$20,800) per chaplain in urban areas and A\$24,000 (US\$24,960) in remote areas for government and nongovernment school communities to conduct chaplaincy services. In 2011 the government authorized A\$222 million (US\$230.9 million) to be disbursed between 2012 and 2014 to continue funding participating schools and extend funding to 1,000 more chaplains in remote and disadvantaged areas. In June 2012, following a challenge by a private individual, the High Court ruled that the program exceeded the Commonwealth's spending powers. Later that month, parliament passed legislation authorizing the program. The federal government provides funding to private schools, the majority of which are faith-based. Family, community and society Social services

The privileged status of religion in society has allowed government to cede control of various social services to religious institutions. In January 2013 the federal government appointed a Royal Commission "to inquire into institutional responses to allegations and incidents of child sexual abuse and related matters". The great majority of complaints have involved abusive clergy who were protected by their church, which was in turn accorded unwarranted deference by state authorities. Freedom of expression, advocacy of humanist values Unprotected free expression leads to "vilification" laws There are no constitutional protections for freedoms of speech and the press, but in practice there is a free press and citizens have significant freedom of expression. However, the federal government and several states have passed laws outlawing "racial vilification" and the states of Tasmania, Queensland and Victoria have extended those laws to also outlaw any "religious vilification". The Racial and Religious Tolerance Act passed by Victoria in 2001 has been used several times to prosecute people for religious criticism. Section 8 (1) of the law states: "A person must not, on the ground of the religious belief or activity of another person or class of persons, engage in conduct that incites hatred against, serious contempt for, or revulsion or severe ridicule of, that other person or class of persons."

## **Event: An Evening with Maajid Nawaz**

29th January. 2016 6.00pm

Deakin Edge Federation Square, Melbourne

30th January. 2016 6.00pm

Everest Theatre, Seymour Centre, Sydney

<https://www.facebook.com/events/192527764423500/>

BOOK HERE: <http://www.eventopia.co/event/An-evening-with-Maajid-Nawaz/311134>

“If liberalism is to mean anything at all, it is duty bound to support without hesitation the dissenting individual over the group, the heretic over the orthodox, innovation over stagnation, and free speech over offense.”

A recurring global conversation of 2015 has been one centered on extremism. The widely-reported Charlie Hebdo killings in January and the recent string of November attacks across Paris have thrust sociopolitical discourse deeper than ever into territory that holds under scrutiny the place that democracy, religion, and identity have in the globalised world. One of the voices proactively calling for a fair and rigorous assessment of tolerance in the 21st century is being brought to Australia in January 2016: author, politician and activist Maajid Nawaz.

An ex-radical Islamist, Nawaz has redirected his efforts towards proactively critiquing the dangers of religious fundamentalism in the 21st century, penning the 2012 confessional ‘Radical: My Journey out of Islamist Extremism’ and continuing to be a positive force in the mammoth discussion on curtailing religious intolerance from both theists and non-theists, promoting the need for greater secularity within religion and society.



In 2008, Nawaz founded the Quilliam Foundation, “the world’s first counter-extremism think tank set up to address the unique challenges of citizenship, identity, and belonging in a

globalised world.” Quilliam’s focal points traverse our most pressing questions: What are the seemingly-countless and complex contributing risk factors for youths joining extremist groups? At which fault are the parties involved? How can these parties form alliances to efficiently combat extremist activity that claims lives by the thousands?

Recently, Nawaz has had to form one such unexpected alliance of his own; in teaming up with controversial ‘New Atheist’ Sam Harris for their book ‘Islam and the Future of Tolerance: a Dialogue’ (2015), they maintain the need for a balanced discussion on extremism that sets aside conversations on deistic existence in order to focus on the tangible issues that face us: promoting social solidarity and a reassertion of liberalist values without violent reprisal. One of Nawaz and Harris’s most crucial critiques is that of the overt ‘political correctness’ of the ‘regressive left’ i.e. those remiss to critically consider and acknowledge the link between religion and extremism, and conflating criticism with bigotry in the process. This discussion has received significant media attention across major outlets such as ABC Australia’s Lateline, and MSNBC.

Think Inc. – the team behind the Australian tours of Sam Harris, Dr Neil deGrasse Tyson, Dr Michio Kaku, Dr Cornel West and The ‘Amazing’ James Randi – are pleased to present An Evening with Maajid Nawaz in late January of 2016. Off the heels of his special guest appearances at An Evening with Sam Harris, Maajid Nawaz will engage Sydney and Brisbane audiences in the discussion of approaching these crucial conversations with critique, candour and courage.



## **Event: Progressive Atheists Inc 6<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration**

**Sunday, 10 January 2016 at 12:00**

**Dennys Kitchen**

66 Brougham Steet, Geelong, Victoria 3220

This will be a nice day out to Geelong for lunch at Italian Restaurant Dennys Kitchen with a short walk to the beach after lunch for those interested.

Progressive Atheists Inc. came about after a series of workshops and discussions, the Progressive Atheists was founded on the 10th January 2010 by four Atheists to unite like-minded individuals who wanted to effect a progressive social transformation in Australia, into an organization capable of carrying this agenda.

<http://progressiveatheists.org/about-us/>

<https://www.facebook.com/events/554440344710356/>



**Event: An Evening with Sam Harris (w/special guest Maajid Nawaz)**

22nd January. 2016 6.00pm

BCEC Brisbane

23rd January. 2016 6.00pm

Think Inc. at The Plenary Melbourne

24th January. 2016 6.15pm

State Theatre Sydney

*“Atheism is not a philosophy, it is not even a world view – it is simply an admission of the obvious.”*

**Think Inc.** is pleased to announce the Australian tour of the celebrated **Sam Harris**, featuring special guest **Maajid Nawaz** in January 2016.

In the current social and intellectual landscape, **Sam Harris** is a valuable and vigorous agent of rational thought, where rational evidence thrives and religious evangelicalism dies. A neuroscientist, author, philosopher and critic of religion, Harris spearheads the New Atheism movement.

**Think Inc.** – the team behind the Australian tours of Dr Neil deGrasse Tyson, Dr Michio Kaku, Dr Cornel West, and The ‘Amazing’ James Randi – are bringing to Australia *An Evening with Sam Harris* in January of 2016, featuring special guest Maajid Nawaz. Audiences will be engaged with these most celebrated of critical thinkers on the matters of science, spirituality, and secularisation in an age where their conflict with religion is as amplified as ever.

FOR MORE INFORMATION: <http://thinkinc.org.au/events/samharris/>

## **Progressive Atheists Inc.**

Est. 10 Jan 2010 Reg: A0054119U Member of AAI

### **Progressive Atheists Inc. Open Meeting**

Progressive Atheists Inc. Open Meeting | 26th December 2015

Our next Progressive Atheists Inc. Open Meeting will be held on Open Meeting at 12 pm, Saturday, 26<sup>th</sup> December 2015. **Venue to be announced**. All who support our purpose are welcome.

<http://www.meetup.com/Melbourne-Atheists/events/224846868/>

### **Progressive Atheists Purpose Statement:**

<http://progressiveatheists.org/about-us/purpose-statement/>

### **Melbourne Atheists MeetUp Group | Event Calendar**

Keep in touch with atheists around Melbourne via the Melbourne MeetUp:

<http://www.meetup.com/Melbourne-Atheists/events/calendar/>

### **Membership Term 2015 | 1 July 2015 – 30 June 2016**

Progressive Atheists Membership is \$20 per annum / \$10 concession.

### **JOIN US | Purchase New Membership Online:**

<http://progressiveatheists.org/about-us/membership/application/>

### **For other methods to renew and join please see our website:**

<http://progressiveatheists.org/about-us/membership/>

### **Email our Membership Officer:**

[membership@progressiveatheists.org](mailto:membership@progressiveatheists.org)

### **OR ASK the person who gave you this bulletin**

### **Progressive Atheists Inc. 'Proudly Atheist' T-shirts & Badges**

**T-shirts ONLY \$15 for members!**

Badges \$2.50 each ~ 2 designs / 3 colours

**Order your t-shirt or badge on our website:**

<http://progressiveatheists.org/products-for-sale/>

**Sales Rep. Elida Radig:** [sales@progressiveatheists.org](mailto:sales@progressiveatheists.org)