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From:

To:

Sent: Thursday, September 16, 2010 12:41 PM

Subject: So, is the faith of atheists worth being evangelistic about?

Atheist zealots a heavy cross to bear

- David Penberthy

MY faith in atheism is being sorely tested by born-againists.

Not of the usual proselytising Christian variety but the obnoxious, pushy, ram-it-down-your-throat, born-again atheist variety.

This new breed of Godless souls has adopted one of the most irritating features of religion. They have become belligerent evangelists for their non-cause.

The once gentle conviction that there is no God, and that in an ideal world everyone would stop fighting over the supremacy of their favourite imagined deity, is increasingly becoming the preserve of aggressive loudmouths.

You know the kind.

They are every bit as annoying as those Jehovah's Witnesses who used to knock on the door at 9am on a Sunday while you were trying to sleep off a big night.

The latest example of this belligerence came from Queensland earlier this week, where Brisbane legal academic Alex Stewart managed to be both remarkably offensive and deeply naive at the same time.

Stewart removed pages from copies of the Bible and the Koran, then smoked them in a clip he posted on YouTube. Now he's fearful of losing his job as a result of his actions.

Stewart is part of this modern breed of evangelical, shouty atheists, a movement which has a number of heroes.

One is the young American physicist Bobby Anderson.

Five years ago, as a 25-year-old university student, Anderson wrote a letter to the Kansas Board of Education saying he believed that Earth had been created by a flying spaghetti monster.

It was a clever satirical point which poked fun at the craziness of "intelligent design" - a re-branded form of creationism which refutes Darwin and claims that it is a matter of scientific fact that all life on Earth is the work of God.

The Kansas Board of Education (whose members included a vet and a blueberry farmer) had previously agreed that the Christian theory of intelligent design should be taught alongside evolution in the state's schools.

Anderson argued that it was only fair that his spaghetti monster religion, which he calls Pastafarianism, should also be included on the Kansas curriculum.

For Anderson, what started as the highly specific ridicule of teaching theological nonsense as science has now ballooned into a more generalised form of juvenile abuse towards anyone who believes in God.

His website - devoted to The Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster - encourages readers to send in Virgin Mary-style sightings of their chosen deity.

So far he's attracted many images desecrating religious art, such as Michelangelo's The Creation of Adam, where God has his finger outstretched to a bowl of pasta with googly eyes stuck on it.

There is a section on the website which is misleadingly headed "Hate Mail", presumably so the author can bolster his outsider credentials.

On the contrary, this section contains an array of measured and thoughtful criticisms. Such as the following: "I think your message got lost a long time ago, Bobby. It's really sad, you had a good thing going, I think.

"It's really sad that your message of 'don't teach intelligent design in our schools' turned into 'religion is pointless', which then turned into 'everyone who believes in a religion is below me, and that gives me the right to completely disrespect everything they stand for'.

"It's really sad that people join this group just so that they can slam other people."

Yet Anderson is a paragon of non-believer civility compared to the brilliant English scientist and celebrity atheist Richard Dawkins, author of *The Selfish Gene* and other books on human evolution and natural selection.

A few years ago Dawkins fired off a particularly narky text - *The God Delusion* - which became a best-seller and spawned an explosion in the "Up Yours, God" genre, which also included Christopher Hitchens' "God is Not Great".

The God Delusion starts off promising a reasoned and scientific examination of why there is no God and can be no God, but soon descends into schoolyard teasing of the flying spaghetti monster variety.

Anyone who saw Dawkin's bullying effort on the ABC's Q&A last year would recall the manner in which he continually interrupted and shouted down other panellists who disputed his view.

The irony here is that the thing which has always fired up atheists, such as me, is a dislike of the righteousness which many religious people display.

There is an impertinence at the centre of religion, namely the conviction that your God is the one and only and that everyone else is deluded in following a rival God or no God at all.

But this spiritual impertinence can be found in equal measure among many atheists, with the latest entrant to their number being none other than Australia's own Koran-smoking Bible-inhaler Alex Stewart.

"It's just a book, who cares," Stewart said as he choofed away on make-believe joints rolled up inside pages torn from the two religious texts.

An articulate bloke, Stewart continued: "Like you can burn a flag and no one cares, people get over it so with respect to books like the Bible, the Koran, or whatever, just get over it."

Most of us are over it, Alex. You're the bloke on the internet trying to make a big deal about holy books. Stewart's little stunt did nothing to advance the noble cause of atheism.

If anything it made non-believers appear intellectually flippant and superficial, reducing their position to the lame schoolyard assertion that anyone who believes in a God and thinks that texts can be holy has rocks in their head, and should just "get over it".

Our website *The Punch* has now published a number of excellent columns by a fellow called Greg Clarke, who two years ago co-founded the Centre for Public Christianity.

Clarke's most recent pieces have addressed Stewart's online book-burning exploits.

A previous column was an absolutely compelling examination of the floods in Pakistan, which asked how Christians could reconcile the existence of an all-powerful and loving God with a natural disaster which brought so much misery and suffering to innocent, impoverished people.

It's the toughest question in theology, and one which pushes many people of faith into the camp of agnosticism or atheism.

In putting the question, Clarke immediately found himself on the receiving end of knee-jerk abuse of the flying spaghetti monster kind from cocky online atheists.

They dismissed his reflective piece on the role of God in such a terrible natural disaster by saying that he probably also believed in Superman. Great work, kids.

If this is the best atheists can do it's no wonder some of us are thinking about taking our non-faith and quietly returning to the closet.