



The Enlightenment



A Mini-Journal of the
Humanist Association of London and Area

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Brad Banks Sitting at the HALA Display He Designed and Assembled

The HALA Board of Directors has been contemplating about what we might do to become better known in our community. HALA member Brad Banks has suggested that we set up a display at various locations and at community events, explaining what humanism is all about. The display he created is shown above and he has used it several times, receiving a positive response and attracting potential members. Providing we can recruit volunteers to staff this display, we plan to set it up at appropriate events in the future. See Page 6.

President's Remarks

We are daily bombarded with news items reminding us that this world would be a lot better off with less sectarianism and more Humanism. Across the sea, Islamic State terrorists are wreaking havoc on the population and beheading infidels in the name of Allah, while encouraging their supporters in our own land to engage in random acts of violence here at home. To our south, right-wing fundamentalist politicians are paralyzing the US government and tying up the courts with their obsessions about abortion and gay marriage, fanning the flames of a culture war that seems to get more vicious all the time. More than ever, it seems, religious extremism is rearing its ugly head. Perhaps this is the last gasp of a threatened minority of religious traditionalists waging a losing battle against the tide of enlightenment and secularism that is washing over the world. But it sure seems like things could get a lot worse before reason, tolerance, and science finally prevail. In this context, one theme of this issue of *The Enlightenment* is that we Humanists need to make ourselves more visible in the world around us, spreading the word about the benefits of living without creeds and superstition. More than simply arguing against the existence of gods, we need to present a positive secular alternative to religion, showing how one can live a meaningful, ethical life of engagement, compassion and even spirituality, without belief in the supernatural. Our September HALA meeting, presented in these pages, was an exercise in "secular spirituality" that was well received by those who attended, and we may do something like this again from time to time. In this issue there is also an appeal for interested volunteers to help staff a Humanist presentation table at the London Central Library. As a further way of seeking to increase awareness of Humanism in London, our meeting on November 12 will be another public event at the Wolf Performance Hall, with Bob Ripley as our speaker. Bob is a well-known former United Church minister and newspaper columnist who has just published a book entitled *Life Beyond Belief: A Preacher's Deconversion*. In his presentation he will relate how he changed his mind about his faith. We're hoping that that this will attract a sizable audience, and we look forward to seeing you there!

~ Rod Martin

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The Humanist Association of London and Area meets at the Cross Cultural Learner Centre, 505 Dundas Street in London, on the second Wednesday of the months September to June inclusive at 7:30 p.m. Please use the rear door off the parking lot. *The Enlightenment*, edited by Don Hatch, is published quarterly in January, April, July and October. Special issues are published from time to time. Please note: We reserve the right to edit and publish articles at our discretion.

Visit our web site at www.humanists-london.org Twitter - [@LonOntHumanists](https://twitter.com/LonOntHumanists)

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New members are welcome. Contact Membership Secretary, Walter Heywood (519) 434-9237, email wjheywood@yahoo.ca Membership fees are listed below.

	<u>HALA</u>	<u>HALA Limited</u>	<u>HC</u>	<u>Humanist</u>
	<u>Basic</u>	<u>Resources</u>	<u>Basic</u>	<u>Perspectives</u>
Single	\$20	\$10	\$40	\$25
Family	\$25	\$15	\$50	

Free Thinker's Fellowship

On September 10th, 2014, the regular monthly meeting of HALA took the form of a Freethinker's Fellowship. For the benefit of those *Enlightenment* readers who were not in attendance, the Order of Service is shown below. This is followed by the discourse that was presented. The comments of attendees are then shown.

Introductory remarks before the service. It has often been suggested that Humanist organizations should try to do more to establish a sense of community among their members. To this end, some Humanist groups in England have started holding Sunday Assemblies on a weekly basis which are a sort of secular substitute for church services. In the United States, they're called Godless Congregations. Part of the goal of these meetings is to create an atmosphere of secular spirituality through inspirational music, poetry, and so on. It may seem like an oxymoron to talk about spirituality and Humanism in the same breath, but a number of writers have argued that a non-supernatural concept of spirituality is indeed compatible with Humanism and even desirable. Sam Harris, one of the leading thinkers in the new atheism, has recently published a book entitled "Waking Up: A guide to Spirituality without Religion." The HALA board has been wondering whether there would be an interest in doing something similar here in London. In order to determine whether this concept would be worth exploring further, we have put together the Order of Service you have received, and during the discussion time afterwards, we'd like to hear whether you think this is something worth pursuing in the future.

Order of Service for September 10th, 2014 – Time 7:30 p.m.

Prelude – Andante from Mozart Piano Concerto No. 21 in C. (Elvira Madigan)

Welcome and Introductory Remarks - Welcome one and all to this Freethinker's Fellowship. We will strive to create an atmosphere of secular spirituality through the use of the best classical and other forms of inspirational music, and through videos that portray the wonders of our natural world and humanity's greatest creations. We will also hear an interesting and informative discourse on the Humanism of the Renaissance. Now please rise as we all sing the first three verses of "Amazing Life," a Humanist adaptation to the tune of "Amazing Grace." And as you sing, please take special note of how Pat Duffy Hutcheon has captured the essence of human evolution in these verses.

Vocal Selection - Verses 1-3 – Amazing Life by Pat Duffy Hutcheon. Tune – Amazing Grace.

<i>Amazing life, how great the code</i>	<i>No master hand defined my fate.</i>
<i>That carves a course through me,</i>	<i>No gods created me</i>
<i>To futures yet uncharted from,</i>	<i>Stardust and ocean current sparked</i>
<i>some long forgotten sea.</i>	<i>The genes that led to me.</i>

*O'er eons of uncounted time,
Like shifting dunes of sand
From grasping paw on groping limb,
Evolved the human hand.*

Humanist Quote (in Unison) – *Reason yields fruit, both for itself and for the world; since from it comes a harvest of other good things, themselves all bearing the stamp of reason.* – Marcus Aurelius.

Choral Selection – Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves from Verdi's opera Nabucco

Discourse – The Humanism of the Italian Renaissance.

Nature's Beauty – A video of the Swiss Alps. Music - Edelweiss.

Closing Vocal Selection – Verses 4-6 of Amazing Life.

*Amazing hand, how great the tools
That humankind could wield.
How wide the world that hitherto
From animals was sealed.*

*But symbols were the crucial key
That opened cultures gate;
for language carried consciousness
and knowledge in its wake.*

*Amazing power of human thought
That carves a course through me;
to futures yet uncharted from
Some long-forgotten sea.*

Closing Remarks - As this gathering comes to a close, let us be mindful that:

We are blessed by the five senses that we may know the world we live in.
We are blessed by reason that we may begin to understand the realities around us.
We are blessed with intuition that we may turn it into a rewarding part of life.
We are blessed with free will that we may choose how we live.

And now as we leave this place and go out into our daily lives, let us continue to be thankful for the many blessings we share and renew our pledge to do whatever we can to help bring about a more peaceful and more compassionate world, while being ever mindful of the need to preserve the natural environment that we have been privileged to inhabit and enjoy.

Postlude – The Grand March from Verdi's opera Aida.

Social Time - Coffee, tea, cookies, fellowship and discussion.

The Humanism of the Italian Renaissance

In order to fully understand the significance of what became known as the Humanism of the Italian Renaissance, it is necessary to go back to the period designated as late antiquity. In the third century BCE, in the city of Alexandria Egypt, construction began on one of the largest and most significant libraries ever to be constructed in the ancient world. The library itself was part of a larger research institute called the Musaeum of Alexandria, where many of the most famous thinkers of the ancient world studied. It employed many scribes who copied books from around the known world. Most of the thousands of books were kept as papyrus scrolls and their combined value was incalculable. In 48 BCE, the library was set on fire by Julius Caesar and partially destroyed. Later, several other fires occurred and by 300 CE, it was fully destroyed. After the destruction, scholars were able to use a sister library called the Serapeum that was located in another part of the city, but unfortunately, the Serapeum was destroyed on the orders of the Coptic Pope Theophilus in 391 CE, presumably because most of the scrolls were authored by non-Christian or pagan writers.

But this was not the only wanton destruction of the great literature of the ancient world. In the sixth century CE, the devout Christian Byzantine Emperor Justinian I (527-565 CE), ordered the destruction of

all pagan literature in the empire, and he also ordered the closure of the Athenian academies established by Plato and Aristotle. From this point on, the Roman Church discouraged the creation of non-Christian writings as well as the study of science, all through the so-called dark ages until changes began to appear during the Italian Renaissance of the 14th and 15th centuries.

But, before moving forward to the Renaissance, I think it is worthwhile briefly exploring a few of the interesting events in the reign of Emperor Justinian I and his Empress Theodora. Theodora was a dancer and actress of outstanding beauty who performed in the Hippodrome, the centre of social life in Constantinople. Her act was something like what we would call burlesque today. It is reputed that in one of her acts, she would lie on her back in the nude, sprinkle grain on her body and let geese peck away at the grain. Ladies who performed these raunchy acts were usually prostitutes as well, and Theodora was regarded as the best of the best. Theodora was a Christian, but a Monophysite. Unlike Justinian, who was a Trinitarian, Monophysites rejected the concept of the three-in-one trinity, hence the prefix mono. (Were these people precursors of the Unitarians? Perhaps!) Somewhere along the way, Justinian became infatuated with the beautiful Theodora, convinced her to repent her wicked ways and after overcoming several legal obstacles, he married her. By taking a Monophysite as his bride, Justinian hoped this would lessen the conflict between the two different Christian beliefs. But of course the Trinitarians won out in the end. Theodora became perhaps the most influential and powerful woman in the Roman Empire's history. Some sources even mention her as empress regent with Justinian I as her co-regent. And while on the subject of Justinian I, it should be recognized that he was responsible for the construction of the huge magnificent Hagia Sophia (Holy Wisdom) Basilica in Constantinople. Today it is a museum.

After this intriguing diversion, we will move on to the Renaissance! The essence of the Humanism of the Italian Renaissance is the rediscovery of the prose and poetry of the ancient world. Fortunately it was not all destroyed. Most of the works we have today were preserved by Arab scholars in their libraries, or by Christian monks in monasteries. One example of an important work discovered in a monastery is the poem by the Italian poet Lucretius, written around 50 BCE, entitled *On the Nature of Things*. This poem, consisting of six books written in Latin, is mainly about the humanist-like reflections of the Greek philosopher Epicurus (341-270 BCE) who is often regarded as one of the world's first humanists. We would never have heard of, or be able to read, *On the Nature of Things*, were it not for a papal apostolic secretary named Poggio Bracciolini who discovered a copy of Lucretius' poem in a monastery in southern Germany in 1417 CE. The events concerning this fortuitous discovery are well documented in a recent book by Stephen Greenblatt entitled *The Swerve*. Greenblatt also summarizes the humanist philosophy of Epicurus that is recorded in *On the Nature of Things*, with the following headings.

- Everything is made of invisible particles.
- The elementary particles of matter – the seeds of things – are eternal.
- The elementary particles are infinite in number but limited in size and shape.
- All particles are in motion in an infinite void.
- The universe has no creator or designer.
- Everything comes into being as a result of a swerve.
- The swerve is the source of free will.
- Nature ceaselessly experiments.
- The universe was not created for or about humans.
- Humans are not unique.
- Human society began, not in a Golden Age of tranquility and plenty, but in a primitive battle for survival.

- The soul dies. There is no afterlife. Death is nothing to us.
- All organized religions are superstitious delusions.
- Religions are invariably cruel.
- The highest goal of human life is the enhancement of pleasure and the reduction of pain.
- The greatest obstacle to pleasure is not pain; it is delusion.
- Understanding the nature of things generates deep wonder.

It is truly amazing that most of these postulates have turned out to be accurate, and it is truly regrettable that they remained dormant for one thousand years thanks to the influence of the Roman Church.

Poggio was considered to be one of the greatest book hunters of early Roman classic literature during the Italian Renaissance, but he also possessed one further gift that set him apart from other book hunters. He was a superbly well-trained scribe with exceptional handwriting. With these talents he became apostolic secretary to several popes. On the occasion of a confrontational papal succession being held at Constance in southern Germany, the pope he served was ousted and he had time to search for ancient manuscripts in monasteries in this alpine area. It is uncertain exactly where he found *On the Nature of Things*, but find it he did. He had it copied and made it available to the world. Greenblatt avers that this revelation changed the course of history, shaping the thoughts of Galileo, Thomas Jefferson, Sigmund Freud, Charles Darwin, and Albert Einstein. Jefferson had five Latin copies of the poem along with translations into English, Italian and French. Humanists everywhere owe Lucretius an enormous debt of gratitude for recording the humanist philosophy of Epicurus, and we owe an equal debt of gratitude to Poggio Bracciolini for discovering and copying *On the Nature of Things*. *The Swerve*, by Stephen Greenblatt, is highly recommended reading.

The foregoing is just one example of how fortunate we are today that many of the writings of late antiquity were not totally destroyed, but were rediscovered during the Italian Renaissance. Not only the classics of Greece, but of Rome as well.

Remarks After the Meeting

Comments were all favourable. The music, the discourse and the video were all enjoyed. Although the format resembled a church service, this was not a problem for those attending, realizing that this was not a format for regular Wednesday meetings, but for an event that would likely be held on a Sunday. In the meantime, however, there was no objection to doing this once a year at a regular meeting, if the Sunday events did not materialize. Obviously, organizing these kinds of programs on a regular basis would require a considerable amount of work by dedicated volunteers and a suitable venue would have to be found. Something for future Boards of Directors to consider.

HALA Display

Brad Banks has set up the display shown on the cover of this Enlightenment at the Westmount Branch Library on several Saturdays and the response has been favourable. Every Thursday, a few religious organizations set up displays in the hallway at the Central Library and it would be good if we could set up our display in order to present an alternative approach to organized religion. The Christian displays seem to be of the evangelical/fundamentalist type. The Muslims are there as well and sometimes there are Mormons. Brad has offered to set up and take down the display, providing we can find volunteers to be there from about 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. If you would be willing volunteer, please contact Brad Banks at elbankster@gmail.com.