



# The Enlightenment



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## On Humanist Spirituality

*By Adriaan Mak*

Spirituality, as most of you know, is a word derived from "spiritus", Latin for breath; it clearly was, for most of its history, used within a religious context. For instance within the Roman Catholic Church the word referred to the different practices in use by the various monastic orders. Hence, it did and still does refer to either "Benedictine spirituality", "Dominican spirituality", or "Franciscan spirituality" - to name a few. (1)

In this religious sense the word came to be used in the 15th century. In the next century, when used in the plural, the word acquired the added meaning of things belonging to the church, ecclesiastical possessions, or revenue in return for spiritual services. In the 17th century lasting well into the 19th, the word "spirituality" meant the fact or condition of being a spirit *or* of consisting of an incorporeal essence, as in "That He is invisible is accounted for by His spirituality [1884].(2)

It has been my personal observation that many Roman Catholics who recently became secular humanists dislike the use of the word. One proponent of spirituality for secular humanists was the astronomer Carl Sagan. When the latter states in *The Demon-Haunted World* (1996), "Science is not only compatible with spirituality; it is a profound source of spirituality," he is obviously not using the word in its traditional sense.

Sagan does not overuse the word. He does not refer to it in the index of his writing as far as I can tell. One really has to hunt for sentences in his writings that mention it. Yet most of us understand what he means. For who can escape the sense of awe that new scientific discoveries continue to elicit. Likewise, those of us who like music have felt it. Yet, music is not an international, and certainly not an intergenerational language.

In my youth, sitting on the organ bench I felt the spirit, when hearing the enthusiastic singing of a favourite hymn by the congregation, causing me to draw a few more stops and raising the melody by a semi-tone for the last verse. During the Second World War during blackouts, I clearly could see the Milky Way, then our own island universe. An older neighbour boy, whose parents were theosophists, explained where "it" all came from and what its destiny was: "The god exhales and a universe comes into being; the god inhales and a universe implodes." I felt awe, wonderment, mixed with "Could this be true?" I now pity city-born youngsters who never get to see the sky on a dark night, but get their knowledge about stars from computer screens. (*Continued on page 3*)

## President's Remarks

I'm writing this in late December as we approach the end of another year. So far we have been enjoying an unseasonably mild winter, with very little snow, although we prepare for the possibility of icy polar blasts in coming days. Earlier this month, many of the members of HALA joined together for a very enjoyable evening of fun, food, and fellowship at our annual Winter Solstice party at the 427 Wing. I'd like to thank Tara Kahnert and Karissa Misener for organizing the games that got everyone mingling, chatting and laughing as we each tried to identify the names of famous people that were attached to our backs. I also thank Adriaan Mak for accompanying us on the keyboard for a rousing time of caroling, as well as his entertaining secular rendition of Good King Wenceslaus. Looking back over this past year, I think we can all be very pleased with our accomplishments at HALA. This year we had not just one, but two large public events at the Wolf Performance Hall, both on the theme of preachers abandoning their faith. In June, Dan Barker spoke on "Losing Faith in Faith" and in November, Bob Ripley, a well-known former United Church minister and newspaper columnist here in London, spoke on "Life Beyond Belief." Both events were well publicized (thanks to Brad Banks for designing the newspaper ads) and attracted large audiences that filled the auditorium. This year also marked the first time HALA had an official presence in the July Pride Parade in London, and it was a thrill for me to march with a number of other HALA members along the streets lined with cheering crowds. We have also greatly increased our presence in social media this year, with our member Brad Banks taking the lead in reviving our Facebook page and starting a Twitter account. We already have a sizable following on both of these, and I'm particularly pleased at the number of young people who have been getting involved and coming to our monthly meetings as a result. In addition, Brad has been enthusiastically promoting HALA, and Humanism in general, at various branches of the public library around the city, making good use of the very attractive and colourful banners and brochures that he has designed. And, as always, our monthly meetings featured a number of very interesting, inspiring, and informative speakers. All-in-all, it has been a very busy and productive year, and we look forward to more of the same in 2015.

~ Rod Martin

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(On Humanist Spirituality Continued)

At that time in my youth a different sense of enthusiasm in the extreme had held large audiences in its grip when a demagogue addressed his followers in the sport palace of Nuremberg claiming that he or the German people had not wanted this war, but that the Jews were to blame. The same mass generated emotions are unleashed in certain types of religious settings led by a charismatic orator. I nearly came forward to show my love for Christ during a mass rally organized by the Youth for Christ movement in post-war Rotterdam; the music during this coming forward invitation was certainly stirring.

By contrast, awe, wonder, *breath*taking, or if you wish, spirituality, are often quiet, inward sensations that cannot be conjured up at will. Maslow used the term "peak experiences"; its use was trendy for a while. Others talk of a sense of community, emerging insights, aesthetics, being swept away. To me personally the word "atheist" leaves out what I really am. Someone who describes her- or him-self by telling what they can do without, namely a deity, might be missing out on a sense of going beyond the self.

For a long time I defended the use of "religious" in the context of humanism. One of our first "Humanist Manifestos" used that word repeatedly. The meaning of the word did not imply a belief in God, but instead came from its origin, the verb "religare" – "to bind" – perhaps leading to the bonding that takes place in a "community." The Manifesto started with this sentence: "*FIRST: Religious humanists regard the universe as self-existing and not created.*" (3)

Among its signatories were John Dewey and Edwin Wilson. The word "religious" was mentioned only once in the second Humanist Manifesto and never appeared again in subsequent versions. Many people today would not understand the history behind the term religious and would with good reason infer that the word often implies a belief in something supernatural.

Today I have the same concern about the use of the word "spirituality." I feel that we might replace it with a term that arises from the new humanism beginning two hundred years ago. The earlier renaissance humanists, including Erasmus - the prince of humanists - were mainly churchmen (4). At my graduation I chose one of Erasmus' famous phrases as a life motto: "Ego mundi esse cupio" (I want to be a citizen of the world). Of course his and my world are centuries of thought apart; he had been eager to escape his cloister, meeting other scholars, such as Thomas More, for whom he wrote his *Moriae Encomium* which translates either as: "In praise of More," or "In praise of folly." As a young man, I hoped for a world where all would see others as sisters and brothers – world citizens.

(1) The Franciscans of Canada ([www.ofmqc.ca/index.php](http://www.ofmqc.ca/index.php))

(2) Oxford Dictionary 1972.

(3) Humanist Manifesto 1933.

(4) Latourette, Kenneth Scott. A History of Christianity, p. 661.

**Editors Note** The October 2013 *Enlightenment* contained an article entitled "Spirituality – The Secular Kind." The implication being that there is no reason humanists can't use the word spirituality to describe feelings of awe and wonder that they might experience in a secular world. There are those, however, who feel the word has such strong religious connotations that it is not wise or appropriate to use it in a non-religious context. This is completely understandable and as Adriaan Mak suggests in the above article, we should attempt to search for a better word. If any *Enlightenment* readers can come up with a better word or words, please email me at [dahatch@rogers.com](mailto:dahatch@rogers.com) or phone (519) 472-6167.

# **God, Darwin and My College Biology Class**

*BY David P. Barash - September 27, 2014*

EVERY year around this time, with the college year starting, I give my students “The Talk.” It isn’t, as you might expect, about sex, but about evolution and religion, and how they get along. More to the point, how they don’t.

I’m a biologist, in fact an evolutionary biologist, although no biologist, and no biology course, can help being “evolutionary.” My animal behavior class, with 200 undergraduates, is built on a scaffolding of evolutionary biology.

And that’s where The Talk comes in. It’s irresponsible to teach biology without evolution, and yet many students worry about reconciling their beliefs with evolutionary science. Just as many Americans don’t grasp the fact that evolution is not merely a “theory,” but the underpinning of all biological science, a substantial minority of my students are troubled to discover that their beliefs conflict with the course material.

Until recently, I had pretty much ignored such discomfort, assuming that it was their problem, not mine. Teaching biology without evolution would be like teaching chemistry without molecules, or physics without mass and energy. But instead of students’ growing more comfortable with the tension between evolution and religion over time, the opposite seems to have happened. Thus, The Talk.

There are a few ways to talk about evolution and religion, I begin. The least controversial is to suggest that they are in fact compatible. Stephen Jay Gould called them “non-overlapping magisteria,” Noma for short, with the former concerned with facts and the latter with values. He and I disagreed on this (in public and, at least once, rather loudly); he claimed I was aggressively forcing a painful and unnecessary choice, while I maintained that in his eagerness to be accommodating, he was misrepresenting both science and religion.

In some ways, Steve has been winning. Noma is the received wisdom in the scientific establishment, including institutions like the National Center for Science Education, which has done much heavy lifting when it comes to promoting public understanding and acceptance of evolution. According to this expansive view, God might well have used evolution by natural selection to produce his creation.

This is undeniable. If God exists, then he could have employed anything under the sun — or beyond it — to work his will. Hence, there is nothing in evolutionary biology that necessarily precludes religion, save for most religious fundamentalisms (everything that we know about biology and geology proclaims that the Earth was not made in a day).

So far, so comforting for my students. But here’s the turn: These magisteria are not nearly as non-overlapping as some of them might wish.

As evolutionary science has progressed, the available space for religious faith has narrowed: It has demolished two previously potent pillars of religious faith and undermined belief in an omnipotent and omnibenevolent God.

The twofold demolition begins by defeating what modern creationists call the argument from complexity. This once seemed persuasive, best known from William Paley’s 19th-century claim that, just as the existence of a complex structure like a watch demands the existence of a watchmaker, the existence of

complex organisms requires a supernatural creator. Since Darwin, however, we have come to understand that an entirely natural and undirected process, namely random variation plus natural selection, contains all that is needed to generate extraordinary levels of non-randomness. Living things are indeed wonderfully complex, but altogether within the range of a statistically powerful, entirely mechanical phenomenon.

A few of my students shift uncomfortably in their seats. I go on. Next to go is the illusion of centrality. Before Darwin, one could believe that human beings were distinct from other life-forms, chips off the old divine block. No more. The most potent take-home message of evolution is the not-so-simple fact that, even though species are identifiable (just as individuals generally are), there is an underlying linkage among them — literally and phylogenetically, via traceable historical connectedness. Moreover, no literally supernatural trait has ever been found in *Homo sapiens*; we are perfectly good animals, natural as can be and indistinguishable from the rest of the living world at the level of structure as well as physiological mechanism.

Adding to religion's current intellectual instability is a third consequence of evolutionary insights: a powerful critique of theodicy, the scholarly effort to reconcile belief in an omnipresent, omnibenevolent God with the fact of unmerited suffering.

Theological answers range from claiming that suffering provides the option of free will to announcing (as in the Book of Job) that God is so great and we so insignificant that we have no right to ask. But just a smidgen of biological insight makes it clear that, although the natural world can be marvelous, it is also filled with ethical horrors: predation, parasitism, fratricide, infanticide, disease, pain, old age and death — and that suffering (like joy) is built into the nature of things. The more we know of evolution, the more unavoidable is the conclusion that living things, including human beings, are produced by a natural, totally amoral process, with no indication of a benevolent, controlling creator.

I conclude *The Talk* by saying that, although they don't have to discard their religion in order to inform themselves about biology (or even to pass my course), if they insist on retaining and respecting both, they will have to undertake some challenging mental gymnastic routines. And while I respect their beliefs, the entire point of *The Talk* is to make clear that, at least for this biologist, it is no longer acceptable for science to be the one doing those routines, as Professor Gould and Noma have insisted we do.

Despite these three evolutionary strikes, God hasn't necessarily struck out. At the end of the movie version of "Inherit the Wind," based on the famous Scopes "monkey trial" over a Tennessee law prohibiting the teaching of evolution, Spencer Tracy's character, fashioned after the defense attorney Clarence Darrow, stands in the empty courtroom, picks up a Bible in one hand and Darwin's "Origin of Species" in the other, gives a knowing smile and claps them together before putting both under his arm. Would that it were so simple.

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**Quote by Charles Darwin on Poetry and Music-** If I had my life to live over again, I would have made a rule to read some poetry and listen to music at least once a week; for perhaps the parts of my brain now atrophied would thus have been kept active through use. The loss of these tastes is a loss of happiness, and may possibly be injurious to the intellect, and more probably to the moral character, by enfeebling the emotional parts of our nature.

# **Problems Inherent in the Argument by Design**

*By Goldwin Emerson*

When religious adherents are asked why they believe in God, they often respond with some version of the “argument by design”. According to this commonly stated argument, it is possible to observe order and structure in the universe, and thus its proponents conclude there must be a master designer, God, creating and sustaining the universe. Further, they argue that the great designer, God, is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent.

## **1. Order and Theistic Design are not Synonymous**

Whatever exists is, of necessity, going to be organized and structured in some fashion. That is, in order to be anything, or any phenomenon at all, it must have some order to it. This includes even chaotic-looking things and events such as rotting piles of garbage, rusting iron, traffic jams, automobile accidents, or deaths caused by disease. In each of these cases, chaotic-looking phenomena are, in fact working according to natural tendencies and could not do otherwise.

To speak of a theistic designer or planner is misleading because it introduces the notion of possible intervention here and there (prompted by prayer, worship, etc.) Such intervention would break the chain of events that would normally follow from natural tendencies such as chemical and physical forces, forces such as gravity, centrifugal force, and biological events.

I have used the term natural tendencies rather than natural laws because the term “laws” too easily suggests a lawmaker, who as religion would have it, takes away or adds to natural tendencies which are in fact constant.

Let’s consider the difference between order and design in the following examples. A very intoxicated driver gets into his unfit vehicle and drives down a congested highway at a high rate of speed. To the driver, his plan or design is simple. He wishes to travel quickly from point A to point B. To an outside observer, the driver’s actions are more akin to “an accident waiting to happen”. All of the ingredients are present leading up to his impending accident. All of the order, and structure, which will lead to his eventual accident could not have been better organized, although the driver is quite unaware of them and has not mentally designed such an unfortunate event. In this case, the order built into the situation is very different from the driver’s design. No one has planned the accident, but all of the structure and order of the accident is present.

## **2. We Cannot Know the Intentions of the Designer**

Even if we were all to agree, for the sake of argument, that there is a grand designer (God), we could not know his/her/its intentions. Let’s consider, for example, the intriguing survival techniques of the most fatal of four malaria parasites, *plasmodium falciparum*. In order for this malaria organism to be viable, it is necessary for it to be housed in the liver of its human host where it can reproduce rapidly under ideal conditions.

When it succeeds in reproducing itself sufficiently, the human liver and spleen can no longer contain the parasite which circulates throughout the human blood system. The function of the liver breaks down, severe anemia results from inadequate red blood cells, and the patient dies, as is the case with hundreds of victims who succumb to malaria each year in tropical countries throughout the world.

In order to continue to survive, the malaria organism will need to move to a new and healthy human liver. Here is where the lowly mosquito comes on the scene. By withdrawing malaria infected blood from the dying victim the mosquito unknowingly carries the infected blood to a new human host as it injects a blood thinning agent into the body of its new victim. The blood-thinning agent enables the mosquito to more easily extract its latest blood meal --- it also helps the malaria to move quickly on its way to the new human liver.

One of the functions of the human liver is to screen out foreign impurities from the blood, and so the malaria parasite is temporarily contained in the liver of its latest human victim. Now it can reproduce rapidly once more.

If we allow ourselves the luxury of anthropomorphizing for the moment, we might say that with the help of the mosquito the malaria parasite gets exactly where it “wants” to be. Yet, none of the players in this dance with life and death is really aware of any design in this highly organized process.

Again, to anthropomorphize, we could say that the malaria parasite, if it were conscious of the process might think, “Thank God I have found a new human liver. Now I can continue to grow and reproduce.” The mosquito might say, “Thank God I have found a new meal of blood. Now I can continue to grow and reproduce”. The new victim who is still unaware of his impending fate might say, “My God, the mosquitoes are bad this time of year”. And God, if he is really a designer might say, “This is a clever plan I have designed for keeping malaria alive and well in the world I have created”.

### **3. Change should not be Confused with Creation**

Within religious circles the word “creation” is usually meant to imply some brand new thing or new event. For example, adherents of religion believe that new species such as humans or other animals can come into existence as a one-time creation event designed by God. This belief offers sketchy, although adequate answers for religious apologists to the following two questions: (a) How did the universe get started? (b) Why did God create things as he did? To the first question, adherents say that everything needs a cause except God who is the first cause. To the second question, followers are usually content to say that the world is as it is because God willed it so. It is according to his plan and we need think no further on this matter

To the sceptic, the notion of a first cause (or uncaused cause) is self- contradictory. If every creation needs a creator, then God needs a creator too. To cause oneself to be created is a nonsensical concept akin to lifting oneself up by one’s own bootstraps. To say, on the one hand that God always existed opens the door to the sceptic’s notion that the universe could also have existed in some form, albeit different from the present. Perhaps a long time ago the universe was still in the form of basic energy or matter but with certain basic organizational structure which in time caused it to change to its present form.

For the sceptic, it is more rational to look upon the universe as a changing evolving phenomenon in which higher forms of life gradually emerged to the present state and also to accept the idea that the universe will continue to evolve in the future.

Changes which result in previously unobserved phenomena should not be equated with one-time “creation” events. In a loose manner of speaking we might say that the sub-continent of India was created hundreds of thousands years ago by force exerted through the movement of tectonic plates. It would be more accurate to say that the formation of India from an island mass to a large sub-continent as it pushed up the Himalayan Mountains in its union with Asia was a natural event rather than a one-time “created” event.

In summary, order should not be confused with design. Secondly, God’s designs, if there be a God, are unknowable, as in the case of why would a benevolent God create a method of enhancing malaria while causing the death of thousands of humans. For the sceptic, there is neither comfort nor understanding in such a belief. Finally, as things change in the universe, they often appear to be newly created when in fact they are simply phenomena which emerge out of natural causes.

## **Another Good Year**

2014 was another good year for HALA. We had an interesting roster of speakers, two events at the Wolf Performance Hall and two social events. These are all listed below.

January – AGM and How I Became a Humanist: Rod Martin and Goldie Emerson.

February – Is Humanistic Judaism an Oxymoron? Rabbi Debra Dressler.

March – Meeting cancelled due to inclement weather.

April – The Beginning of Life: A Discussion in the Context of the Right-to Life/Pro-Choice Debate  
Dr. Tom Kennedy

May – The First Love Story: A Brief Overview of Attachment Theory and Research. David & Deanne Pederson.

June – Losing Faith in Faith: From Preacher to Atheist. Dan Barker at the Wolf Performance Hall.

July – Annual HALA picnic at the home of Linda & Will Sanderson in Sparta.

September - The London Freethinker’s Fellowship: A Secular Service.

October – Humanism and the Founding Fathers of the United States. Anthony Martin.

November – Life Beyond Belief: A Preacher’s De-conversion. Bob Ripley at the Wolf Performance Hall.

December – Annual HALA Solstice Celebration at 427 Wing.