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Three Religions – One God?



Jewish Yahweh



Christian Jesus –son of God?



Islam's Allah

Judaism, Christianity and Islam are often referred to as Abrahamic religions because their adherents believe the patriarch Abraham to be their founding father. Abraham worshiped a deity known as Yahweh who reputedly told him he would be the father of an eventual great nation through his son Isaac, his grandson Jacob and Jacob's twelve sons. This nation, consisting of twelve tribes, became known as Israel. But Abraham had an older son Ishmael, birthed by Hagar a handmaiden to his wife Sarah. Muslims regard themselves as descendants of Abraham through his son Ishmael, calling their deity Allah rather than Yahweh. A couple of millennia after Abraham, Christians claim a virgin named Mary gave birth to a baby they called Jesus, the son of God, with God being synonymous with the Jewish deity Yahweh.

Non-believers regard the three monotheistic religions as human inventions incorporating a supernatural deity to satisfy a human need to account for the unexplainable. These religions still exist today and one could well ask, if there really is an all-powerful, all-knowing benevolent deity common to all three religions, why does he, she or it allow so much fighting among them? This is similar to the age-old theodicy question, why does this all-powerful, all-knowing, benevolent deity allow so much suffering in the world? The logical answer is of course - this supposed supernatural deity does not now, nor has ever existed. He, she or it is also a human invention, and therefore unable to influence events on earth.

Nevertheless, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, all based on supernatural phenomena, make up about half of the world's population and must be reckoned with. These religions are not going away anytime soon, and one of them, namely Islam, merits special attention because of the various atrocities happening today in the Islamic world. *(Continued on page 2)*

These recent Islamic happenings include beheadings of Western captives by Islamic State fundamentalists, kidnapping of Protestant school girls by Boko Haram in Nigeria, the killing of two soldiers in Canada and killings in Paris France.. They have all precipitated increasing concerns about Islam. These despicable events present a quandary because many Muslims claim that Islam is a religion of peace and that only a small minority is involved in carrying out the barbaric terrorist actions reported in the news. Evidence, however, tends to suggest otherwise because the atrocities are so widespread. There is not only Al Qaeda and the attacks on 9/11, there is the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, threats in Yemen, bombings in Nairobi, Lisbon and London England, Boko Haram and others in northwest Africa, constant hatred between Sunnis and Shias, civil war in Syria, unrest in Libya and Egypt, as well as threats against Jews in Israel by Hamas in Gaza. And in Canada, besides the recent killing of the two soldiers, we have had honour killings, an attempt to instil Sharia law in Ontario, (fortunately unsuccessful) and three youths who went to Africa to join the Islamist cause apparently received their indoctrination and training in London Ontario. (How scary!) And to boot, there are long-established customs including the subordination of women and the cruel act of female circumcision that do not belong in our modern world.

So can anyone be blamed for wondering if there is not more than just a small minority causing all the problems with Islam? And why are only a very limited number of moderate Muslims speaking out and condemning the perpetrators? The reality is, we non-Muslims have no idea what proportion of Muslims are peace-loving and wish to respect the values of others living in the countries where they reside, and what portion of Muslims wish to establish and live in Islamic states under Sharia law. Another concern is the Qur'an. Just how much do the teachings therein influence the actions of the terrorists? Probably quite a lot! There is just so much we do not know with any certainty.

On balance, surely it is not illogical to conclude that a religion fostering the kinds of violence and atrocities cited above, is out of place in the twenty-first century and is sorely in need of reform. Both Judaism and Christianity have undergone periods of violence through wars and inquisitions, but have also embraced reform. Therefore, perhaps examining the histories of Judaism and Christianity could prove helpful in pointing the way toward badly needed reform in Islam.

A Brief History of Judaism

Early humans were animists believing that "spirits" resided in earthly objects as well as in the heavens. These spirits were thought to be able to influence events on earth, and thus required sacrifices for appeasement. By the time of the Greek civilization, there was thought to be a plethora of influential non-earthly gods that had to be appeased through animal sacrifices. At the same time, 1500 kilometres to the south east, there was another civilization that in contrast worshipped only one God called Yahweh. These people were the Jews whose often violent history is documented in the *Hebrew Scriptures*. These scriptures can be divided into four sections: 1. the first five books or Pentateuch; 2. the history books telling the history of the Israelites from their conquest of Canaan to their defeat and exile to Babylon circa 586 BCE; 3. the poetic and "Wisdom" books dealing in various forms with questions of good and evil in the world; 4. the books of the biblical prophets, warning of the consequences of turning away from God.

Today most people, other than devout religious fundamentalists, regard the stories in Genesis including the creation story and the flood as myths. Furthermore, there is little archaeological or other non-biblical evidence to confirm that the sojourn in Egypt or the Exodus ever occurred. It is most likely that the peoples who became known as Israelites were living in Canaan as far back as 2000 BCE. By about 1000 BCE, the Israelites were ruled by King David. He was succeeded by his son Solomon who was then succeeded by his son Rehoboam. During Rehoboam's reign, the Kingdom split into Northern and

Southern entities with ten tribes in the north and two in the south. Jerusalem was the capital in the south. The ten northern tribes disappeared (the so-called ten lost tribes) and those people in the south, mostly from the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, became known as the Jews. In 586 BCE, the Babylonian leader Nebuchadnezzar captured Judea and hauled off a number of the Jews to Babylon as slaves. It was there that much of parts 1 and 2 of the *Hebrew Scriptures* cited above were compiled from earlier writings and oral traditions. In 539 BCE, Persian King Cyrus captured Babylon and allowed the Jews to return to Judea where they resided, sometimes peacefully, sometimes not, until the Roman general Pompey captured Palestine in 63 BCE. The Jews were not content under Roman rule and revolted in 66 CE. In 70 CE the Romans sacked Jerusalem and destroyed Herod's magnificent Temple. This ended the traditional Jewish Temple worship. It was replaced by Rabbinic Judaism which has continued to this day. In the centuries following the Roman victories, the Jews were dispersed and settled in various countries throughout the known world, sometimes in ghettos, sometimes being referred to as "Christ killers," and often persecuted. The barbaric holocaust in Germany during WW II being one of the most horrendous persecutions suffered by the Jewish people, but there were others that occurred in previous centuries.

During the later years of the 19th century there was a movement called Zionism that encouraged Jews to return to their homeland Palestine, and by the start of WW II there were close to half a million Jews living relatively peacefully among Muslim Palestinians. After the war there was much sympathy toward the Jews due to the revelation that six million were killed in the holocaust. An official Jewish state was formed in 1948 and Jews migrated into Palestine while many native Palestinians were forced into Gaza and the West Bank. Ever since there has been never ending off and on conflict and it continues to this day.

Judaism is not only a unique religion, but it is also a culture. For example it is perfectly acceptable for a person to be an atheist Jew if he or she desires. And it must be stressed that Jews have made contributions to humanity way out of proportion to their fifteen million numbers (six million in Israel). Comprising less than 0.2 percent of world population, Jews have won 41% of Nobel prizes in economics, 28% of medicine, 26% of physics, 19% of chemistry, 13% of literature and 9% of peace awards. Quite an outstanding achievement! Who knows how many budding Albert Einsteins or Jonas Salks were killed in the holocaust?

On reading the *Hebrew Scriptures*, one will find in the Pentateuch (the first five books) 613 commandments that were to be adhered to by the Israelites. There are positive commandments with instructions on how to perform certain acts and negative commandments saying what acts or practices to avoid. While there may be orthodox Jews who still attempt to live according to many of these commandments or laws, modern reformed Jews will observe only a few of them. The point to be made is that Judaism has evolved, or has been reformed, in order to coincide with the realities of today's world. For example, Judaism no longer advocates stoning for adultery. It is suggested that it is time for Islam to reform as well.

Another point to make is that unlike Christians and Muslims, Jews do not proselytize and try to convert others to their faith. Nevertheless, though the Jews had little to do with it, two problematic religions, Christianity and Islam, adopted the monotheism of Judaism and through proselytizing and other activities, eventually became the two most populous religions in the world.

A Brief History of Christianity

After reading books on first century CE history, as well as the Bible and books about the life of Jesus of Nazareth, I have concluded that the following scenario about the early years of Christianity is probably

closer to what actually happened than the accounts recorded in the New Testament gospels. Around the year 4 BCE in the village of Nazareth, a Jewess named Mary became pregnant out of wedlock. In accordance with Jewish law she should have been stoned to death, but her future husband Joseph somehow protected her and she gave birth to a son named Jesus. He was a precocious child often getting into trouble, but was very clever and eventually enrolled in a yeshiva (a rabbinical school) studying to become a rabbi, thus learning a great deal about the *Hebrew Scriptures*. He was expelled from the yeshiva for sexual misdemeanours and eventually at age 30 formed a cult proclaiming he was the expected Messiah, possessing the power to forgive the sins of those who believed in him while guaranteeing these believers entry into heaven at the time of death. He was a charismatic preacher and was able to attract a crowd of followers convincing them that he was indeed the Messiah promised in the scriptures. The Jewish authorities in the Temple heard of this upstart imposter and knew he did not possess the required characteristics of a Messiah. After Jesus upset the tables in the Temple courtyard, the authorities persuaded the Roman Procurator Pontius Pilate to have him crucified. After the crucifixion the cult continued on, led by Jesus' brother James. They attempted to convert fellow Jews (not gentiles) to this Jesus movement, but were not very successful and indeed some of them, including James, were martyred. This cult eventually died out and this should have been the end of the "Jesus movement", but something happened that helped change the course of western history. That something was the apostle Paul.

(As already mentioned, the above brief account of the life of Jesus of Nazareth differs substantially from the stories contained in the New Testament gospels, wherein the writers attempt to portray Jesus in a positive light, rather than as an imposter. The details cited in the paragraph above come mostly from the Jewish Babylonian Talmud and present the Jewish side of the story rather than the Christian side. I submit the Jewish accounts are probably closer to what actually happened, compared to the inconsistent, contradicting and supernatural accounts in the gospels. It seems preposterous that an individual born of a virgin, able to forgive sins and rise from the grave could possibly have existed. This Jesus, the supernatural Christ, had to be a human invention, but who was the inventor? I believe the inventor was most likely the clever fully human Jesus of Nazareth, the imposter).

Now back to Paul. Paul (originally named Saul) was an educated Jewish Pharisee who despised those in the Jesus sect. On the road to Damascus a few years after the death of Jesus, Paul apparently had a vision wherein Jesus implored him to take his message of "faith and redemption" to the gentiles. This he and his associates did very successfully as they established a network of Christian churches throughout the eastern Mediterranean, despite often being jailed and tortured. Paul and others wrote a series of Epistles to the various churches promoting Jesus' message of salvation through faith as well as providing instructions for righteous living. Some of the passages contain considerable wisdom. Paul ended up in Rome on trial for disturbing the *Pax Romana*. He was martyred in 62 CE during the reign of Nero.

After the death of Paul, the Christian churches did not fade away. Although the Roman elite thought the Christian message was nonsense, and even fed Christians to the lions in the Colosseum, the downtrodden peasants accepted the concept of a blissful afterlife in an idyllic heaven and kept the churches alive. These churches were led by a number of dedicated bishops, many of whom became saints in the Roman Catholic Church. By the start of the fourth century the future of Christianity was still uncertain as persecutions of Christians sporadically continued, but then another fortuitous event occurred, and again it involved a vision or a dream.

In 312 the Roman emperor Constantine was about to engage in battle at Milvian Bridge. Before the battle he is reputed to have had a dream in which he believed he was told that if he fought the battle under the banner of the Christian cross, he would win. He had his warriors paint crosses on their shields and he did

indeed win the battle. He later decreed that Christianity should become the official religion of the Roman Empire and eventually the many pagan Roman gods were replaced by the one Judeo/Christian God.

In the early fourth century, there were several Christian factions expounding different versions of Jesus-the-Christ, so Constantine, desiring unity, convened the Council of Nicaea and instructed the church fathers to sort out the conflicts. It was at this Council that the Nicene Creed and the Trinity were further developed and clarified, and from that time onward the Roman Church grew and prospered throughout Europe for over 1200 years. During this period numerous atrocities were committed, including crusades, inquisitions and burnings at the stake for heresy, apostasy and witchcraft.

By the fifteenth century CE, there were those who realized there was rampant corruption in the Roman Church and certain individuals, including Martin Luther in Germany, John Calvin in Switzerland and Henry VIII in England, broke away from the Catholic Church and the Protestant Reformation was born. Aided by the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, democracy and science (often suppressed by the Catholic Church) began to develop and flourish. The West prospered and pulled away from rest of the world. Many of the Protestants exhibited the stoic qualities of the ancient Romans and it has been suggested that the Protestant work ethic was at least partly responsible for the rapid settlement of North America and the unprecedented developments in science and technology in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Several Protestant mainline denominations emerged, including Lutherans, Anglicans (Episcopalians), Methodists, Congregationalists, Presbyterians and Baptists. Today many of these mainline Protestant churches, as well as the Catholic Church, are in decline in much of the secular Western world. But in the United States in particular, evangelical/fundamentalist churches are in the ascendant and are even influencing governments in undesirable ways, threatening the separation of church and state.

At the start of fourth century CE, there were two roads Western civilization could have followed. The Athenian road encompassing Greek philosophy, humanism, democracy, and the beginnings of science, or alternatively the Jerusalem road encompassing Christianity based on spurious supernatural beliefs. Unfortunately, due to the likes of the apostle Paul, Constantine and others, as well as the Roman Catholic Church, Christianity prevailed. Fortunately, thanks to the Renaissance, the Enlightenment and the Protestant Reformation, the West did get partly back onto the Athenian road. Now what remains to be done is to get fully back on the Athenian road with the establishment of secular societies free from the negative influences of monotheistic religions.

The Protestant Reformation and its influences on Western societies were certainly beneficial, but further reform is required. One area of concern is the Catholic Church. In issues such as abortion, birth control, LGBT rights, celibate priesthood with accompanying paedophilia, married priests, and women priests, they are far behind most Protestant churches. Although the latter issues have to be solved internally, the Church's stance on the first three – abortion, birth control and LGBT rights – are of concern to humanists and other like-minded people concerned with human rights. Pope Francis appears to be advocating progress in some areas, but traditions will die hard. Human rights advocates can be of aid in continuing to support artificial birth control, women's right to abortion and the LGBT community.

As stated previously, many mainline Protestant churches are in decline and present few problems, but the fundamentalist evangelicals are in the ascendance in some areas and are threatening separation of church and state, particularly in the United States where they have achieved influence in governments. This is a situation that requires opposition and speaking out by organizations and individuals who are concerned about maintaining firm separation of church and state.

Without question, reforms within the Christian religion have had positive outcomes, and again I suggest it is time for reform within Islam, that only moderate Muslims can bring about.

A Brief History of Islam and Reflections on the Qur'an

Although as indicated at the outset, there is a supposed link to Abraham, Islam is actually the youngest of the three major monotheistic religions dating from 610 CE. In that year an Arabian merchant named Muhammad reputedly received a message from Allah through the angel Gabriel who commanded him to recite. For the next 22 years until his death in 632 he did just that. After Muhammad died, the revelations were collected together into the Qur'an from the accounts of those who memorized them or wrote them down. Before he died, Muhammad had taken up arms and converted all of Arabia to Islam. After his death, Muslim warriors embarked on a series of conquests unprecedented in their breadth and swiftness. Syria and the Holy Land fell in 637, Armenia and Egypt in 639, Cyprus in 654, and North Africa by the 660s. Today Muslims inhabit a vast area from north-west Africa to the Philippines, and there is a sizable Muslim population in many European countries causing great concern because Muslim birth rates are so high. Muslims could quite possibly outnumber native Europeans in the not too distant future and take control. A frightening thought!

Also frightening are the problems radical fundamentalist Muslim jihadists are causing today, particularly in North Africa and Syria/Iraq where the rebels are attempting to establish caliphates. They are beheading western journalists and kidnapping and killing non-Muslims. Sunnis are killing Shias and vice versa. As if this were not enough, western Muslim youth have joined terrorists groups abroad and threaten to return home and carry out jihad. At the moment the jihadists are winning, and Western nations really do not know how to effectively cope with these religious fanatics.

These jihadists get much of their inspiration from the sacred Qur'an which contains instructions on killing the infidels and on the spreading of the Islamic religion. To the best of my knowledge, very few non-Muslims have had the perseverance to read the Qur'an in its entirety, but recently I received an email from a friend who did manage to slog through it a little bit at a time. The email I received presented his "Reflections" in point form, and with his permission I have combined the points into paragraphs in order to save space. If this causes any lack of flow the fault is mine. Because there are without doubt passages in the Qur'an that are being used to justify killings today, I feel it is necessary to include the interpretations of an intelligent well-read objective person in this Enlightenment, which by now readers will have concluded, is among other things, a critical assessment of Islam and an attempt to make a case for reform within Islam. The author of the "Reflections" wishes to remain anonymous.

Reflections on the Qur'an

An Objective Review - Compiled From Point Form Notes

Never thought I'd find something that would make the Book of Mormon look good but this is it. The Book of Mormon is utter nonsense, but it is harmless. The Qur'an is actively harmful, spiritually and in practical ways.

Reading this was spiritually very difficult; I literally could only tolerate it in small doses, with time in between. It is an embarrassment to all people of faith. A major theme is that disbelievers will burn in Hell for all eternity; 89 out of 114 Suras mention this in one way or another, often more than once. The promise that believers will go to the Gardens is prominent, but this (in my opinion) is a secondary theme. It is full of vindictiveness, anger, hatred, vengeance. For example (Sura 4:55-56): "...Hell blazes fiercely enough. We shall send those who reject Our revelations to the fire. When their skins have been burned away, We shall replace them with new ones so that they may continue to feel the pain; God is mighty and wise." And here's a bit that is a good illustration of the tone of the

Qur'an (10:90-92): "We took the Children of Israel across the sea. Pharaoh and his troops pursued them in arrogance and aggression. But as he was drowning he cried, 'I believe there is no God except the one the Children of Israel believe in. I submit to Him.' Now? When you had always been a rebel, and a troublemaker! Today we shall save only your corpse as a sign to all posterity..."

The "God" here is light years from the God of Jesus or even the God of Israel. This "God" has far more in common with Attila the Hun. One observation I would make is that the approach here to the late-believing Pharaoh is the precise, complete opposite to that expressed in the New Testament in the parable of the workers in the vineyard. The belief in God here is very primitive and fear based. The "God" presented in the Qur'an is not one I want to have anything to do with.

Muhammad is the most insecure prophet ever, constantly in need of reassurance. There's a lot of material along the lines of 'rest assured I [God] have destroyed lots of civilizations before for disobeying and I can do so again. Sura 6:165 contains a short, nigh-on self-contradictory statement that is indicative of some of the problems I see here: "...your Lord is swift in punishment, yet He is most forgiving and merciful."

The Qur'an is extremely repetitive! Some larger Suras appear to be cobbled together from bits and pieces, and are very disjointed, meandering and incoherent in places. Self-evident this is the work of a man, not God; Sura 2:106- "Any revelation We cause to be superseded or forgotten, We replace with something better or similar..." This seems fishy to me.

Many sections in the Qur'an are clearly a written version of what originally was a verbal sermon. Many of these feature a distorted telling of a tale from the Old Testament (or occasionally the New Testament), by a human going on memory. These references to Biblical people or events frequently deviate significantly from the Bible; there's also added material in addition to the distortions. Some of this may be Arabic tradition. Other parts read like someone who either had imperfect knowledge or was going on imperfect memory, or both.

There are a number of times when there's an obscure reference to some local, at-the-time happening; these typically would have had meaning at the time, but they have none for posterity. Another little sign of the Qur'an's human origins: Sura 15 mentions the creation of the Jinn by God. The Jinn were a purely local (to Muhammad's area) legend.

The fact that the Qur'an is in Arabic (and therefore aimed at Arabs) seems to be important. It is clear that Muhammad didn't have a lot to work with where his prospective followers were concerned. Here's one instruction to them that stuck out for me (17:31): "Do not kill your children for fear of poverty."

For later reference, this is quote A: 2:191-"Kill them whenever you encounter them, and drive them out from where they drove you out, for persecution is more serious than killing." The notes give an alternate form: "Persecuting you unlawfully is worse than you killing them in the precincts in self defense." We're a loooooooooooooong way from the Jesus of the New Testament. There's some context missing here (hinted at in both versions) that is mentioned in the notes, but any way you slice it, this a very dangerous verse, open to all kinds of abuse. I also have to note, the idea of persecution being worse than killing is offensive (the alternate version has a substituted modification re: self defense; this is different). There's a similar thought in 2:217 (for later reference this is quote B): "They ask you [Prophet] about fighting in the prohibited month. Say, 'Fighting in that month is a great offence, but to bar others from God's path, to disbelieve in Him, prevent access to the Sacred Mosque, and expel its people, are still greater offences in God's eyes: persecution is worse than killing.'"

There's some good stuff like most of 2:256-257: "There is no compulsion in religion: true guidance has become distinct from error, so whoever rejects false gods and believes in God has grasped the firmest hand-hold, one that will never break. God is all hearing and all knowing. God is the ally of those who believe: He brings them out of the depths of darkness and into the light. As for the disbelievers, their allies and false gods who take them from the light into the depths of darkness, they are the inhabitants of the Fire, and there they will remain." And also the

appeal for ecumenical understanding in 3:58-64, and the various sections where guidance for good behaviour is given.

In Sura #3 there is an account of Jesus' birth, which turns out to be a mangled version of Luke's account. In the Qur'an's version Zachariah (Bible: Zechariah), husband (in Luke) to Elizabeth (John's mother), has become a guardian of sorts to Mary, although there is also a reference to him being a husband, and to confuse things further, a fleeting reference to John, but no explanation of who he is. The Lukan virgin birth is here, but Joseph is nowhere in sight. At one point the narrative suddenly morphs from an angel addressing Mary, indicating what Jesus will say, to the adult Jesus actually saying it.

There are rules à la Leviticus; nothing really though to justify some Muslims' treatment of women. There is a significant amount of anti-Jewish material. One example of possible inspiration for martyrdom is 4:74 (for later reference this is quote C): "...To anyone who fights in God's way, whether killed or victorious, we shall give a great reward."

The Qur'an comes out repeatedly against the Christian concept of the trinity; personally I have some sympathy with this. 4:33 has an interesting sanctioned punishment: "Those who wage war against God and His Messenger and strive to spread corruption in the land should be punished by death, crucifixion, the amputation of an alternate hand and fist, or banishment from the land..."

One does wonder if Muhammad started out as a holy man, and later morphed into a politician among other things. It does seem to me that Muhammad started out with a message, had trouble convincing people for various good reasons (Meccan Suras; there's more than one reference to him being accused of being insane) then in frustration resorted to force to ram his message down people's throats at sword point (Medinan Suras). There's lots of examples of the latter approach. Here's one that hints at least at the former, from an earlier (Meccan) Sura (17:54): "...[Prophet], We did not send you to take charge of them." And here's an example of Muhammad having trouble convincing people on account of his changing revelations that supposedly came from on high (16:101-102): "When We substitute one revelation for another – and God knows best what He reveals – they say 'You are just making it up,' but most of them have no knowledge. Say that the Holy Spirit [JPW: the notes say this refers to the Angel Gabriel] has brought the Revelation with the Truth step by step from your Lord, to strengthen the believers and as guidance and good news to the devout."

The Qur'an is not at all consistent in its handling of the issue of free will. In fact, it often seems to contradict itself, if only in implication. The nearest thing to a consistent statement would be 'God decides if you will believe or not, but if you don't you'll burn in Hell.' A simple example would be 10:100: "No soul can believe except by God's will,..." So God at whim decides who will not believe, thereby dooming them (as we know from countless statements on the topic) to an eternity in Hell. In my view this is patently ludicrous and deeply offensive on many levels.

The Qur'an is very big on listing signs of God to be seen in the wonders of nature. Sura 47:1-2: "God will bring to nothing the deeds of those who disbelieve and ban others from the way of God, but He will overlook the bad deeds of those who have faith, do good deeds, and believe in what has been sent down to Muhammad – the truth from their Lord..." This is a licence for Muslims who do a few good deeds to do whatever evil they choose!! Combining the above quote with earlier quotes A, B and C gives the likes of Osama bin Laden all the justification they need for any terrorist act, no matter how heinous. I really struggle to understand how Islamic civilization (which featured innumerable accomplishments in many practical and intellectual fields) arose from the Qur'an.

It is a great tragedy for humankind that one of our largest religions is based on this book. I would maintain that having it as the foundation renders Islam forever vulnerable to violence, among other things. Perhaps a major Reformation that completely alters the current Islamic approach to the Qur'an would help. Finally, in my view, children of any faith should not be exposed to the Qur'an.

Readers will note that the writer of the “Reflections”, after identifying many of the shortcomings of Islam, also calls for reform. This raises the question. What can humanists or humanist organizations do to encourage beneficial reforms in all three religions?

Actions For Humanists and Humanist Organizations

Judaism – There is little that outsiders can do to solve the problems in Israel. The Orthodox Jews believe that the Jews are entitled to inhabit all of the West Bank and in fact settlements are steadily creeping eastward toward the Jordan. The Hamas rebels in Gaza hate Jews with a passion and have vowed to drive all Jews in Israel into the sea. A solution to this stalemate is nowhere in sight. If it is agreed that a two-state arrangement is the logical eventual solution, reformed Jews must convince the orthodox Jews that a compromise is required and the Palestinian Authority must get control of Hamas and convince them to compromise as well. Israel is a secular democracy and deserves to survive and prosper, but regrettably peace is nowhere in sight at the present time. It can only be solved by the parties involved.

Christianity – Although concerns about Christianity are not nearly as serious as with Islam, there are nevertheless areas that merit consideration for change. As already noted above, one area concerns the Roman Catholic Church’s stand on abortion, birth control, and LBGT rights. Another concern is the attempts by fundamentalist evangelical Christians to gain influence in governments and threaten separation of church and state. How can humanists and other like-minded individuals and organizations help alleviate these problematic situations?

When humanist organizations observe the suppression or curtailment of basic democratic human rights, and the incursion of fundamentalists into democratic governments, they have a responsibility and a duty to respond and make their views known. To do this it will often be necessary to get political. This can only be done through nationally well-known leaders that the media will respect and seek out. Many humanist organizations have been lax in this regard. It must be realized that it took 30 years for the fundamentalists to get a foothold in the U.S. Congress, and 30 years for the LBGT community to gain respectable recognition. Unfortunately the humanists are behind and need to catch up. Only through competent dedicated leaders can this be done. While it may be tempting to preach to devout believers that there is no deity, much more is required. The objective should be the promotion and preservation of prosperous democratic societies free of religious influence, recognizing that Christianity will not disappear overnight, but will gradually fade into the background as has happened in prosperous social-democratic northern Europe.

Islam – It is within monotheistic Islam, whose adherents are constantly praising their revered Allah, that today’s most serious problems exist. It seems incredible that in the 21st century barbaric acts including beheadings, honour killings, stoning, female circumcision, female suppression and jihad still occur. Military action is often employed in an attempt to root out terrorist groups carrying out these atrocities, but with only limited success. In fact the American invasion of Iraq has made matters worse. The problems are exacerbated by the teaching of Qur’anic exhortations to Muslim youth encouraging them to commit jihad and earn a way into heaven (72 virgins) through suicide bombings. Surely today with the internet and social media, Muslim youth can be made aware that there is a better life in democratic non-theocratic countries and begin to question what they are being asked to believe and why they should participate in jihad. But this can only happen if there is a cavalcade of voices of moderate Muslims and others, pointing out and condemning the spurious harmful beliefs and practices of Islam. It is time to stop pussy-footing around and call it like it is. In the past, some solitary critics of Islam have

been killed and others require bodyguards. But if critics unite *en masse*, the jihadists can't kill everybody. With enough criticism, moderate peace-loving Muslims should react and hopefully join in and help ferret out the radicals and lessen hatred toward the West. It is most encouraging to see Prince Charles on TV condemning the killings of Christians and others. Regarding the Sunni/Shia conflict, only they themselves can sort this out. Western interference is probably unwise as long as neither side has nuclear weapons.

Yes, it is easy to be an armchair quarterback and offer suggestions, but in the long run what is required are competent knowledgeable leaders with the foresight and the means to tackle these horrendous problems caused by misguided members of a fallacious monotheistic religion. Short-term solutions unfortunately seem elusive and the struggle will continue until brave progressive Muslim leaders tackle the tribalism that now exists and bring about badly needed reform. (DAH)

Alternatives to Monotheistic Religions

It would be disingenuous to be critical of monotheistic religions without proposing the possibility of something better to take their place. It is suggested that the something better should be secular societies based on humanist principles. But where do secular humanists, free from moral commands imposed by religious dogma, look for moral and ethical guidance?

Perhaps a good place to begin a discourse on the subject of morality is the teaching of children in their critical formative years. In the past, religions have played a major role in imparting moral principles to children, but unfortunately children have been learning untruths based on supernatural phenomena, and they have also had instilled into them a sense of fear about what may happen in the afterlife. As English philosophy professor A.C. Grayling states in his book *The God Argument*, "the major reason for the continuance of religious belief in a world which might otherwise have been moved beyond it, is the indoctrination of children before they reach the age of reason." Surely, this is a violation of the children's right to grow up as free individuals. Surely it is time the teaching of religious dogma to children ceases and parents and teachers assume responsibility for ethical and moral instructions to children. But of what should the instructions consist?

My suggestion is that these instructions should be based on the miracle of life itself in all its aspects. Life *per se* does not begin in the womb. Life began about three and a half billion years ago and has been evolving ever since. Each human is the result of chance happenings occurring over eons and eons, and each living being is truly a miracle. And it is a reverence for this miracle of life, including their own, that should be instilled in the minds of children rather than religious dogma. They should be led to realize that the most unpardonable sin of all is to destroy another human life because each life is unique and precious. Children should be made aware of the need to eliminate child hunger and poverty in the world as well as the need to preserve and protect the natural environment in order that they and their descendants will be able to survive with clean air, nutritious food, and sufficient potable water. Could we dare hope that this approach could aid in the decline of wars in the future and lead toward better secular societies with a minimum of religiosity? It certainly should help.

Another question often asked about secular societies concerns spirituality. This concern is not hard to allay. For non-believing humanists there is a secular spirituality that some like to describe as awe and wonder. They marvel at the awe and wonders of nature, the existence and complexity of the universe, the miracle and preciousness of life itself, the accomplishments of humankind in the areas of art, music, poetry and architecture, at the emotion of falling in love and the joy experienced at the birth of a child. Rather than worshipping a supernatural deity, humanists celebrate the joy of living a moral, ethical and

compassionate life. With this approach, non-believers obtain a sense of achieving a fulfilling and satisfying way of life, living every day to the fullest extent possible, believing that this life is all there is. There is no afterlife.

In prosperous secular societies the majority of citizens do not spend much time thinking about religion or about what are called spiritual matters. They are more concerned with getting an education, raising their families and keeping their jobs. In their spare time, many people engage in or watch sports, watch movies and their favourite TV shows, listen to pop music, or indulge in some personal hobby. For those who may be more aesthetically or intellectually inclined, there is classical music, art, drama and philosophy. And for all who crave feelings of spirituality, there is a wealth of secular awe and wonder available on our marvelous planet. As far as humanists are concerned, this world offers sustenance and delight to every one of us, each according to his or her own likes and desires, and the last thing they wish is to rely on escape to celestial delusion in the form of an afterlife.

Such are the morals and ethics in a secular humanist society. Humanists regard this approach as preferable to following the monotheistic religious paths that after centuries of dogmatic rule, have taken us to the edge of self-destruction. No wonder humanists rejoice in the unfolding of reason and compassion. Further insight into humanism can be gleaned from the following:

Humanism is the outcome of a long tradition of free thought that has inspired many of the world's thinkers and creative artists, and has given rise to science itself.

It is ethical. It affirms the worth, dignity, and autonomy of the individual. Humanists have a duty of care to all of humanity including future generations, and affirm that morality is an intrinsic part of human nature.

It is rational. It seeks to use science creatively, not destructively. The solutions to the world's problems lie in human thought and action rather than in supernatural intervention.

It insists on personal liberty in balance with social responsibility.

It is undogmatic. It imposes no creed upon its adherents. It is thus committed to education free from indoctrination.

It is a life stance. It aspires to achieve the maximum in human fulfilment,

- through the cultivation of ethical living,
- through the power of science and creative imagination.
- through the furtherance of peace and in the service of compassion.

We are connected, all of us, in a community of human beings. All the lies that have divided us - about nation and religion and sexuality - are being torn down, and we are realizing that we really are one family.

Religion Versus Humanism - Quotes by Isaac Asimov

From the book It's Been a Good Life, published posthumously by Isaac's widow Jane Jeppson Asimov

"I have never, not for one moment, been tempted toward religion of any kind. The fact is that I feel no spiritual void. I have my philosophy of life, which does not include any aspect of the supernatural and which I find totally satisfying. I am, in short, a rationalist and believe only that which reason tells me is so."

“I’ve never been particularly careful about what label I placed on my beliefs. I believe in the scientific method and the rule of reason as a way of understanding the natural Universe. I don’t believe in the existence of entities that cannot be reached by such a method and such a rule and that are therefore “supernatural.” I certainly don’t believe in the mythologies of our society, in Heaven and Hell, in God and angels, in Satan and demons. I’ve thought of myself as an “atheist,” but that simply described what I *didn’t* believe in, not what I did.”

“Gradually, though, I became aware that there was a movement called “humanism,” which used that name because, to put it most simply, Humanists believe that human beings produced the progressive advance of human society and also the ills that plague it. They believe that if the ills are to be alleviated, it is humanity that will have to do the job. They disbelieve in the influence of the supernatural on either the good or the bad of society, on either its ills or the alleviation of those ills.”

“Have I told you that I prefer “rationalism” to “atheism”? The word “atheist,” meaning “no God,” is negative and defeatist. It says what you don’t believe and puts you in an eternal position of defense. “Rationalism” on the other hand states what you DO believe; that which can be understood in the light of reason. The question of God and other mystical objects-of-faith are outside reason and therefore play no part in rationalism and you don’t have to waste your time in either attacking or defending that which you rule out of your philosophy altogether.”

“There is nothing frightening about an eternal dreamless sleep. Surely it is better than eternal torment in Hell and eternal boredom in Heaven. And what if I’m mistaken? The question was asked of Bertrand Russell, the famous mathematician, philosopher, and outspoken atheist. “What if you died,” he was asked, “and found yourself face to face with God? What then?”

And the doughty old champion said, “I would say, ‘Lord, you should have given us more evidence.’”

“The soft bonds of love are indifferent to life and death. They hold through time so that yesterday’s love is part of today’s and the confidence in tomorrow’s love is also part of today’s. And when one dies, the memory lives in the other, and is warm and breathing. And when both die — I almost believe, rationalist though I am — that somewhere it remains, indestructible and eternal, enriching all of the universe by the mere fact that once it existed.”

[It’s Been a Good Life](#) is excellent in its entirety and is recommended reading.

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