



# The Enlightenment



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

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## Sources of Ethics and Morality

Every Saturday the *London Free Press* displays a Spirituality and Ethics page. One of the regular contributors to this page is HALA member Goldie Emerson, whose articles appear from time to time. Also contributing on a fairly regular basis is Bruce Tallman, a practising Catholic who offers spiritual advice to people who feel they are in need of counseling.

On January 24<sup>th</sup>, 2015, the *London Free Press* published an article authored by Goldie entitled "*Humanism Essential to Good Religion.*" In this article Goldie listed twelve humanist principles from the 2002 Amsterdam Declaration, the most recent world consensus on the definition of humanism. The gist of this article is that these principles are compatible with the teachings of many religions. It can be read in its entirety on the HALA web site at the address shown above on the masthead. In rebuttal to Goldie's article, the *Free Press* published an article on February 7<sup>th</sup>, 2015 by Bruce Tallman, entitled "*All the Truths of Humanism Come From God.*" Tallman states that while most of the humanist principles are "motherhood and apple pie," and would be accepted by many religious people, principle 10 would not. This principle states: "A fundamental principle of humanism is the rejection of beliefs held in absence of verifiable evidence, such as beliefs based (solely)\* on dogma, revelation, mysticism, or appeals to the supernatural." Tallman states that principle 10 would not be accepted by religious people because it rejects the existence of God and furthermore he claims, "God is the source of all religious, scientific, and humanistic truth."

On February 14<sup>th</sup>, 2015, the *Free Press* published an article by Goldie entitled, "*Goldwin Emerson Responds to Bruce Tallman.*" The article Goldie originally sent to LFP can be viewed on the HALA web site. Unfortunately the article that appeared in the *Free Press* was edited and shortened, but among other things, Goldie mentioned that it is sometimes more useful to discuss issues of contention on a one-on-one basis rather than back and forth in print. So he suggests: "Bruce maybe it is time we met one-on-one for coffee and conversation again." In fact, Goldie and Bruce did meet for coffee on March 17<sup>th</sup>, but no views were changed. Bruce adamantly insisted on the simplistic idea that all ethics and morals come from God.

The purpose of the above preamble is just to reiterate that there are people "out there," who like Tallman, sincerely believe that all morality does in fact originate with God, and is then propagated by religions. They maintain it is the duty and responsibility of religions to impart these God-given commandments and rules to all of humankind, and without these mandates, humanity would degenerate into lawlessness. The rest of this discourse is dedicated to the premise that all rules of morality are human creations and certainly did not originate from on high. (*Continued on page 3*).

(\*Tallman left out the word "solely" in his article.)

## President's Remarks

In these pages, Don Hatch makes a very good case that, contrary to what many Christians claim, belief in a god is not necessary for humans to have ethical standards and a sense of morality. This discussion reminds me also of the famous Euthyphro dilemma, presented in one of Plato's dialogues, which I think is a useful response to the argument that god is the only source of ethics and morality. Essentially, this dilemma asks the question: "Is a particular action good because god commands it, or does god command it because it is good?" If the first "horn" of the dilemma is true, then morality is based on the arbitrary whim of a god, and there is no basis for determining right and wrong apart from the commandments of this god. In this view, god could just as well have commanded us to hate, kill, lie, and steal as to be kind, honest, and caring. Most people, including religious believers, find that view unacceptable. On the other hand, if the second horn of the dilemma is true; then morality and ethics have a rational basis which can be arrived at through careful thought and observation of human experience. Certain actions are good because they are the best way for humans to live together in peace and harmony. In that case, we don't need the commandments of god to live ethical and moral lives – we can figure it out by ourselves. Of course, as Humanists we don't believe any gods exist in the first place, so the whole question is irrelevant to us. However, the Euthyphro dilemma is a powerful argument that we can use to refute those who do believe in a god and claim that morality is impossible without god.

Now that summer is here, we take a break from our regular monthly HALA meetings for two months. However, there are two fun events over the summer that I hope you will be able to join us at. The first is our annual summer potluck picnic on Sunday, July 12. The other is the London Pride Parade on Sunday, July 26, where many of our members and friends will once again be marching in support of LGBT rights and, indeed, equal rights for all people. HALA members and friends will receive more information about both these events by email in coming days. In the meantime, I take this opportunity to wish all of you a very enjoyable, refreshing, and relaxing summer, and I hope to see you at our next regular meeting on the second Wednesday of September. ~ Rod Martin

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## Sources of Ethics and Morality – Continued

To begin with, it should be useful to define ethics and morality and explain how they differ. Ethics and morals relate to right and wrong conduct. While they are sometimes used interchangeably, they are actually somewhat different. Ethics refers to rules of conduct provided by an external source. Morals refer to an individual's own principles regarding right and wrong conduct. Perhaps another way of putting it is that a person's moral compass consists of the ethics or rules he or she adheres to.

One of the earliest recorded attempts to prepare an outline for the purpose of maintaining law and order in a society was the Code of Hammurabi, established in the third century BCE. Its purpose was:

- to cause Justice to prevail in the land,
- to destroy the wicked and the evil
- that the strong might not oppose the weak
- to light up the land.

Another early source of moral and ethical principles were the teachings of Confucius (551 BCE-479 BCE) that were concerned not only with the ethical and moral living habits of individuals, but also with the moral and ethical actions of rulers of the state. There are many aphorisms containing wisdom and foresight attributed to Confucius. A few are quoted below:

- Knowledge is recognizing what you know and what you do not know
- To know your faults and be able to change is the greatest virtue.
- What you do not wish for yourself, do not do to others. (The Golden Rule).
- The superior man is modest in speech, but exceeds in his actions.

In about the same time frame as Confucius, the Old Testament became available to the Hebrew people, providing sets of guidelines to live by. The most famous pronouncement was the Decalogue or Ten Commandments.

- You shall have no other gods before Me.
- You shall not make idols.
- You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain.
- Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.
- Honor your father and your mother.
- You shall not murder.
- You shall not commit adultery.
- You shall not steal.
- You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.
- You shall not covet.

In addition to the Decalogue, there are 613 laws contained in the first five books of the Old Testament (the Pentateuch) giving instructions on what to eat, what to wear and a host of other requirements. Orthodox Jews will try to adhere to many of these guidelines, but Reformed Jews will observe only a few of them.

Also in roughly the same era as Confucius, about 1500 kilometers to the northwest of Palestine, philosophical rationalism was evolving in Greece. The pre-Socratic philosophers were pseudo-scientists, attempting to describe how the world works. Then along came Socrates (470-399 BCE) whose emphasis was on how to live “the good life.” This theme was picked up by Plato (427-347 BCE) and Aristotle (384-322 BCE). Some scholars (but not all) consider Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* to be one of the most comprehensive books ever written on the subjects of ethics and morality. Later, the Stoic, Sceptic and Epicurean philosophers continued on this theme.

Then, in the first century CE, a movement began that charted much of the course of Western history, and continues to have influence even to this very day. This movement was created by one Jesus of Nazareth, who claimed he had a mission to reform the Judaism of his day. But the Jewish authorities resented this upstart and had him crucified. His followers attempted to convert fellow Jews to the Jesus movement, but in the long run were unsuccessful. Then a Jewish Pharisee, who became known as the apostle Paul, undertook to take Jesus’ message of salvation to the gentiles. Despite persecutions, he and his associates experienced considerable success in this endeavour and a religion that became known as Christianity evolved over the next few centuries, eventually spreading throughout Europe, North and South America and other areas as well. This propagation was due to the efforts of the Roman Catholic Church, and after 1500, due to the efforts of the many Protestant denominations that came into being.

The ethical and moral teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, in the form of sayings and parables, are documented in the four Gospels and the Epistles of the New Testament. Some of Jesus’ messages contain wisdom while others are confusing and contradictory. Over time, the human Jesus of Nazareth morphed into the supernatural Jesus-the-Christ, the son of the Jewish monotheistic God, and a member of the Holy Trinity consisting of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Creeds were invented to strengthen the supernatural aspects of Jesus and promote the concept of an afterlife. Christians were encouraged to believe that if they adhered to Christian morals, ethics and beliefs, and believed in the redemptive power of Jesus, they would be guaranteed a reward in an idyllic heaven. This promise had mass appeal and today Christianity boasts at least two billion members and adherents.

During the period in which early Christianity was evolving, the Roman Empire was in full swing. As was the case in Greece, Roman morality was not the purview of religion, but was in the domain of philosophers. The Roman elite by and large were stoics and this stoicism was perhaps best exemplified by the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius. In his *Meditations* he put forward a plethora of common sense aphorisms to live by. Here are a few of them:

- Contentment comes from doing a few things and doing them well.
- Life is short; then snatch your profit from the passing hour, by obedience to reason and just dealing. Unbend, but be temperate.
- Observe how transient and trivial is mortal life; yesterday a drop of semen, tomorrow a handful of ashes. Spend therefore these fleeting moments on earth as Nature would have you spend them, and then go to your rest with a good grace, as an olive falls in its season, with a blessing for the earth that bore it and a thanksgiving to the tree that gave it life.
- In this life one thing only is of precious worth: to live out one’s days in truthfulness and fair dealing, and in charity even with the false and unjust.
- To a reasoned being, an act that accords with nature is an act that accords with reason.

The Stoic Roman elite were not attracted to Christianity, but the Christian churches attracted the downtrodden peasants and, despite periodic persecution, the churches managed to survive partly by promising a better life in the hereafter. In the early years of the fourth century, Christianity received a great boost when the Roman Emperor Constantine declared Christianity to be the official religion of the empire. Over time, the polytheism of the Stoics was replaced by monotheistic Christianity hijacking the teaching of morality from the philosophers, and claiming morals and ethics were ordained by God. And to this day many, but not all, Christians believe the Bible is divinely inspired, hence their belief that all morality comes from God.

Now it is a certainty that individuals such as Hammurabi, Confucius, the Greek philosophers and Marcus Aurelius, were all real human beings and that their concepts of morality originated in their own minds, not from on high. And if as humanists and other secularists claim, the chances of there being a God are extremely remote, then the Bible is a human construct and its moral teachings also originated in the minds of humans. In fact only about half of what came to be regarded as the fundamental ingredients of Christianity came from the Old or New Testament. The other half came from Greece as the following chart devised by UWO Philosophy Professor John Thorpe illustrates.

### Sources of the Fundamental Ingredients of Christianity

|                 |                       | OT-NT | (Neo)platonism |
|-----------------|-----------------------|-------|----------------|
| <b>Theology</b> |                       |       |                |
|                 | otherworldly          |       | x              |
|                 | incarnation           | x     |                |
|                 | trinity               |       | x              |
|                 | creation              | x     | x              |
|                 | personal god          | x     | (x)            |
|                 | philanthropy          | x     |                |
|                 | sin & redemption      | x     | x              |
|                 | salvation             | x     | x              |
|                 | eschatology           | x     |                |
|                 | immateriality of soul |       | x              |
|                 | resurrection          | x     |                |
| <b>Morality</b> |                       |       |                |
|                 | love & benevolence    | x     |                |

|                     |                  |   |   |
|---------------------|------------------|---|---|
|                     | asceticism       |   | x |
|                     | antisex          |   | x |
|                     |                  |   |   |
| <b>Epistemology</b> |                  |   |   |
|                     | revelation       | x |   |
|                     | mysticism        |   | x |
|                     | natural theology |   | x |

It is likely that most Christians have no idea of the amount of Greek thought that influenced the fundamentals of Western Christianity, as shown in the above chart. Many also probably do not realize that the concept of body and soul was also not exclusively Christian. Certainly the Egyptians believed in an afterlife and Plato was known for his dualism, among many other things.

So where are we? I believe I have made a credible case that anyone who believes that God is the source of all morality is sadly mistaken. All formulations of how to live a moral and ethical life originated in the minds of intelligent thoughtful human individuals. Case closed.

But there is something else that must be dealt with, and that is the claim of some religious people that without religious moral guidance, societies will degenerate into corruption, debauchery and violence. Now it must be admitted that most people raised in a religious home do acquire the guidelines necessary to live a moderate, compassionate and ethical life, and it must also be admitted that these guidelines have contributed to the stability of societies in the past and will continue to do so. There is, however, also strong evidence that societies that are largely secular can function just fine without a lot of religious instruction on morality.

Author Phil Zuckerman deals with this situation in his book *Society Without God*, describing life in secular Denmark and Sweden. In this book he says, “contrary to the claims of certain outspoken, conservative Christians who regularly argue that a society without God would be hell on earth: rampant with immorality, full of evil, and teeming with depravity, in reality Denmark and Sweden are remarkably strong, safe, healthy, moral and prosperous societies.” He then adds, “It is crucial for people to know that it is actually quite possible for a society to lose its religious beliefs and still be well-functioning, successful, and fully capable of constructing and obeying sound laws and establishing and following rational systems of morality and ethics. Worship of God can wane, prayer can be given up, and the Bible can go unstudied, yet people can treat one another decently, schools and hospitals can still run smoothly, crime can remain minimal, babies and old people can receive all the care and attention they need, economies can flourish, pollution can be kept to a minimum, and children can be loved in warm homes--without God being a central component of everyday life.”

Finally we must answer the question. If children do not receive instructions on moral living from a religious institution, where will they get it? Of course the answer is obvious, at home and at school. But

what should they be taught? What they should not be taught are religious untruths such as the existence of an afterlife, and the threat of hell fire if they live a sinful life. These kinds of instructions are not productive and as 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 moved beyond it, is the indoctrination of children before they reach the age of reason.” In addition to accepted common sense instructions on how to live morally in a civilized society, they should be taught that their life is precious and they should live every day to the fullest, knowing that there is no God watching over them and judging their actions. They should be made aware that all guidelines for moral living have been devised over centuries by intelligent caring people.

## **More on The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life**

*By Goldwin Emerson*

Some time ago, Rev. Bob Ripley wrote about a growing number of people who, when asked what their religious affiliation was, classified themselves as “none” (London Free Press, June 25, 2014). This growing number are now the third largest group of people, following behind Christians with approximately 2.2 billion adherents world-wide, and Muslims with approximately 1.6 billion. (The Pew Forum on Religious and Public Life, Oct. 2012). The Median age among Christians is 31.5 years, while among Muslims, the median age is 23. (Daily Mail Reporter, Dec. 18, 2012) These age factors are important in that other factors being equal, Muslim populations will increase at a more rapid pace than Christians and will eventually surpass Christian populations world-wide. Of course, there are other religious factors at play. Some religious teachings may encourage population growth while other religions may believe that smaller families are a more morally responsible route in a world population of over 7 billion people.

Within Christian populations, Roman Catholicism predominates with approximately 1.2 billion or 50 % of Christian adherents. Remaining Christians are a mixture of various Protestant and other sects. Among Protestants there are two main branches. That is, evangelical religions, and those that are main-line denominations such as Anglican, Presbyterian, United Church, and most Baptists.

Muslim religion predominates in many mid-east countries, but is less evenly spread world-wide. Christian populations, on the other hand, are more evenly spread throughout the world. Some religions, such as Hinduism have approximately 94 % of its total adherents in one country, India. Judaism is predominant in Israel with approximately 40 % of its world-wide adherents in that country while another 41.5% live in United States.

Now, some more comments about the “*nones*”. These are the people who when asked on a survey what their religious affiliation is, replied “none.” They are a growing but diverse group (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. Oct., 2012). Some are atheists, some secular humanists, and some are agnostics. Among the agnostics, however, there are quite a few who maintain religious affiliation. Agnostics may believe, or not believe, in a Supreme Being, but agnostics, as the term etymologically implies, generally agree

that while one can believe or not believe in religion, they maintain that it cannot be known by any hard evidence whether or not God exists.

“Nones” are more likely to be found among younger adults. When asked whether or not they believe in moral principles they are likely to maintain fairly high moral values with regard to social aspects of everyday life. These values include sexual equality, freedom of conscience, honesty and integrity, and most other socially acceptable principles of modern living. While some believe in God, many have become disenchanted with traditionally held religious doctrines and procedures. Generally, the “nones” do not fear death nor have concern for afterlife, which is different from the belief of most traditional religions. Some “nones” may be strong believers in God, but see their relationship with God as individual and different from what is usually offered in traditional religions. This latter group may also have strong feelings of spiritual reverence, but are not drawn to religious affiliation.

There are many variations among “nones” and it is difficult to tell what is common among them. Modern societies make it difficult for religion to maintain its traditional appeal. Most of us know of friends and relatives who seem to live at a more frenetic pace than was the case years ago. Women used to do a great deal of volunteer church work and took on family responsibilities for bringing children to Sunday school and they often taught Sunday school as well. Today, many mothers work outside the home. They drive their children to music lessons, sports practices, and many non-religious events. Modern mothers help children with their school homework, and of course, do the usual tasks of making meals and doing the normal housework. Fathers too work hard at their everyday occupations, paying bills for mortgages, buying and repairing vehicles, and developing their careers. Some, but not all, help with household tasks. In such a fast-paced modern world, for a large group of people, religious affiliation has become a lower priority than it was years ago.

### **Be Careful With What Comes Over the Internet**

The previous *Enlightenment* contained an article about the mayor of Dorval, Quebec, who supposedly proclaimed that pork could continue to be served in school canteens, despite objections from Muslim parents. An astute *Enlightenment* reader was suspicious of this article and checked it out on a Truth or Fiction web site and found that the article was bogus, and in fact had also appeared in Belgium a year or two earlier. Then not long ago, an article appeared citing a rant against Muslims by Vladimir Putin. I checked it out on the Truth or Fiction web site and found that it too was essentially bogus. So we have learned a lesson. If what comes over the internet in emails looks suspicious, check it out before reprinting it.

### **How I Became a Humanist**

At the May HALA meeting, Dr. Imran Atta, and Wendy & Tom Kennedy spoke about how they became humanists. Their talks will be printed in the next *Enlightenment*.