



The Enlightenment



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How I Became a Humanist:

Once a year for the past several years, two or three HALA members have related their experiences on how they became a humanist at one of our regular meetings. At last May's meeting, three members, Wendy Kennedy, Tom Kennedy and Imran Menon told us about their journeys. Wendy and Tom's presentations were available in Word and are printed below. Imran's presentation was a series of interesting slides on which he commented as he went along so consequently was not available in Word. I sat down with Imran at the HALA picnic and jotted down some of the high points of his talk and put together the summary (edited by Imran) shown on page 5. (DAH)

How I Became a Humanist

By Wendy Kennedy

I have become a humanist as a result of a gradual process over many years. My early life experience (I was not from a devoutly religious background) began the process.

I was born just before the end of WWII in a small rural community in south mid-western Queensland, Australia, about 259km west of Brisbane. I think I was an accident coming after 3 brothers, 7, 8 and 17 years older than me. As they were rarely at home when I was I had a fairly solitary childhood. My mother who did attend church irregularly was Church of England. The fact that there was not regular church was due to the fact that we lived 'in the bush' where religious services were provided by the Bush Brothers who travelled long distances throughout huge dioceses so services were often 6-8 weeks apart. I attended Sunday school by correspondence – church mail bag school from Brisbane. My father did not attend church at all, except for weddings and funerals.

Although I did have some religious education and attendance at church, my parents appeared to me to place greater importance on education and contribution to our community. They certainly encouraged me to make the best of any educational opportunity that came my way. They also emphasized that I should be prepared to contribute to any community that we were part of, e.g. cricket, tennis and golf clubs; Queensland Country Women's Association, local fairs, community dances etc They certainly modeled active participation in all those activities.

School for me was a one teacher State primary school – 20 children covering grades 1 – 8. Following that, as there was no local secondary school, I was sent to a Church of England girls boarding school. Although it was a church school, we were not constantly exposed to religion because there were lay teachers and no clergy on site although we did have regular chapel services and attended a local church on Sundays. Emphasis for me was to do well and pass the state Senior exam so I could go to university. I was not an outstanding student but did manage to obtain an Australian Commonwealth Scholarship which provided me with a living away from home allowance that meant that I could attend the University of Queensland in Brisbane where I enrolled in a liberal arts degree. At university, without the boarding school religious routine, I stopped attending church other than when I returned home for vacations. Religion dropped off my horizon totally except for a few pleas to God to get me through the exams!!! Life was full of study (plenty of time in the library) active involvement in the UQ Women's golf club, plus some bush walking. I made many new friendships including males: remember I had attended an all-girls school for four years! In order to make the most of the scholarship money I had for four years I had to seriously consider my future options to ensure I had a job at the end of those four years. Through contacts made at the UQ library I decided that librarianship was the route to take rather than nursing and/or teaching. After graduating from UQ with a 3 year BA I departed for Sydney to the University of New South Wales for a post graduate diploma in librarianship (2 years – 1 year coursework, 1 year practicum). For the first time I could afford to stay in college and felt it was a good investment in order to meet people in a strange new city. I met my husband Tom in college. For my practicum year I managed to obtain a job at Macquarie University Library. Tom and I got to know each other as he finished his honours degree and I started work. Life was too full to really worry about attending church. However, the question of religion was raised when we decided to get married as Tom was a practicing Roman Catholic. There was no doubt in my mind that I was not going to convert to Catholicism: God was of little interest to me so felt I did not need to add the pope to the mixture as well! However, we had to undergo religious instruction before the marriage! I had no problems with Tom going off to church but I made no effort to resurrect my Church of England practice.

As Tom was finishing his Ph.D. he began looking overseas for post-doctoral opportunities. As a consequence we arrived in London in 1969 for Tom to begin a post-doctoral fellowship. I was hired on as a librarian cataloguer in the Lawson Library, started to study for my MLS and then became pregnant. After our daughter was born I became a stay at home mom as she had a congenital hip dislocation that required plenty of attention while in the waist to ankle cast for 9 months. The only religious event of significance during this time was her baptism (largely because of family expectations) in a lecture theatre in Middlesex College.

We returned to Sydney in 1972 where our son was born shortly after our return. I continued as a very busy full time mom. Family expectations meant another baptism despite the fact that both Tom and I were by then not practicing any form of religion.

A full time academic research position for Tom led to our return to London in 1974. We could then be classed as a secular family. I went back to finish that MLS on a part time basis, graduating in 1979,

after which I started looking for a full time job. The only religion on the horizon during that time was a brief attempt by me to introduce the children to the Roman Catholic Church so they could have a moral compass to keep them out of the hands of strange religious sects. Needless to say that attempt at introducing religion went nowhere as Tom and I were too far down the path of secularism. In retrospect there was no time to spend thinking about an alternative to religion - we were both very involved with careers and children.

I had a variety of part time jobs until 1981 when following Tom's sabbatical in France I obtained a full time position again with Western Libraries. Thereafter there were many career changes within the libraries usually involving greater responsibilities and accountability. The fact that I desired such positions related back to my early indoctrination to actively participate in anything in which I was involved. I also had a strong desire for change when I could see the benefits. I had also been indoctrinated through my education that I should contribute to my profession. That involved active participation in library professional organizations. There was also considerable volunteer involvement with school and music organizations in support of the children's activities. Tom meanwhile was very involved with his research and academic career. It was a very busy time of our lives. We did not make time to put much thought into religion or rather the lack of religion in our lives.

We retired six years ago to enjoy more time with family that now includes four grandchildren, and to spend more time at our cottage! God never did play a big role in my life and I saw no reason for a change of thinking in my retirement. Our children and their families are all secularist and to my great relief there were no threats from strange religious sects.

I have found it interesting to find out about HALA and to join a community of like-minded people. However, I cannot call myself an activist for humanism. I certainly admire the time, knowledge, and effort contributed by HALA leaders but I do not see myself as an activist or with being comfortable trying to convince others to be humanists. For the moment I am comfortable being part of the humanist community and to further exploring the concepts of humanism.

How I Came to be a Humanist

By Tom Kennedy

I was born in Lockhart, a small rural town in southern New South Wales, Australia in 1943. My father was of Irish descent, with the original Kennedy arriving in Australia in 1850. Unlike most of the Irish who arrived in Australia at around that time, he was not a victim of the "potato famine". His father in Ireland had contested the right of the English to construct a railway line through his property, and ended up bankrupt. As a result, the children, three boys and two girls, emigrated to Australia. The boys headed to the goldfields near Ballarat, Victoria where two of them died of typhoid fever. My great-grandfather survived, was involved in the Eureka Stockade (now recognized as the beginning of Australian independence), and subsequently became a farmer.

My father was also a farmer who produced fat-lambs and wheat. He was nominally a Roman Catholic, but only stepped inside a church for weddings or funerals. My mother was of English/French descent, and her paternal great-grandfather arrived in Australia in 1813, but somewhat to our family's disappointment, was apparently not a convict! She was a protestant, and like my father, was not a church-goer.

At the time I was born, my father had three farms, and we lived on one located about 8 km from Milbrulong. It had a population of about 15 and consisted of a pub, general store and a one-teacher state-run school (which is still in operation – the only single-teacher school in NSW). I had three older sisters, and because of the rationing associated with World War II, they went off to boarding school. One of my sisters went off to boarding school at age 6 and was only ever home for school holidays; she then went off to university – not the best of family experiences!

My younger sister and I started school at Milbrulong. In 1952, my parents purchased a house in Albury, one of NSW's largest rural cities. (My mother's grandfather had been the first white settler in Albury, and that may have influenced their decision.) The major reason for buying the house "in town" was to enable to live at home and go to school. My father commuted to the farm. We were sent off to the local Catholic school. Given my parents' disinterest in religion, it remains a mystery to me why we were sent to the Catholic school rather than the state school.

Consequently, at the age of about 9 I was first exposed to religion. We were expected to attend Mass every Sunday (if not more frequently) and did so, but never accompanied by our parents. All during my schooling, I never really believed in religion. I well remember an occasion when I was about 10 or 11 when a priest came into our class-room and began questioning us on our religious knowledge. I happened to be the first to be questioned. "Do you believe in God?" My response was evasive; my answer was: "As Catholics, we believe in God". All through my elementary and high schooling, we were indoctrinated to believe that if we lacked faith, then it was our fault for not praying hard enough! I completed my high school education in the Catholic school system, and received numerous awards, but never one for religion. There was always this underlying skepticism.

It was only when I went off to university that I was first exposed to the biological sciences and became aware of the problem of reconciling the Church's teachings with scientific facts. This was further exacerbated during my doctoral studies in reproductive physiology. Nevertheless, I continued as a "practicing Catholic", but it was a habit rather than a belief. Wendy and I were married in a Catholic Church, somewhat to Wendy's chagrin! Increasingly, I became more and more agnostic, and finally, when I was about 27 or 28, concluded that I was an atheist.

So how did I end up at HALA? For many years, I was content with my atheism, and had lots of professional colleagues with similar views. It was Jon Hore who enticed me to attend some debates hosted by HALA, and as a consequence I came to know about HALA, and along with Wendy, joined.

As a postscript, it seems to me that if HALA is to increase its membership, its greatest challenge is to make itself better known to the likes of Wendy and me. I'm afraid I don't have any great ideas about how to accomplish this.

How Imran Menon Became a Humanist

Imran was born in Pakistan into a Muslim family, not far from Lahore. He was educated in Pakistan where he obtained his medical degree. He then went to England to do post graduate work, returned to Pakistan and later moved to Kuwait where he practiced medicine. In 2009 he and his family emigrated to Canada, coming to London Ontario where he now practices family medicine.

Imran did not become a humanist overnight. While growing up in Pakistan, he observed that Christians, who were socially under-privileged and mostly worked as house maids and janitors, were often treated badly and he began to have doubts about the Muslim religion. He believed servants to be human beings in the same manner as privileged people, and felt that they should not be looked down upon or treated as second class citizens. While at university, Imran noticed that a Hindu student from Nepal was being shunned by the Muslim students. He felt this was not right so he befriended the Hindu and eventually he became more accepted by other students. Near the beginning of Imran's presentation, there were a dozen or more slides depicting the negative aspects of Islam in Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, particularly in regard to the treatment of women.

By the time Imran was living in Kuwait he was leaning more and more toward humanist thinking. This was the result of directly observing a devout Muslim society, and the people among whom the Muslim prophet was born. Arabs try to practice faith in its pure form and their practices were not acceptable to him. He realized he could not accept any part of the real Islam and eventually considered himself to be a true humanist.

But living in Kuwait had its disadvantages, particularly in regard to freedom, so Imran decided to move to Canada in order to raise his children in an environment where freedom prevails. He can hardly say enough about the freedoms Canadians enjoy and cautions that we must not take these precious freedoms for granted. We must guard against any infringement on our freedoms. The last slide in Imran's presentation was a Canadian flag, signifying how grateful he is to be living here.

In addition to freedom, Imran's presentation had a strong emphasis on the importance of nature and the preservation of our environment. We are part of nature and to illustrate this, one of his slides displayed the chemical composition of the human body.

Oxygen –	65.0%
Carbon –	18.5%
Hydrogen –	9.5%
Nitrogen –	3.2%
Calcium –	1.5%
Phosphorus –	1.0%
Sulfur –	0.3%
Sodium –	0.2%

Chlorine – 0.2%
Magnesium - 0.1%
Trace Elements < 1.0%

All of these elements, present in human bodies in the form of proteins carbohydrates, fats, vitamins or minerals, have natural sources originating from either soil or air or water. With this close connection to nature, humans must realize that the future of homo sapiens is highly dependent on the preservation of our environment. Surely all humans are entitled to clean air, adequate potable water and sufficient arable soil to provide food for all. We humans are miraculously the result of about three and a half billion years of the evolution life forms, and we have a responsibility to pass on a thriving healthy and sustainable natural environment to our descendants. Imran can't emphasize this enough.

Religious Discussions in the London Free Press

Following is a letter sent to the editor of the *London Free Press* in late June by Dr. George Cherian, a new HALA Friend and Professor Emeritus in Pathology at UWO. He has broad interests and has spoken several times to the Society for Learning in Retirement. This letter offers a credible explanation of reality when it comes to discussions of religion versus atheism.

All Religions are Human Creations

We are having lots of discussion about religions and atheism in *The London Free Press* during the last few weeks. Some groups think religion is the cause of all our problems and atheism is the solution. Others think the Bible is the word of God and is the solution. It is time to start thinking in a new direction to improve our spiritual life. We should understand that all the religions and gods are created by human imagination based on belief, but not on facts.

Christianity was formed to reform Judaism and prove that the Messiah prophesy in the Old Testament was fulfilled by the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. The writers of the New Testament made sure all the prophecies were achieved because they already had the Old Testament in front of them.

Everyone should read the history of their religions and the basis of their belief rather than accepting literally and worshipping the contents of Bible, Qur'an and Gita. There is nothing holy about these writings.

Fortunately, we all have the freedom to believe in whatever we want in North America. Let us not misuse this freedom. No one will be able to prove or disprove the existence of their gods. Therefore, no one can say which is correct, religions or atheism. Why waste our time in this world arguing about these concepts made by humans?

We should start asking whether there is any divine purpose of our existence. If there is one, it is to respect each other, improve our conditions for a better life and love each other. We don't have to eliminate religions or atheism. There is an alternative: humanism. Let us think about humanism and try to do positive things.

George Cherian, London.