



# The Enlightenment



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

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## Wonders of the World

If you Google “Seven Wonders of the World,” you will find many different lists such as Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, Seven Wonders of the Modern World, Seven Wonders of the Natural World, etc.

A teacher asked her class to list what they believed to be the Seven Wonders of the World. Most students came up with a list fairly quickly, but one student was taking much longer than the others. Finally she finished. When asked to share her list, she offered:



A Rose – A Symbol of Love

- The ability to **See**
- The ability to **Hear**
- The ability to **Touch**
- The ability to **Taste**
- The ability to **Feel**
- The ability to **Laugh**
- The ability to **Love**

What an unexpected, touching and thoughtful list! Taking the five senses (that most of us take for granted) and adding laughter and love is truly enlightening. Someone described this, quite accurately I believe, as “Humanist Spirituality.” Or another way of putting it: the sheer joy of being human and alive.

The most popular wonders listed by other students were, in descending order: the Great Pyramid of Egypt, the Taj Mahal, the Grand Canyon, the Panama Canal, the Empire State Building, St. Peter’s Basilica, and The Great Wall of China. Incidentally, if asked, very few people can name all the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. They are: the Great Pyramid of Egypt, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, the Temple of Artemis at Ephesus, the Statue of Zeus at Olympia, the Mausoleum of Mausolus in Turkey, the Colossus of Rhodes, and the Lighthouse at Alexandria. There are of course many candidates to be selected for various lists, but the list above provided by the student gives one much food for thought.

**Editor's Note:** The story on page 1 came over the internet so it could be a true story or a story that some thoughtful creative person made up. There was no mention of a specific town or a specific school so it could be made up. But does it really matter? I thought it was so touching that I had to share it with *Enlightenment* readers. (DAH).

## **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 January's meeting, two members, Peter Evans and Bradley Banks told us about their journeys. Peter's story is printed below. Brad's will appear in a future *Enlightenment*.

## **My Journey to Humanism**

*By Peter Evans*

I would describe my personal journey to humanism as effortless. There was no adversity or soul searching in my travels to this time and place. In the next ten minutes you won't hear any uncomfortable childhood stories about over-zealous, religious parents forcing me to experience rolling in the aisles and speaking in tongues with a hall of religious fundamentalists. Nor can you expect any painful disclosures of physical or emotional abuse at the hand of some debauched religious leader. I was lucky. Neither person, nor experience influenced me to adopt or abandon organized religion and belief in a supernatural being. If you will indulge my analogy: I was gently handed the chalice of Christianity and I took a sip. Although I found the chalice and other trappings enticing, and the elixir within comforting and flavourful, I always detected a confusing after-taste that made it difficult to swallow.

My parents, both Protestant, had different views on organized religion. Neither of my parents were raised by regular 'church-goers'. Interestingly, while researching my family's religious background, I learned that my mother's maternal grandparents were Christadelphians and that her grandfather was a lecturing brother. A BBC website notes, "The Christadelphians are a non-Trinitarian, millennial Christian group whose fellowship is linked by a common understanding of the Bible and Christianity".<sup>1</sup> They have no priests, paid ministers, or central leadership, and the leadership of local ecclesia (Latin for congregation) is shared by senior male members. As in the case of many conservative Christian denominations, women are excluded from positions of authority. However, they are given equal voting rights within the church. However, Christadelphians do not vote, run for political office, or go to war.

As a young girl my mother attended several denominations—usually the one located most conveniently to her home—before finally confirming with the United Church. Mom never recalls her parents attending church with her or her three sisters. In hindsight, she surmises that during the Great Depression and WWII of her youth, the long hours of work required by her parents to sustain and raise a family made Sunday morning, with the children safely ensconced at Sunday school, the only time they could enjoy the pleasures of marriage. Some things never change. Mom attended church regularly and enjoyed participating in many of the social events and outreach programs of the United Church until she married in her early 20's.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/subdivisions/christadelphians\\_1.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/subdivisions/christadelphians_1.shtml)

My father, on the other hand, seldom attended church and felt no affinity for organized religion whatsoever, especially the Catholic Church. As far as I can determine, both of his parents were of a similar ilk. When questioned, my father would invoke “religious hypocrisy” as the justification for his rejection of organized religion. No further explanation was offered. By the time I was born Mom, frustrated and embarrassed at going alone, had stopped attending church on a regular basis. However, my parents did come to an agreement and christened both me and my younger brother in the United Church. As a young child, I attended Sunday school and remember enjoying the occasional strawberry social and church picnic. As a pre-teen I attended confirmation classes and was eventually confirmed at Riverside United Church here in London.

About this time my parents’ marriage failed and I recall two men from the church, dressed in dark suits, visiting our home. I remember them arranging with Mom for my brother and me to assist with the Sunday service collection. This was a considerable honour. Interestingly, they also left us with a box of ‘offering envelopes’ for our own family’s contribution. Even with a boy’s limited understanding, I knew that my father’s departure had significantly compromised our family social economic status, and I found it strange that these two men would be asking us for money. There was never any further discussion about this situation with my mother (I’ve always been a pleasant, compliant child) but after what seemed ‘a month of Sundays’ passing the collection plate, my mother’s dogged determination to attend church ceased and all three of us stopped attending. In reflection, I often feel that my church experience was more about freshly pressed suits, shined shoes, clean fingernails, and a new Easter hat for Mom than celebrating the teachings of Christ. Granted, I enjoyed the biblical stories, the music—I still do—and although I thought Jesus was a very special man, I was never filled with the spirit of the Lord or thought my prayers would be answered. There has been no church in my life since that time.

In my senior year at high school, my father affiliated with the Unitarian Fellowship of London and invited me to several of the Sunday meetings. It was at one of these meetings that I heard Dr. Havelka, professor of psychology at UWO King’s College, speak. I admit understanding little of his lecture at the time, both because of his Eastern European accent and the subject matter. But I was impressed with his presence and he piqued my interest in psychology. Several years later I enrolled in psychology at King’s College (much to my Father’s chagrin) and from 1971-74, I took all of Dr. Havelka’s undergraduate courses. Around that time there was a popularization of Nietzsche’s “God is Dead Existentialism” (I enter a disclaimer here. “Please Richard, do not ask me to explain it.”), and I became interested in the human potential movement. It was while participating in these safe and supportive group workshops, that I experienced what I feel was the unencumbered spirit of mankind and the power of love. Sounds sanguine today, but I have always imagined that my emotional experiences in those workshops were similar to the euphoria generated by religious belief. At times in my life this has left me with what Michael Krasny describes as “spiritual envy”. Julian Barnes writes in his book, *Nothing to Be Afraid Of*: “I don’t believe in God, but I miss him....” Although I have never believed in God, on occasion I am envious of those who can make that leap of faith to embrace a force that is all-powerful and looking out for your interests. There is a sense of security and serenity to be gained in that belief. Now don’t be nervous, your new secretary of membership is not a closet believer. I just want to state publicly that it is not my mission as a Humanist to take those feelings of security and serenity away from people who do believe and depend on that belief to help navigate through their lives. ‘Any port in a storm,’ I say.

I admit to and take full responsibility for being married (the first time) in the Anglican Church, because that is what my fiancée wanted and I appreciate the allure of all the trappings and history provided by

the church on such occasions. However, when our daughter Ashleigh was born I insisted that she not be christened until she was mature enough to make her own spiritual decisions. She is sitting with us tonight, still not christened, but she knows that if she decided to join the Catholic church tomorrow, her father would join in the celebration of her first Mass (her grandfather would roll over in his grave) and love her just the same.

My recent marriage to Pauline was conducted beautifully by our own Humanist officiant, André Lachance. Pauline and I received many favourable comments from our guests, even the 'religious' ones, about their appreciation of our wedding ceremony. I cannot speak too highly of André's presence and what a positive contribution he made to our day. Thank you, André.

So as you have heard, my journey to Humanism and HALA has been an easy voyage, free of personal angst or guilt. But I would like to leave you with a thought. Maintaining anything of value, something like HALA is never an easy task. Like a garden, in order to remain vibrant and luxuriant, organizations like HALA require constant watering, feeding, and nurturing.

### **Interesting Information on the Christadelphians**

1. Christadelphians do not have elaborate churches, robes or ceremonies.
2. Their local group is called an ecclesia which is Greek for "congregation". (Plural is "ecclesias.") They average about 20 members each.
3. They have no paid clergy. This is a volunteer position and he travels to various ecclesias to lead their worship and Bible study.
4. They meet weekly on Sundays for a Memorial Meeting or Breaking of Bread
5. Most of the ecclesias meet in each other's homes or in rented halls. A few own their own buildings
6. They have no central organization. Each ecclesia is autonomous. Coordination is largely through publishing houses
7. They have no paid clergy or church hierarchy.
8. Their leaders are classified as lecturing brethren, managing brethren, and presiding brethren. All are male volunteers who are elected to their posts.
9. Many members read the Bible daily; some use a reading plan which completes the Old Testament once per year, and the New Testament twice.
10. Some Christadelphians discourage their members from having fellowship with Christians from other denominations.

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## Book Review

### Atheism For Dummies

*By Dale McGowan, PhD*

For anyone who desires to get a fairly comprehensive overview of humanism from late antiquity up to the present, I cannot recommend this book too highly. Also, this is a great book to recommend to anyone having doubts about their religious beliefs and who may be looking for an alternative. It is an easy read and, like most books for “Dummies,” does not have to be read from cover to cover all at once. You can pick and choose topics of special interest and read those sections separately.

The book is divided into five parts.

- Part I: Understanding What Atheism Is
- Part II: Following Atheism through the Ages
- Part III: Reading the Great Works of Atheism
- Part IV: Living a Full Life Without Belief in God
- Part V: The Part of Tens

In **Part I**, McGowan notes that there are a number of labels for non-believers including:

- **Atheist:** A person who’s of the opinion that no supernatural god or gods exist.
- **Agnostic:** One who doesn’t claim to know whether a god or gods exist, and also thinks that it is unknowable.
- **Freethinker:** A person who holds opinions based on independent reasoning without the undue influence of authority, doctrine or tradition.
- **Skeptic:** Someone who withholds judgment until sufficient evidence is available.
- **Humanist:** A person who believes that concerns in this world and this life are of primary importance and who asserts disbelief in the existence of a supernatural god.

McGowan says he is all of these things, as this imaginary conversation demonstrates:

Q: Do you think God exists?

A: No, I am an atheist.

Q: But are you absolutely certain?

A: Of course not, I am an agnostic.

Q: And do you believe as you do because some authority told you so?

A: No, I am a free thinker.

Q: And if there is no God, don’t you think it’s important for us to take care of each other?

A: Of course, I am a humanist.

Of all these labels, I believe humanism is the most inclusive and I suggest a better title for the book would have been *Humanism for Dummies*, because for many, atheism simply implies a disbelief in God. It states what an atheist does *not* believe, but not what he or she *does* believe. I suppose McGowan thought that using Atheism in the title would attract more attention. Also, many of the general public may not be quite sure of what humanism is all about.

Also included in **Part I** is Richard Dawkins' seven-point belief scale, a means of defining where a person fits in relation to belief or non-belief. A "1" on the scale indicates certainty that God exists. A "7" indicates certainty the God does not exist. A "2" person believes God probably exists, but is not absolutely certain. A "6" person believes God probably does not exist, but stops short of absolute certainty. Dawkins calls himself a "6." Wow! The world's most famous atheist calls himself an agnostic!

I really enjoyed **Part II**. It goes right back to Confucius and Greek philosophy, particularly the humanist philosophy of Epicurus, author of the famous Epicurean Paradox. God is said to be all-powerful and good – but Epicurus says he can't be both. Here's why:

- Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is not all-powerful.
- Is he able, but not willing? Then he is not all-good.
- Is he both able and willing? Then why is there evil?
- If he is neither able nor willing? Then why call him God?

I think most readers will be surprised at just how rich the humanist history described in Part II is.

**Part III** presents a chronological glimpse at some of the most famous writings of humanists from the ancient Greeks to the modern "Four Horsemen."

**Part IV** deals with a most important aspect of humanism, living a full life without belief in God.

**Part V**, The Part of Tens, explores ten surprising things about Atheists and other non-believers, ten famous people you may not know are non-believers, and ten fun and easy ways to explore humanism.

As I said at the beginning, I highly recommend this book. I have only one criticism. There is no mention of the Roman Emperor Constantine, who was in large part responsible for the eventual propagation of Catholicism throughout the West, thus suppressing the humanism of the Greeks until it emerged again after the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. (DAH).

### Looking For a Black Cat

- **Metaphysics** is like being in a dark room and looking for a black cat that isn't there.
- **Theology** is like being in a dark room and looking for a black cat that isn't there and shouting, "I Found It!"
- **Science** is like being in a dark room and looking for a black cat with a flashlight.