



The Enlightenment



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Wherefore Islam?

With ISIS and *Jihad* so much in the news these days, the HALA Board of Directors decided to invite a Muslim Imam to one of our regular meetings and ask him to outline his understanding of Islam and perhaps inform us about what moderate Muslims are doing to mitigate the horrible atrocities being committed by ISIS and other terrorist factions. Imam Abd Alfatah Twakkal from the London Muslim Mosque on Oxford Street accepted our invitation and was the guest speaker at the HALA regular meeting on May 11th, held in our new meeting room in the London Public Library.

At the HALA Board meeting on May 18th, Board members discussed the Imam's presentation and the consensus seemed to be that the talk was largely a PR effort to paint Islam in a positive light and contained suggestions that the *Jihadists* were misguided and not followers of the true Islam. At the question period he shunned answering questions about Sharia law and why moderates were not speaking out more forcefully against the fanatical terrorists.

At the Board meeting it was decided to try something different at the June regular meeting and allow HALA members and friends an opportunity to offer their thoughts and conclusions about the Imam's talk. To kick off the evening, HALA member biologist André Lachance pointed out serious flaws in the Imam's assertion that the Qur'an contains accurate statements concerning science. André displayed verses from the Qur'an on the heart, embryology, the big bang, and the shape of the earth that were all dead wrong. André's conclusion was that Islam, like all monotheistic religions, is based on fallacies and HALA should not be offering religious individuals in authority an opportunity to present their propaganda at HALA meetings.

Next, President Rod Martin took a somewhat more positive perspective on religions, while also recognizing their obvious faults. He pointed out that both Judaism and Christianity have done horrible things in the past. The Israelites were at constant war with their neighbours and condoned stoning of adulterers and heretics. The Christians conducted crusades and inquisitions and burnt heretics at the stake. It took Christianity 1500 years to stop these barbaric practices and in time Islam could also possibly reform.

The meeting then opened up for discussion and a variety of views were offered. It is difficult to summarize the gist of the comments, but I concluded that the majority of comments about Islam and religions in general were negative. (Continued on page 2)

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Some commentators were very passionate about their views, and a few offerings were quite lengthy. There seemed to be a consensus that we should hold more meetings with this format in the future.

The remainder of this *Enlightenment* contains several articles on Islam and also an interesting article with a secular bent by Duncan Watterworth. Duncan has attended some of our HALA meetings, is a resident of St. Thomas, and writes regularly for the *Elgin This Month* publication. Finally, there is an outline of future HALA events.

Striking at the Root

Getting to the Root of Islamic Jihad

To quote Henry David Thoreau: *There are a thousand hacking at the branches of evil to one who is striking at the root.* This quote perfectly describes the current situation in the middle-east where various forces are hacking at the branches of evil Islamic *Jihad* instead of striking at the root, which is Saudi Arabian Wahhabism. Ever since 9/11, where 15 of the 19 hijackers were from Saudi Arabia, the root has been ignored, while the branches have been hacked at. The first branch was Afghanistan, the second was Iraq and the third branch is ISIS. Both the Afghanistan and Iraq wars were failures and now no one seems to know how to effectively defeat ISIS. And there are other branches including Boko Haram in Nigeria, and cells that organize lethal attacks in Western cities. How can all this carnage be stopped?

In a March 31, 2016, *Globe and Mail* article entitled *How to shut down the 'jihad factories,'* geostrategist and author Brahma Chellaney states: "The key to battling Islamist terrorism is to stem the spread of the ideology that has fostered 'jihad factories.' The export of Wahhabism by Saudi Arabia, Qatar and some other oil sheikdoms, is the source of modern Islamist terror. From Africa to Asia and now Europe, Arabian petrodollars have played a key role in fomenting militant Islamic fundamentalism that targets the West, Israel and India, as its enemies."

And Chellaney goes on: "If Saudi Arabia is to be stopped from continuing to export radical Islamist extremism, the United States and Europe will have to adjust their policies to stop the cloistered Saudi royals from continuing to fund Muslim extremist groups and madrassas in other countries. Since the oil price boom of the 1970s, Saudi Arabia has spent 200 billion dollars on its global *jihad* project, including Wahhabi madrassas, mosques, clerics and books. Wahhabism legitimizes violent *Jihad* with its call for war on infidels. Shutting the wellspring demands that the West hold Saudi Arabia to account for spawning the dangerous extremists who are imperiling regional and international security. As long as Wahhabism keeps *Jihad* factories in business, there will be suicide killers. Dismantling the Saudi religious-industrial complexes exporting *jihadism* is now more imperative than ever."

It is certain that the call to "bomb the hell out of ISIS" by Donald Trump will be futile. What is needed is tough demands and embargos on the Saudis to force them to curtail Wahhabi influence and financial support for *jihadism*. We no longer need their oil, so it is time to call a spade a spade. In other words, Get to the "root" of the problem. This is a formidable challenge. (DAH).

Striking at Deeper Roots

Yes indeed, as stated at the bottom of page two, convincing Saudi royals to curb the propagation and expansion of Wahhabism is a formidable challenge, because convincing Western nations to put the required pressure on the Saudis will be difficult and will take considerable time. For example, in view of human rights violations, particularly in regard to women, Canada should not be exporting armoured vehicles made in London Ontario to Saudi Arabia. On the other hand, London area jobs are important to us so we continue the exports. But once the contract is fulfilled, exports should cease. With oil prices low, and a plentiful supply of oil in the world, the time is right for Western nations to put excessive pressure on Saudi Arabia to actively curb Wahhabi promotion of *jihad*.

But Wahhabism is not the only problem. There is a deeper rooted fundamental problem, namely the ancient well-established roots of the monotheistic religions Islam and Christianity. Today there are over two billion Christians and over one billion Muslims (half the world's population) holding the belief that there exists a supernatural deity that has influenced and continues to influence events on earth. And although the moderate adherents of these faiths, by and large, are not causing any serious problems, the fundamentalists certainly are. Islamic fundamentalist terrorists are waging *jihad* and Christian fundamentalists have undue and unhealthy influences in the government of the United States. And the root cause is the supposed existence of a supernatural deity.

Now if the likelihood of a supernatural deity existing is infinitesimal, as atheists, agnostics, freethinkers and humanists believe, surely one must conclude that monotheistic religions are based on absurd fallacies. Just look at the facts. Muslims believe that Allah sent the angel Gabriel to Muhammad to dictate the words in the Qur'an. But if there is no Allah, then the religion of Islam is a hoax, a deception, or a fraud. And the foundation of the Christian religion is even more improbable. Christians claim a baby named Jesus was born of a virgin, grew up to become the promised Messiah, rose from the dead and ascended into heaven. By dying on the cross, he supposedly possessed the power to grant salvation in heaven to those who believe this implausible story. Now if this story is truly implausible, which I believe it is, then Christianity is also a hoax, a deception or a fraud.

These are strong condemnations, but are not new. Reasoning that the Christian scenario described above was unrealistic, the German philosopher Herman Samuel Reimarus (1694-1768) averred that Christianity was a fraud. In a similar vein, in his *Testament*, the French cleric Jean Messlier (1664-1729) concluded that Jesus was an imposter, a clever charlatan. Of course many Christians, especially the fundamentalists, will say that these conclusions are blasphemous, but if there is no supernatural deity called God, then what else can be concluded?

So again, perhaps it is time to call a spade a spade, and actively educate the public on the fallacies of a belief in monotheism, and on the harm that fundamentalist monotheists are causing in today's world. Promoting this message is difficult in the case of Islam because anyone denying the existence of Allah stands a good chance of being shot. The Christian situation is easier because most Western countries are largely secular and religiosity is in decline, particularly amongst the young people. It is mainly in the U.S. that evangelical Christians are influencing governments in a negative manner. Convincing dyed-in-the-wool evangelicals that their beliefs are spurious is again a huge challenge. Any suggestions on how to go about this will be welcomed. So far attempts to convince them God does not exist have been futile.

Some Historical Facts About Islam – By Adriaan Mak

Muhammad, Islam's Prophet, was born circa 570 CE, and died circa 632 CE. The first possible historical evidence of his existence is his name on a monument recorded around 700 CE. By 800 CE, partial biographies deemed by Muslims of that time to be worthy of preservation, begin to be written down. What might have happened to these earlier versions of his life we cannot know for certain.

The first biography of Muhammad that has survived appeared almost 2 centuries after the death of the Prophet. The biographer was Ibn Hisham (died \pm 830 CE). Ibn Hisham claims that what previous generations had recorded of the Prophet was either bogus, or irrelevant, or sacrilegious writing. "Things which it is disgraceful to discuss; matters that would distress certain people; and such reports as I have been told are not to be accepted as trustworthy – all these things have I omitted."

The Qur'an to Muslims is sacred literature and the last revealed words of Allah. Muslims only accept the Arabic text in which it was revealed. According to imam Bukhari (810 - 860 CE) it was one of Muhammad's 13 wives Aisha, married to him at age 9, who knew that the first Quranic revelation occurred when angel Gabriel visited Muhammad and asked him to pass on Allah's words. After this, Muhammad continued sporadically over a period of twenty-three years to relate these revelations, until shortly before his death in 632.

Muslims believe that Gabriel brought the words of Allah to Muhammad verbatim without any alteration or change. The Qur'an emphasizes that Muhammad was required only to receive the sacred text and that he had no authority to change it. There are disagreements among Muslim scholars as to when the Qur'an was compiled. Some believe Muhammad compiled it before he died, while others believe it was collected by either Ali ibn Abu Talib or Abu Bakr. Other accounts also exist.

My questions are this: What do the above beliefs bode for the possibility of rational ethics developing within the Muslim faith? What are the chances that Islam will go through an "Enlightenment" phase any time soon, knowing that in the Christian world, beliefs did not begin to be questioned until \pm 1700 CE, and the questioning is still going on?

WHO'S THAT KNOCKING? - Facing the Big Questions, Without Enough Evidence

*By Duncan Watterworth**

"Do you believe in a Supreme Being?" That uninvited and rather personal question followed a knock on my front door recently. Last fall it was Jehovah's Witnesses. This time it was the Mormons. There are a lot of competing worldviews out there – around the world, back through history, and lined up at my doorstep. I tossed the question back to these "Elders" - why do they believe that their version of God, Heaven, etc. exists? I heard their arguments. I was not convinced. Coincidentally, I had recently picked up a Book of Mormon in a used book store (I am an eclectic reader), so I asked them about their church's founding story – the golden plates with mysterious writing buried in upstate New York in 400 A.D., how the plates were dug up in 1823 by Joseph Smith, and the symbols translated into English with the help of an angel. I was even less convinced.

So do I believe in a Supreme Being, Heaven, etc. of the Mormon sort, or similar? I told them: No. I have seen no persuasive evidence, so I don't think they exist. As near as I can tell, humanity, as of 2011 A.D., does not have the answers to life's biggest questions – where did we come from? Is there an afterlife? I wish we knew the answers. I long for the answers. If better evidence comes along, I would love to see it. If the God/Heaven theory proves correct, it would be wonderful.

At the present time, many people try to bridge the gap between the evidence, and their picture of God/Heaven, with "Faith" and "Belief". I just don't get that. If you don't already know for sure that something exists, what does it mean to simply decide that it does? If it doesn't exist, a Belief won't create it.

No doubt, a real Belief must be a great comfort, and will banish that pesky existential angst. For the troubled and suffering, the relief that Belief would provide must be nearly irresistible. But I can't believe something is true just because it would be nice if it was. So I must walk a tougher road. I live with the big questions unanswered, without belief in a safety net.

The Mormons had one more card to play, even if their evidence for Heaven was shaky. Wouldn't I be smarter, they argued, to grasp at any "sliver of a chance" that Heaven existed, rather than have no chance at all of eternal bliss? Interesting, but to me this play-the-odds approach to religion had a whiff of Las Vegas to it.

There is a bigger problem with the Mormons' suggestion. Surely an all-knowing God would catch on pretty quick that I was just feigning belief in Him, in a calculated attempt to score the big prize. I'm sure I would be tossed out of the casino. Anyhow, I won't be playing that game. I will just live my life, try to be a good neighbour, and follow pretty much the same ethical rules as most people around here.

In a world awash with conflicting visions of reality, many uncontaminated by evidence, I suggest we all, as much as possible, just "live and let live". It seems to me that duct tape comedian Red Green sees it right - "We are all in this together." And if it turns out that there is a loving and understanding God, I have a hunch He just might find a little corner in His House for a sincere skeptic, like me.

*Duncan Watterworth lives in St. Thomas and writes articles with a secular theme for *Elgin This Month*. His articles will appear in future *Enlightenments*. Thank you Duncan for contacting us.

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Upcoming HALA Events – Mark Your Calendar

July 17th Annual HALA picnic for HALA members at the home of Peter and Pauline Evans. Details will be sent out soon.

July 24th London Pride Parade. Details to follow.

Sept. 19th Wolf Hall Event. Hemant Mehta – The Friendly Atheist. See poster below.

Oct. 12th Discussion on Hemant Mehta’s talk.

Nov. 9th Rod Martin – How a humanist finds meaning in life.

Dec. 3rd HALA Winter Solstice Celebration.

Why Are Young People Leaving Religion?

The talk will explore the reasons for the rise of non-belief among the millennial generation, the challenges facing young atheists in North America, and why things are actually getting much better for them.

HEMANT MEHTA, raised in the Jain faith, is now a prominent atheist, writer, blogger and public speaker. He is editor of a blog called the Friendly Atheist, appears on the Atheist Voice channel on YouTube, and co-hosts the (uniquely-named) Friendly Atheist Podcast. Mehta also writes for the "On Faith" column in the Washington Post. Mehta helped establish and serves on the board of the Foundation Beyond Belief. He has degrees in mathematics, biology, and math education, and spent seven years as a high school math teacher. His books include: *I Sold My Soul on eBay: The Young Atheist's Survival Guide*; and *The Friendly Atheist: Thoughts on the Role of Religion in Politics and Media*.

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