



The Enlightenment



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Ann Druyan's Comments on Her Husband's Death

Carl Sagan, who introduced so many people to the wonders of the cosmos, died in 1996. At an event in 2003, his wife, Ann Druyan, was asked about him. Her thoughtful response is worth quoting at length.

When my husband died, because he was so famous and known for being a non-believer, many people would come up to me - it still sometimes happens - and ask me if Carl changed at the end and converted to belief in an afterlife. They also frequently asked me if I think I will ever see him again.



Ann Druyan

Carl faced his death with unflagging courage and never sought refuge in illusions. The tragedy was that we knew we would never see each other again. I don't ever expect to be united with Carl. But, the greatest thing is that when we were together for nearly twenty years, we lived with vivid appreciation of how brief and precious life is. We never trivialized the meaning of death by pretending it was anything other than a final parting.

Every single moment that we were alive and we were together was miraculous - not miraculous in the sense of inexplicable or supernatural. We knew we were beneficiaries of chance...That pure chance could be so generous and so kind...That we could find each other, as Carl wrote so beautifully in *Cosmos*, you know, in the vastness of space and the immensity of time...That we could be together for twenty years. That is something which sustains me and it's so much more meaningful.

The way he treated me and the way I treated him, the way we took care of each other, and our family, while he lived. That is so much more important than the idea I will see him someday. I don't think I'll ever see Carl again. But I saw him. We saw each other. We found each other in the cosmos and that was wonderful.

It takes courage to face up to the finitude of our lives, and even more courage to admit the limits of our existence. The most telling part of Ann Druyan's reflection is not the acknowledgement that she won't see Carl again, but where she affirms that it was pure chance that they found each other in the first place. (This excerpt is taken from the book *The Big Picture* by physicist Sean M. Carroll).

Book Review

A Little History of Religion – By Richard Holloway

This is a great book, written in layman's language, describing and explaining all of the world's major religions and a few of the minor ones in only 237 pages. We humanists, who may wish to challenge certain aspects of religions, need to know something about them, and this book is very helpful in that regard.

The first religion explained in the book is Judaism. This is followed by Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. Then we move back to Judaism where this religion is further fleshed out in five more chapters. Next we encounter Zoroastrianism, the religion of the Parsees. Moving farther east to China we learn about Confucianism which is more of a philosophy than a religion. Staying with China we are exposed to Taoism or the "Way." Then we move on to Japan and Shintoism, the national religion of that country.

Reverting back to Palestine, the next five chapters relate how a tiny Jewish sect or cult, led by one Jesus of Nazareth, began to evolve into Christianity, a religion that eventually became the most populous religion on earth. The next three chapters document the rise of Islam which became the second most populous religion. Hell is the subject of the next chapter. Hell was not a major factor in early Judaism, but began to creep in in the years leading up to Christianity where it occupies a significant moral position for those who believe in an afterlife. And of course Hell is of utmost significance in Islam. Next we have a chapter on Catholicism and the papacy followed by two chapters on Protestantism.

There are two religions that have split off from Hinduism. The first is Buddhism, mentioned above, and the second is Sikhism. Unlike Hinduism, Sikhism is monotheistic, but unlike Christians and Muslims they do not proselytise. Like Judaism, Sikhism is as much a racial identity as a faith. I am grateful that reading this book significantly increased my understanding of these three religions, especially Hinduism which of all religions, with its karma, reincarnation, caste system and difficult to grasp concepts of one or multiple gods, is probably the most difficult of all religions to comprehend.

Two chapters are devoted to the interesting history of the Church of England. This is not unexpected because the author is a former Bishop of Edinburgh and Primus of the Scottish Episcopal Church.

Except for the last three chapters on "Angry Religion" (fundamentalism), "Holy Wars," and the "The End of Religion," the remaining chapters describe a number of lesser religions. These include the Quakers or Society of Friends, the natural ways of the North American indigenous people and the special churches of the African-American slaves. These are followed by Mormonism, The Seventh Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Christian Science, Scientology, the Unification Church, founded by the Korean Sun Myung Moon, and Baha'i. Tim LaHaye's *Left Behind* series of books is mentioned, but Rick Warren's *Purpose Driven Life* books are not. Both series have sold many millions of copies.

In the interest of brevity, I have purposely just listed the names of the religions covered in the book rather than going into details on each one. For those wishing to peruse the details, I strongly recommend purchasing the book. I do however, want to comment in some detail on the last three chapters because they are about subjects that are of extreme importance today.

Chapter thirty-eight is entitled "Angry Religion," but it is really about fundamentalism. Christian fundamentalism began to appear after Charles Darwin published *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, which postulated that human beings were the culmination of millions of years of evolution, rather than being created 6000 years ago by God as detailed in the book of Genesis. Fundamentalism attained widespread notoriety in Tennessee in 1925 during the famous Scopes trial. Thomas Scopes dared to teach evolution in science classes, was found guilty and fined \$100. Clear thinking people knew of course that Scopes was right, but it was not until 1968 that banning the teaching of evolution in schools was overturned by the U. S. Supreme Court. Nevertheless, Christian fundamentalism is still very much alive in the United States, as evangelical Christians wield considerable political power opposing abortion, gay marriage and still, believe it or not, teaching evolution in schools. It is an anomaly that the U.S. is the only Western country where Christian fundamentalism is a significant undesirable factor in government relations.

As if Christian fundamentalism was not bad enough, Islamic fundamentalism is so much worse because as we often witness on the evening TV news, it can be brutally homicidal. Author Holloway does not go into details about the current Jihad situation, but discusses the overall problem in a chapter entitled "Holy Wars." In this chapter he points out that all three monotheistic religions have a long history of violence and carnage, and it is still going on. Jews are fighting Muslims in Israel, Sunnis and Shias are fighting each other, and ISIS and al Qaeda are waging Jihad against Western Christians. The rallying cry often is: God is on our side and we are being obedient to his command. This is an enigma because all three religions are supposed to be worshiping and serving the same God. So why not get rid of this God? Even though getting rid of God will not solve all the problems of human violence, it would at least remove one of its pretexts. But getting rid of God is not easily accomplished as explained in the last chapter, "The End of Religion."

During the *Enlightenment*, doubts began to appear about the validity of a religion based on supernatural phenomena. Dare to know, don't give into superstition, were the mottos. The decline in the Christian religions was slow, but since WW II there has been a significant decline in the main-line denominations. Nevertheless, religions are not all bad, they do possess positive attributes that may be desirable to preserve. So if you get rid of religion and the associated supernatural God, what do you replace them with? Holloway suggests the gap might be filled with *secular humanism*. He notes, "secular humanists find a non-religious spirituality with meaning and beauty in this life. It is the only life we will ever have, so we should be grateful for it and use it well." Perhaps the most noticeable success of secular humanism is the provision of licenced humanist celebrants to officiate at weddings, funerals and ceremonies for babies. In Scotland, as many such ceremonies are now performed by humanist celebrants as are by ministers of the Church.

But as Holloway notes, secular humanism has not progressed by leaps and bounds as a movement, and religion is still the biggest show on earth. Nevertheless, many democratic countries can legitimately be described as secular with religiosity declining as long as they remain economically prosperous. Perhaps maintaining a prosperous economy with low unemployment and low income inequality will be more effective in decreasing the influence of God, than shouting from the rooftops that there is no God. That seems to be the reality. (Reviewed by Don Hatch).

A Wonderful Symmetry

By Don Hatch

When I was a teenager I acquired an interest in electronics and began to construct a few radios as a hobby. I also started to study the circuits of these radios, as well as the theories behind them. What I discovered were natural laws that could not only be described by words, but also by precise mathematical equations. For example, in all direct current circuits, the Voltage drop across a resistance is always equal to the Current (in Amps) times the value of the resistance (in Ohms). And other electronic measurements such as capacity and induction can also be represented by precise mathematical equations, albeit more complicated ones.

But the thing that really blew me away was my discovery of the electromagnetic spectrum. I could hardly believe it. The radio waves coming into my receivers possessed the same characteristics as light rays, X-Rays, and cosmic rays, differing only in frequency and wavelength. And they all could be represented by the simple equation: frequency times wavelength equals the velocity of light. Wow!

Also, as a teenager I also became fascinated with chemistry. My Eureka moment came with my discovery of the periodic table. What symmetry! Each of the ninety-two elements (that's all that were known at that time) contained one more proton and one more electron than the preceding element in the table. Wow again!

Having been raised in the Baptist Church, I attributed this amazing symmetry to God. Only he could have designed something so amazing and so precise and yes, so beautiful. But as the years went by, I began to have doubts about the existence of this supernatural monotheistic God who supposedly answered prayer and could influence events on earth. After retirement and after a considerable amount of reading and after joining a humanist group, I concluded this supernatural entity called God could not possibly exist. But there was something missing, I needed a replacement for the God I had lost. It was then that I thought back to my earlier days studying physics and chemistry and the amazing mathematically precise laws and forces of nature. I realized I was a pantheist, nature with her laws and forces was my God!

This line of thought was reinforced when I read a quote by my hero Albert Einstein. When he was asked if he believed in God, he replied; "I believe in Spinoza's God who reveals himself in the beauty and harmony of all that exists, but not in a God who concerns himself with the fate and doings of mankind. Spinoza was the first philosopher to deal with the body and soul as one, and not two separate things. I do not believe in immortality. One life is enough for me." At this point I had never heard of Spinoza, but I had to find out more about him because we both seemed to be thinking along the same lines. Since then I have read more about Benedict de Spinoza and he has been featured on the front page of two *Enlightenments*, once in the November 2007 issue and once in the November 2015 issue.

Spinoza was born in Amsterdam in 1632, where his orthodox Jewish family had fled from Portugal. He was expelled from the synagogue because of his heterodox philosophy, and earned his living as a lens grinder. He identified God with nature and denied the possibility of the creation of the universe by a supernatural deity. He is the author of several books published either anonymously or after his death. His *Ethics* is probably the most famous and contains many still-unresolved obscurities and is written with a forbidding mathematical structure modelled on Euclid's geometry. Nevertheless, it has been described

as a "superbly cryptic masterwork." Yes, Spinoza's books are not an easy read, perhaps because he had to disguise his thoughts a bit in order not to be charged with blasphemy. (They were still burning people at the stake when he was alive).

Just recently I came across a new book entitled *The Dream of Enlightenment: The Rise of Modern Philosophy*, by Anthony Gottlieb. This book documents the lives and writings of nine Enlightenment philosophers beginning with Descartes and ending with Voltaire and Rousseau. The chapter on Spinoza is entitled "A Breeze of the Future" and is the clearest account of Spinoza's thinking that I have come across. Spinoza was indeed far ahead of his time and, as Einstein noted, was the first philosopher to reject belief in a supernatural entity concerned with the doings of humankind and to reject the Cartesian dualism of body and soul. He was an admirer of the logic of Euclid's geometry and used the geometric format in some of his writings. He said, "I do not differentiate between God and Nature the way all those known to me have done. The greater our knowledge of natural phenomena, the more perfect is our knowledge of God." Like Einstein, Spinoza did not believe in an afterlife. If he were alive today, with our knowledge of the mathematical precision of Nature's laws and forces, he would be even more convinced that God and Nature are one.

As a freethinker and humanist, I have no difficulty coming to the conclusion that there is no supernatural monotheistic deity in the sense believed by devout Jews, Christians and Muslims. But I am so in awe of the mathematical precision and beauty of the natural laws and forces in the universe that I learned about during my studies of physics and chemistry. So I have no qualms in substituting Nature in all her aspects for the God I left behind. This may not work for everybody but it works for me.

LIVING MINDFULLY

By Duncan Watterworth

"...to stand on the meeting of two eternities, the past and the future, which is precisely the present moment." Henry David Thoreau

Back in university, I was initiated into the practice of Transcendental Meditation. I went to the ceremony with \$35, a piece of fruit, and a white handkerchief, and I received my personal mantra. It was the 1960s after all, and the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi was guru to the Beatles. After two or three months of meditating I quit, and gave up that path to Nirvana.

Since then, I have lowered my sights a bit. Now, my goal is be in the Present Moment, with at least a little regularity. I would like to "live mindfully", as the Buddhists say. "Mindfulness helps us to pay attention to what we are doing, ... to live in, and appreciate, the present moment in all its richness and depth," writes American born Lama Surya Das, a monk in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. "Mindfulness helps us smell the roses."

But for me, focusing my attention on the present for more than a few scant seconds is surprisingly challenging. I can return from walking the dog and have no idea what I walked past, heard or smelled. My mind is continually distracted by my own mental chatter – rehashing yesterday, planning tomorrow, replaying battles lost and won. And I can't be the only one with this affliction, because Buddhists have a word for it: "monkey mind".

As I understand it, part of Buddhist training is to learn to focus the mind on what is happening here and now, and to ease the monkey mind into the background. It is a learnable skill. Many who have met the Dalai Lama, spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhists, comment on how he focuses his total attention on whoever he meets, whether head-of-state or head waiter.

We can bring more mindfulness into our daily lives by a conscious effort to regularly return our attention to the present moment. We can stop, take a few breaths, and connect with our surroundings. What do we see, hear, feel?

At first, it helps to have a regular reminder to refocus on the present. One way is to train mynah birds to regularly squawk, "Attention," and, "Here and now boys," from the treetops. This creative technique was employed by the inhabitants of a South Seas island in Aldous Huxley's utopian novel, *Island*. The islanders had formed a unique society by carefully blending the best elements of eastern and western cultures.

Surya Das has perhaps a better idea for remembering to practice mindfulness. He suggests picking activities you already do daily, and making them into little rituals of mindfulness practice. An example is "mindful eating" (which is already an ancient spiritual practice in some places). Whenever you sit down to eat, give your full attention. Take a moment to relax and focus. Savour the first bite a little longer.

I have a small mindfulness ritual you might call Driveway Meditation. Whenever I step out of my house and head for the car, I try to remember to pause for a moment, take a breath, focus, and connect with my surroundings. You could do the same for whenever you enter a room, meet your spouse at the end of the day, or see the sun. Make up your own reminders, and refocus on the moment.

These mindful moments may not add up to Nirvana, but they might point in the right direction. After all, life does not happen in the past, or in the future. Life happens only in the present moment. We don't want to miss it.

Apolitical Aphorisms

Having survived over a year witnessing the idiotic United States election process, a little political humour should be in order.

I offer my opponents a bargain: If they will stop telling lies about us, I will stop telling the truth about them. – Adlai Stevenson, campaign speech 1952.

I have come to the conclusion that politics is too serious a matter to be left to the politicians. – Charles de Gaulle.

The problem with political jokes is they get elected – Henry Cate VII.

Politicians are the same all over. They promise to build a bridge even when there is no river. – Nikita Khrushchev.