



The Enlightenment



A Mini-Journal of the Humanist Association of London and Area
Visit Our Web Site at www.humanists-london.org

Volume 13

Number 12

December 2017

DEFIANT EARTH: The Fate of Humans in the Anthropocene

by Clive Hamilton

Reviewed by Rosslyn Ives

Hamilton's aim in *Defiant Earth* is to set out a compelling case for how humans have become major agents affecting the functioning of the Earth System. In this book he argues that humans have become so powerful we have disrupted the functioning of the Earth, bringing on a new geological epoch, the Anthropocene.

As he reminds readers, from the beginning of the Industrial Revolution humans have been responsible for huge changes on Earth, including the consequences of burning fossil fuels. Since the rapid growth in the post-Second World War period of land clearing, manufacturing and resource use these changes have accelerated. The carbon dioxide from fossil fuels has caused global warming, climate change, ice melts and acidification of the oceans, among other significant system changes. In other words, humans have become a major agent for change, augmenting the blind forces of nature

This is a challenging book to read, because Hamilton is setting out the evidence and arguments for a paradigm shift in how the Earth System ought to be understood. Instead of perceiving ourselves as simply products of evolution living on a planet that sustains our livelihood, we need to see ourselves as active agents affecting how the Earth System functions. This has led scientists to apply the concept of the Anthropocene epoch, a time when humans are significant agents.

An easier way to grasp this paradigm change is to recognize that humans are rapidly altering the very benign conditions that enabled the growth and development of modern civilization. If humans are to survive in anything like a semblance of how we are today, huge changes will need to be made to the way we live and organize our economies. And new ethics are needed that take account of the changed role of humankind.

Hamilton is dismissive of the Enlightenment with its elevated role for the autonomous person and the use of reason. This leads him to talk about a post-humanist understanding that requires humans totally to reassess how they relate to the Earth. He is challenging those of us active in the Humanist movement to seriously rethink our ethics and how we relate to the rest of the living world.

This book needs to be read and its messages absorbed by all who care about the future of humankind and the rest of nature.

Rosslyn Ives is the editor of the *Victorian Humanist*, the newsletter of the Humanist Society of Victoria, based in Melbourne Australia.

Canadian Beauty from Sea to Sea

By Goldwin Emerson

This year Canada celebrated its 150th birthday, and as the year draws to a close it is appropriate to once again reflect on the bounties of our great and vast country.

To our north we have spacious lands and lakes and rugged beauty as travelers will observe when looking towards the northern aurora borealis lighting the evening skies with a startling display of undulating colours. The North-West Territories and Nunavut as well as Yukon possess mineral wealth and strategic positioning of Canada's national defense. These territories also contain ice fields providing important evidence regarding global climate change.

Canada has more lakes than all other countries combined. In some cases, there are even large islands within large lakes which in turn contain smaller lakes that contain yet smaller islands. Traveling westward we can experience the vastness of our prairies, Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta. In summer, travelers can see the beauty of blue flax fields and immense acres of golden canola grain with colour that takes one's breath away.

Canada is the second largest country next to Russia. As we go further west the Rocky Mountains emerge larger and steeper as each turn in the winding roads presents another exciting discovery when we drive through mountain passes and beside swift waterfalls. As we descend towards our western shores, immense forest trees stretch skyward. If we travel westward to Vancouver Island we will come to a well-known spot called Cathedral Grove. Some of the giant Douglas firs are nearly 30 feet in circumference and are up to 295 feet tall. Here, whether one is religious or secular, these giant fir trees will fill one's mind and emotions with spiritual enrichment. There is something about the overwhelming gigantic trees in this spot that brings us to a quiet respectful reverence for the grandeur of nature at its best.

Returning eastward through our largest province of Ontario we will be struck by the contrast of dairy farming and fruit orchards in southern Ontario. In northern Ontario the land changes to rugged outcrops of rock and forests which cover rich mineral wealth. As we travel northward in Ontario with a little luck we are likely to see wildlife such as deer, moose and bears.

Further eastward the province of Quebec is similarly beautiful with many waterfalls and abundant wildlife and mineral wealth. Quebec also has large dairy farming operations which produce and export cheese, butter, and milk. In addition, Quebec is famous for its delicious maple syrup. It also produces and exports electric power produced from natural water falls.

The Atlantic Provinces include New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, and Newfoundland & Labrador. These eastern provinces depend on fishing and some farming and forestry. Newfoundland has rugged coastlines and friendly people who will invite travelers to their homes to share their hospitality and

tell stories of their past history. Nova Scotia has opportunities for whale watching and for beautiful scenery as travelers follow the Cabot Trail. Nova Scotia's Peggy's Cove is famous for its serenity and outstanding beauty. In New Brunswick there is farming, forestry and fishing. There are also spectacular natural features such as the reversing falls, Magnetic Hill, and Hopewell Rocks along the coast line and many beautiful parks for camping.

Traveling has become more expensive, especially when one travels by air to Europe, Asia, the Mid East or to the large continent of Africa, or far away to Australia and New Zealand. But, for those who wish to travel by automobile or train, it is still possible to do so within Canada. In the past, I have been fortunate to take some time during summer holidays to see Canada one area at a time. Traveling in this manner makes vacationing more affordable than going to faraway places beyond our Canadian borders.

If every Canadian citizen could travel at least outside their own province or territory I think this would help us see how fortunate we are to live in Canada. It would also help us appreciate our fellow Canadians who have immigrated either recently or long ago from other parts of the world.

Many more people would like to live in Canada than we are able to accommodate each year. Those of us who have been born in Canada are fortunate to live here and to share in its beauty from sea to sea. But in Canada we share more than nature's beauty. We are fortunate to live in a country with democratic principles, good health care and peaceful surroundings. I hope that as citizens we can keep Canada as beautiful as it now is.

CHRISTMAS SPIRIT IS ALIVE AND WELL

Even with Hindus, Muslims and Atheists

By Duncan Watterworth

I'm an atheist, but I like Christmas as much as the next guy. 96% of Ontarians celebrate Christmas, although only 24% think it is "about religion," according to a recent Forum Research poll. While its Christian roots are withering, Christmas is as healthy as a hothouse poinsettia.

So what is it about Christmas that we like so much? I think it is the "Christmas spirit" that suffuses the season. Christmas brings out the best in us. When we are in Christmas spirit mode, the world is a better place.

Christmas spirit is a re-focusing of our priorities. Partly, it is turning in toward family and friends, a time to reconnect with our inner circle.

But the Christmas spirit is also about turning outward. It is about thinking of others, about extending our generosity and goodwill beyond their usual limits, beyond our tribe. We organize food drives and coats-for-kids collections. We drop money in Salvation Army kettles. We show greater kindness and charity to strangers. As the social scientists say, we "expand our moral circle." The better angels of our nature hold sway for a while.

The most wonderful thing about Christmas spirit is its range. There's no boundary around it. I've seen it in some far-away places. Once was in India during Dewali, the ancient Hindu "festival of lights". It was

evening, and I was wandering through a street teeming with celebrants. Every doorway, windowsill and flat surface was lined with blazing candles. A group of men with a chillum was sitting on the street and, upon seeing me, literally expanded their circle to bring me in. I gratefully accepted their hospitality toward one who could not have been more foreign or alone. We watched the fireworks, which occasionally ricocheted horizontally along the street.

A second time was in a small mountainside village in southern Morocco during Eid al-Adha, a major Muslim holiday. I was thirsty, a half-day's walk from my hotel, and no stores were open. I pantomimed to a man on the street that I was thirsty, and he led me to his friend's house nearby. The friend, all smiles, insisted I take two large, store-bought bottles of water – more than I could possibly drink – and offered soft drinks as well.

Later that day, back in the town where I was staying, I bumped into two female backpackers who described to me being invited into a family's home to share their holiday meal.

Can the Christmas spirit really abide in the hearts of Hindus and Muslims? Can it exist outside of December? Why not? If it looks like Christmas spirit, feels like Christmas spirit, and if it springs from the better side of human nature ... Call it what you want; we could use more of it.

The Christmas spirit shows us that people everywhere can open the tap of human kindness and expand their moral circle, at least for a while. That is the magic of Christmas. It's still about: Peace on Earth, Good Will Toward Men.

Freedom From Religion Safeguards Liberty

Historic conference in London brings together committed secularists

By Annie Laurie Gaylor

Since co-founding the Freedom From Religion Foundation in 1976 with my mother Anne Nicol Gaylor, I've never faltered from my conviction that freethought and secular government are each necessary for both human progress and survival.

Had I ever doubted the necessity of working for freedom from religion, those doubts would have evaporated after attending July's historic conference of the single largest gathering of ex-Muslims in the world.

The life and death experiences faced by global freethinkers working for secularism vividly brought home how vitally important our work is. I was buoyed, despite the staggering opposition to freethought on our planet, after meeting such brave, personable and committed secularists.

FFRF was proudly co-sponsor of the historic International Conference on Freedom of Conscience and Expression in the 21st Century in London, 22 – 24 July. The gathering was the idea of Iranian-born **Maryam Namazie**, a powerhouse activist with the Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain and One Law for All. Maryam will receive FFRF's Henry Zumach Freedom From Fundamentalist Religion Award, by the way, at our upcoming convention.

Maryam told us: “It’s really important for us to defend the right to leave and criticize Islam, especially when you can be killed for it. In 13 countries under Islamic rule, atheism is a crime punishable by death. Freedom of conscience also includes the right to freedom from religion . . . without fear, without threat and without intimidation.”

The conference’s compelling hashtag — #IWant2BFree — was the message of more than 220 individuals from more than 30 nations, including countries where it’s a crime to leave Islam or be an atheist.

A variety of secular activists from other countries, including Dan Barker and myself, participated. The conference-goers were especially touched by the participation and presence of Britain’s atheist intellectual stars, **Richard Dawkins** and **A. C. Grayling**.

Ironically, Dawkins had just got word, right before this conference on free expression, that a supposedly progressive radio station in Berkeley [California] was de-platforming him due to his measured criticism of Islam. The conference issued a formal condemnation of radio KPFA’s action.

Demographically, it was exciting to see that the conference and its speakers were overwhelmingly young, and many activists and organizers female and feminist.

Unfortunately, a number of speakers were unable to get permission to travel to the event.

As a cofounder of FFRF, I was thrilled to meet so many others around the globe who have also founded freethought or secular organizations, but often in nations where such work is truly fraught with peril, where colleagues have even been murdered.

In the case of **Bonya Ahmed**, a Bangladeshi-American, she survived, with grievous wounds, the machete-wielding militant Islamists who murdered her husband Avijit in cold blood in plain sight on the streets of Dhaka two years ago. The conference opened with the debut of a new film, *Islam’s Nonbelievers*, including chilling photos of that attack. Bonya was the first inspiring speaker on the program.

Other co-founders of secular groups in attendance included:

Zehra Pala, president of Atheism Association of Turkey, a nation where almost daily secular rights are being frighteningly curtailed. The slogan of the association, which is the first legally recognized atheist group in the country, is: “No atheists will be alone anymore.”

Mohammed Alkhadra, founder of Jordanian Atheists Group, in a nation where apostasy is illegal. Mohammad had the crowd on its feet with his first remarks in public. Mohammed was toying with radical Islam when he read one of those pirated Arabic translations of *The God Delusion*.

Armin Navabi, the Iranian-born founder of The Atheist Republic, which has one million fans and followers, and is dedicated to offering a safe forum for freethinkers to share ideas. He now lives in Canada.

Inna Shevchenko, Femen leader, who was kidnapped and threatened by the Belarus KGB in 2011 and given political asylum in France. Inna was speaking at a conference in Copenhagen when militant Islamists opened fire. After surviving the attack, Inna famously said: “Liberal voices should be louder than

Kalashnikovs.” Inna stated at the conference: “Religion is not compatible with feminism.”

Fauzia Ilyas, a brave young woman who founded Atheist and Agnostic Alliance Pakistan, where apostasy can be punished by death.

Representing the United States at the conference as heads of ex-Muslim groups were **Sarah Haider**, co-founder of Ex-Muslims of North America, and Egyptian-American **Noura Embabi**, young president of Muslim-ish, whom we’ve interviewed recently for Freethought Radio. “The cost of silence for ex-Muslims is too high,” Noura counseled.

We also heard from **Zineb el Rhazoui**, the Moroccan-born French journalist and former *Charlie Hebdo* columnist who happened to be out of the office on 7 January 2015, when terrorists burst in and murdered her colleagues (“Nothing is forgiven,” says Zineb): “I believe there is no way to get rid of dictatorships if we do not get rid of superstition and religious dictatorship,” she told us.

There were panels on Secularism as a Human Right, Women’s Resistance, the Veil and Religious Morality, “Out, Loud and Proud,” Religion in the Law and State, on blasphemy, and a particularly fascinating panel on Art as Resistance.

Entertainment included Australian singer **Shelly Segal** and **Shabana Rehman**, a Pakistani-Norwegian known as the “mullah-lifter.” (She explained that label during her act.)

Blasphemy is a victimless crime but blasphemy laws create all too many victims, first among them freedom of speech and freedom of thought. Bertrand Russell noted: “Every great idea starts out as blasphemy.” But in today’s world, there are still many countries with blasphemy laws, including not just Islamist nations.

The message of this conference was the message of the Freedom From Religion Foundation. The only way to safeguard liberty is to keep religion out of government.

Annie Laurie Gaylor is co-President of the Freedom From Religion Foundation and Executive Publisher of Freethought Today. The other co-President is her husband, Dan Barker.

Now That’s Attitude - On being asked his age on his 80th birthday, a wise man said, “I am 16 with 64 years of experience.”

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