



The Enlightenment



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Food for Thought

A group of students were asked to name what they thought were the present “Seven Wonders of the World.” Though there were some disagreements, the following received the most votes.

1. The Great Pyramids of Egypt.
2. The Taj Mahal.
3. The Grand Canyon.
4. The Panama Canal.
5. The Empire State Building.
6. St. Peter’s Basilica.
7. The Great Wall of China.

When gathering the votes, the teacher noted that one student had not finished her paper yet. So, she asked the girl if she was having trouble with her list. The girl replied, “yes a little, I couldn’t quite make up my mind because there were so many.” The teacher said, “well tell us what you have and maybe we can help.” The girl hesitated, then said, “I think the seven wonders of the world are:”

1. To see.
2. To hear.
3. To touch.
4. To taste.
5. To feel.
6. To laugh.
7. To love.

The room was so quiet you could hear a pin drop. What is the moral to be learned here? The things we overlook as simple and ordinary and that we take for granted are truly wondrous, and a reminder that:

The most precious things in life cannot be built by hand or bought by man.

Editor’s note. It is unknown if the above story is true, or has been created by a thoughtful individual.

Why Bashing Religions is Non-productive

I once heard a comment from someone out of town who attended a local Humanist Association meeting for the first time. The comment was, "I will not go back to another one of these meetings because all it is, is a bunch of old people bashing religions." I don't think this criticism can be applied to HALA because we have tried to present humanism in a positive light and have rarely actively bashed religions. The exception could be when we have had three moderate Canadian Muslim speakers expressing concerns about radical Islam and multi-culturalism at regular meetings and at Wolf Hall events.

But now when we have evangelical Christians influencing governments in regressive ways (particularly in the U.S.), the establishment of Sharia law in some Muslim countries, the senseless Sunni/Sharia divide, the never-ending Israel/Palestine conflict, conflicts between Buddhists and Muslims in Myanmar, as well as between Hindus and Buddhists in Sri Lanka, is it now time to be more critical of religions?

There are those who will say religions are not all bad and that they do have redeeming qualities. I agree that religions have been of some benefit in the past. However, using Christianity as an example, I would like to outline how religions can begin, go through a cycle of growth, eventually outlive their usefulness, and begin to disappear. I think I can put forward a good case that it is not religion bashing that causes a religion to wane, it is prosperous economic conditions and minimum inequality.

Going back to the time of the Roman Emperor Augustus Caesar, around 4 BCE a baby was born in Palestine who was reported to be born of a virgin, the son of God, and the promised Messiah. According to scripture, he later died and rose from the grave to ascend into heaven to sit at the right hand of God. And he also promised salvation. He claimed that if believers accepted him as their savior, after death they would end up with him in an idyllic heaven. To a secularist who does not believe in a supernatural deity, all of this sounds preposterous. I believe the reality is that Jesus of Nazareth was not the supernatural son of God, but was a fully human individual, most likely illegitimate, who somehow managed to establish a Jewish cult with a few followers. The Jewish authorities realized that this purported Messiah was an impostor and convinced the Romans to have him crucified. The Jesus cult eventually died out. That should have been the last ever heard of Jesus of Nazareth. Instead, a Jewish Pharisee named Saul claimed he had a vision on the Damascus road in which Jesus instructed him to proclaim a message of salvation to the Gentiles. Saul became the apostle Paul and he and his associates successfully established a number of Christian Churches throughout the eastern Mediterranean.

As things turned out, it was the Roman peasants that adopted Christianity. The Roman elite thought the Christians were crazy and they were often persecuted. The Romans had adopted stoicism from the Greeks, culminating in Emperor Marcus Aurelius' book, *Meditations*, a short book outlining how to live a moral and rewarding life. This book should have been the bible for secular societies that could have followed, but alas, things fell apart with the fall of the Roman Empire and the growth of Christianity under the thumb of the politically active Catholic Church. This top-down organization eventually became very wealthy, possessed political clout, discouraged the development of science and democracy and became corrupt.

Things began to change for the better in the early 1500s when Martin Luther, a Catholic priest, recognized the corruption in the Church, particularly in regard to indulgences, and formed a new Protestant denomination that became known as Lutheranism. Luther pronounced that salvation was achieved through faith, not by obeying and observing all the sacraments. He insisted that prayers should be directed directly

to God, not through a priest. He encouraged his adherents to read the bible for themselves and not have it interpreted by a priest. The invention of the printing press in 1440 aided in this endeavour. Also occurring in the 1500s was the founding of the Anglican Church in England and the Presbyterian Church in Scotland. By 1600, northern Europe was essentially Protestant, allowing for the advancement of science and the beginnings of democracy, leading to the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution.

For the next four hundred and fifty years, Western societies in northern Europe, as well as in the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, gradually became more secular as the influence of God and the Churches waned and separation of Church and State became the norm. Nevertheless, families continued to attend the Church of their choice on Sundays and looked to their religion for moral and ethical guidance. By 1960 attendance at mainline Protestant Churches was at its zenith.

But things began to change after 1960 as attendance began to decline while prosperity increased, social safety nets were added and a strong middle class developed. The decline in attendance has continued to this day as churches, both Protestant and Catholic, close while societies become more secular and less religious in most Western democracies except the United States, perhaps partly because of the lack of adequate social safety nets. In most Western countries, young people in particular are finding that religion is not a need nor a significant factor in their lives. After 2000 years, Christianity has outlived its usefulness, except perhaps for their outreach activities, at least in most Western democracies.

A second reason for presenting this brief, admittedly simplified, history of Christianity is to illustrate how reform (the Protestant Reformation) caused the Catholic Church to abandon barbaric practises, including inquisitions and burnings at the stake, and become more tolerant 1500 years after the founding of Christianity. Surely there is a lesson here for Islam founded in the early 600s. Now 1400 years after Islam's beginning, is it not time to end the barbaric features of Sharia Law and jihad, and bring about a Reformation? Where are the moderate Muslims who are needed to form a critical mass of people under an outstanding leader and instigate reform? Unfortunately, reform seems to be a ways off. Will it happen by the time Islam is 1500 years old? We hope so, if not sooner.

So how can non-Muslims help? Not by bashing Islam per se, but hopefully by pointing out that discarding Sharia Law and bringing Islam into the 21st century will significantly improve the lot of Muslims (particularly women and girls) in predominantly Muslim countries, and at the same time improve standards of living for all Muslims living in these countries. Perhaps the best hope lies with young Muslims, as they learn more and more through modern technology, how the other half lives.

Now what about evangelical Christians? How can they be convinced about the errors of their ways? Obviously, we cannot just come out and state that the supernatural aspects of their lord and savior, Jesus Christ, defy any sense of reality and should not be believed. This will only get their backs up and make them dig in their heels even more. Since the problem exists mainly in the U.S., it would be helpful for Americans to improve their public education system and remove the desire of some fundamentalists to teach creationism in the Bible-belt schools. But foremost, the U.S. needs to establish the same level of social safety nets that exist in most other secular Western countries. Then there will be less need to look to churches for assistance and the relevance of churches should wane.

The U.S., however, is not the only area where Protestant evangelical Christians are present in numbers. They are gaining ground in Catholic Latin America, most likely because of deteriorating economic conditions.

There too, it is prosperous economic conditions with low inequality, not outright bashing, that will make religions obsolete and gradually cause their disappearance and allow secularity to reign. (DAH).

An Eye For an Eye

By Goldwin Emerson

On the evening of July 7, 2016, a tragic event happened in Dallas, Texas, when a twenty-five-year-old black man, Micah Johnson, shot and killed 5 white police officers and injured seven other police as well as two civilians. In addition, the shooter was also eventually killed by policemen using a remote-controlled bomb. Media reports tell of negotiations between police officers and the lone gunman who was angered by events a few days earlier when white police officers in other locations shot two black men to death. Video scenes of the two black men being shot by police raise questions from both black and white citizens about police methods in shooting these two black suspects. To many blacks and whites, the media videos of the police shooting seem to show unjustified or at least questionable action on the part of the police.

There have been similar incidents occurring in the past years in the United States which call into question police procedures in dealing with black citizens. Often, follow-up investigations indicate that police were simply following normal procedures and concluding that police had operated in a professional and correct manner.

Unfortunately, the shooting of young black men during their arrests has become too frequent an occurrence. In American history, often the police investigations have resulted in the arresting officers not being found guilty of any wrongdoing and police being exonerated for any inappropriate actions on their part.

It is ironical that in the Dallas shooting, the police were actually part of a street march in support of “black lives matter” and the white police were acting in a supportive crowd protection role to assist in a peaceful march. The Dallas Police Chief, David Brown, is a black man who has tried to continually improve relations between black and white police in dealing with Dallas black and white civilians in a fair and impartial manner.

In the mind of Micah Johnson, he had apparently attempted to bring some rough justice to the grievances of the black community. He seemed to be acting in accordance with an Old Testament belief about retaliation (Exodus 21: 23- 24). That is, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a hand for a hand, a foot for a foot, and a life for a life. Micah Johnson’s actions may have been different had he been familiar with New Testament teachings of St. Matthew 5: 38-42 which present a more enlightened and peacefully nuanced different version of an eye for and eye.

Currently in the United States there are at least two social problems which have been brought to light by Johnson’s killing of 5 white police officers. One is related to a relaxed and easy accessibility for citizens in USA who purchase firearms. The second is a longstanding, but sometimes hidden prejudice, of whites against blacks and vice versa. When these two problems intertwine the results often turn out very badly.

Both problems have long-standing roots. In the matter of blacks versus whites and its opposite, whites versus blacks, prejudice runs deep. Skin pigment, whether black or white or the many shades in between, does not serve humanity well as a way of determining one’s human value. A more enlightened view would include the recognition that all skin shades are part of the human family. We are all equally human.

Regardless of skin colour we all deserve the dignity and respect that comes with being part of humanity. We are each born with the skin tones that our genetic make-up provides for us at birth. Within some modifications, the colour of our eyes or our hair is similarly determined by our genetics. These are given features which we do not choose and for which we ought to be neither praised nor condemned by our fellow human beings. Such features do not in themselves serve us well in assessing our value in the greater picture of our human dignity or our human worth among our fellow members of society. We should not pre-judge our fellow humans by the colour of their skin. Such pre-judgments are but a short step towards racism and bigotry.

Humanism in Iceland

By S. N. Stuart

ON ARRIVING in Iceland during its summer break we made contact with the local Humanists.

Hope Knútsson hails from New York and has lived half her life in Iceland. After introducing us to the Humanist managing director, Bjarni Jónsson, we settled down to a hospitable lunch together in a sunny corner of Reykjavik's botanic garden and swapped Humanist experiences.

As a parent, Hope took exception to Iceland's *Compulsory Education Act 1974*, which required Christian morals to be taught at school.

Arguing that schools should be safe havens regardless of belief, she started to agitate for respect and equal status to be given to humanist views.

Most church goers were only nominal, but their teenage children were widely subjected to Christian confirmation. In 1989 Hope instigated secular confirmation as an alternative coming-of-age ceremony and copped some hate calls.

The next year she founded the Icelandic Ethical Humanist Association, Siðmennt, which began to educate Icelanders about the concept of life stance. She retired as president of the Association in 2015.

The first ten Icelandic celebrants in the civil confirmation program were trained in Norway, where Humanist confirmation was well established, and they now have forty celebrants. Young people aged thirteen or fourteen undertake a course of fourteen weeks culminating in a public graduation ceremony, to "welcome [them] into the society of adulthood with all the responsibilities that go with it".

Teaching follows the method of Philosophy for Children: topics include critical thinking, human rights, self-image, prejudice, and the meaning of life. There is no intention to enlist young Humanists, and the only explicit mention of Humanism is in Stephen Fry's animated videos (<https://humanism.org.uk/thatshumanism/>), which are dubbed into Icelandic. The festive flavour of the ceremony is apparent on web video clips (see <http://sidmennt.is/ferming/kynningarefni/>). The intake for classes has grown to well over 300 a year.

As in other countries of Lutheran heritage, taxpayers have to pay a congregation tax which goes to their nominated religion (if any), registered at birth. Despite wanting the tax abolished, Siðmennt attempted to register as a religion and was blocked until 2013, when the alternative status of a life-stance organisation was officially granted, coupled with the authority to conduct marriages. This brought government funding, used for an office and staff. (Dialectical Materialism attained the same status in 2016. In 2015 a minority religion called Zuism announced a full tax rebate to their members and, remarkably, 3,000 people joined up within two weeks.)

Bjarni led a campaign that got the Reykjavik city council, in 2011, to regulate the relation between churches and primary schools. In the last four years Siðmennt has expanded its membership to more than 2,000, or 0.6 percent of the country's population of 338,000, and claims 7,000 Facebook followers. A board member is a member of parliament. It takes part in the annual Humanist meeting of all the Nordic countries, including Faeroe Islands; it spawned a Euthanasia Society in January 2017.

Iceland is pervaded by a thousand-year-old Christian tradition: 94 per cent of the population has a registered religious affiliation, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church remains the state religion. However, a social survey in 2015 turned up only 28 per cent identifying as Christian, and no respondents under the age of twenty-five believing in god.

Iceland legalised civil unions in 1996, and Reykjavik's gay pride week (in August) is more popular than national celebrations. The blasphemy provision in the Criminal Code was abolished in 2015.

The Nordic countries are said to be the most secularised in the world. It is suggested that the Nordic model of social welfare as a human right has contributed to a sense of security, so reducing the appetite for religion, while religiosity has thrived under conditions of general insecurity or anxiety, as in the United States (Philip Zuckerman, *Society Without God*, 2008).

Iceland is an island half as big again as Tasmania, while Tasmania has a population half as big again as Iceland's. Geologically, Iceland is growing by repeated volcanic eruption, where the Eurasian and North American continental plates are separating at the rate of two centimetres a year. The island is peppered with volcanoes, some of which support glaciers covering 10 per cent of the total area. Among the lava fields, which begin to acquire moss after a few centuries, the sparse pasture on 23 per cent of the land is given over to big-horn sheep, largely free-ranging. Only 0.1 per cent is described as arable.

It's a hard life for the populace, but they seem to have a strong sense of community. While they have plenty of hydroelectric and geothermal power, most necessities have to be imported at great expense.

Diverse immigration will put pressure on social cohesion, and the Humanist voice will need increasingly to be heard.

However, since its foundation less than thirty years ago, Icelandic Humanism has brought Humanist values to bear on the country's affairs, contributed to progressive law reform and created a social role with civil confirmations, marriages and funerals. It promises to go on from strength to strength.

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