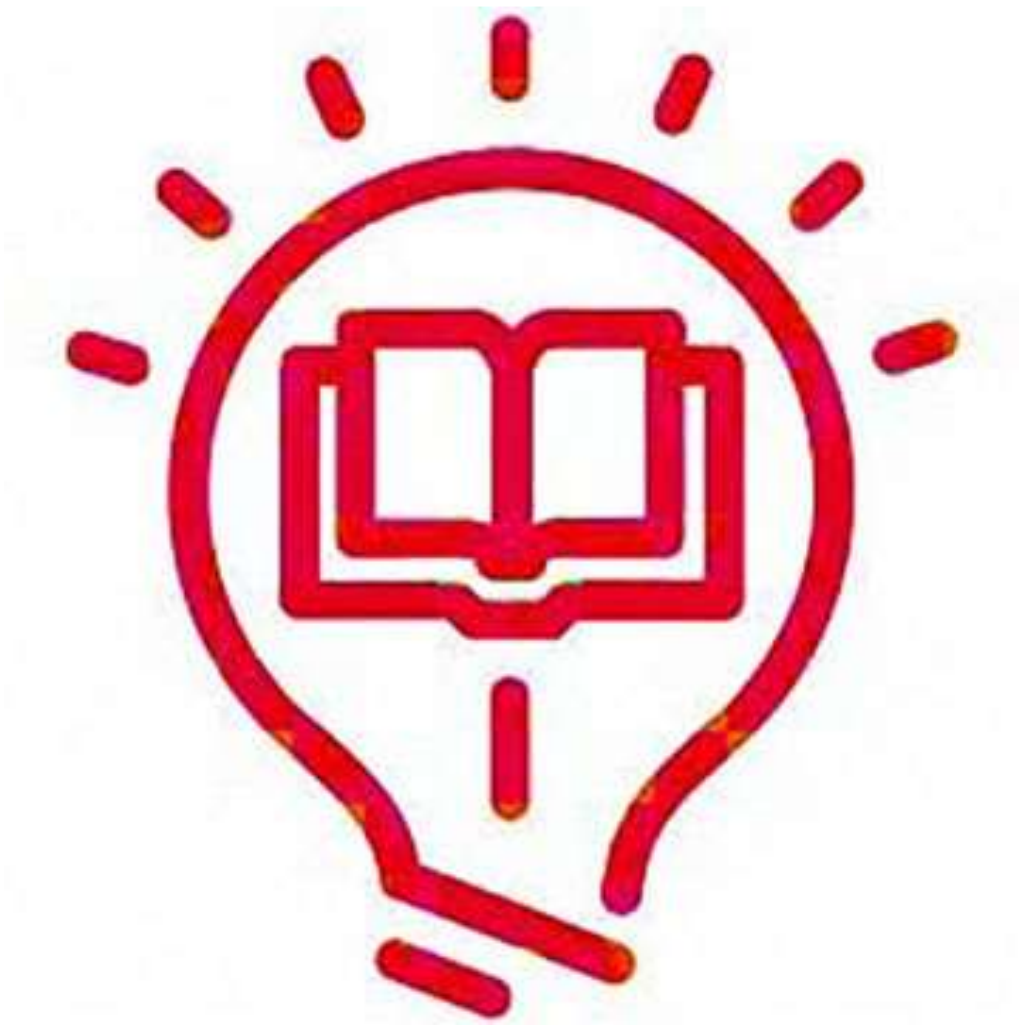


# An Enlightening Compendium

Excerpts From - *The Enlightenment*

A Secular Mini-Journal for Inquiring Minds



By Donald A. Hatch



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## Introduction

This book is a compendium of selected articles that have appeared in *The Enlightenment*, originally a newsletter for the Humanist Association of London and Area (HALA) in Ontario, Canada. The first issue was published in April 2005. The early issues contained information on the activities of humanist organizations locally and elsewhere. But the publication soon developed into a “mini-journal” covering subjects as diverse as the existence or non-existence of God, religions, philosophy, science, ethics, secular societies and more. It started out as a quarterly publication, but soon became bi-monthly and then monthly. It was intended that *Enlightenment* articles would dovetail with the purpose of HALA as stated in its Constitution: *The purpose of The Association shall be to educate and increase the public’s understanding of the principles of secular worldviews, including humanism, through the provision of seminars, conferences, and newsletters.* My aim in compiling this book is to fulfill the same purpose with an emphasis on education.

The Humanist Association of London and Area, consisting of about eighty paid-up members, operated successfully in London for twenty years, but came to an end on December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2019, due to an inability to attract a sufficient number of volunteers to keep the Association active. When HALA ceased to exist, a number of *Enlightenment* readers inquired as to whether it would be possible to keep it going. I quickly assessed the situation and decided to keep the publication going on a monthly basis, using the subtitle, “A Secular Mini-Journal for Inquiring Minds.” It is emailed to about one hundred people as well as to five individuals who are not online and get it by regular mail.

When I first became aware of humanist organizations in the early 2000s, and joined the group that was newly formed in London, Ontario, I observed there were members who thought the way to promote the attributes of humanism was to shout from the roof tops that “there is no God,” and at the same time bash religions. Then I observed that of the twelve Principles of the Humanist Association of Canada (now Humanist Canada) only one (number 10) dealt with the supernatural and the absence of God. The remaining eleven were concerned with other subjects including human rights, democracy, the scientific method, the freedom of each individual, the kinship of all humanity, world peace, and the preservation of the environment, among other things. These admirable attributes are well outlined in Humanist Canada’s definition of Humanism, which states:

*Humanism is a philosophy or life-stance based upon a profound respect for human dignity and the conviction that we are all ultimately accountable to ourselves and to society for our actions. Our worldview is deity-free and affirms our ability and responsibility to lead ethical and meaningful lives without the reliance upon a belief in the supernatural. As Humanists, we believe that reason and science are the best ways to understand the world around us. And we believe that dignity and compassion should be the basis for how we act towards others. Humanist Canada is committed to advancing free thinking and freedom of choice in Canada so that we can all live in a fair and equal society. Through our ceremonies, educational services, affiliate groups and partnerships, we bring Humanism to communities across the country while also raising awareness on the national stage.*

A further understanding of Humanism can be gained from the four articles in this compendium authored by Dr. Rod Martin. In these chapters Rod presents a comprehensive analysis of what Humanism is all about, particularly as it applies to humanist organizations and their members.



But it must be recognized that the above definition is only one explanation of the word humanism, because dictionaries offer three. It turns out that the word humanism is a homonym. A homonym is a word with one spelling and while sounding the same, can have two or more meanings. The word bark is an example. It can be the outer layer of a tree trunk or the sound a dog makes. The three dictionary definitions are:

**Humanism** – The cultural movement of the Renaissance, based on classical studies.

**Humanism** - The doctrine emphasizing a person's capacity for self-realization through reasoning: rejecting religion and all things supernatural.

**Humanism** – The doctrine that it is the duty of governments and citizens to promote the well-being of all humans, i.e., all of humanity.

Consistent with the first definition, the word humanism was first used in the early 1800s to describe the revival of the study of Greek and Roman classics, including philosophy. This book contains a Section on philosophy.

Definition number two defines the humanism of humanist associations and their members as mentioned above. In 1927 the newly formed "Humanist Fellowship" chose the word Humanist as part of the title of their organization. This group became the American Humanist Association in 1941. The word Humanist has appeared in the title of most Humanist Associations ever since.

Definition number three is coming to the forefront more often now that inequality is increasing in many societies. It implies that concern for the well-being of all citizens should trump the quest for the almighty dollar by the few. Compassion should replace greed.

In addition to the Section on Humanism, there is a Section on Secularism, so I think it would be helpful to point out a difference between the two. Although the words are often used interchangeably, and the phrase "secular humanism" is in common usage, there can be a difference in the understanding of the two concepts. In most definitions of humanism, the rejection of belief in God and the supernatural is one of the key issues. And while many who call themselves a secularist, also reject belief in the supernatural, they comfortably live in a society with a firm separation of church and state with both freedom of religion and freedom from religion being present. People are free to believe or not believe in supernatural phenomena. Thus, secularism can be defined as follows:

*"Secularism seeks the development of the physical, moral, and intellectual nature of humans to the highest possible degree as the immediate duty of life. It inculcates the practical sufficiency of natural morality apart from Theism or the Bible and selects as its methods of procedure the promotion of human improvement by material means. Secularism proposes these positive qualities as the common bond of union to all who would regulate life by reason and ennoble it by service. Implicit in secularism is the assertion that governmental practices or institutions in a secular society should exist separately from religion and/or religious beliefs."*

(Taken from Wikipedia).

As time went on, I came to observe that Humanist Associations throughout the Western world did not generally have many members and that they were sometimes described as organizations of little influence. And it seemed to me they would never have any meaningful influence unless they got involved with politics at least to some extent. I came to this conclusion when I observed that societies with a minimum of religiosity and low concern about the existence of God have evolved naturally wherever there were prosperous secular liberal democracies with adequate social safety nets such as free medical care. In some of these countries, many of them in northwestern Europe, attendance at churches was as low as 5% of the population. People just went about enjoying their lives, not caring whether or not God exists.



These observations substantiate, I believe, my contention that the best way to achieve the objective of humanist organizations, which is the creation of societies with low religiosity where people can be “good without god,” is to promote the advantages of secular societies. Highly secular countries with low religiosity tend to have leaders and other officials who try to provide their citizens with as good a life as possible. In other words, governments with concern for the well-being of all citizens, not just for the few and not for personal gain, political or otherwise. Under these conditions, God and religiosity just naturally fades away. In these secular countries with firm separation of church and state, there are millions of good people living according to humanist values, but most of them don’t think of themselves as humanists, never having heard about the concepts of humanism. They just go about trying to live as flourishing a life as possible in a secular environment with optimum freedoms and obeying the laws of the nation in which they live.

It should be evident that both those who call themselves humanists and those who call themselves secular are concerned with the living of an ethical, moral, and satisfying life in an environment of freedom and order, as well as having concern for the well-being of all humanity. While many secularists will label themselves as humanists, atheists, or free thinkers, their main *raison d’être* will be **separation of church and state**, with freedom of religion and freedom from religion. On the other hand, most humanists will consider the rejection of all supernatural phenomena, including God, heaven and hell, as being a key element in their thinking.

In addition to articles on humanism and secularism, this book contains an eclectic assortment of articles on science, ethics, equality, religions and a few book reviews, representing some of the best of past issues of the *Enlightenment*. These topics are in accordance with the content of Humanist Canada’s already mentioned twelve principles. (These principles are listed in Appendix I.)

In order to offer some respite after contemplative reading, interspersed among the selected articles there are quotes by famous individuals, some poetry and song, and some humour. Many of the articles have been authored by well-known international writers, and others are by former members of HALA, including:

**Dr. Rod A. Martin** – Rod retired in 2016 after 32 years as a professor of clinical psychology at the University of Western Ontario (UWO). He was President of HALA from 2010 until 2018. He has written 3 books on the psychology of humour and has published over 100 journal articles and book chapters. He is an avid cyclist.

**Dr. Goldwin Emerson** – Goldwin (Goldie) spent his whole life as an educator, first in elementary and high schools and latterly as a professor of philosophy at the Faculty of Education, UWO. He retired in 1986 and is now professor emeritus. Since retirement, Goldie periodically has articles of a humanist nature published in Saturday editions of the *London Free Press*. To date over 125 articles have appeared.

**Duncan Watterworth** – Duncan is a long-time resident of Elgin County, a retired lawyer, a world traveler, and an atheist since his teens. He writes a monthly column for *This Month in Elgin* magazine.

The designation for articles written by me is DAH. As for me, after retirement from a career in the Canadian chemical industry, I became interested in philosophy and the history of monotheistic religions. Subsequently, I have written numerous articles and one book on these subjects. I am a past president of HALA and publisher of *The Enlightenment*.

The book opens with the inspiring words of John Lennon’s song *Imagine*. It would be hard to find a better way to describe in a nutshell, what this compilation is all about.

Donald Hatch, London Ontario, May 20, 2020.



# **Imagine**

*By John Lennon*

Imagine there's no heaven  
It's easy if you try  
No hell below us  
Above us only sky  
Imagine all the people  
Living for today...

Imagine there's no countries  
It isn't hard to do  
Nothing to kill or die for  
And no religion too  
Imagine all the people  
Living life in peace...

You may say I'm a dreamer  
But I'm not the only one  
I hope someday you'll join us  
And the world will be as one

Imagine no possessions  
I wonder if you can  
No need for greed or hunger  
A brotherhood of man  
Imagine all the people  
Sharing all the world...

You may say I'm a dreamer  
But I'm not the only one  
I hope someday you'll join us  
And the world will be as one



# Section I - Humanism

## What is Humanism?

*By Dr. Rod A. Martin*

*[The following is a talk that was given at the HALA meeting on July 9, 2009. It was inspired in part by the first chapter of Dr. Jeaneane Fowler's book, Humanism: Beliefs and Practices.]*

### The Human Search for Meaning

Humanism is essentially a response to questions about the meaning of life. Humans seem to have an inherent need to understand and to make sense of things, including their own lives. Most of us struggle from time to time with questions like, "What makes my life worth living? What difference does my life make in the grand scheme of things?" There are times in our lives when each of us face the reality of our own mortality, when we struggle with adversities, such as personal failures, financial loss, illness, interpersonal conflicts, the breakup of a relationship, or the death of a loved one. These can often be periods when everything seems pointless, when we feel like giving up. At times like these, we may wonder whether life has any deeper meaning, or is it, as Shakespeare put it, "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing?"

Paul Kurtz (in *The courage to become: The virtues of humanism*) has noted that there are three common responses in our culture to these sorts of questions. The first of these is the **theistic religious** response, which seeks to answer these questions by invoking belief in God, an afterlife, and a supernatural reality. In this view, life has meaning because God loves you, will save you, and will take you to a blissful eternal afterlife. This approach is obviously very appealing to a great many people in our culture. However, as Kurtz points out, this is an inherently anti-humanistic view, because it sees humans as helpless and hopeless, unable to take care of themselves. It is a denial of reality, a wish to escape reality by fleeing into fantasies and myths.

The second common response is **skeptical nihilism**, which says that there is no evidence for the existence of God, an immortal human soul, life after death, or a supernatural realm. Consequently, according to this view, there is no real basis for ethics, social justice, or even knowledge. This is an extreme post-modernist outlook, which says that everything is relative, subjective, and a matter of personal taste. There is no basis for objective knowledge, no way of arriving at truth. This leads to a pessimistic, despairing view of humanity. In this view, life is meaningless and there is no real hope for humanity. This is also quite a widespread perspective in our secularized culture. However, this too is an anti-humanistic view, according to Kurtz, because it also sees humans as weak and powerless, incapable of gaining genuine knowledge, solving problems, making progress, and achieving self-improvement.

The third response is **Humanism**, which combines a realistic outlook with optimism and courage. It is *realistic*, because it agrees with the skeptic that there is no evidence for the existence of God, supernatural powers, an immortal soul, life after death, and so on. We are alone in the universe, and we need to embrace this reality, rather than fleeing from it. At the same time, Humanism is also *optimistic* about the human potential to gain knowledge, solve problems, and thrive. Humans are a product of millions of years of successful evolutionary adaptation and survival. We have intelligence, creativity, an ability to understand,



to solve problems, and to overcome adversities. We are fundamentally a social animal, and we can work cooperatively with others to build a harmonious society. Thus, Humanism affirms the possibility of the good life here and now. It is an exuberant, joyful response to questions about the meaning of life. It urges us to face the struggles of life with courage and joy, striving to create a better world based on reason and the ideals of freedom and progress.

### **Small-h versus big-h humanism**

Most people in our society seem to have little awareness that Humanism even exists, let alone what it is all about. The name “humanism” itself is often used in a rather vague way with many different meanings. Jeaneane Fowler (in *Humanism: Beliefs and Practices*) points out that we need to make a distinction between (small-h) humanism and (big-h) Humanism. In a broad, everyday sense, “humanism” refers to a concern for humanity, and is often used as a synonym for *humane* or *humanitarian*. In this general sense, almost everyone is a “small-h” humanist, including such historical figures as Jesus of Nazareth, the Buddha, or Karl Marx.

Another common use of “humanism” occurs in the context of university education, where the “humanities” refer to disciplines outside the natural sciences and engineering, such as literature, modern and classical languages, philosophy, history, etc. This use of the term originated during the Renaissance, when a division was made between “human” and “divine” studies. The Latin word *humanitates* referred to the study of such subjects as literature and rhetoric, as opposed to divinity or theology, and “humanists” were the teachers of such subjects. Even today, some professors of the humanities still call themselves “humanists.”

However, these are not the meanings of the word that we are concerned with here. Our topic here is Humanism (with a capital h) as an organized movement, a “life-stance” which stands in contrast to theistic religious perspectives. Humanists tend to have certain shared beliefs and values, and an orientation to life which is centered on *human beings*, rather than on God.

It is important to recognize at the outset that Humanism has no formal creed and is not a narrowly defined belief system. Humanists have many different points of view and disagree among themselves about many issues. As Fowler notes, this multiplicity of views is an asset rather than a hindrance, because it means that Humanism is an ever-growing, dynamic process, rather than a static system of thought. It can respond to the changing world in which we live. Indeed, it is important for Humanists to constantly rethink their views, responding constructively to the ever-changing issues and challenges facing the world.

### **Emphases of Humanism**

As the name suggests, the focus of Humanism is on what it means to be *human*, or what Fowler calls “*human-being-ness*.” Interestingly, the word “human” comes from the Latin *humus*, meaning ground, earth, or soil. This etymology emphasizes our close kinship with nature, and our evolutionary origins in inorganic matter, along with all of life, in contrast to a view of humans as divinely created *ex nihilo*. It underscores the secular rather than the religious, and the Humanist’s concern with *this* life rather than an imagined life after death. And although Humanists have no official creed, there are several key emphases or assumptions that they generally tend to agree on. I will summarize these in the following paragraphs.



## **(1) Optimistic view of human potential**

Humanism emphasizes the dignity of the human being, and the human potential for goodness, rational reflection, choice, self-realization, and creativity. Unlike other animals, humans are not just passive products of natural forces and biological determinism. We have the ability to transcend biology, and to redefine our nature through culture and creativity. We have freedom of choice and freedom of will, providing the potential for a whole life for each individual. This sort of self-fulfillment requires courage – the “courage to become,” as Kurtz puts it – courage to overcome inertia, discouragements, and past failures, and to strive to achieve our fullest potential. Humanistic optimism is realistic, recognizing that things will never be perfect, but it is based on a fundamental *choice* to reject pessimism and to strive for something better.

This optimistic view of humans is reflected in the following lines from Shakespeare (in *Hamlet*):

“What a piece of work is man [and woman]! How noble in reason! How infinite in faculty! In form and moving how express and admirable! In action how like an angel! In apprehension how like a god! The beauty of the world! The paragon of animals!”

## **(2) Human responsibility**

The flip side of the human potential coin is human responsibility. Humans alone are responsible for shaping their own lives. Because we can't rely on some mythical supernatural power to take care of us, what we make of our life ultimately depends on us alone. This is true both individually and collectively. At an *individual* level, this responsibility means taking hold of one's own life to strive for self-actualization, growth, and fulfillment. Of course, we each have limitations in our abilities, intellect, health, financial resources, etc. Nonetheless, we can each strive to make the best with what we have. *Collectively*, humans have a responsibility to one another and to the planet. We are responsible for creating a society that fosters the freedom, growth, and potential of all humanity. We need to work together cooperatively to combat poverty, ignorance, war, violence, and intolerance. Humans also have a responsibility to use our intellect and ingenuity to address the pressing problems facing the earth today, including global warming, pollution, and the extinction of many species. Our existence is intimately intertwined with that of all living things in this world, and the preservation of nature is essential for human self-preservation, self-realization, and happiness.

## **(3) Ethics and morality**

Far from being an amoral, “anything-goes” philosophy of egotistic hedonism, Humanism is very concerned about ethics and morality. Contrary to the claims of the religious right, Humanists emphasize that it is possible to be good without God. Morality for Humanists is decided through human reason and an overall concern for humanity, rather than divine revelation, tradition, or religious authority. As Paul Kurtz has noted, morality means striving for the fulfillment of individuals and societies in a peaceful, happy co-existence. Views on morality can change over time with new knowledge and information, but this does not mean that morality is entirely subjective and tenuous.

Humans are inherently social animals. Throughout our evolutionary history, we adapted and survived as a result of living in small groups of individuals that banded together to help and protect one another. We still need others in order to survive and flourish. Consequently, a Humanist system of ethics is based on caring



for others, empathy, compassion, and altruism. This caring goes beyond our immediate family, community, and nation, extending to all of humanity, recognizing that we are all one species. All humans have the same inherent dignity and worth.

Humanists, therefore, reject the sort of self-centered hedonistic approach to life which often grows out of skeptical nihilism. Humanists are generally opposed to crass materialism, consumerism, and the superficial values of our age. They have concerns about inequality, injustice, and the exploitation of others, and strive for a more fair and equitable sharing of resources. Because humans are social by nature, true meaning in life is found in caring relationships with others. Individual happiness is maximized when we work to benefit society, and we find joy and satisfaction in contributing to human betterment.

#### **(4) Naturalism**

As we have already seen, Humanists reject belief in supernatural powers, entities, or experiences. Nature – the natural universe – is all that is, and there is nothing that is “super-” (i.e., “above” or “beyond”) nature. This natural universe is potentially knowable through scientific investigation. Humans also are a part of the natural world. We are the product of an amazing process of evolution, beginning with the big bang, the gradual formation of stars which produced all the elements, the development of the planet we live on, and the evolution of living cells and an incredible multiplicity of organisms over billions of years. Because we are an evolved animal, Humanism takes a non-dualistic view of human nature, rejecting beliefs in a soul or spirit or other immaterial part of us that exists apart from our physical bodies. Our minds are the function of our brains; all of our thoughts, feelings, emotions, and desires are based on exceedingly complex biochemical processes taking place in the neurons of our brains. When we die, we do not continue to exist, except in the memories of others and whatever influence we may have had on the world.

Humanists tend to be quite skeptical about things like astrology, horoscopes, extra-sensory perception, clairvoyance, spiritualism, near-death experiences, miraculous medical cures, and so on. These sorts of claims must be tested empirically and scientifically validated before they can be accepted as true. At the same time, rather than being a cold and detached outlook, naturalism is a very positive perspective. In the words of William R. Murry (in *Reason and Reverence*), Humanists “exult in being alive in this unimaginably vast and breathtakingly beautiful universe.” Although the natural universe is all that is, it is *enough* to fill us with awe, wonder, and a sense of mystery.

#### **(5) The scientific method as the means to knowledge and truth**

The scientific method is not a fixed set of procedures, but a general approach to seeking truth by testing hypotheses through rigorous, systematic observation and experimentation. Science is based on *empiricism*, which seeks answers to questions through objective, replicable evidence, rather than divine revelation, philosophical speculation, mysticism, ancient scriptures, or other sources. Science is also based on *rationality*, requiring clear, logical, and critical thinking. Science is the most reliable method we have of arriving at truth. We will never have absolute or perfect truth – our knowledge is always tentative and open to correction with new evidence – but science does provide a gradual accumulation of knowledge.



## **(6) Rejection of theistic religion**

Humanists tend to be either agnostics or atheists. Agnostics assert that it is impossible to know whether or not God exists. Atheists go one step further and assert that God does not exist. In practice, though, there is little difference between the two, as they both go about their daily lives without faith in God. This means that we need to find the answers to life's problems within ourselves, rather than through divine intervention. Each person has only one life to live, there is no life after death, and therefore we need to enjoy this one life as fully as we can and make the most of it.

Incidentally, a recent poll in the US found that atheists were rated number one among "minorities whom Americans are least willing to allow their children to marry" (Muslims and African Americans were second and third, respectively). Clearly, as Rodney Dangerfield would say, we get no respect!

The major emphases of Humanism that I have listed above are summarized quite well in the "Minimum Statement" published in 1996 by the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU), the parent body of all the major Humanist organizations throughout the world:

Humanism is a democratic and ethical life stance which affirms that human beings have the right and responsibility to give meaning and shape to their own lives. It stands for the building of a more humane society through an ethics based on human and other natural values in a spirit of reason and free inquiry through human capabilities. It is not theistic, and it does not accept supernatural views of reality.

Of course, any definition of Humanism is tentative and flexible, recognizing its dynamic nature, and the freedom of individuals to think for themselves.

## **Challenges for Humanism Today**

As with any movement, there is a danger for Humanism over time to become ossified, out of touch, and irrelevant. This is a challenge for us today, as we think about how we can reach out to the younger generation. Having examined the major emphases of Humanism, I would like to briefly discuss several issues that I think Humanists need to grapple with if we wish to remain relevant in today's society.

### **(1) The human potential for evil as well as good**

Humanists have been criticized for having an overly idealized view of humanity, seeing humans as the most highly evolved animal, with a position of dominance over the rest of nature. Although we can be optimistic about the human potential for goodness, we also need to acknowledge the human potential for evil and atrocity. This has been amply demonstrated by the events of the past century, with its world wars, the Holocaust, genocide, pollution, global warming, and gradual destruction of the environment. Some people today view humanity as a cancer on the earth and argue that the world would be better off without us. Humanists need to avoid such a pessimistic view, but we also need to be realistic about the human potential for evil and avoid the kind of overly idealized view of humanity that leads to arrogance. It is the arrogance of Western humanity that is destroying the planet. Thus, Humanists need to retain an optimistic view of human potential, tempered by realism.



Historically, Humanists have tended to be rather uninvolved in social and political activism. Their optimistic view of human nature almost seems to have led to a sense of the inevitability of progress, with little need for active efforts on our part to make it happen. However, a more realistic view of human nature would suggest that there is a need for us to become more actively engaged in efforts to improve the world in which we live. Things are not going to get better on their own, and the outcome is not certain. We need to put our Humanist values to work by becoming involved in social initiatives both in our local community and in the broader world.

## **(2) Potential misuses of science**

Humanism has also been criticized for having an overly simplistic faith in the benefits of science. We need to recognize that science can be used for destructive as well as constructive purposes. Over the past century, science has brought us weapons of mass destruction, and the indiscriminate misuse of science has contributed to the degradation of the environment, pollution, and global warming. Although the scientific method is the most reliable means we have of arriving at truth, it clearly needs to be coupled with human ethics and moral values. This ethical approach to science also entails a greater recognition of our oneness with all of nature. Rather than viewing ourselves as the pinnacle of evolution with a right to dominate over nature, Humanists need to acknowledge that, as stated in the Unitarian-Universalist principles, we are part of the “interconnected web of all existence.”

## **(3) Beyond rationalism**

Another criticism of Humanism is that it puts too much emphasis on reason and intellect and not enough on emotion and relationships. While continuing to emphasize the importance of reason and rationality over superstition and ignorance, Humanists need also to affirm the positive aspects of human experience that go beyond reason, logic, and rationality. These include the esthetic pleasures of art, poetry, music, literature, and the beauty of nature. They also include the joys of personal relationships: love, intimacy, devotion, commitment, joy, and laughter. In addition, they include experiences that are traditionally referred to as “spirituality” (although this word is somewhat problematic due to its implication of dualism): feelings of awe, wonder, and even ecstasy that can arise from meditation and contemplation. Of course, all these types of emotions and experiences are based on natural, scientifically knowable brain processes, and are products of evolution. However, this doesn’t invalidate them as valuable aspects of human experience. Humanists need to be careful not to disparage these “non-rational” experiences, and indeed we should encourage their cultivation. If we focus exclusively on rationality, we run the risk of becoming just a dry, intellectual debating club. In celebrating all that it means to be human, we need to find ways of nurturing the social and emotional as well as the intellectual aspects of our nature, becoming a warm community of joy, compassion, fellowship, mutual support, and caring.

## **(4) Positive aspects of religion**

Humanists, many of whom have been liberated from a background of oppressive and narrow-minded religious orthodoxy, tend to emphasize the negative aspects of religion, focusing on the many examples of religious bigotry, warfare, intolerance, and oppression throughout history. However, there is a danger for Humanists of becoming too negative and intolerant of all aspects of religion. The religious impulse is deeply ingrained in the human psyche and is also a product of our evolutionary history. While criticizing the dehumanizing effects of extreme religious ideologies, we need to recognize that religion at its best also has



many positive benefits. We need to acknowledge that the world would not necessarily be a better place if we could simply eliminate all religion. An exclusively negative attack on religion only leads to greater defensiveness and hostility from believers, many of whom may share many of our values and goals. In seeking to promote Humanist values in a positive way, rather than bashing all religions, we would do well to learn what we can from the age-old wisdom of religious traditions and find common cause with liberal religious people on particular social issues, while respectfully disagreeing with their supernatural beliefs.

In addition, we need to explore ways in which Humanism can more adequately fulfill the basic religious needs and desires of humans, within a non-theistic, non-supernatural framework. For many people, religious belief serves important functions, providing them with a sense of meaning and fulfillment that keeps them going in times of adversity, a basis for morality, deeply satisfying experiences of transcendence and “spirituality,” and a caring and supportive community. Rather than bashing religion, we need to strive for a Humanism that acknowledges and fulfills these human needs, thereby reaching out to a broader segment of society.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, Humanism is not just a club, not just a meeting we attend once a month. At its best, it is a way of life which can make a difference in people’s lives and can bring out the best in people. Humanism is an exciting, vibrant, dynamic life-stance that gives deeply satisfying answers to questions about the meaning of life. It can be the basis of a life of fulfillment, joy, and value that is dedicated to reaching toward the full potential of what it means to be human.

### **Are You a Humanist?**

*By Duncan Watterworth*

The officiant at my daughter Brooke’s wedding was very dignified, with kind, wise eyes, and a white beard. He started the ceremony as follows, “Humanism is a non-religious ethical philosophy, a way of life and of thinking that involves adherence to the common moral decencies of altruism, integrity, and honesty. Humanists embrace core human values of respect, responsibility, and compassion for all. We look to nature and on-going inquiry for the explanation of life, rather than a divine or supernatural power.”

Brooke and I were members of the Humanist Association of London and Area. I dragged her to her first meeting, but she bought the membership. We heard a talk by Dr. André Lachance, a biology professor at Western. Turns out he is also an officiant of the Ontario Humanist Society and when Brooke and Joe got engaged, they asked him to do the wedding.

Dr. Lachance is also president of the Thames Talbot Land Trust, a charity involved in preserving land of natural value for posterity. He offered Brooke and Joe the option of donating to the Land Trust in lieu of his officiant fee.

Humanism has been called a worldview, a life stance, or a philosophy of life. It has no leader, pope, or prophet. Nothing need be taken on faith, or blindly believed. I see Humanism as having three components.

- First, Humanists prefer reason, scientific inquiry, and critical thinking as the means of understanding the world.



- Second, Humanists do not believe in gods, the supernatural, or mysticism. They are atheists or agnostics.
- Third, Humanists choose to “be good without God.” They choose to value the flourishing of every human being, in this lifetime. They think that they have the right and unavoidable responsibility to give meaning to their lives.

These ideas – a preference for reason, a skepticism of the supernatural, and human-centered ethics - are not new. They have roots in classical Greece, and in ancient Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism.

Skipping forward a couple thousand years, these ideas were linked in The British Humanistic Religious Association of 1853, The Humanist Manifesto of 1933, The American Humanist Association of 1941, The Humanist Association of Canada of 1968, and the Amsterdam Declaration of 2002. And let’s not forget Humanist International, a coalition of 117 Humanist, rationalist, irreligious, atheistic, secular, ethical culture, and freethought organizations in 38 countries.

Well known Humanists include Margaret Atwood, Albert Einstein, June Callwood, Bill Nye (the science guy), John Lennon, Steven Pinker, Sigmund Freud, John Kenneth Galbraith, Bertrand Russell, and Frank Zappa.

Historically, churches have filled several functions in society. They are purveyors of theology, of course, but they also facilitate a sense of community, and preside over ceremonies marking births, marriages, and deaths. Today Humanist officiants are available to perform these rites of passage in secular ceremonies.

So ... are you a Humanist? If so, keep in mind that humanist officiants are available to perform secular rites of passage ceremonies.

## **Humanist Associations**

In the second quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, various Humanist Associations began to appear throughout the western world. They exist at several levels, International, National, State or Provincial and local. Details of a few of these organizations are presented on page 23 in an article entitled *The Long Past of Humanism* by Dr. Rod Martin.

In Canada we have Humanist Canada (HC) formerly known as The Canadian Humanist Association (CHA) founded in 1968 by Dr. Henry Morgentaler, famous for achieving legal rights to abortion in Canada. From time to time Humanist Canada recognizes a Humanist of the Year. This is a recognition of people who have fought for human rights and secular freedoms. To date fourteen awards have been handed out. A few past recipients have been June Callwood, founder of Casey House, the world's first hospice for people with HIV/AIDS, (posthumous), Margaret Atwood, John Ralston Saul, Kurt Vonnegut and Dr. Henry Morgentaler. (DAH).

## **A Humanist of the Year**

In the year 2000, Dr. Pat Duffy Hutcheon received the CHA Humanist of the Year award. I had the privilege and good fortune to get to know Pat quite well and visited her in her remarkable condo overlooking Burrard Bridge in Vancouver once a year, before she passed away in 2010 at age 84. She called her condo, “a little bit of heaven on earth.” A short profile of Pat is presented below. (DAH).



## **Dr. Pat Duffy Hutcheon**

### **Canadian Philosopher, Sociologist and Educator**

Pat Duffy Hutcheon was a professor, sociologist and educator. She studied/taught in three countries. Her undergraduate degree is in education with a major in history, and her PhD (from the University of Queensland Australia) is in sociology. At one time she was the Head of the Educational Foundations Department at the University of Regina. She has received a number of awards, including a Canada Council citation of 'Master Teacher' when she was teaching secondary school in the public-school system. The Humanist Association of Canada named her Humanist of the Year 2000, and she received the Distinguished Humanist Service Award from the American Humanist Association in 2001. She was the Canadian voice on the committee of drafters of the new Humanist Manifesto III issued in 2003 by the American Humanist Association. Her scholarly articles have appeared in journals in Holland, Norway and Belgium. Great Britain Ireland and Australia as well as Canada and the United States. Her 1975 textbook, *A Sociology of Canadian Education* was the first ever published on that subject and was widely used (both nationally and internationally) for over a decade. She has authored four more books, *Leaving the Cave: Evolutionary Naturalism in Social Scientific Thought* (1996), *Building Character and Culture* (1999), *The Road to Reason: Landmarks in the Evolution of Humanist Thought* (2001/03) and *Something Lost*, a murder mystery novel set in the faculty of a fictional western Canadian university (2004). A Japanese version of *The Road to Reason* was published in Japan in 2004 and a Korean version has been published as well.

Pat Duffy Hutcheon's philosophy is one of natural humanism and is beautifully outlined in the final chapter of *The Road to Reason* under the title of "A World View For the Global Village. In addition to her other accomplishments, Pat was an accomplished poet. Her exceptional poem *Amazing Life* is printed below. This poem cleverly describes evolution in six stanzas. It can be sung to the tune of *Amazing Grace*. Another of her poems, *Life Is a Stream Evolving* appears later in this book. Also below is a picture of me and Pat at a marina on False Creek in Vancouver circa 2009. (DAH).

### **Me & Pat at a Marina on False Creek, Vancouver**





## **Amazing Life**

Amazing life, how great the code  
That carves a course through me,  
To futures yet uncharted from,  
some long-forgotten sea.

No master hand defined my fate.  
No gods created me.  
Stardust and ocean current sparked  
The genes that led to me.

O'er eons of uncounted time,  
Like shifting dunes of sand;  
From grasping paw on groping limb,  
Evolved the human hand.

Amazing hand, how great the tools  
That humankind could wield.  
How wide the world that hitherto  
From animals was sealed

But symbols were the crucial key  
That opened cultures gate;  
for language carried consciousness,  
and knowledge in its wake.

Amazing power of human thought  
that carves a course through me;  
to futures yet uncharted from  
Some long-forgotten sea

## **A Few Quotes**

- If there is righteousness in the heart, there will be beauty in the character. If there is beauty in the character, there will be harmony in the home. If there is harmony in the home, there will be order in the nation. If there be order in the nation there will be peace in the world. – Confucius.  
(Of all the quotes in this book, this is my favourite. – (DAH)
- If you are ever to enjoy life, now is the time – not tomorrow, nor next year nor in some future life. - Thomas Dreier.
- Those who can make you believe absurdities can also make you commit atrocities. -Voltaire
- Which is it? Is man one of God's blunders, or is God one of man's blunders? – Fredrich Nietzsche.
- Nothing is so firmly believed as what is least known. -Michel de Montaigne, (1533-1592).



# **The Long Past of Humanism**

*By Dr. Rod A. Martin*

The early roots of Humanism can be traced to three important periods of European history: ancient Greece, the Renaissance, and the Enlightenment.

## **I. Ancient Greece (500 – 250 BCE)**

Like most ancient cultures, the Greeks originally espoused a polytheistic religious belief system. Many of the early philosophers began to question faith in gods and superstitious religious traditions and argued that it is better to rely on human reason and intellect to gain knowledge of the natural world and to live a good life. Many of these thinkers were persecuted and even put to death for their atheism, which was seen as a threat to the social order. Several of these philosophers are particularly noteworthy in the early development of what we would now call humanist thinking.

Anaxagoras (500 - 428 BCE), who is sometimes called the “father of free thought,” was an early Greek philosopher who questioned the superstitious beliefs of his age. He attempted to give scientific explanations for such phenomena as eclipses, meteors, rainbows, and the sun. He was an early proponent of *atomism*, the belief that all things are made of tiny imperishable elements.

Protagoras (490 - 420 BCE) was also skeptical about the nature of the gods. His agnostic views are embodied in his statement: "Concerning the gods, I have no means of knowing whether they exist or not or of what sort they may be, because of the obscurity of the subject, and the brevity of human life." Protagoras is famous for stating that “man is the measure of all things,” which seems to capture an essentially humanistic perspective. He also grappled with questions about how we can have a naturalistic system of morality and ethics without believing in divine absolutes.

Democritus (460 - 370 BCE), who has been called the “father of science,” was a materialist, who had a mechanistic view of the world and believed that everything is governed by natural laws. He questioned belief in the gods and was skeptical about personal immortality. He was also an atomist, believing that everything is composed of atoms, which he conceived of as tiny particles that are physically indivisible and indestructible. He taught that atoms are always in motion, there is empty space between them, and there are infinite numbers and kinds of atoms, which differ in shape, size, and temperature. These views are quite amazing when we consider that it was not until the late 1800s that the theory of atoms was finally confirmed by science.

Epicurus (341 – 270 BCE), the founder of Epicureanism, is a particularly important figure in the history of humanist thought. He took a materialistic perspective on the world and attacked superstition and belief in divine intervention. He also believed in atomism, which seems to be a hallmark of these forerunners of humanism. Although he believed that the gods exist, he conceived of them as physical beings made of atoms, who are very far away and are unconcerned about humans and uninvolved in human affairs. These ideas seem to make him an early proponent of Deism. Epicurus believed that the greatest good is to seek modest pleasures and attain a state of tranquility and freedom from fear, through knowledge, friendship, and living a virtuous, temperate life. This philosophy is quite different from the common stereotype of Epicureans as advocates of self-indulgence and gluttony (a pejorative



view of them that was disseminated much later by the Roman Catholic Church). Instead, Epicurus advocated enjoyment of the simple pleasures of life, restraint, and self-discipline (he himself was celibate, although he didn't require this of his followers). He said that "who you eat *with* is more important than *what* you eat." His ideas were put into practice by members of numerous local Epicurean societies, which flourished throughout Greece and the Roman world for several hundred years. They preached egalitarianism, and treated free men, women, and slaves as equals. It is interesting to think of these groups as the original Humanist movement. Unfortunately, they were eventually suppressed and virtually wiped out by the Church after the emperor Constantine converted to Christianity in 313 CE. Christians condemned the Epicureans because of their materialistic views and their emphasis on personal happiness rather than service to God.

## **II. The Renaissance (1300s – 1400s CE)**

The Renaissance began in the mid-fourteenth century in Florence, Italy, and spread throughout Europe over the following century. Until then, Europe had gone through the 1000-year period often called the "dark ages" in which the Catholic Church controlled all aspects of society. The Renaissance (which means "rebirth") was a period of rediscovery of ancient Greek and Roman writings and revival of classical thinking and ideals. Unlike earlier medieval scholars who subjugated all areas of thought to religion, the leaders of the Renaissance began to compartmentalize "secular" thinking from "religious" thinking. Although they didn't reject religion altogether, they relegated it to only one area of life. As Fowler points out, "the very fact that classical Greece and Rome pre-dated the Christian era made it possible to place more emphasis on human potential rather than divine providence, and on secular progression rather than theological determinism" (p. 15).

Instead of promoting humility and the innate sinfulness of humans, these thinkers focused on humans' ability to aspire to dignified heights and shape their own destiny. Artists such as Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci began to focus their art on the human form and secular human concerns rather than purely religious themes. Through the study of human anatomy, their sculpture and painting took on greater realism, capturing human emotion and feeling (as exemplified in the Mona Lisa). Philosophers emphasized the power and potential of the human mind in reason, debate, and analysis. In the universities, there was the rise of the *studia humanitatis*, a curriculum of study that focused on grammar, rhetoric, moral philosophy, poetry, and history, as studied via the classical authors. This was in contrast to the traditional university curriculum of Scholasticism, which was based on the medieval theology of Thomas Aquinas.

I

In sum, this period witnessed the revival of humanistic ideas from the ancient Greeks, along with a renewed sense of self-confidence, exploration, and discovery, leading to growth in commerce, trade, and exploration. The focus was shifting away from divinity to humanity, from religious concerns to secular interests, and humans were being seen as masters of their own fate. However, there were limits to the humanism of this period. The Renaissance thinkers were still essentially religious believers, even though they de-emphasized religion in their world view. They also tended to be very elitist: they were aristocrats and intellectuals who were not very concerned with the lives of ordinary people. They looked down on the common vernacular languages, preferring to write in classical Greek, and they idealized ancient Greek thought and customs. They even snobbishly preferred hand-written manuscripts rather than the less expensive books that were being mass produced on the newly invented printing presses. Thus, their focus was largely on the *past* rather than the present or future.



### **III. The Enlightenment (1650s – late 1700s)**

The period known as the Enlightenment began in Paris with the thinking of a group of philosophers called the “philosophes,” including Voltaire, Montesquieu, Diderot, and Rousseau. As a leader of this movement, Voltaire fought for civil liberties, the right to a fair trial, and freedom of religion, denouncing the hypocrisies and injustices of the French aristocracy and the Roman Catholic Church. He was a proponent of Deism, which is a belief in a sort of “watchmaker God” who created the universe and the laws of nature and set everything in motion, but is no longer involved in the day-to-day running of the world and is largely irrelevant to human affairs. Enlightenment ideas spread from France to other countries of Europe and to America, where they were taken up by thinkers such as David Hume, John Locke, Adam Smith, Immanuel Kant, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson. The constitution of the United States of America was essentially an Enlightenment document.

This period saw the re-emergence of human-centered ideas and renewed optimism about human potential. Unlike the Renaissance, it was based on *science*, rather than ancient Greek and Roman writings. New scientific discoveries were being made, building on the earlier work of people like Galileo and Isaac Newton. This period also represented a more definite break with religion. Writers like Voltaire voiced a more clear-cut opposition to religious superstition, dogma, and rituals. Instead of religion as the basis for knowledge, humans themselves had to find answers by studying nature scientifically. The human mind was seen as capable of finding answers to problems. Some thinkers, such as Voltaire, embraced Deism, whereas others rejected belief in God altogether. The Enlightenment was also less elitist than the Renaissance, as many of its leading thinkers were concerned about social issues such as slavery, criminal justice, democracy, and tolerance.

### **The Short History of Humanism**

The organized movement that we know today as Humanism emerged in the early twentieth century out of several groups and movements originating in the nineteenth century. Prominent among these are the Freethinkers, the Ethical Societies, and the Unitarians.

#### **I. Freethinkers**

The “free thought” movement, which started in Britain, championed the right of all people to think for themselves, free from the constraints of religion. Its roots went back to the 1700s in the Enlightenment ideas of writers like John Locke. By the late nineteenth century, it had become an organized movement made up of many working class as well as middle class members. Its members argued that one’s beliefs should be formed on the basis of science, logic, and reason, rather than religion, authority, tradition, or any other type of dogma. They followed *Clifford's Credo*, named after the British mathematician and philosopher William Clifford, which stated: “*It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.*” They emphasized social morality and responsibility, informed by individual choice and rational thought. They also believed in racial and sexual equality, advocated the abolition of slavery and women’s right to vote, and emphasized the importance of education as a means of achieving these goals. The International Federation of Freethinkers was formed in the late 1800s, and the *Freethinker* magazine, which is still published today, was first issued in Britain in 1881. In the late 1800s there were many Freethought congregations throughout the U.S. and Canada. For example, the Toronto Freethought Association (later renamed the Toronto Secular Society), was founded in 1873. For



about 25 years, this organization also published a Canadian free thought magazine entitled *Secular Thought*.

## **II. Ethical Societies**

The Ethical Societies were another group that emerged in the late 1800s, originally in the United States. Similar to the Freethinkers, they were opposed to dogmatic religious beliefs, but they were also particularly concerned about issues of morality (hence the name “Ethical”). They challenged the claim that only religious people can be moral and sought to live ethical lives based on reason and science rather than belief in the supernatural and life after death.

Felix Adler, who was the son of a Jewish Rabbi, founded the Ethical Culture Movement in New York City in 1876. Later, its name was changed to the American Ethical Union. Members of this organization emphasized the importance of living in accordance with ethical principles, in order to live meaningful and fulfilling lives, and to create a world that is good for all. They sought to support and encourage one another in becoming better people and doing good in the world. They were actively involved in many social causes, including promotion of universal education, adequate housing for the poor, health care, and early childhood education.

Numerous ethical societies were formed throughout the United States, Canada, and Britain. In many ways, this was a sort of non-theistic religion. The congregations functioned much like local churches, with Sunday morning meetings, social outreach activities, and ceremonies such as weddings and funerals. Apparently, there are still some Ethical Society congregations today in several American cities.

## **III. Unitarianism**

Unitarianism also played an important role in the emergence of Humanism as an organized movement. Several of the leading founders of Humanism in the U.S. were Unitarian ministers. Interestingly, the Unitarians in the U.S. were descendants of the Puritans who originally settled in Massachusetts. Although the Puritans are usually known for their religious orthodoxy, rigidity, and intolerance, by 1800 one faction had become very liberal. Their ministers and seminary professors were highly educated and were influenced by the scientific outlook of the Enlightenment and by the study of textual criticism, which was casting doubt on the divine origins of the Bible. The name *Unitarian* comes from their rejection of belief in the deity of Jesus Christ and the Trinitarian view of God. Throughout the nineteenth century, they became increasingly liberal, rejecting a literal interpretation of the Bible, belief in miracles, and other supernatural beliefs. They were quick to accept Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution. (As an interesting side note, Darwin’s maternal grandparents, the Wedgwoods, were Unitarians).

By the early 1900s, the liberal religious views of a number of American Unitarian ministers had led them to doubts about the very existence of God and any sort of supernatural reality. These people began to advocate a religion based on humanism (as they called it), with a focus on human potential rather than divine intervention. They retained the organizational structure of the church, along with religious ideas of spirituality, morality, social action, concern for others, and so on, but without belief in God, life after death, or supernatural entities.

Three of the leading proponents of this humanistic approach to religion are particularly worth mentioning. John H. Dietrich became the minister of the Unitarian church in Minneapolis in 1916. He



was the first person to use the term *Humanism* to refer to this new religious perspective. He became a well-known radio preacher, proclaiming the message of religious humanism to the American public. Curtis W. Reese, a Unitarian minister in Des Moines, Iowa, published a book entitled “Humanism” in 1926. Charles F. Potter left the Unitarian ministry and founded the First Humanist Society of New York City in 1929. Among the members of this society were such luminaries as John Dewey, Will Durant, and Helen Keller. Many other Unitarians were involved in founding local Humanist societies throughout the United States, and in the formation of the American Humanist Association.

In 1933, the first *Humanist Manifesto* was published, setting out the principles of Humanism in 15 theses. This document presented Humanism as a new sort of religion for humanity which, it was hoped, would replace theistic religions and supernatural belief systems and bring harmony and peace to the world. It was signed by a number of Unitarian ministers, as well as some professors of philosophy and theology, and one Reformed Jewish rabbi.

As Humanist views spread through the Unitarian churches, they were strongly opposed by members who still held theistic beliefs, leading to a great deal of controversy and dissent within the denomination. By the middle of the twentieth century, however, this conflict was generally settled, and Humanism became an accepted part of Unitarianism. Today, nearly 50 percent of Unitarian-Universalists still identify themselves as Humanists, and many of the members of Humanist associations in the U.S. and Canada are also members of Unitarian-Universalist congregations.

### **Humanist Organizations Today**

Today there are numerous local and national Humanist organizations in many countries of the world. The International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) was founded in Amsterdam in 1952, with Julian Huxley (the grandson of Thomas Huxley, “Darwin’s bulldog”) as its first president. This is the umbrella organization that oversees Humanism worldwide and has more than 100 member organizations in 40 different countries. It publishes a magazine entitled *International Humanist News*, which can be downloaded for free on the Internet.

The American Humanist Association was founded in 1941, and has local chapters throughout the U.S. It publishes *The Humanist*, a bimonthly magazine. The Center for Inquiry (CFI) is another Humanist organization in the U.S., which was founded in 1991 by Paul Kurtz, a philosopher and author of numerous books. Its headquarters are located in Amherst, NY, just outside of Niagara Falls, where they have an extensive library, offices, a publishing house, and facilities for meetings and conferences. They also publish several magazines, including *Free Inquiry* and *Skeptical Inquirer*.

In Canada, Humanist Canada (formerly the Humanist Association of Canada) was founded in 1968, with Dr. Henry Morgentaler, the well-known advocate of abortion rights, as its first president. Also, in Canada, Canadian Humanist Publications publishes a quarterly magazine called *Humanist Perspectives*. Thriving Humanist organizations exist in many other countries throughout the world, including Britain, Norway, Sweden, the Netherlands, Australia, New Zealand, and India.

With its long past and short history, Humanism is a naturalistic life stance that offers an alternative to religious belief systems. Humanism promotes the value and potential of each individual human, an ethical lifestyle, responsible caring for the natural environment, and joyful celebration of life. We owe a



great deal to the courage and insight of a long line of pioneering thinkers and reformers who have preceded us.

## **Humanist Blessings**

Probably like a lot of other non-believers, I cringe whenever I hear long winded Christian blessings, usually ending with the words, "and Father we ask this in the name of our Lord and savior Jesus Christ." I have since wondered if there is such a thing as a humanist blessing and subsequently learned there are several. Those I found are printed below, plus one I wrote myself. The first was composed by Unitarian Ivan Sexsmith, (now deceased).

We are blessed by the five senses that we may know the world we live in.  
We are blessed by reason that we may begin to understand the realities around us.  
We are blessed with intuition that we may turn into and be a part of life.  
We are blessed with a heart that we may feel what the other senses can only witness.  
We are blessed with free will that we may choose how we live. Let us take a moment to be thankful for the many blessings we share and to renew our pledge to uphold an environment in which the human spirit may grow. Shalom.

A close friend gave me this one.

Bless our hearts that in the breaking of the bread, we may hear the song of the universe, and may it bring us peace.

Here is another, submitted by Jackie Emerson.

For what we are about to receive, let us be truly thankful. And let us be ever mindful of those in need.

Here is mine:

Let us be thankful for the food we are about to receive and for the many blessings we share. And let us renew our pledge to do whatever we can to help bring about a more peaceful and more compassionate world, while being ever mindful of the need to preserve the natural environment we have been privileged to inhabit and enjoy.

So, if you do not want to be caught off guard whenever you may be called upon to give thanks before a meal, and wish to offer a blessing that will be compatible with humanist principles, keep a copy of one of these blessings in your wallet. (DAH)



## Five Humanist of Note

### Mary Wollstonecraft: (1759-1797)

#### Forerunner for Humanism and Women's Rights

*By Adriaan Mak*

Many 18th century thinkers whose ideas opposed the religious/political establishment of their age were labelled atheists; yet, few of them really were. More often, they were "deists" who might believe in the existence of a deity on rational grounds, while rejecting the miraculous, supernatural accounts found in Holy Scriptures. Although Mary Wollstonecraft had misgivings about religion, she was very much more concerned about the present human condition.

Her abusive father had been a tyrant and wife beater, wasting the family wealth, thus forcing his daughters to live in genteel poverty. Wollstonecraft tried being a teacher and a governess. While she proved very capable in those areas, she aspired at age 28 to be a writer.

She had written *Mary: A Fiction* (1788) and presented it to Joseph Johnson, a Unitarian, who became her publisher and advisor. In spite of its subtitle, the book contains much autobiographical material about her youth. She moved to Johnson's neighbourhood and soon became a member of his regular meetings of artists, religious dissenters, and radicals, among whom were Tom Paine, William Blake, Joseph Priestly, and other supporters of the American and French Revolutions, such as journalist William Godwin, the first anarchist philosopher. Johnson had served time in prison on charges of "seditious libel" (expressing criticism of government policies, or the king) after he had distributed a political article containing such criticism written by a fellow Unitarian. Seditious libel, while no longer in effect in British law, is still a criminal offence in Canada.

When Edmund Burke published his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), which contained defences of the monarchy, the aristocracy, and the established (Anglican) church, Wollstonecraft soon responded with *A Vindication of the Rights of Man* (1790), attacking Burke's justifications of an unequal society where only a few thousand wealthy males, of the Anglican persuasion, had the right to vote, and where privilege was based on tradition, custom, and the passivity of women. Instead, Wollstonecraft argued for secular, republican virtues, and equal rights, invoking an emerging middle-class ideology in opposition to what she viewed as vice-ridden aristocratic principles.

Her book sold out quickly because it was written by a female. Critics soon derided it as being based on female emotion rather than sound reason. Wollstonecraft answered their critiques with a work that firmly reinforced her essential humanism, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792). In a famous quotation from this work she stated: "[Any] being cannot be termed rational or virtuous, who obeys any authority, but that of reason."

What followed next in Wollstonecraft's life is both bitterly ironic and humanly tragic. In spite of all that she knew so well from history and had experienced as a young girl with a child- and wife-beating father, she fell several times too deeply, romantically in love, even well into her thirties. One lover (Gilbert Imlay) was a real "cad". No modern expression such as "louse" or "rat" will do. After she gave birth to their child, she discovered that he had been seeing other mistresses. After this detection Imlay deserted both Mary and



their new-born infant, Fanny. Feeling very betrayed, she tried to commit suicide twice by overdosing with an opiate and in 1795 by jumping into the Thames at night. This time she was rescued by mere chance.\*

Nevertheless, in 1796 she started another romantic relationship, fortunately with a man she had known well, an author sympathetic to her ideas, the aforementioned William Godwin. Mary died a year later after severe difficulties resulting from childbirth. The child, also named Mary Wollstonecraft, survived, and became the author of *Frankenstein* and the live-in partner of the poet Percy Shelley. Although both Mary and Godwin had opposed the laws about matrimony, Godwin did arrange a secret marriage in order to protect the legal rights of the as yet unborn child. He also adopted her first child, Fanny.

Because of her opinions and lifestyle, she was not mentioned by later fighters for women's rights from Victorian times on, until finally she was recognized by a wave of modern feminism beginning in the 1960's.

\* These experiences resulted in her last attempt at fiction. Although it was left unfinished, Godwin had it published posthumously: *Maria: The Wrongs of Woman*.

Source: Emily Sunstein, *A Different Face: The Life of Mary Wollstonecraft* (1975)

Adriaan Mak (1931-2016) was an educator, musician, an iconoclast, and consummate humanist. Born in Holland, he came to Canada in 1956 and later obtained an honours BA. He taught both public and high schools in Hamilton Ontario teaching English literature and music. He spent his retirement years in London Ontario. He was a member of HALA and contributor to *The Enlightenment* on various subjects.

### **Percy Bysshe Shelley – Poet and Humanist**

Percy Bysshe Shelley was born into a noble English family in 1792. His father, Sir Timothy Shelley, was a Whig Member of Parliament. Very early in his life Shelley decried the enslavement of the mind by church, state, law, custom and tradition. He inveighed against priests, kings, soldiers, magistrates and others wielders of institutional authority. He attended the famous Eton Boarding School where he became known as “Shelley the Atheist,” During his freshman year at Oxford in 1811, he and his friend Thomas Hogg were expelled for “contumacious conduct” after they publishing a pamphlet entitled *The Necessity of Atheism*, and after they declined to recant their wicked views. In 1813 he published *Queen Mab*, a stinging critique of Christianity.



**Percy Bysshe Shelley**

In 1814 Shelley's notoriety mushroomed when he abandoned his first wife Harriet Westbrook and their two children to elope with Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, whom he married two years later after Harriet committed suicide. Mary was the daughter of the famous early feminist Mary Wollstonecraft. Mary Shelley is of course famous herself as the author of *Frankenstein* – or *The Modern Prometheus*, which was published in 1818 when she was just 21.

In his lifetime Shelley's poetry was seldom praised, but he is now ensconced in the pantheon of great English poets. His “Ode to the West Wind,” “To a Skylark,” “The Cloud,” “Prometheus Unbound,” and many other



works are entrenched in anthologies of literature and studied throughout the world. He had a facility for lyricism. No one else has come nearer to capturing in words the inexpressible surgings of human emotion. Whatever his emotion – whether joy, sorrow, desire or regret – he clothed it in vibrating, persistent, haunting overtones of song.

Shelley's tracts on religion aren't sensational or bombastic. They are erudite disquisitions tailored to sophisticated minds. They are grounded in his voluminous knowledge of philosophy, history, languages, literature, logic and science. With Locke and Hume, he held that belief in God derives from three sources: sensory experience, inferences therefrom and testimony. None of these confirms the existence of a creator. God was the "personification of human ideals" – the enduring quest for beauty, truth, love, freedom, wisdom and joy. God was also the universe or the totality of natural phenomena. Shelley was indeed the consummate humanist. Tragically and sadly he drowned in a sailing accident in 1822 off the coast of Italy at the young age of 29. (Source: An article on Shelley by Gary Sloan in the October/November 2008 Free Inquiry magazine.) The last stanza of Shelley's poem *The Cloud*, describing the water cycle in picturesque poetic language is printed below.

### **The Cloud**

*I am the daughter of Earth and Water,  
And the nursling of the Sky;  
I pass through the pores of the ocean and shores;  
I change, but I cannot die.  
For after the rain when with never a stain  
The pavilion of Heaven is bare,  
And the winds and sunbeams with their convex gleams  
Build up the blue dome of air,  
I silently laugh at my own cenotaph,  
And out of the caverns of rain  
Like a child from the womb, like a ghost from the tomb,  
I arise and unbuild it again.*

### **Simone de Beauvoir - French Philosopher and Author**

Many books have been written charting the historical progression of philosophers from the pre-Socratics to those of our modern era. With very few exceptions, most of these philosophers have been male. Only two females seem to be mentioned consistently, Simone de Beauvoir and Hannah Arendt. This article centers on the extraordinary life of Simone de Beauvoir, leaving Hannah Arendt for another time.

Simone was born in Paris in 1908. She graduated from the Sorbonne in 1929 along with Jean-Paul Sartre, who became her frequent companion for the rest of her life. At age 21 she became the youngest student ever to pass the aggregation examination in philosophy. She then went on to become one of the most preeminent French existential philosophers and writers, working along side other famous existentialists including Sartre, Camus and Merleau-Ponty.



As a child de Beauvoir was deeply religious as a result of her education and her mother's training, but at the age of 14 she had a crisis of faith and decided definitively that there was no God. She remained an atheist until her death at the age of 78.



**Simone de Beauvoir**

Her most famous and influential work, *The Second Sex*, heralded a feminist revolution and remains to this day a central text in the investigation of women's oppression and liberation. She argues that women have historically been considered deviant and abnormal. She asserts that women are as capable as men, and thus can choose to elevate themselves, moving beyond the 'immanence' to which they were previously resigned, and reaching 'transcendence,' a position in which one takes responsibility for oneself in the world where one chooses one's freedom. de Beauvoir did not think that women's freedom lay simply in attacking men. Women's freedom can ultimately only be found through their capacity for individuality. Groups dedicated to the emancipation of women should concentrate on removing those institutions which restrict women's freedom.

At the end of World War II, Beauvoir and Sartre edited *Les Temps Modernes*, a political journal that she used to promote her work and explore ideas on a small scale before fashioning essays and her numerous books. At the time of her death in 1986, she was recognized as one of the most powerful and influential philosophers and female intellectuals of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Richard Dawkins – Evolutionary Biologists, Ethnologist and Author**

Richard Dawkins DSC, FRS, FRSL was born on March 26<sup>th</sup>, 1941 in Nairobi Kenya. He is a humanist, sceptic, and as a commentator on science, religion and politics, is among the world's best-known public intellectuals, sometimes referred to as Darwin's rottweiler. Dawkins is probably best known for his popularization of the gene-centered view of evolution — a view most clearly set out in his books *The Selfish Gene* (1976) and *The Extended Phenotype* (1982). As an ethnologist, interested in animal behavior and its relation to natural selection, he advocates the idea that the gene is the principle unit of selection in evolution.



**Richard Dawkins**

Dawkins coined the term meme (analogous to the gene) to describe how Darwinian principles might be extended to explain the spread of ideas and cultural phenomenon, which spawned the theory of memetics. He is an established critic of creationism, describing it as a "preposterous, mind-shrinking falsehood." His book *The Blind Watchmaker* is a critique of the argument from design, and his other popular science works touch on the topic. He generally refuses to debate with creationists because doing so would give them the "oxygen of respectability" that they want.

Dawkins continues to be a prominent figure in contemporary public debate on issues relating to science and religion. He sees education and conscious raising as the primary tools in opposing what he considers to be religious dogma. Following the September 11, 2001 attacks, when he was asked how the world might have



changed, he responded: Many of us saw religion as harmless nonsense. Beliefs might lack all supporting evidence, but we thought if people need a crutch for consolation, where's the harm? September 11<sup>th</sup> changed all that. Revealed faith is not harmless nonsense, it can be lethally dangerous nonsense. Dangerous because it gives people unshakable confidence into their own righteousness. Dangerous because it gives them false courage to kill themselves, which automatically removes normal barriers to killing others. Dangerous because it teaches enmity to others labeled only by a difference of inherited tradition. And dangerous because we have all bought into a weird respect which uniquely protects religion from normal criticism. Let's now stop being so damned respectful!

Richard Dawkins has published eight books as well as many essays and documentaries. His latest book, *The God Delusion*, appeared in September 2006. (DAH).

### **Christopher Hitchens (1949-2011) Author, Journalist and Humanist**

Christopher Eric Hitchens, one of the world's best-known antitheists, was the first-born son of Eric and Yvonne Hitchens. Eric was a Commander in the Royal Navy and Yvonne was a Wren in the same Service. Christopher attended various private boarding schools in England and later he attended Balliol College at Oxford where he graduated with a "third class degree." He married his first wife, Greek Cypriot Eleni Meleagrou, in 1981. They have two children, Alexander and Sophia. In 1989 he married American Carol Blue and they have one daughter, Antonia. Though Hitchens retained his British citizenship he became an American citizen on the steps of the Jefferson Memorial on April 13<sup>th</sup> 2007, his 58<sup>th</sup> birthday. He died on December 15<sup>th</sup> 2011 from pneumonia, a complication of cancer of the esophagus.



**Christopher Hitchens**

Hitchens described himself as a believer in the philosophical values of the Enlightenment. He was an admirer of George Orwell, Thomas Payne and Thomas Jefferson. His Journalist career began in England in 1970 where he worked for various publications including the *International Socialism* magazine, the *London Times Higher Education Supplement*, and the *New Statesman* where he acquired a reputation as a fierce left-winger, aggressively attacking the Vietnam War and the Roman Catholic Church. In 1981 he moved to the United States where he wrote for *The Nation* penning vociferous critiques of American foreign policy. He became a contributing editor of *Vanity Fair* in 1992. He also wrote for *The Atlantic*, *Free Inquiry*, and *Slate* among others. He worked as a foreign correspondent in various countries including Cyprus, Chad, Uganda, Darfur and Iraq. In total his work took him to over sixty countries.

During his career Hitchens authored thirteen books, four pamphlets, and numerous essays. One hundred and seven of his essays are contained in his last book *Arguably*, published in 2011 not long before he died. Of special interest to humanists is his 2007 book *the Portable Atheist*, an anthology documenting the works of forty-seven humanistic thinkers from Lucretius to Ayaan Hirsi Ali. Probably his best known book is *God Is Not Great – How Religion Poisons Everything*. The following paragraph sums up part of the message of this book.



*“Above all we are in need of a renewed Enlightenment, which will base itself on the proposition that the proper study of mankind is man and woman. This Enlightenment will not need to depend, like its predecessors, on the heroic breakthroughs of a few gifted and exceptionally gifted people. It is within the compass of the average person. The study of literature and poetry, both for its own sake and for the ethical questions with which it deals, can now easily depose the scrutiny of sacred texts that have been found to be corrupt and confected. The pursuit of unfettered scientific inquiry, and the availability of new findings to masses of people by electronic means, will revolutionize our concepts of research and development. Very importantly, the divorce between the sexual life and fear, and the sexual life and disease, and sexual life and tyranny, can now at last be attempted, on the sole condition that we banish all religions from the discourse. And all this and more is, for the first time in our history, within the reach if not the grasp of everyone.”*

With all the problems facing us in the world today, it would seem that Hitchens is overly optimistic about beneficial changes occurring in our societies in the near future, but I believe he is absolutely right in claiming that these problems will be easier to solve if religions are out of the picture.

In order to get a real understanding of Hitchens the man it is necessary to read his book *Hitch 22, a Memoir*, published in 2010. In this volume he chronicles his life with anecdotes about his parents, his younger brother Peter, his education, his close friends Martin Amis, James Fenton, Salman Rushdie and others. Also his many experiences in foreign countries, why he approved of the war in Iraq, how he became an (Anglo) American, his metamorphosis concerning his political views, his debates on atheism and religion, the Jewish/Palestinian problem, (he learned later in life that he was partly Jewish), his love of wine and whiskey, and a host of other things.

Regarding his love of the grape and grain, in 2003 he wrote that his daily intake of alcohol was enough “to kill or stun the average mule,” noting that many great writers, “did some of their finest work when blotto, smashed, polluted, shitfaced, squiffy, whiffled or three sheets to the wind.” British politician George Galloway called Hitchens “a drink-sodden ex-Trotskyist popinjay,” to which Hitchens replied, “Yes, I am an ex-Trotskyist, a popinjay (a target for arrows and shots) but that I cannot hold a drink, here I must protest.”

Hitchens is now identified as a champion of the “New Atheism” movement, describing himself as an antitheist, someone who is “relieved that there is no evidence for the assertion of god.” It is truly regrettable that this great humanist, one of the most prolific wordsmiths of our time, passed away at the young age of sixty-two. His friend, and fellow antitheist Richard Dawkins, lamented his passing with these words, “I think he was one of the greatest orators of all time. He was a polymath, a wit, immensely knowledgeable, and a valient fighter against all tyrants including imaginary and supernatural ones.”

Christopher Hitchens requested that his body be donated to science and that there be no funeral. (DAH).

## **The Human in Humanism**

*By Dr. Rod A. Martin*

*This is the third in a planned series of talks loosely based on the book “Humanism: Beliefs and Practices” by Jeanane Fowler. It was presented at the meeting of the Humanist Association of London and Area on July 14, 2010.*



As the name suggests, the focus of Humanism is the human being. Indeed, Humanism is all about what it means to be human, and it particularly emphasizes the value of being *fully* human and reaching one's full potential, both for the individual and for society as a whole.

### **The Christian View of Human Beings**

The way we view the human being profoundly influences how we feel about ourselves and other people, how we view our relationship to the rest of nature, and how we live our lives. We can contrast the Humanist view of humans with that of Christianity. In the Genesis story, God creates Adam and Eve out of pieces of earth, and breathes into them the breath of life. This creation narrative gives rise to a *dualistic* view, which sees humans as composed of two distinct essences or substances: a physical body (from the dust of the earth), and a soul or spirit (the divine breath of life). The soul is part of the supernatural realm, existing outside the natural world, and having an eternal existence. In contrast, the physical body is less enduring and less important. This dualistic Christian view was also influenced by the ideas of the ancient Greek philosopher Plato, and was further reinforced by the writings of the seventeenth century French philosopher Rene Descartes.

- Christianity focuses on the spiritual domain, which is seen as more real and enduring than the natural realm. In the Christian view, humans are separate from the rest of nature. God gives them dominion over the earth and all other living things, thereby setting them apart from the rest of creation. According to the Christian doctrine of original sin, humans, despite their special place in nature, are also fundamentally sinful and depraved. They are incapable of saving themselves or achieving self-improvement, and are in need of divine salvation. This is reflected in the words of the well-known hymn, "amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me."

In Christianity, then, the purpose of life is to have faith, live a good life in obedience to God, and eventually go on to a blissful eternity in paradise after death. This present life is only an ephemeral prologue to one's eternal existence in heaven.

### **The Humanist View: Naturalism rather than Supernaturalism**

All of this is alien to the Humanist perspective. The Humanist view is based on scientific discovery rather than divine revelation. Unlike religious beliefs, Humanist ideas are not static, written down forever in an ancient book, but instead undergo a constant process of development as our understanding of humans grows through scientific progress in biology, neuroscience, psychology, and so on.

In the Humanist view, the natural universe is all that exists. Humans are a product of millions of years of evolution, which is certainly an extraordinarily amazing process, but one that is not guided by an intelligent being. This means that we are fundamentally part of nature, inextricably entwined within the "interdependent web of all existence." Our physical bodies are all that we are: there is no such thing as a soul, spirit, or other supernatural entity, and no reason to expect a life after death. When our bodies die, we no longer exist, except in the memories of others. The only life we have is here on earth: what we do with our life is up to us alone. We are not ultimately responsible to a god, or to some other power, but only to ourselves.



Humanism sees life as very precious. As Jeanane Fowler (in *Humanism: Beliefs and Practices*) states, “the atoms of which we are composed exist in combinations only for the brief span of life that we have. When we die, those atoms are recycled for use in another form, and then in countless other forms in the evolutionary process. We are, temporarily, of the stuff of the universe.” This is a very positive view of human nature. Rather than being sinful, guilty wretches, we can hold our head high and reach for the stars. We don’t need something outside ourselves to make sense of our lives or to give ourselves value. We have inherent dignity and worth, and we can have respect for ourselves and for others.

### **Brain and Mind**

The Humanist view of human nature is one of *monism* rather than dualism. Instead of positing a soul that can exist apart from the body, monism states that our bodies are all that we are. Our thoughts, emotions, desires, hopes, dreams, and aspirations – our very self-identity – are all based on complex electrochemical processes going on in our brain. As I write these words, there are millions of neurons sending signals to one another in various parts of my brain, calling up memories, carrying out logical computations, choosing appropriate words, manipulating muscles of my hands as they type. As you read these words, there are similar biological processes going on in your brain, underlying your comprehension.

Nonetheless, saying that our minds are dependent on biological processes in the brain does not in any way diminish the amazing complexity and potential of human consciousness. As a result of our evolutionary history, humans have developed a capacity for conscious thought, self-awareness, creativity, problem-solving, and language that far surpass the abilities of other animal species. We are able to learn from our own experiences and from those of others. We are able to conceive of alternative futures, imagine things as they might be, consider the consequences of various courses of action, and make decisions based on these cognitive processes. Through language, we are able to communicate our thoughts and feelings to others in exquisite detail, to understand one another’s point of view, and enter into each other’s rational processes.

All of this means that humans are not simply helpless automata controlled by our innate biological inheritance or by our physical and social environments. Rather, we have the capacity to grow and change, to find creative solutions to problems, and to choose how we will live our lives.

### **Human Potential**

The Humanist emphasis on freedom of will leads to a strong focus on the human potential for self-determination and self-assertion. Every one of us is unique; we each have certain traits, abilities, interests, and values. Humanism emphasizes the possibility – and indeed the *necessity* – of developing these abilities and traits, to enrich our own lives and the lives of others around us. Of course, there are limits to what any one of us can do. Millions of years of natural selection have made us into a particular kind of animal with a particular human nature. To some degree, our individual personalities are influenced by the genes we have inherited, and we are also constrained to some extent by our personal life circumstances.

Despite these limitations, however, the Humanist perspective emphasizes the *potential for human growth*, self-actualization, and self-fulfillment. The Humanist philosopher Paul Kurtz (in *The Courage to Become*) states:



The human species differs qualitatively from other species on this planet, which seek primarily to satisfy their instinctive needs... For we are not simply passive products of natural forces, responding to impulses within our biological being, but rather interactive participants in the world about us... We differ from [other species] because we are builders of culture. As such, we enter into the natural, sociocultural environment, and we constantly endeavor to change it.

Thus, it is an inherent characteristic of human nature to be creative, to seek new and better ways of doing things, to reinvent ourselves. This is true at the societal level, with the constant development of new forms of architecture, agriculture, engineering, governments, clothing, food, art, music, and so on. It is also true at the individual level, as people strive to improve their personal lives, gain an education, develop their talents and skills, nurture their children, gain wisdom, overcome bad habits, and so forth.

### **Existential Choices**

This emphasis on human self-determination means that Humanism is inherently an *existentialist* approach to human life. There is no manual for life, no clear-cut roadmap for us to follow, no predetermined way for humans to live, either as individuals or as a species. As Jean-Paul Sartre put it (in the rather sexist language of his time), “man is condemned to invent man.” Each one of us is faced with an existential choice: we must choose to live our lives in the way that seems best for us, finding our own way through life. Rather than seeing ourselves as being determined and controlled by our genes, or our family history, or our present life circumstances, or the powerful others whose voices we carry around in our heads, we have the capacity to make a voluntary choice to take some measure of control over the direction of our lives. We will never achieve perfection, but we can continue to strive for growth and self-improvement.

Thus, human life is always one of *becoming*, always in transition, never a finished product. Ronald Fletcher (in *A Definition of Humanism*), put it this way:

The making of character, the seeking of excellence in qualities of character, is thus a creative activity, both personal and social, of the utmost worth to the Humanist. Here ... the quest for truth and value is not only a matter of *knowing* but a matter of *becoming*, a matter of self creation.

I think this view of human beings is a very exciting one. It is an optimistic perspective, seeing individuals as having the potential to shape their own lives. At the same time, though, it can also be a daunting outlook, because it carries with it a sense of personal responsibility. To face this responsibility requires *courage* – what Paul Kurtz calls “the courage to become.” Kurtz describes this type of courage as a virtue, and he relates it to creativity. He states, “the stimulus that incites all such creative actions is the affirmative expression of the human spirit. It is the will to live that is the spring of motivation, the spark of inventiveness; and it is the drive to achieve our goals, whatever they are, that is essential.”

### **A Social Animal**

So far, I have been focusing on humans as individuals. It is extremely important to recognize also that humans are fundamentally a social animal, like most other primates, and mammals in general. Throughout our evolutionary history, we lived in groups of individuals who were dependent on one another for protection and survival. Because of our large brains, we are born prematurely, long before we are capable of caring for ourselves. We are therefore completely dependent on our parents and other caretakers for an extended period of early development. A wealth of research has shown that the quality of the attachment



bond between parents and children has an important effect on later social and emotional development. Not just in childhood, but throughout our lives we continue to need close, loving relationships with others in order to thrive. There is an abundance of research demonstrating the importance of close, stable relationships for both physical and psychological health and well-being.

Thus, a Humanist view of humans focuses not just on the individual in isolation, but on the individual in relationship to others. Part of our striving for self-actualization and growth also involves working towards better relationships with other people, our family members and friends, those with whom we work, and the broader community. Self-determination also involves learning to communicate effectively, to develop empathy and understanding, to show caring and compassion, to share our joys and sorrows with one another, and to encourage others in their own pursuit of growth and self-development.

Beyond our immediate relationships, Humanism also means strengthening bonds with the broader society around us, treating others with respect, behaving in an ethical way, and seeking to contribute to the improvement of society as a whole. It is important for Humanist associations such as ours to provide for the social as well as intellectual needs of members, offering a caring, nurturing community that people can belong to and find support in. In addition, we need to encourage our members to become engaged in social action to work for the improvement of society.

## **Spirituality**

Spirituality is a concept that seems foreign to Humanism. Indeed, many Humanists are understandably uncomfortable with this concept, because it has always been so closely tied with religion. Also, the very word “spirituality” seems to imply a dualistic view of humans which, as I have discussed, is foreign to Humanist thought. However, I would argue that what is called “spirituality” is a valuable and important aspect of human experience. Of course, we need to view it as something that is natural rather than supernatural. Although it has been usurped by religion in the past, spirituality is something that Humanists can and should reclaim for themselves.

It would help if we had a different word to describe a naturalistic form of “spirituality,” which would not have these religious and dualistic connotations. One possible alternative is “transcendence,” described by psychologists Martin Seligman and Christopher Peterson as “that which reminds us of how tiny we are but that simultaneously lifts us out of a sense of ... insignificance.” Abraham Maslow, a Humanist psychologist, coined the term “peak experience” to refer to the kinds of experiences that some might call “spiritual.” Others like to use the expression “awe and wonder.” In my view, however, none of these terms capture the full meaning of the concept.

Regardless of the word we use, part of what I am talking about involves feelings of self-transcendence that occur at certain times, such as when we contemplate a beautiful mountain scene, or the infinity of space when gazing at the night stars, or the deep joy of intimacy in a loving relationship, or the feeling of wonder at the birth of a child. These feelings sometimes arise while listening to stirring music or admiring a beautiful painting. They involve a sense of awe, wonder, and mystery in response to the universe. We might even use terms like “sacredness” and “reverence” to describe such feelings.

But spirituality goes beyond these occasional experiences, and can be viewed as a way of life, or a *life-stance*. It involves going about our daily lives with a sense of gratitude and joyfulness at being alive; relating to



others in an ethical, respectful, compassionate way; maintaining a sense of responsibility toward the environment based on a deep awareness of our connectedness to all of nature. This sort of attitude toward life helps to give it a depth of meaning and value.

Spirituality has to do with emotion and action, as well as reason. Thus, while being based on science, the Humanist view of humanity is not cold, dispassionate, and objective. Some people view science as the very antithesis of spirituality, thinking that greater scientific knowledge robs the universe of its mystery, wonder, and sacredness. On the contrary, I would argue that the more we understand the incredibly complex mechanisms of nature, the more amazing and awe-inspiring it becomes. This view is expressed by the scientist Richard Dawkins, who wrote the book *The God Delusion* and is certainly not known as a friend of religion, when he says:

All the great religions have a place for awe, for ecstatic transport at the wonder and beauty of creation. And it's exactly this feeling of spine-shivering, breath-catching awe – almost worship – this flooding of the chest with ecstatic wonder, that modern science can provide. And it does so beyond the wildest dreams of saints and mystics.

Writing about this same sense of wonder and awe that comes from scientific discovery, Albert Einstein said, "The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. ... The person to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead.... This feeling is at the center of true religiousness. In this sense, and in this sense only, I belong to the ranks of the devoutly religious."

Many people in our society today seem to be hungering for some spiritual dimension to their life, seeking a sense of transcendence and feelings of purpose and meaning. Indeed, many people who are not very religious in the traditional sense still describe themselves as spiritual. These people are often drawn to various kinds of new age beliefs, and they typically do not see Humanism as having anything to offer in this regard. I think there has been an unfortunate failure on the part of Humanists over the years to offer a compelling vision of how the Humanist perspective can fulfill these deep-felt human needs. All too often, Humanists are seen as coldly rational and anti-religious, contemptuous of anything that smacks of feeling, reverence, or mysticism. I think it is important for us as Humanists to make room for this dimension of transcendence in our understanding of humanity, and to find ways of cultivating and communicating it. Although we reject the supernatural beliefs of religion, we must not close our minds to the positive and rich experiences of transcendence and community provided by religion at its best.

## **Conclusion**

Humanism offers a well-rounded view of human nature. Humans are a *biological* animal, the product of millions of years of evolution, along with countless other species in this natural world. At the same time, humans are a *conscious, self-aware, thinking, creative* animal. We have the ability to learn, to understand the world and ourselves, and to creatively solve problems. We have the ability to choose how to live our lives, and to strive to achieve our full potential, as individuals and as a species. We are also a *social* animal, with a need for community, culture, meaningful relationships, and connectedness to others. Finally, we are a "*spiritual*" animal (although I use that word with reservation because of its dualistic and supernatural connotations), with a need for meaning, purpose, and self-transcendence.



# **Faith, Reason, and Atheism**

*By Dr. Rod A. Martin*

*This is the fourth in a series of talks loosely based on the book “Humanism: Beliefs and Practices” by Jeanane Fowler. It was presented at the meeting of the Humanist Association of London and Area on January 11, 2012.*

As stated on the Humanist Canada website, “Humanism is a deity-free worldview that affirms our ability to lead ethical and meaningful lives without reliance upon a belief in the supernatural.” By rejecting belief in the supernatural, Humanists also reject the notion of gods or other supernatural entities. Thus, a fundamental assumption of Humanism is atheism, or at least agnosticism. What is an atheist? The simple answer is: someone who doesn’t believe in God. However, this simple definition bears further reflection. I’d like to briefly explore the concept of “God,” and what it means to “believe.”

## **The Concept of God**

It’s important to recognize that there are many different conceptions of God, and some of them are less believable than others. Any rational argument that we might make against belief in a god may apply to some of these conceptions but not others. Albert Einstein, when asked if he believed in God, would reply, “Tell me first what you mean by God, and I’ll tell you whether or not I believe in it.” Two people might be having a heated debate about the existence of God, each strenuously opposing the other’s arguments with further counter-arguments. However, it’s possible that they’re not actually talking about the same thing. The god that the atheist doesn’t believe in may be quite different from the god the believer does believe in. So in our discussions with believers, it’s important to clarify what we’re talking about.

There are many gods that no one believes in today, such as Zeus, Apollo, Aphrodite, Thor, and Woden. At one time there were many people for whom each of these gods was very real and important in their lives, much like the gods of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam today. Ironically, the early Christians were condemned for being atheists themselves, because they didn’t believe in the many gods of the Greeks and Romans. If a Christian says, “How can you be an atheist?” one reasonable response is, “Well, you’re an atheist yourself! There are many gods that you don’t believe in either. I just don’t believe in one more god than you!”

Obviously, where we have our real difference with the Christian is over the God of the Bible. Even there, however, it’s important to recognize that there actually isn’t just one god of the Bible. Several very different conceptions of God are seen in different parts of the Bible, as beliefs evolved while this book was written over more than 1000 years. Early in the Old Testament, we meet Yahweh, a tribal war god of the Israelites, who is very similar to the local gods of many other tribes living in the region. Richard Dawkins describes this early conception of God as:

... arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.

By the end of the New Testament, however, God has evolved into something quite different, a universal god of love, grace, and mercy (although he is still a rather sexist and homophobic male figure).



It's also important to recognize that the "god" concept has continued to evolve over the years since the Bible was written. Particularly in the past century, there has been a major shift among liberal or "progressive" Christians. Many honest, thoughtful Christian theologians have grappled with the issues and arguments that have led many of us to become atheists or agnostics. They have acknowledged that the old ideas about God are incompatible with modern science and ethics, and they have modified their view of God accordingly. For example, John Shelby Spong, a well-known Anglican bishop in the United States, has written a number of best-selling books (e.g., *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism*) in which he rejects many traditional Christian beliefs. He criticizes much of the Bible and the concepts of God portrayed in it, and sees it as a product of human thinking that is full of errors, primitive ideas, and outmoded ethical standards. He would no doubt agree with most of the arguments against God made by people like Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens, because he also doesn't believe in the god that they reject. Nonetheless, he still apparently believes in some sort of concept of god, which he defines in very vague, metaphorical terms, such as "the ground of all being," or "ultimate concern." It's not at all clear, though, what he really means by this.

For most Humanists, the crucial issue is whether you believe in something supernatural, or outside of nature. Nature is everything that is understandable through science and can be potentially explained by natural laws without having to resort to explanations involving divine intervention. I say "potentially" because there are, of course, many things that science doesn't yet understand but which will presumably become clearer with further research. The supernatural, in contrast, refers to some sort of higher dimension of existence, or divine energies or miraculous events, that cannot be explained scientifically, even in principle. Another way of putting this is the distinction between monism and dualism. Monism is a view of the entire universe as all one continuous thing, which is ultimately based on the natural laws of physics and chemistry. Dualism is the belief that there is something more than physical reality, which can't be known through empirical science. The fundamental problem with this sort of dualistic belief is that, because the supernatural domain can't be known scientifically, by definition, there is no objective way of knowing it at all, and therefore it can only be "known" through subjective experiences or feelings, the pronouncements of religious gurus, ancient scriptures, etc. Without any objective standard for evaluating such concepts, believers open themselves up to all kinds of potentially ludicrous ideas that can't be verified and can only be taken on faith.

The point where I would part company with someone like Bishop Spong, therefore, is when he begins talking about something that is beyond nature, something supernatural. However, it's very hard to know whether Spong's conception of God actually involves the supernatural, or if "god" is just a word he uses to refer to something within nature. John Dewey, a well-known Humanist philosopher and educator who was one of the signers of the first Humanist Manifesto in 1933, wrote a book called *A Common Faith*, in which he argued for an approach to Humanism as a purely naturalistic religion. He advocated that we continue to use the word "god," but that we redefine it to describe the things we value most in human nature, such as love, truth, beauty, and honesty. However, this idea never caught on, as it was rejected by believers and Humanists alike. Using the word "god" in this way was seen (correctly, in my view) as too confusing and potentially misleading, and Dewey himself later backtracked on this idea.

However, I suspect that many liberal or progressive Christians may actually have adopted Dewey's idea without acknowledging it. For example, when Bishop Spong talks about God, he may very well be using the concept in this purely naturalistic way. If so, then in my view he is actually a Humanist. The only thing we disagree about is semantics: whether or not religious language ("god-talk") should be used to describe what



are really naturalistic concepts. We can have a disagreement about that, but this is quite a different disagreement than the one about the existence of a supernatural god. In any event, it's obviously very important that we clearly define what it is that we're arguing about.

### **Faith/Belief versus Knowledge**

It's also important for us to recognize that whether or not a god exists is a matter of faith or belief, not knowledge. I'm personally convinced that the evidence against the existence of God is much stronger than the evidence for his existence, and I'm quite sure of my position, but I still need to acknowledge that it's a matter of belief rather than knowledge.

Immanuel Kant, in his book *Critique of Pure Reason*, discussed the distinction between opinion, belief, and knowledge. There are some things that we have opinions about, some things that we believe, and other things that we know. An opinion is an idea for which there is no strong objective evidence, and limited subjective confidence or conviction. You might have the opinion that the Toronto Maple Leafs will win the Stanley Cup this year, but there's not a lot of evidence for this and you're not likely to bet a lot of money on it. A belief is an idea for which the objective evidence remains inconclusive, but there is much stronger subjective confidence. You might believe that a particular political party has the best policies, and you're so convinced about this – even though it can't be proved conclusively – that you're willing to devote your energies to this cause. Finally, knowledge is when subjective confidence is accompanied by conclusive objective evidence through direct sensory experience or scientific research. You may know what you ate for breakfast today, but no one really knows for sure whether or not God exists.

For some reason, we humans have a tendency to form very strong beliefs accompanied by a subjective sense of certainty, even in the absence of sure objective evidence. There's likely some evolutionary reason for this. This means that our beliefs – for theists and atheists alike – are only partly based on objective evidence, reason, and logic. There are also many non-rational, personal, and emotional reasons why we either believe or don't believe in God. The emotional aspect of our beliefs often becomes very evident whenever people get into an argument about religion, especially on the Internet, where the normal rules of politeness are harder to maintain. What starts out as a polite, rational debate can very quickly deteriorate into angry name-calling, irrational defensiveness, and foul language. The reason for this is that there's a lot of emotion underlying each person's point of view, and this is just as true of the atheists as the believers. If it was purely a matter of logic, reason, and evidence, there would be a cool, thoughtful discussion without so much defensiveness, anger, and name-calling.

Why am I an atheist? In part, it's because of objective scientific evidence and rational arguments that have convinced me to abandon my earlier belief in the existence of God. This is a very important part of the reason. But if I'm honest with myself, there are also no doubt some non-rational reasons for being an atheist. Atheism feels good; there's a sense of liberation in it. As an atheist, you're not under the thumb of authoritarian priests; you're able to think for yourself, to be in control of your own life. Some of these non-rational reasons likely have their origins in early life experiences that have given us negative conditioned responses to religion. Some of us may have memories of aversive experiences with religion such as guilt induction, punitive treatment, emotional abuse, and even sexual abuse. For some of us, feelings about religious beliefs may partly have to do with the way we were treated by our parents, which became associated with religion in our minds. Much of this is likely outside of our conscious awareness. Of course,



there's no one pattern for everyone; we each have our own personal, subjective, experiential reasons for not believing in God.

The same is true for those who believe in God. They have positive feelings associated with their beliefs. Their faith may give them a profound sense of reassurance and confidence in times of trouble and adversity. Why are believers so antagonistic toward atheists? Why do people like Bishop Spong still feel the need to cling to the concept of God? Why don't they just accept science as their basis for living, and leave concepts of God and the supernatural behind? A big part of the reason is that they conceive of a purely science-based world as a very cold, hostile, unwelcoming place; a place without soul, without compassion, ethics, warmth, and feeling; a place they wouldn't want to live in. For them, the concept of God brings a dimension of sacredness to life. If God created the natural world, then it is worthy of our respect and care. If God created us, then our lives and relationships can take on a sacred meaning. They are threatened by atheism because they assume that it takes the joy, love, meaning, and mystery out of life.

This is one of the points where I think believers are mistaken. Rejection of God does not necessarily mean the loss of goodness, morality, meaning, love, and a sense of the sacredness of life. These are all things that I certainly value too, along with my fellow Humanists. None of us want our lives to be cold and meaningless, devoid of caring, value, mystery, and joy. This is where Humanism moves beyond atheism. Humanism begins with the rejection of belief in God, but it is much more than that. I see Humanism as a very positive, life-affirming, joyful, compassionate response to life and the universe. As Humanists, we are thrilled by the wonder and mystery of life, evolution, and the human experience. If there is no God, then we have all the more reason to value the world we live in, to cherish our lives and our relationships with one another. If there is no life after death, then all the more reason to find joy and beauty and meaning in our lives, to do all we can to make the world a better place for everyone.

In our dialogue with believers, I think it's important not only to try to give rational arguments and logical evidence against the existence of God. That is certainly an important part of the dialogue, but it only addresses the logical, rational component of faith. It misses the underlying non-rational, emotional reasons why people cling to their religious faith. We need to try to understand the fears, desires, values, and emotional needs underlying their faith, and we need to acknowledge that we share the same basic values, desires, needs, and fears.

At the risk of gross oversimplification, I think there are two general kinds of atheists, which I call Bashers and Builders. Bashers are those who take a confrontational approach, make fun of religious belief, and push their views on others, often in a fairly obnoxious way. There is certainly value in getting the word out there, through books and publicity campaigns that make people aware of the existence of atheism and the arguments for it. But too much bashing can lead to polarization, defensiveness, and misunderstanding of one another, leading to further stereotyping, demonization, and entrenchment of attitudes. On the other hand, the Builders are those who seek to engage in dialogue with religious believers, to listen, empathize, and try to understand what people mean by their conception of God and what it means to them. This can hopefully lead to finding some common ground, better mutual understanding, and respect. It might also help others to see, by the compassionate and responsible way we live, that their fears about the dire consequences of atheism are groundless.



## **Conclusion**

There are many compelling rational reasons for rejecting belief in God. It's important for us as Humanists to understand the arguments on both sides, and to be clear about why we take the position we do. However, reason, logic, and evidence are only part of the story. For atheists as well as theists, there are also non-rational and emotional reasons for believing as we do. In rejecting the concept of God, Humanists reject beliefs in the supernatural; we refuse to rely on the speculations of religious mystics, spiritual gurus, and ancient scriptures. However, rejection of gods and other supernatural entities does not mean rejection of meaning, morality, values, love, beauty, and the sacredness of life. These are things we all cherish and strive to promote, values we share with many religious believers. Religious faith is not going to go away; most believers in God will never be convinced by our arguments, no matter how rational and logical these arguments may seem to us. Through empathic listening and dialogue, we may be able to find a way of building greater respect and acceptance of one another, despite our differences in beliefs, so that we can work together to make this world a more caring and more peaceful place for all of us.

## **Another Poem**

### **Life is a Stream Evolving**

*By Pat Duffy Hutcheon*

1. There is a stream evolving  
down through the hills of time.  
There is a stream evolving;  
the stream of life sublime.

#### Refrain

Life is a stream evolving  
from out an ancient sea.  
Life is a stream evolving  
and will not cease to be.

2. Sometimes I feel discouraged,  
and think my years in vain.  
But the fact of evolution  
redeems my life again.

3. In evolution's river  
each self is but a wave;  
yet, like pebbles in the water,  
our deeds survive the grave.

4. If we can build sound values,  
and preserve the urge to know;  
If we use the tools of science  
for guidance as we go --

5. There'll be a brighter future;  
for wisdom is the key  
and knowledge is the basis  
of all morality.

6. If we can live like Schweitzer,  
if we can die like Hume,  
the glory of our journey  
will live beyond the tomb.

*Life is a Stream Evolving* can be sung to the tune of: *There is a Baum in Gilead*.



## **Section II - Secularism**

### **Suma Secularia**

*By Don Hatch*

In the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Thomas Aquinas, one of the Catholic Churches greatest theologians and philosophers, authored his famous *Suma Theologica*. And in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Georges Bataille published his *Suma Atheologica*. Suma in Latin means total and Suma Theologica roughly translates, “all you need to know about God” while Suma Atheologica translates, “all you need to know about atheism.” It crossed my mind that now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it might be appropriate to create a Suma Secularia which translates, “all you need to know about secularism.” My attempt at this endeavor follows.

According to Wikipedia, “secularism seeks the development of the physical, moral, and intellectual nature of humans to the highest possible degree as the immediate duty of life. It inculcates the practical sufficiency of natural morality apart from Theism or the Bible and selects as its methods of procedure the promotion of human improvement by material means. Secularism proposes these positive qualities as the common bond of union to all who would regulate life by reason and ennoble it by service. Implicit in secularism is the assertion that governmental practices or institutions in a secular society should exist separately from religion and/or religious beliefs.”

Note the emphasis on the desirability and necessity of separation of church and state. Most Western liberal democracies do maintain separation of church and state and would be classified as secular societies, whereas Iran controlled by an Ayatollah is a theocracy.

A secular society is not one where everyone is an atheist. The ratio of non-believers to believers will vary from country to country, but religiosity is gradually decreasing in most Western democracies. The United States is an exception. Another feature of a secular country is that there is freedom from religion and freedom of religion, or in other words, citizens are free to be believers or non-believers as they choose.

Prior to 1500, God and the Catholic religion was an important part of most people’s lives in Western countries. Adherents believed that if they followed the sacraments of the Church, including the last rites, they would gain entry into an everlasting heaven. But after the Renaissance, the Protestant Reformation and Enlightenment, things slowly began to change as the study of science grew and democratic governments began to evolve. Astronomers were discovering that the sun was the centre of the solar system, not the earth, as Catholic doctrine asserted. Also, in this era, a few philosophers including Spinoza, d’Holbach and Hume were questioning the existence of God.

Then in 1859, a major event that challenged religious beliefs occurred with the publication of *On The Origin of Species* by Charles Darwin. This treatise postulated that humans were not created by God, as described in the biblical book of Genesis, but had evolved over eons through natural selection. This was a nail in God’s coffin, but nevertheless, he, she or it is far from disappearing. Despite the fact that the majority of humans now accept the reality of evolution, evangelical Christians still insist the Genesis creation story is factual, not myth. The lesson here is that the changing of long held religious beliefs is a gradual evolving educational process, not a rapid revolution from old beliefs.



Secularism draws its intellectual roots from Greek and Roman philosophers such as Epicurus and Marcus Aurelius and from Enlightenment thinkers including David Hume, Denis Diderot and Voltaire. The word “secular” itself, preceded *On The Origin of Species* by a few years. It was first used in writing by British author George Holyoake in 1846. Holyoake had been imprisoned earlier for being an atheist. He was one of the fathers of the cooperative movement, and fought for issues such as education for all, freedom of the press, political reform and the enfranchisement of women. He edited a publication called *The Reasoner* and founded The Secular Society that later became the National Secular Society (NSS) with Charles Bradlaugh as its first president. This organization published a journal called *The Freethinker* that along with the NSS still exists today. Bradlaugh also edited a secularist newspaper called the *National Reformer*. He was prosecuted by the British Government for blasphemy and sedition, but he was eventually acquitted. In 1880 he was elected Member of Parliament for Northampton but refused to take the oath on the Bible and was not able to take his seat. He appealed and eventually he was allowed to sit in parliament. Supporting him were William Gladstone, John Stuart Mill and George Bernard Shaw.

Since the time of Holyoake and Bradlaugh, England has truly become a secular society with only about five percent of the population attending church on a regular basis. The same applies also in Western Europe, especially in Scandinavia, where religiosity is also very low. The question then naturally arises; why is religion so much more prevalent in the United States than in Europe? It is worth exploring this difference because doing so reveals the conditions under which secular societies develop and thrive.

In his book, *A Secular Age*, Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor documents the gradual secularization of Europe over a five hundred-year period, using the term “exclusive humanism” to describe the prevalent secularism that now prevails throughout much of the continent. In Chapter 14, Taylor poses the same question as raised above: Why has European society become far more secular than is the case in the United States where church attendance has not declined nearly as much? Why does close to half the population in the U.S. believe humans and dinosaurs walked the earth at the same time? Why do a few members of Congress sincerely believe there is no need to worry about climate change because the current unrest in Israel is fulfilling prophecies in the New Testament book, The Revelation to John, prophesizing the end of the world is near at hand? Why this incredible ignorance exists in the U.S. is a bit of a mystery to Taylor. He admits he does not have satisfactory answers. He says he would be groping in the dark if he tried to fathom the reasons.

Perhaps Taylor was wise in not attempting to answer these questions because arriving at plausible answers would necessarily require considerable research and analysis, which would probably be outside Taylor’s areas of expertise. Independent scholar Gregory Paul has done just that. His analysis and conclusions are presented in an article of considerable length in the December 2008/January 2009 issue of the *Free Inquiry* magazine entitled, “The Big Religion Question Finally Solved.” Quoting *Free Inquiry* Editor Tom Flynn, “Paul has digested vast quantities of survey data compiled on national and global scales, based on which he argues that religion is *not* a universal feature of human societies and that the much maligned secularization hypothesis is very much alive. In his new model, popular piety has less to do with metaphysics and more to do with the level of economic and social security middle-class majorities perceive themselves to enjoy. If this hypothesis is true, then if we bring more members of the human community to the social standards enjoyed by western Europeans, we might expect religions to wither away in America.” (p23).

Paul’s article displays several graphs that conclusively demonstrate the difference in the level of secularization in first-world democracies compared with the United States. Individual letters, designating



seventeen different countries, are positioned on the graphs indicating the degree of secularization or religiosity of each country. All of the countries except the U.S. are clustered together in the most secular quadrant, while the U.S. is positioned far away in the most religious quadrant. The data on one of the graphs shows conclusively that income inequality is a major factor in separating the secular countries from religious America. The rough order of the degree of secularization in the cluster, starting with the most secular, is Japan, Sweden, Denmark, France, England, Germany, Norway, New Zealand, Holland, Canada, Spain Switzerland, Australia, Austria, Italy and Ireland. The United States always stands alone, far removed from the cluster as being the most religious. Happiness surveys, for whatever they may be worth, reveal the same relationship.

Paul points out that in most first-world democracies, secularization has occurred casually and voluntarily. There has been no visible organized atheistic movement and almost no atheistic proselytism. Hundreds of millions almost spontaneously lost interest in religion. He claims this historic occurrence dispels the notion that humans possess a compulsive desire for God. He posits that once humans are freed from the anxiety of poverty caused by income disparity, and no longer fear going bankrupt from crippling medical bills, the need for religion greatly decreases. He believes that in most modern democracies, religious faith has been, and is being reduced by three specific factors.

The first is *modern science, evolution and education*. In most progressive countries the teaching of evolution, rather than creationism and intelligent design in science classes, along with all the latest scientific findings, discourages belief in religious articles of faith. Education is a potent secularizer: every additional year of higher education tends to undermine and lessen religiosity.

The second factor, and by far the most significant in Paul's opinion, is *economic and societal security*. Poverty engenders discomfort and want for basic needs raises stress and anxiety prompting humans to embrace religion as a source of comfort. Income inequality, along with the absence of universal health care, is a major factor in making the U.S. the most dysfunctional nation in the first world, with a declining middle class slowing down any significant move toward secularism. Middle class Americans feel anxious and fearful enough to seek the assistance of a friendly creator. In contrast, in most first-world democracies, it is more difficult to lose middle class status and very few go bankrupt due to overwhelming medical bills, a circumstance that causes a lack of interest in religion. Simply put, insecurity breeds religion, security promotes non-theism and secularization.

The third factor is *the corporate-consumer popular culture*. It is the aim of corporations to promote materialistic consumption in order to increase profits. Big business knows that when piety and pop culture square off, pop culture wins hands down. Excessive advertising promotes the habit of acquiring a wealth of materialistic possessions and encourages "keeping up with the Joneses," often by over borrowing. In particular, young people are yearning to acquire all the latest electronic gadgets as well as other things, and this segment of the population shows little interested in belonging to a church. Paul postulates that materialism is a deeper part of the human psyche and a more stable feature of human societies than religion, and that under stress-free economic conditions the theist's perpetual hope that a profound need for spirituality must eventually compel a revival of faith is mere speculation.

But the situation in the United States is somewhat different where corporations have been running the country in recent years. The drug industry, the health care industry, the industrial-military complex, big oil, the gun lobby and others have made huge financial contributions to Republicans in particular and



encouraged politicians to reduce taxes for the wealthy, cut social programs and thwart all attempts to establish universal health care. The mantra of the corporations and many Republicans is that the kinds of socialism prevalent in most other democracies are not wanted in the U.S. and are a threat to the freedoms Americans are entitled to enjoy. Consequently, America really has no universal social safety nets to provide its citizens with a guaranteed sense of security. These are the very conditions that foster religiosity, allowing the religious right fundamentalists and evangelicals to become powerful enough to influence governments, and in fact, no president can be elected without their support.

So, what can be learned from Paul's research? Three things can be concluded:

Few individuals base their decisions to become unbelievers on rational analysis of philosophical and scientific arguments. Most non-religious first-world citizens raised in religious surroundings simply lose interest in the supernatural when their lives become sufficiently pleasant and assured, drifting away from church with relatively little thought about the matter. And their children usually have very little interest in religion.

Higher income inequality tends to foster religiosity, while higher education levels tend to weaken religiosity.

The ideological struggle is largely limited to partisan activists and the intellectual élite. No broad grass roots organized atheist movement has ever successfully emerged. Proselytizing atheism is basically ineffective in decreasing religiosity and does little to promote or cause increased secularization.

Reality supports these conclusions. Secularization of first-world democracies happened basically because social safety nets allowed people to become more comfortable and they did not see religion as being important in their lives. As an exception, the United States, with fewer social safety nets and one of the highest levels of income inequality, is one of the most religious of the first world democracies.

Any beneficial effects as a result of activities by organized humanist groups are not readily apparent. None are mentioned in Paul's article and the word humanism does not appear anywhere. Karen Armstrong in her book *The Battle For God* describes the American Humanist Association as "an organization of little influence." In *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor does not mention one humanist organization in all 776 pages, this in a book on secularism. Humanist associations are just not on the public's radar screen.

Further support for Paul's hypothesis is presented in a paper by researcher Priyanka Palani in the Spring 2008 edition of the *Journal of Politics and International Affairs*. The paper is entitled "The Effect of Religiosity on Income Inequality." Analyzing answers from surveys in over eighty countries questioning the role of religion in people's lives, Palani found a direct positive correlation between income inequality and religiosity. The higher the level of income inequality, the more religious was the country. He also found an inverse correlation between education levels and religiosity. The higher the level of education the less likely a person was to be religious.

And more support for Paul's contentions comes from a book by Philip Zuckerman, a sociology professor at Pitzer College in Claremont California, entitled *Society Without God*. Zuckerman spent fourteen months living in Denmark in 2005 and 2006 researching secularism in Denmark and Sweden. After interviewing one hundred and fifty Danes and Swedes, he concluded that "society without God is not only possible but can be quite civil and pleasant. And contrary to the claims of certain outspoken conservative Christians who



argue that a society without God would be hell on earth, rampant with immorality, full of evil and teeming with depravity, the reality is that Denmark and Sweden are remarkably strong, safe, healthy, moral and prosperous societies. Zuckerman's conclusion is that traditional religion fades in a society not because of aggressive atheist activity, but due to a society achieving a high level of personal security.

It would certainly appear that Gregory Paul, Priyanka Palani and Philip Zuckerman have indeed solved the "Big Religious Questions" and determined why the United States is so much more religious than most other democracies. Nevertheless, It is encouraging to observe that the number of people professing "no religion" is growing in the U.S., where now 23% of citizens identify as "nones," equal to the number of evangelical and higher than the number of Catholics. In some European countries the nones approach 40%, but regular church attendance is as low as 5% in many countries. This compared to 22% in America. In Canada about 13% attend church regularly.

From the foregoing I believe it is safe to conclude that prosperous secular democracies with adequate social safety nets, superior education systems, and firm separation of church and state, foster conditions that generate lower inequality, less poverty and a good environment for all citizens to by and large live contented lives in an atmosphere of desirable freedoms. Certainly, democratic societies are far superior to theocracies, but also to oligarchies such as the United States, that as noted above is not a true democracy because of the influence of big business, big finance, the NRA and even evangelicals on many, but not all, elected politicians.

The key word in the preceding paragraph is prosperous. Secularity thrives best and religiosity declines most rapidly under prosperous economic conditions. Thus, it follows that societies must generate enough total revenue to be able to obtain sufficient tax revenue to finance public safety nets and other amenities such as education and infrastructure. This brings governments into the picture. Governments must operate in such a manner that allows businesses to be profitable, able to use natural resources to generate wealth, but with concern for the environment.

The heyday for secular democratic societies was the period from 1945 – 1980. During this time a sizable middle class developed, incomes for most increased and inequality was at a minimum. Things are different now. Real incomes for many have been more or less constant for many years, while wealth has been concentrated in the hands of the few, thus increasing inequality. This is causing an increase in populism in certain countries, not the best of conditions for advancing secularity. Challenging times are ahead.

Of the 195 countries in the world, 96 are described as secular by surveys listed on Google. China is the most secular where 90% of the population say they have no religion. The remaining 9 of the top 10 countries are Sweden 73%. Czech Republic 72%, UK 69%, Azerbaijan, 64%, Belgium 64%, Australia 63%, Hong Kong 63%, Vietnam 63% and Norway where 62% say they have no religion. The figure in Canada is 45%.

But it must be recognized that all secular countries are not democracies. The most secular country, China, is communist, far from being a democracy and is a country with numerous human rights violations. The number of secular countries that are democratic is hard to establish because of the ambiguity in defining democracy. Nevertheless, various countries have been rated on the attributes of their democracy. The top 9 in descending order are: Norway, Iceland, Sweden, New Zealand, Denmark, Ireland, Canada, Australia, Finland, and Switzerland. This list corresponds, more or less, with the countries in the top 10 in happiness surveys.



Before concluding, further mention must be made of Humanist organizations. They have been described above as being “of little influence” and not on the public radar screen. Sadly, this is true. If there was ever a movement that should have had a significant effect on promoting the cause of secularism, it should have been humanist organizations, but this has not happened. Why?

The first organization to use the word humanist in their designation was the “Humanist Fellowship,” founded in Chicago in 1929. (In 1941 this group became The American Humanist Association which still exists). The name came up again in 1933 with the publication of the first Humanist Manifesto. After WW II more organizations promoting humanism began to appear. “Humanism is a proactive life stance guided by the principle of rational thought, scientific inquiry, ethics, responsibility, compassion, fairness and equality without belief in the supernatural,” or simply, “being good without God.” The groups exist at four levels; local groups are at the bottom of the pyramid, Provincial or State next, then National and finally Humanist International founded in Holland in 1952 and now headquartered in London England is at the top. But relatively speaking, membership in these organizations is not large, thus the low recognition.

When I joined a local association almost 20 years ago, one of the main endeavors of many humanists seemed to be the promotion of atheism by shouting from the roof tops that God did not exist and bashing religions. Money was being wasted putting signs on busses stating that “God did not exist.” As stated above, this proselytizing is not effective in promoting secularism. God fades away gradually in prosperous secular democracies. Therefore, humanist groups should be lobbying for the preservation of democracies at a time when populism is on the increase, while promoting the election of governments that will tackle the serious problem of advancing inequality and a shrinking middle class, and hopefully foster a strong economy.

In summary, it is hoped the preceding will give a credible explanation of how secularism developed in the West over the last 500 years and the advantage of secular democratic societies with firm separation of church and state.

## **The Advantages of Secular Societies**

It is well known that many western European countries have become less religious and more secular in the last fifty or so years, and it is also well known that the trend to secularization has been much slower in the United States. In his recent book *Civilization*, Niall Ferguson attempts to explain why this is so. In this book Ferguson sets out to document the reasons why after about 1500 CE, the “West” moved ahead of the “Rest.” He lists six phenomena or reasons why this came about. They are: competition, science, property, medicine, consumption and work. By work he means the Protestant work ethic, a term coined by the German professor Max Weber. While other religions associated holiness with the renunciation of worldly things, the Protestants saw industry and thrift as expressions of a new kind of hard working godliness. While others “worked to live,” Protestants “lived to work.” Ferguson rightly notes that it was the Protestant countries in the west that were the first to advance and prosper, England, Holland, Prussia, Saxony and Scotland, as opposed to the Catholic countries of France, Italy, Portugal and Spain.

So how does Ferguson explain the current difference in religiosity between Europe and America? He cites competition. He notes that many European countries have a state religion: the Anglican Church in England, the Presbyterian Church in Scotland and the Lutheran Church in Germany and the Scandinavian countries. In all of these countries, churches have become almost irrelevant except when used for christenings, confirmations, weddings and funerals. Contrast this with the United States where there are umpteen religious denominations evangelically competing with each other for members. Ferguson claims this active



promotion by TV evangelists and others helps to keep church membership at a much higher level than in most other western countries. This may indeed be a significant factor, but Ferguson is missing another important reason for the higher level of religiosity in the United States. This reason is the lack of social safety nets and high-income inequality in the United States, compared with other western countries. The following account gives a picture of what life is like in successful secular societies.

In the Scandinavian countries there is an archetype of democratic socialism that seems to work. These secular societies provide their citizens with a good education, as well as social safety nets that avoid anxieties if families experience setbacks. Scandinavians seem to know how to maintain strong economies, while providing citizens with the means to be able to pay taxes in order to supply essential social services. Income inequality is low and, people seem to be satisfied with living modestly by avoiding purchasing things they do not need. And take note, surveys show that citizens in these secular countries with a minimum of religiosity are among the happiest people in the world.

A common thread that stands out in secular societies is low-income disparity. In a book entitled *The Spirit Level*, authors Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett display numerous graphs comparing income inequality in developed countries by analyzing various factors including poverty, mental health, physical health, obesity, educational performance, teenage births, life expectancy, violence, imprisonment, community life, social relations, social mobility and trust. Almost without exception, the secular countries of Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Finland are at the low-income inequality end of the trend line in regard to the lifestyle characteristics listed above. The United States with a high degree of religiosity is nearly always at the high-income inequality end of the trend line. Countries including Japan, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Germany, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, are usually nearer to the favourable, rather than the unfavourable section of the graph.

Another common thread is that all four of these democratic countries appear to have found the right balance in regard to socialism. They have managed their economies in such a way as to provide sufficient capital to afford government sponsored social safety nets, and the citizens are willing to pay the taxes necessary to deliver these safety nets.

And another factor of great importance is spending on the military. Scandinavian countries have relatively small militaries. These countries do not engage in pre-emptive wars, their activities are mostly related to peacekeeping. Low defense spending helps greatly as a means of being able to pay for the social safety nets. Contrast this with the United States, the country that set out to police the world. U.S. defense spending is gargantuan, thereby leaving little for social safety nets or for compensating citizens who have experienced devastation from hurricanes, tornados or earthquakes. And as already mentioned above, a lack of safety nets leads to more religiosity and higher income inequality, making it difficult for a truly secular society to materialize.

An excellent understanding of what it is like to live in a thriving secular society can be obtained from sociologist Phil Zuckerman's book *Society Without God*. Zuckerman spent fourteen months living in Denmark and Sweden and the results of his research after interviewing 150 Danes and Swedes are summarized below:

Zuckerman found that, "society without God is not only possible, but can be quite civil and pleasant. And contrary to the claims of certain outspoken, conservative Christians who regularly argue that a society without God would be hell on earth: rampant with immorality, full of evil, and teeming with depravity, in



reality Denmark and Sweden are remarkably strong, safe, healthy, moral and prosperous societies.” He goes on to say, “It is crucial for people to know that it is actually quite possible for a society to lose its religious beliefs and still be well-functioning, successful, and fully capable of constructing and obeying sound laws and establishing and following rational systems of morality and ethics. Worship of God can wane, prayer can be given up, and the Bible can go unstudied, yet people can treat one another decently, schools and hospitals can still run smoothly, crime can remain minimal, babies and old people can receive all the care and attention they need, economies can flourish, pollution can be kept to a minimum and children can be loved in warm homes--without God being a central component of everyday life.”

Phil Zuckerman acknowledges that a much-attenuated cultural Lutheranism continues in Denmark and Sweden. Most Danes and Swedes still pay the church tax (though they can easily opt out) have church weddings, and baptize their children even though they rarely darken the door of a church. Most Danes and Swedes regard themselves as Christians, though like Thomas Jefferson, they regard this simply as being a good and moral person and pay no attention to traditional creeds. “Benign indifference” is the term Zuckerman uses for the Scandinavian approach to religion, and he emphasizes that this indifference is neither hostility nor plain atheism; religion is simply a non-topic.

It is important to note, as Zuckerman points out, that a low incidence of factors such as homicide rates, levels of violent crime, levels of disrespect for human rights, political instability, levels of distrust among citizens etc, leads to a high degree of security and benign indifference. Denmark and Sweden rank third and seventh on the 2007 Global Peace Index. (Norway ranks first). A low degree of security generally typifies societies that tend to be more religious. For example, the United States ranks ninety-sixth on the aforementioned index.

An obvious conclusion to be drawn from Zuckerman’s revealing book is that traditional religion fades in a society, not as a result of aggressive atheist activity, but as a result of a society achieving a high level of personal security. The United States, according to Phil Zuckerman, would do well to emulate the Scandinavians.

While Zuckerman confined his research to Denmark and Sweden, I believe his findings can be extrapolated to Norway and Finland as well. The conclusion must be that secular societies with low-income inequality are more likely to provide the “good life” for their citizens than those with a high degree of income inequality and a high level of religiosity. But which comes first? This is really a no-brainer. Obviously, you will not reduce religiosity, leading to a secular society, without first establishing a large prosperous middle class and low-income inequality. The protests on Wall Street and elsewhere are letting world leaders know that things are “out of whack” as the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. It is abundantly clear that secular societies such as exist in Scandinavia, are far superior to the mess existing in the U.S. today. But how did this disparity come about? (DAH).

## **A Tale of Two Societies- Scandinavian and American.**

Like the rest of Europe, Scandinavians once had their share of mythology featuring pagan gods and goddesses. Names like Thor, Odin and the Valkyries come to mind. Unlike the rest of Europe, Catholicism did not reach the Scandinavian area until about 1000 CE and after that, paganism slowly faded away. Not long after Luther began the Protestant Reformation in 1517, the Scandinavian countries adopted Lutheranism as their state religion and Catholicism was suppressed. For almost six hundred years, citizens in Scandinavia have willingly



paid a church tax to support the state religions, but in more recent times paying the tax is usually optional. Also, in recent times, church attendance has fallen drastically with as low as 2% of the population attending church services on a regular basis. People have just gradually lost interest in religion, except for marking life's passages including baptism, confirmation, marriage and funerals. Thus, today's secular society described in the preceding section is now a reality, and I believe is a model for the rest of the world to follow. This, however, is not to claim that Scandinavian societies are utopian, they have problems like everyone else. Probably their biggest concern at the moment is how to integrate immigrant Muslims into their way of life.

Now on to America. From about 1600 CE onward, the early American colonies were settled predominately by Christians from the British Isles, most of whom were English. The major religion was Church of England, although there were of course the Puritans (Congregationalists) in New England. By the 1770s, thirteen colonies had been established with a population of two and a half million. An idea of the religious make-up of the country at that time can be garnered from examining the religions of the fifty-five men who signed the Declaration of Independence in 1776. The breakdown is shown in the left-hand table below compared to today at right:

### **Religions in the United States**

<u>Founding Fathers - 1776</u>			<u>In 2008</u>	
	<u>No.</u>	<u>%</u>		<u>%</u>
Episcopalians –	28	51	Evangelical Protestants	25
Congregationalists –	12	22	Mainline Protestants	17
Presbyterians –	8	14	Black Church	6
Unitarians –	3	5	Mormon	2
Deist –	1	2	Other Protestant	<u>2</u>
Baptist –	1	2	Total Protestant	52
Quaker –	1	2	Roman Catholic	23
Roman Catholic –	<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>	Nothing in Particular	16
Total	55	100	Atheists and Agnostics	4
			Non-Christian	<u>5</u>
			Total	100

In 1776 Benjamin Franklin was the sole Deist, and Thomas Jefferson and John Adams were two of the three Unitarians. Around 1800 Thomas Jefferson predicted that within two or three generations, two thirds of Americans would be Unitarians. The table above on the right shows how wrong he was. He failed to anticipate the religious revival phenomena of the 1800s or the advent of TV evangelists and mega-churches in the late 1900s. The founding fathers were determined that the new country would be a republic rather than a monarchy, and that there would be no State religion. There would be a complete separation of church and state and citizens would be free to adopt any religion of their choice or none at all. As Niall Ferguson has suggested, this freedom has allowed competition between denominations, and those who are the best promoters have been the most successful. In 1776, almost one hundred percent of citizens would have regarded themselves as mainline Protestants. As the right-hand table above indicates, this category has dwindled to only seventeen percent while evangelical Protestants now represent one quarter of Americans. The next largest group is Roman Catholic at twenty-three percent. This is not surprising due to immigration from European Catholic countries and due to the influx of Hispanics from Mexico and elsewhere. Somewhat



encouraging is the fact that atheists, agnostics and nothing in particular, make up a fifth of the population and this section is growing, albeit rather slowly.

Thus, we have the dichotomy between secular Scandinavia where most citizens believe in Darwinian evolution, and the religious United States where deplorably, about forty-five percent of citizen still believe in creationism. And most importantly, the Scandinavian countries are prosperous economically, while the U.S. is in a political mess. We need only look at the current partisan Republican Party under the leadership of Donald Trump to illustrate one of the many reasons why the mess exists. (DAH).

## **Secularism as a Guarantor of Social Harmony**

By Dagmar Gontard-Zelenkova

On November 26<sup>th</sup>, 2010, one of the Munk Debates brought together two men from different ideologies, former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair, a convert to Catholicism, and Christopher Hitchens, one of the world's best-known atheists. The title of the debate was: "Be it resolved: religion is a force for good in the world." The debate proceeded smoothly, with both debaters showing a high degree of civility and respect for each other. Thanks to this respectful approach on totally conflicting opinions, those who watched or listened will remember a harmonious encounter of two courteous adversaries.

I submit that this harmony amid divergent ideas is the very essence of secularism. This may come as a surprise to those who claim: "secularism aims at the eradication of religions." It is obvious that etymological confusion plays a role here, stemming probably from the common misconception of the so-called "secularization of society", where secularization is equated with atheism.

A brief etymological reminder is necessary. The term 'secularism' was coined by the nineteenth century English Humanist George Jacob Holyoake. Initially it was a socio-political program, aimed at defining sources of knowledge, best suited to informing leaders of society in making choices in areas such as education, politics, art, etc. Over time, the term evolved, and secularism has been used to describe various concepts, one of them being the relation between state and religion, in other words: the separation of Church and State. In this concept, secularism is enshrined in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Interestingly, in France, the term 'laïcité' is being threatened by etymological confusion as well. Indeed, under the constant pressure of the ever-increasing demands for religious accommodations, we now hear such terms as "open laïcité," "hard laïcité," "political laïcité," to name just a few. Confusion reigns supreme, yet the French law of 1905 successfully achieved an official separation between Church and State, thus putting an end to centuries of bloody inter-religious fights.

As a secularist, I want to make it very clear, I am promoting secularism, without any adjective. I am promoting the separation of Church and State, I am not advocating the death of religions. It is important to know what we are talking about. The concept of secularism – or laïcité - boils down to two words: separation and respect. In this conception, secularism relies on the division between private life, where various beliefs belong, and the public sphere, in which each individual should appear simply as a citizen equal to all other citizens, devoid of ethnic, religious or other particularities. This concept of secularism does not imply any hostility of the government with respect to religion. It does imply that government and political issues should be kept separate from religious ones. This is meant to protect both - the government from any possible



interference from religious organizations, and, vice versa, to protect the religious organizations from political quarrels and controversies.

A recent survey of history shows that quarrels, disguised under the religious cloak, are springing up again. In God's name, killings are taking place all over the world. In the Middle East, Christians are being massacred, while in Mumbai, where they have been peacefully living for many centuries, the Jews are now targeted. Not so long ago, in Florida, a minister of a small religious congregation threatened to engage in a histrionic show of burning Korans. In British Columbia, under the pretense of religious requirements, legalizing of polygamy is demanded. In other places, frustrated faith groups strike alliances and lash out against atheists. All over the world, under the pretense of "religious freedom," inconceivable criminal acts are tolerated due to political correctness. And, everywhere, religions compete with each other – while, in the UK, the private Muslim schools, financed by Saudi Arabia, educate children about chopping off of hands, in Southern Ontario the Gideons insist on distributing Bibles in public schools and the Muslims claim the right to distribute Korans.

What is the driving force behind this? Could it be that people are looking for some kind of identity? For some sort of community? What about those who are turning religion into a badge of identity, used in opposition to others – the burqua being such an example of religion being totally hijacked. What is it that we are observing here? Isn't it some kind of religious nationalism? I contend that, once we take the theological clothes from these movements, they are, simply, political and social movements.

It seems to me that something important is obfuscated here. Something that harks back into the infancy of humanity, something that dives deep into our subconscious, and that something is the profound yearning for spirituality. No matter what sources we get it from – some may get it from sending prayers to some supernatural being while others may get it from nature, by simply listening to babbling brooks – no matter what external envelope of any particular faiths this need for spirituality takes on, it is part of each of us. And this yearning for spirituality, this need, is documented scientifically. "God is a state of mind," writes Dr. Robert Buckman in one of his books. Let me quote him: "Our brains lead us to readily undergo experiences that we have chosen to call god or spirituality or oneness-with-the-universe or similar words or names. If the limbic system is activated by means of the right temporal lobe, a person will have an experience of spiritual or divine nature. God is – literally – a state of mind."

An interesting conclusion, based on the experiments conducted by scientists worldwide, one among them being our Professor Michael Persinger, in Sudbury. It's also in line with the conclusions of Daniel Baril, a Quebec anthropologist, who sees religion as a by-product of evolution and contends that it would take the mutation of our species to make religion disappear. All this may be contradicting Sam Harris, who heralded the "end of faith" in his book of the same name, in 2004.

Be that as it may, from the secularist point of view, this theological-philosophical-biological debate is certainly interesting but should be left with the experts in related fields. The secularist's interest lies elsewhere – in separation and respect. There are some fourteen hundred religions worldwide and, of course, they can't all be "accommodated." But the secularist is not interested in weighing their respective merits, or in establishing their hierarchy. Secularism strives to guarantee the right of people, of all peoples of the world, to choose and practice the religion of their choice, or not to choose any. In order to avoid inter-religious fighting, the secularist invites people to worship in places designated to the specific religions. Faith should remain a private affair! From the secularist point of view, separation and respect are the cornerstones of social harmony.



Separation and respect! Those two words have to be hammered in again and again! In this regard, I believe, the debate of November 26<sup>th</sup>, 2010, is of utmost importance. It is also a shining example of what a secular state can accomplish. The debate was broadcast worldwide, and I was happy to read comments coming from countries beyond the Atlantic Ocean. They read: "Well done, Canada! Way to go!" One very interesting comment came from Quebec. It read:

"It was a real joy to see two men of this caliber fencing with superlative English prose. This type of debate is quintessential to our common Western civilization. This type of public civilized debate about humanity's deepest convictions does not exist outside the West: not in China, not in Arabia, not in Africa, not yet in Latin America or Russia. It is to the credit of Canada that such a debate did happen in one of our cities rather than within the USA or Britain, as one would have expected, considering the origins of the speakers. With this debate, Canada is unexpectedly taking a kind of lead in reasserting Western values." In case you are wondering, Christopher Hitchens won the debate.

As a secularist and as a Canadian, I am proud of being a citizen of this great country.

*Dagmar Gontard-Zelinkova was a francophone, European by birth. She lived in Europe for about 20 years and in Africa for another 20 before making Canada her home. She was a member of Humanist Canada, Secular Ontario, the Centre for Inquiry, the Canadian Secular Alliance, and has volunteered for Dying With Dignity. She was a lover of nature and animals and lived on a beautiful wooded property on Baptiste Lake. She was dedicated to the humanist movement. Sadly she passed away a few years ago.*

## **How to be Secular: A Call to Arms for Religious Freedom**

*By Jacques Berlinerblau*

After the introduction, this book is divided into three sections; What Secularism Is and Isn't, The Very Peculiar "Rise" and Fall of American Secularism, and Reviving American Secularism. Early in the first section Berlinerblau defines secularism as:

*"A political philosophy concerned with the best way to govern complex, religiously pluralistic societies. It aims to strike an extraordinarily delicate balance. On the one hand, it wishes to ensure the existence of a stable social order free of religious strife. On the other, it aspires to guarantee citizens as much religious freedom and freedom to be non-religious as possible."*

Thus, order and freedom are the yin and yang of the secular vision.

Later on, in the first section, Berlinerblau defines what secularism is not. *Secularism does not equal atheism!* The author makes it clear that one of the goals of this book is to disarticulate secularism from atheism in order that secularists and atheists can pursue their legitimate and worthy agendas and work together when their interests overlap (which is often). The common "enemy" is not religion per se, but the fundamentalist religious right constituency that after thirty years of effort has gained political clout in the United States and is threatening the separation of church and state. To date the "New Atheists" have been totally ineffective in combating this menace and Berlinerblau suggests the only means of halting and reversing the influence of these misguided revivalist individuals is for liberal Protestant believers, plus those who declare they have



“no religion,” along with avowed atheists, to work together in this common cause. And don’t forget the Jews and liberal Catholics.

Quite often when researching the origin of secularism, scholars go back to nineteenth century England and look to George Jacob Holyoake (1817-1906) who is credited with being the originator of the word secularism. Also mentioned is Holyoake’s contemporary Charles Bradlaugh (1833-1891). Both were jailed for short periods for blasphemy. But their ideas on secularism and atheism were quite different. Holyoake stated, “as such, atheism can never be made the basis of a Secular philosophy of life,” whereas Bradlaugh said, “the logical consequence of the acceptance of Secularism must be that the man gets to atheism, if he has brains enough to comprehend.” And the argument continues to this day!

In his quest, Berlinerblau goes farther back than the nineteenth to the sixteenth century and Martin Luther (1438-1546) as his starting point. The Protestant Reformation not only paved the way for The Enlightenment that allowed science and democracy to develop, but also unlike the Catholic Church, advocated the separation of church and state. Luther maintained that the church should concentrate on saving the souls of men and leave matters such as maintaining civil order, collecting taxes and waging war to the state. He recognized the distinction between what is due to Caesar and what is due to God.

Another person who had significant influence on the advancement of secularism was the English philosopher John Locke (1632-1704). Locke was a strong proponent of the separation of church and state and believed that any religion that commandeers the wheel of state will wreak havoc upon order. Furthermore, a state that cannot control animosities between religious groups will effectively sow chaos. The Thirty Years War (1618-1648) being a prime example. Locke was one of the first to advocate separation of powers within governments and he greatly influenced both Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826) and James Madison (1751-1836) in keeping any reference to God out of the U.S. Constitution.

The second section of *How To Be Secular* documents the rise of secularism in America during the first three quarters of the twentieth century and its decline after 1980 with the election of Republican President Ronald Reagan. At the beginning of the section, however, the author takes a diversion and describes just how ineffective the American atheist movements have been. He says that although groups that include The Freedom From Religion Foundation, the American Humanist Association, the American Atheists, and the Center for Inquiry claim their numbers are booming and their agenda is advancing, the truth is slightly different. Combined, they probably have no more than fifty thousand card-carrying members. This is a drop in the bucket compared to their revivalist adversaries who number in the many millions and have political clout as well as adequate financing while the atheists have neither. Berlinerblau says, “although the atheist movements fancy themselves as a lion, they are more like the gimpy little zebra crossing a river full of crocs.” These people have a lot of catching up to do and they must realize they cannot achieve a return to a predominately secular society on their own.

The zenith of modern American secularism was in the era between 1945 and 1980. It was during this period that significant decisions favouring secularism were made in the U.S. Supreme Court. In 1947 it was firmly established that the wall separating church and state “must be kept high and impregnable.” And there were later decisions regarding public schools that included the prohibition of release time for religious instructions, nondenominational prayer, and Bible reading to start the day. Then of course there was the *Roe v. Wade* decision in 1973 allowing legal abortions. And it was in this time period that the “anything-goes” 1960s prevailed, generating feelings of increasing freedom and optimism.



But unfortunately, the trend toward more and more secularism did not last. Over the last thirty years the conservative Christian Right has pulverized secularism. Coincident with this development, the former liberal Supreme Court of Burger and Warren has morphed into the conservative Court of Roberts, Alito, Thomas, Gorsuch and Kavanaugh. During this period the Christian Right has been better organized, disciplined, funded and focused than its secular adversaries, even to the point where the road to any Republican presidential nomination must pass through evangelical America. The situation is so bad that at one point William Rehnquist avowed, “the wall of separation between church and state is a metaphor based on bad history, a metaphor which has proven useless as a guide to judging. It should be frankly and explicitly abandoned.” Yes, there are those in the revivalist camp that would revel if the United States became a theocracy and if a national religion was established. So, what should be done about this dire situation? That is the question the third section of the book entitled “Reviving American Secularism” attempts to answer.

Berlinerblau proffers that for secularists to achieve their goal, they must get millions upon millions of their compatriots to share their core values and convictions. These millions will include theistic moderates, as well as a lot of people who consider themselves atheists, agnostics, or spiritual but not religious. He admits that time is not on the side of the secularists. He notes that it took thirty years for the LGBT community to begin to achieve their objectives, and of course we know that it took the same thirty years for the revivalists to get where they are today. Yes, the obstacles facing the secularists are gargantuan and the practicalities are daunting. Where can the secularists find a person with prodigious leadership and oratorical skills that can unite a multitude consisting of diverse groups and meld them into a cohesive entity with a common cause? A common cause of exposing the threat of misguided revivalists who want to destroy a democracy that was founded on secular principles. And where will the millions of dollars needed to finance programs that promote a secularist agenda come from? The chances of this kind of scenario happening are virtually nil, so in the writer’s view, another tactic must be employed.

The plan of attack must be an economic one. It was not until the penultimate page of the book that the author notes that the zenith of secularization occurred during the post WWII period of “confidence, introspection and plenitude.” It is the economy stupid!!! Experience in certain Western European socialist democracies, and in a few other countries, have shown that as prosperity increases, religiosity declines on its own. These countries have been able, at least up to now, to provide social safety nets such as universal health care to their citizens, thus providing a feeling of security. These people do not need to look to a religion to provide comfort, solace and support in times of family emergencies. This is in contrast to the United States, where Republicans in particular, shun any semblance of socialism. For example, up until recently there was no program of universal health care in the United States. Ever since the 1974 oil crisis, real income in the U.S. has leveled off or decreased as the important middle class began to shrink, while the rich got richer and the poor got poorer. Under these unfavourable conditions, religiosity increased as those in decline looked to religion for support. The only way to rectify these conditions and decrease religiosity, is to create a level of prosperity with high employment that will support a large middle class and allow the provision of adequate social safety nets to provide peace of mind for families in times of adversity. It is that simple and at the same time that difficult in these times of economic recession in much of the western world.

So, it is virtually impossible, or at least very difficult, to reverse the trend toward more religiosity and less secularism in the U.S. without involving politics. Unfortunately, the immediate future does not bode well because the Republicans abhor socialism and will do everything in their power to delay a system of adequate social safety nets. Furthermore, Congress is heavily influenced by lobbyists on Wall Street who, rather than



having concern for the will of the majority of citizens, seem to be concerned only with the prosperity of the wealthy at the expense of the middle class and the poor. So, unless the Democrats can get control of all three branches of the government, and get more liberals on the Supreme Court, the status quo of gridlock will continue, and secularists can do little to change things. Yes, capitalism has run amok in the supposedly democratic United States.

Over two millennia ago Aristotle proclaimed, and I paraphrase, “it is the duty of the *statesman* to provide the good life for all citizens.” Note the word statesman rather than politician. Today many political leaders govern in a manner that they believe will result in re-election, rather than having the welfare of all citizens as their major concern. If leaders operate in a statesman-like mode, with economic prosperity for all being a major consideration, surely then they are almost guaranteed to be re-elected. Yes, there is a real need for statesman-like leaders, and it does not have to be a man. Perhaps a stateswoman could fill the bill.

*How To Be Secular* provides a clear picture of how secularism declined in the United State as the political influence of the Religious Right increased. But Berlinerblau’s suggested solution of trying to unite all the various liberal entities of both believers and nonbelievers is in my view impractical. The only way to reduce the influence of the revivalists and create a more secular society is to provide economic prosperity and a sense of security for all citizens. The current situation in Brazil, where evangelical Christians are gaining political clout, provides a good example of how the evangelical message appeals to the poor who feel they have been abandoned by their government and the Catholic Church.

This book is recommended reading for all humanists, freethinkers, atheists and agnostics alike, because it points out that non-belief need not be the only focus of a secular society. Economic prosperity that enables the freedom for all to believe or not to believe as they see fit, while maintaining separation of church and state is also key. *Jacques Berlinerblau is a professor at Georgetown University.* (DAH).

## Godless

*By Dan Barker*

*Godless* is former evangelical pastor Dan Barker’s autobiographical chronicle of his journey from soul-saving preacher to confirmed non-believer. This 356-page book is divided into four sections: Part 1 – Rejecting God; Part 2 – Why I am an atheist; Part 3 – What’s wrong with Christianity; and Part 4 – Life is Good.

Dan was raised as a devout Christian and at age 15 he began his soul-saving ministry. He is a talented musician as well as a bilingual gifted speaker (Spanish). He became a successful independent pastor, and with his wife traveled throughout the United States and northwestern Mexico playing, singing and preaching at special religious events, firmly believing in redemption and the second coming of Jesus. After attending Pacific Bible College in California, he was ordained in 1975 at age 26. Starting in 1979 he began to have serious doubts about the messages he was proclaiming, and by 1983 he realized that he could no longer continue preaching because he was being hypocritical. Early in 1984 he sent a letter to relatives, friends and associates, notifying them that he was no longer able to call himself a Christian and that he was indeed now an atheist. He put it this way. “You can either have God or you can have the truth. You cannot have both.”

This severance with the past resulted in losing contact with a number of relatives and friends and cost him his marriage. Surprisingly, soon after, both his parents, who were formerly devout Christians, also left their religion behind them. His mother said, “religion is just a bunch of baloney. I don’t have to hate anymore.”



Dan joined the Freedom From Religion Foundation, (FFRF) the largest organization of atheists and agnostics in the U.S., with 13,000 members, based in Madison, Wisconsin. It was founded in 1978 by Anne Gaylor. In 1987 Dan married the “boss’s daughter,” Annie Laurie Gaylor, and in 2004 they were elected co-presidents of the organization. Over the years Dan had debated 64 times with Christian theologians on the subject of, “Is there or is there not a God?” A lot of his time is spent in court on cases that threaten the separation of church and state. They have won some and lost some. The FFRF received national recognition when they placed a sign with the following wording along side a nativity scene at the Wisconsin State Capitol:

“At this season of the Winter Solstice, may reason prevail. There are no gods, no devils, no angels, no heaven or hell. There is only our natural world. Religion is but a myth and superstition that hardens hearts and enslaves minds.”

A similar sign was placed at the Washington State Capitol in Olympia in 2008. It was stolen but later returned. The FFRF is much more than an organization that preaches to the converted. Their members and staff actively get out into the real world and fight for human rights and freedom from religion. In the central sections of the book Dan convincingly outlines in, great detail, his logic and justification for abandoning Christianity. He discusses topics such as “Refuting God” and “Bible Contradictions” and asks questions like, “Did Jesus Exist?” and “Did Jesus Really Rise From the Dead?” The book is loaded with quotable excerpts, some of which are listed below.

One excerpt provides credible explanations for atheism and agnosticism. As Dan explains, agnosticism addresses knowledge, and atheism addresses belief. The agnostic says, “I don’t have knowledge that God exists.” The atheist says, “I don’t have a belief that God exists.” You can be both at the same time. Some agnostics are atheists, and some are theists. One common belief is that agnosticism is a halfway house between theism and atheism – but this cannot be since it performs in a different arena. Agnosticism is sensible. Agnostics will not claim as a fact, something for which evidence is lacking. Atheism is merely the lack of theism. You are an atheist if you lack a belief in God. Dyed-in-the-wool atheists, however, are not also agnostics, because they are adamant that God does not exist. (Many people have an aversion to the word atheist because it can have a negative connotation. In the U.S. atheists are hated more than homosexuals. For this reason, some prefer the term non-believer or non-theist.)

Here are a few more notable, but shorter quotes from the book:

- Truth does not ask to be believed. It asks to be tested.
- There is no evidence that theists are more moral than atheists. In fact, the contrary seems to be true, as portrayed by centuries of religious violence.
- Why did Jesus, the unrivaled moral example, never once speak out against slavery?
- In the Old Testament, hell is just death or the grave. With Jesus, hell became a place of everlasting torment with wailing and gnashing of teeth.
- Only three of the Ten Commandments have any relevance to American law: homicide, theft and perjury.
- Simply stated, ethics *asks* what is actually good or bad, while morality *states* what is good or bad.
- Morality is simply acting with the intention to minimize harm. To be moral, people employ the simple tools of reason and kindness. There is no cosmic code book directing actions.
- Creationism tries to explain complexity with more complexity, which only replaces one mystery with another.
- Science has given us much. Theology has given us hell.



- We have suffered enough from the divine malignancy of belief. Our planet needs a faithectomy.
- As long as there are problems to solve there will be purpose in life.
- Using judgment, we can stem racism, sexism, and violence. Using reason, we can rise above religion.
- Religion divides, art unites.
- We atheists believe in life *before* death.

Also, worth quoting are the first two lines of Dan's poem, *It's Only Natural:*

*Thanks to Galileo for showing us our humble place in outer space.  
And thanks to Mr. Darwin for showing us the origin of the human race.*

And here, from the book, is a great definition of humanism: "Humanists are accountable to real, natural, breathing human beings (and other sentient animals), and to enforceable human laws, not to an unprovable, pie-in-the-sky deity. This makes humanism superior as a guide for moral behavior. Humanism is not just better than the bible – the Bad Book – it is the only way we can be moral."

The book ends with the following pearl of wisdom: "If salvation is the freedom from sin, then we atheists have it. If salvation is deliverance from oppression and disease in the real world, then there is work to do. In this ongoing effort to make our planet a better place – to have true peace on earth – we atheists and humanists are happy to work shoulder-to-shoulder with truly good religious people who also strive for a future with less violence and more understanding."

As stated above, the book presents a logical and convincing explanation of how non-belief in a deity, and non-belief in the inerrancy of the bible, trumps the beliefs and dogmas of Christianity. While at times there may be some overkill in the explanations (20 pages are devoted to listing contradictions in the bible) this is a small quibble. *Godless* is highly recommended reading for all humanists. (DAH).

## **Living the Secular Life – By Phil Zuckerman**

The title of this book describes what it is all about, ie., living a rewarding and fulfilling moral and ethical secular life without belief in the supernatural. In the Introduction, Zuckerman puts it this way. Secularists "share certain key traits and values, such as self-reliance, freedom of thought, intellectual inquiry, cultivating autonomy in children, pursuing truth, basing morality on the empathetic reciprocity embedded in the Golden Rule, accepting the inevitability of our eventual death, navigating life with a sober pragmatism grounded in this world (not the next) and enjoying a sense of deep transcendence now amid the inexplicable, inscrutable profundity of being."

A secondary theme in the book is the recent spike of secularity that has been a remarkable phenomenon unprecedented in America's history. Back in the 1950s, fewer than 5 percent of Americans were non-religious. By the early 1990s the number had grown only modestly to 8 percent, but jumped to 14 percent in 2001 rising to 19 percent in 2013. Today the overall figure is close to 30 percent. Furthermore, over a third of individuals between the ages of eighteen and twenty-nine now claim to be non-religious. Yes, despite the efforts of the religious-right evangelists, secularism is the fastest growing orientation in America. For the first time ever, more people are leaving churches than are joining them.



Chapter 1 is entitled Morality, in which Zuckerman deals with the age-old question of: how can one be good without God? Many religious believers seem to feel that morality originated only from God, but this is far from reality as George Jacob Holyoake, who coined the word secularism back in 1851, explains. "Secularism is a code of duty pertaining to this life, founded on considerations purely human, and intended mainly for those who find theology indefinite or inadequate, unreliable or unbelievable. Its essential principles are three: (1) The improvement of this life by material means. (2) That science is the available Providence of man. (3) That it is good to do good. Whether there be other good or not, the good of the present life is good, and it is good to seek that good." In sum, morality must stem from our humanity, and from our experiences with other humans.

Other chapters are entitled, The Good Society, Irreligion Rising, Raising Kids, Creating Community, Trying Times, Don't Fear the Reaper (This life is all we get. Never take it for granted, because it is precious) and Atheism. All great chapters, but I want to comment especially on Community.

Creating community is a challenge for humanists. How do secularists create the sense of community present in most churches? Many mainline churchgoers readily admit that it is not a firm belief in creeds and dogmas that is the attraction; it is mainly the "social glue" and perhaps the opportunity to engage in outreach social work. So what about secularists? How do they participate in community activities? Or on the other hand, do most secularists really feel it is even necessary to belong to an organized group?

According to anthropologist Dr. Frank Pasquale, the "natural resting state" of secularity for many secularists is an indifference or lack of interest concerning joining a secular group. Why? Because the very nature of being secular is such that it does not lend itself to joining large groups of like-minded people specifically on the basis of their secularity. His recent research indicates that atheists and agnostics tend to value the autonomy of the individual rather than loyal bonds to a collective. Other research by Dr. Catherine Caldwell-Harris seems to confirm this view. She has found that non-believers tend to be much less social, less conformist, and more individualistic than believers on average, and ultimately less in need of social support. And observations on the ground appear to confirm these findings. Memberships in organized humanist groups are not large, except in Norway where the Norwegian Humanist Association is able to claim up to 80,000 members, mainly because this group receives a part of the National church tax. In most other official humanist organizations, membership is in the low thousands. (The Freedom From Religion Foundation is an exception. It has about 20,000 members). Most humanist organizations do not have the critical mass of numbers necessary to guarantee the political clout required to insure the continuance of secular societies with firm separation of church and state. It seems that most secularists just want to go about engaging in a moral and ethical lifestyle, raising their families, furthering their career and enjoying the "good things" in life. Joining organizations does not seem to be a priority for many secularists. (DAH).

## **Free Thinkers: A History of American Free Thinkers**

*By Susan Jacoby*

The essence of this book is that the affairs of human beings should be governed not by faith in the supernatural, but by a reliance on reason and evidence from the natural world. In this book, Jacoby documents the lives and thinking of American free thinkers from pre-revolutionary days up to the present time. The first person mentioned is Thomas Paine, whose polemical pamphlets on behalf of independence, including his well-known treatise *Common Sense*, were instrumental in aiding the cause of the American



Revolution. His later publication, *The Age of Reason*, a critical examination of Christianity, resulted in his being labeled a “filthy little atheist.” The next individuals considered are the free-thinking founders of the American Constitution; Franklin, Jefferson, Madison, and Washington, who fought hard to keep the words God and Jesus out of the Constitution, thus establishing a firm wall separating church and state.

Among the free thinkers of the 1800s were the abolitionists, including Abraham Lincoln, and the women suffragettes including Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Ernestine L. Rose, Susan B. Anthony and Emma Goldman. A full chapter is devoted to the trials and tribulations of introducing Darwinian evolution into American society as well as long chapter devoted to the “Great Agnostic” Robert Green Ingersoll, the most famous orator of the late 1800s. Ingersoll is Jacoby’s hero (along with Paine) and she laments that since Ingersoll’s death, no free thinker has been his equal. Other free thinkers mentioned in this era are Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, Henry David Thoreau and Mark Twain.

Names of freethinkers that come up in the 1900s are Clarence Darrow, defense lawyer in the Scopes trial, the journalist H.L. Mencken, birth control advocate Margaret Sanger, and feminists Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem. One chapter is devoted to the increasing influence of the Catholic Church, beginning in the 1930s, promoting opposition to birth control, abortion, divorce and later, gay marriage. Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement is also covered. Of great concern today is the increasing influence of the religious right, particularly as it applies to government.

The last chapter is appropriately entitled Reason Embattled. Jacoby laments the lack of reason and common sense in so many areas of American life. She also regrets the fact that secularists do not have a spokesperson of the stature of Robert Ingersoll. She states, “secularists must stop pussyfooting around the issues of harm that religion is capable of doing and speak up in defense of the Constitution. They must defend the Enlightenment values that produced the legal structure crafted by the framers.” In conclusion, she notes that secularists need a new name to identify themselves, because the term secular humanist has been so denigrated by the right. She says, “It is time to revive the evocative and honorable *freethinker*, with its insistence that Americans think for themselves instead of relying on received opinion. The combination of *free* and *thought* embodies every ideal that secularists still hold out to a nation founded, not on dreams of justice in heaven, but on the best human hopes for a just earth.” (DAH).

## **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,” Dawkins, Hitchens, Harris and Dennett.

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).

### **More Quotes**

- If God does exist, he must be an underachiever. - Woody Allen.
- There is in every village a torch: the teacher; and an extinguisher: the clergyman. – Victor Hugo.
- Men will never be free until the last king is strangled with the entrails of the last priest. - Denis Diderot
- I don't believe in God because I don't believe in Mother Goose. – Clarence Darrow.
- A great conductor is credited with saying: “If you have Mozart, you don't need God.”
- I do not believe that the same God who has endowed us with sense, reason and intellect, has intended us to forego their use. - Galileo.
- We must learn to live together or perish as fools. – Martin Luther King.
- God is dead: but considering the state Man is in, there will perhaps be caves for ages yet in which his shadow will be shown. - Friedrich Nietzsche.
- Prayers are to men as dolls are to children. They are not without use and comfort, but it is not easy to take them very seriously. – Samuel Butler, poet (1612-1680).
- All religions we call false were once true. – Ralph Waldo Emerson.
- Religion is excellent stuff for keeping the common people quiet. – Napoleon Bonaparte.
- If you talk to God, you are Praying. If God talks to you, you have Schizophrenia. - Thomas Szasz.



## **Section III - Science**

### **The Pale Blue Dot**

*By Carl Sagan*

Look again at that dot. That's here. That's home. That's us. On it everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives. The aggregate of our joy and suffering, thousands of confident religions, ideologies, and economic doctrines, every hunter and forager, every hero and coward, every creator and destroyer of civilization, every king and peasant, sunbeam, every young couple in love, every mother and father, hopeful child, inventor and explorer, every teacher of morals, every corrupt politician, every "superstar," every "supreme leader," every saint and sinner in the history of our species lived there-on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam.



The Earth is a very small stage in a vast cosmic arena. Think of the endless cruelties visited by the inhabitants of one corner of this pixel on the scarcely distinguishable inhabitants of some other corner, how frequent their misunderstandings, how eager they are to kill one another, how fervent their hatreds. Think of the rivers of blood spilled by all those generals and emperors so that, in glory and triumph, they could become the momentary masters of a fraction of a dot.

Our posturings, our imagined self-importance, the delusion that we have some privileged position in the Universe, are challenged by this point of pale light. Our planet is a lonely speck in the great enveloping cosmic dark. In our obscurity, in all this vastness, there is no hint that help will come from elsewhere to save us from ourselves.

The Earth is the only world known so far to harbor life. There is nowhere else, at least in the near future, to which our species could migrate. Visit, yes. Settle, not yet. Like it or not, for the moment the Earth is where we make our stand.

It has been said that astronomy is a humbling and character-building experience. There is perhaps no better demonstration of the folly of human conceits than this distant image of our tiny world. To me, it underscores our responsibility to deal kindly with one another, and to preserve and cherish the pale blue dot, the only home we've ever known.

### **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).

## **What an Amazing Wonder - This Pale Blue Dot**

**How Did Our Planet and We Humans Come To Be?**

*By Don Hatch*

Sitting in my comfortable La-Z-Boy chair in my ninety first year, I sometimes cogitate about just how lucky I am. I am in reasonable health, have family around me, have all the conveniences one could ask for, can still drive my car and have enough income to keep the wolf from the door. Also, I have complete peace of mind, believing that my short time on this earth is the only life I will ever live, and at some time in the future, my body will return to the earth from whence it came.

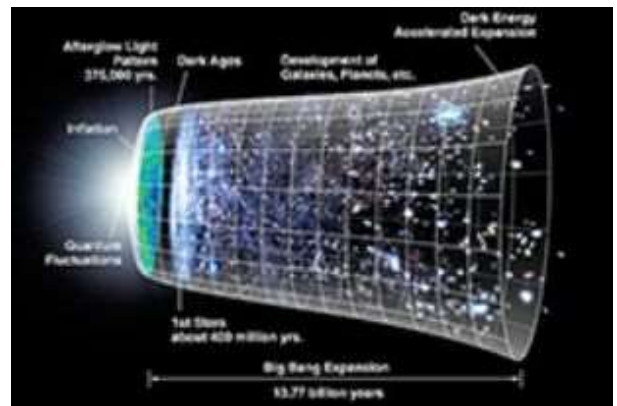
So, I wonder, what were the series of events occurring over billions of years that led up to me being born in 1930, enabling me to be able to obtain an education, establish a career, raise a family and now enjoy a lengthy retirement? I have read that it all began 13.77 billion years ago with a big bang. This prompted me to investigate the major events that happened between then and now, in order to try and get some idea of how it was that I came to be a resident on our pale blue dot during the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. I trust readers will be willing to join me on this explorative journey.



# The Universe

## Pre-human Times

Immediately after the big bang, the universe was very hot and very dense. As the universe cooled and expanded, complicated developments occurred, little of which I understand. Suffice to say that after about 400,000 years, large quantities of hydrogen and helium and a bit of lithium and beryllium were present, and after about 200 million years these elements began to lump together and form stars. After about 400 million years galaxies began to form and by one billion years many galaxies existed as the universe continued to expand. A spiral galaxy similar to our Milky Way is shown below right.



**The 13.77 Billion Year Old Universe**

But stars within galaxies do not last forever. After a few billion years they burn out. Smaller stars like our sun turn into red dwarfs, then white dwarfs and finally brown dwarfs. Large stars become supernovas and some may eventually become a black hole. It is from the decaying of stars that the 88 elements, not formed originally in stars, come into being and eventually lump up into planets circulating around a sun. In other words, our planet, and we humans, are made from the ashes of stars. Or, as Carl Sagan has stated, "we are made of star stuff." Admittedly, the foregoing is an over-simplification but I trust it is a credible summary.



**A Spiral Galaxy**

**Our Solar System** - In our solar system, the outer gaseous planets of Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, and Neptune formed first. The terrestrial planets of Mercury, Venus, Earth, and Mars formed later. Our Earth is estimated to be 4.54 billion years old. A detailed account of this 4.54 billion-year evolution is printed below.

<b><u>Eon</u></b>	<b><u>Time (millions)</u></b>	<b><u>Description</u></b>
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<b><u>Hadean</u></b>	4,540–4,000	
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	The Earth is formed out of debris around the solar protoplanetary disk. There is no life. Temperatures are extremely hot, with frequent volcanic activity and hellish-looking environments (hence the eon's name, which comes from Hades). The atmosphere is nebular. Possible early oceans or bodies of liquid water. The Moon is formed around this time probably due to a protoplanet's collision into Earth.
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<b><u>Archean</u></b>	4,000–2,500	
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	Prokaryote life, the first form of life, emerges at the very beginning of this eon, in a process known as abiogenesis. The continents of Ur, Vaalbara, and Kenorland may have existed around this time. The atmosphere is composed of volcanic and greenhouse gases.
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<b><u>Proterozoic</u></b>	2,500–541	
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	The name of this eon means "early life". Eukaryotes, a more complex form of life, emerge, including some forms of multicellular organisms. Bacteria begin producing oxygen, shaping the third and current of Earth's
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atmospheres. Plants, later animals and possibly earlier forms of fungi form around this time. The early and late phases of this eon may have undergone "Snowball Earth" periods, in which all of the planet suffered below-zero temperatures. The early continents of Columbia, Rodinia, and Pannotia, in that order, may have existed in this eon.

### **Phanerozoic** 541–present

Complex life, including vertebrates, begin to dominate the Earth's ocean in a process known as the Cambrian explosion. Pangaea forms and later dissolves into Laurasia and Gondwana, which in turn dissolve into the current continents. Gradually, life expands to land and familiar forms of plants, animals, and fungi begin appearing, including annelids, insects, and reptiles, hence the eon's name, which means "visible life." Several mass extinctions occur, among which birds, the descendants of non-avian dinosaurs, and more recently mammals emerge. Modern animals—including humans—evolve at the most recent phases of this eon.

(Taken from *Wikipedia*. It would have been impossible to compose this *Enlightenment* article without extensive use of Wikipedia. For a number of years, I have been making an annual donation to Wikipedia, and I urge all readers who make use of Wikipedia to do the same).

## **The Human Times**

Homo sapiens first appeared on the scene about 200,000 years ago, after 3.5 billion years of evolution of life forms on earth. But humans with highly developed brains did not come into being until about 30,000 years ago. This became known as the "great leap forward" theory. The descendants of these early people lived for millennia as hunter-gathers foraging for food, both animal and vegetable. They cooked their food, fire having been discovered thousands of years earlier. It has been speculated that the hunter-gatherers lived happily with plenty of leisure in times when food was readily available. And it is likely that everyone was treated equally, sharing in the food that had been gathered. Hunter-gatherers were also probably the first to domesticate the dog. Were they peaceful people, or did tribal warfare exist? We cannot be certain, but we do know that North American indigenous tribes engaged in warfare. The hunter-gatherer era in western Asia came to an end about 11,000 years ago with the beginning of the Agricultural Revolution in the area now known as Iraq. It happened in this region because animals that could be domesticated were living nearby. The first domesticated animals (after the dog) were sheep and goats, followed by pigs, cows, horses, and camels. Early varieties of wheat, barley, and rice were also available.

The Agricultural Revolution was not entirely a positive development. If indeed the hunter-gatherers had time on their hands, this leisure disappeared for the masses that comprised 90% of the population. Peasants were forced to work long hours in the fields to feed the 10% who were royalty, aristocracy, and merchant class, as well as for themselves.

Villages, towns, and cities began to appear as a ruling class developed. Ownership of land became important and often caused disputes. The mining and smelting of metals came on the scene with tin and copper amalgamated to form bronze. This invention ushered in the bronze age (3000-1200 BCE) followed by the iron age (1200-600 BCE) with the subsequent invention of carbon steel used for making tools and weapons. These were also the years of ancient empires. The Egyptian empire lasted from 3100 BCE to 332 BCE. The Persian from 550-350 BCE. The Greek from 776-350 BCE, and the Roman from 27 BCE to 476 CE.



Special mention must be made of Greece. So much developed there. By 800 BCE an alphabet had been developed, and the writings of Homer are available to us even today. Athens is famous as the cradle of democracy, its impressive architecture (Parthenon), its poetry, drama, and its philosophers, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Euclid was the founder of geometry and Archimedes was an early scientist.

After the conquests and death of Alexander the Great, the Romans began to expand their territory, forming a huge empire that lasted for 500 years. It was during this period that the Christian religion came into being, morphing into the Roman Catholic Church which ruled as a top down oligarchy all through the so-called Dark Ages, stifling the secular democracy, science, and philosophy of the Greeks. But things began to change for the better with the advent of the Protestant Reformation in 1517, and the beginning of the Scientific Revolution, with people like Copernicus (1473-1543), Galileo (1564- 1642), and Sir Isaac Newton (1642-1727) coming on the scene. A new era like no other had begun. An era that has come to be known as the Anthropocene because for the first time in history, the activities of humans have affected the earth's atmosphere and brought about climate change that must be dealt with on behalf of our descendants.

### **The Last Five Hundred Years – From 1500 Until Now**

After the beginning of the Agricultural Revolution, manual labour and animal power were the main sources of energy, although wind was used to propel ships and drive windmills. Eventually waterpower was harnessed to drive mills and factories, but it was after 1800 that rapid changes began to take place. With the advent of improved equipment in textile mills and the invention of the steam engine, the Industrial Revolution was underway. Workers who transferred from farms to factories initially worked long hours, often under undesirable conditions, but eventually unions were formed and conditions gradually improved. Transportation advanced from horses and buggies and stagecoaches to trains, automobiles, and airplanes. Eventually our homes became equipped with a multitude of electrical labour-saving devices. Yes, drudgery has all but disappeared and now only a small percentage of the population lives on farms, and these few stewards of the land capably feed the rest of us. But all these advancements have come with a price. They could not have come about without the use of fossil fuels that are now being recognized as a contributor to climate change. Hopefully, common sense and new technology will solve this problem.

None of this relatively rapid transformation could have occurred without amazing advancements in science and technology. The invention of the steam engine has been mentioned. These engines provided economical power to drive factories, steam ships, and locomotives. The invention of the internal combustion engine brought about the proliferation of the millions of automobiles and trucks we see today, as well as providing a power source for heavier-than-air aircraft. Now electric motors have replaced steam engines; hopefully they will soon replace internal combustion engines in cars and trucks as well.

The development of the electric motor and the electric grid deserve special mention. Scientists in the late 1700s and early 1800s discovered a relationship between electric current and magnetism, and this was the start of something truly phenomenal. First, with direct current (DC) and later with alternating current (AC), thanks to Michael Faraday's discovery of electromagnetic induction leading to the transformer, the dynamo, and the electric motor. This, coupled with Nicola Tesla's invention of three-phase power, led to the electric grid and all the electric appliances we have today.

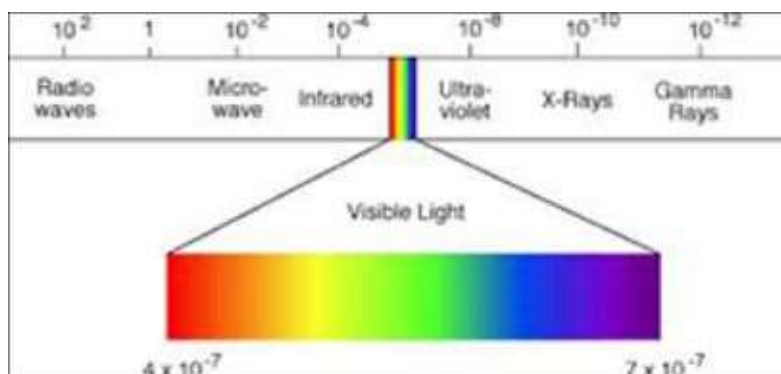
Now I would like to mention two amazing natural phenomena that were discovered in the 1800s and changed the way we live. They are the Periodic Table of the Elements and the Electromagnetic Spectrum.



The Periodic Table of the Elements was first revealed by the Russian chemist Dmitri Mendeleev in 1869. In this table all the elements beginning with hydrogen are listed in ascending order with each element having one more proton and one more electron than the previous one. What amazing symmetry! Knowledge of this table aided the development of the chemical industry which now produces a multitude of chemicals, most of which are beneficial to humanity, although a few have proved harmful and production had to be discontinued.



The Electromagnetic Spectrum is truly an amazing natural phenomenon. It has brought remarkable technologies to humankind. These include radio, television, smart phones, radar, microwaves, and X rays. And of course, the visible light section enables us to see. The spectrum consists of a series of electromagnetic waves, ranging from radio waves having long wavelengths and low frequencies to very short wavelength



### The Electromagnetic Spectrum

and high frequency cosmic rays. These radiations can travel through space, and the lower frequencies are used for voice communication and the transmission of pictures. The whole spectrum was not discovered at one time. It took a while before all the pieces were put together. In 1888 Heinrich Hertz proved in his laboratory that it was possible, as predicted by physicist James Maxwell, to send radio waves through the air. The electronic age had begun.

## Me

I believe I have provided a fairly realistic summary of how it is that, 13.77 billion years after the big bang, I am able to live comfortable in my home, surrounded by conveniences that are the results of the ingenious minds of scientists, inventors, technologists, engineers, and others. But how did it happen that I personally arrived on this third rock from the sun, that sits in the so-called goldilocks zone 93 million miles (150 million km) from the sun, on May 20, 1930, in Guelph Ontario Canada? Yes, I am fortunate to be a Canadian.

I know from family tree research and DNA testing that my roots go back principally to England, with a bit of Scottish influence thrown in. My mother's immediate ancestors came to Canada in the late 1800s and my father's grandparents and parents arrived in Canada in the early 1900s. My mother was born in Guelph, Ontario in 1905 and my father in Fergus, Ontario in 1907. They were married in 1929. I was the first born. Thus, it would follow that I am the chance result of untold numbers of copulations that go way back to the long history of the British Isles and who knows, likely to hunter-gatherer days as well.

My life began sometime in 1929 as a zygote formed in my mother's womb after the union of my mother's ovum and my father's sperm. This zygote divided countless times until I was born as a fully developed conscious human being. To me this is a miracle, and I state without fear of contradiction: *the development of a human being in a mother's womb is the greatest miracle in the universe*. How is it that DNA from two parents contains the instructions for forming bones, muscles, limbs, organs and, above all, a complicated



amazing brain? A miracle? Yes indeed! Surely the birth of a child is sacred in a secular sense, and surely it should be the aim of all humanity to guarantee that every new-born child in the world is provided with clean air, potable water, food, clothing, and shelter. What a laudable challenge for humanity to strive for.

So, here we are, humans sitting at the top of our world's animal kingdom. We have the ability to learn and speak languages, to reason, to make decisions, to feel emotions like love, compassion and forgiveness, to enjoy the company of others, to invent and create, to build things, and to enjoy the wonders of nature and the arts. Lots of good things to be thankful for.

But there are also bad and even evil things. Humans can be greedy, lazy, hate others, especially those not like themselves, destroy things and go to war, degrade the environment, and ignore warnings about climate change. The need for improvement in the way some greedy and destructive people behave is obvious.

We know that the human brain has evolved to its present state over millennia, enabling the majority of people to live ethical and moral lives, so is there any reason not to think that the human brain will continue to evolve and result in individuals being less greedy and less inclined to go to war? We can hope so.

Today we are facing a new revolution. It is called the Digital Revolution with the coming reality of artificial intelligence (AI) that we must learn to use for the benefit of all humankind, not just a few. We are living in turbulent times with increasing populism and even oligarchy at the expense of democracy, and it will require clear-thinking leaders with intelligent brains to guide the future of humanity toward a better world on our precious blue dot, but I see very few such leaders in sight. Nevertheless, we should not despair because in the past humanity has overcome disastrous wars, economic depressions and other hardships, but at other times enjoyed peace and prosperity and the fruits of human creativity. So, let us take a moment to reflect on the good things.

## **Time for Reflection**

### **With Poetry and Song**

After reading about our wonderful Blue Dot, I think it is fitting to reflect on just how privileged and fortunate we are to be alive on this speck in the universe. What better way than to read the words of jazz great Luis Armstrong's poem, *What a Wonderful World*. And yes, maybe sing along too. Reading or singing these words should make us ever mindful of the need to preserve what we have and make us realize that we must find ways to ensure that our descendants are able to thrive, as we have done, on this Blue Dot. Enjoy! (DAH).

## **"What A Wonderful World"**

*By Louis Armstrong*

I see trees of green,  
red roses too.  
I see them bloom,  
for me and you.  
And I think to myself,  
what a wonderful world.



I see skies of blue,  
And clouds of white.  
The bright blessed day,  
The dark sacred night.  
And I think to myself,  
What a wonderful world.

The colors of the rainbow,  
So pretty in the sky.  
Are also on the faces,  
Of people going by,  
I see friends shaking hands.  
Saying, "How do you do?"  
They're really saying,  
"I love you".

I hear babies cry,  
I watch them grow,  
They'll learn much more,  
Than I'll ever know.  
And I think to myself,  
What a wonderful world.  
Yes, I think to myself,  
What a wonderful world.

## **Science Versus Metaphysics and Theology**

### **Looking for a Black Cat**

**Metaphysics** is like being in a dark room 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.

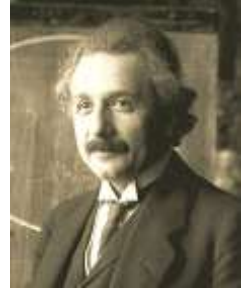
### **More Quotes**

- The attempt to make either the Bible or tradition infallible, is never an attempt to preserve truth. - John Shelby Spong
- Faith is believing in something you know ain't true. – Mark Twain
- Prayer has no place in the public schools, just like facts have no place in religion. Superintendent Chalmers, the Simpsons



## The Wonders of Science

Humanist principle No. 3 states: Humanists advocate the use of the scientific method, both as a guide to distinguish fact from fiction and to help develop beneficial and creative uses of science and technology. Centering on this principle, science is the theme of this special edition of *The Enlightenment*. The contents of this issue will not only point out some of the historical achievements of scientists but will also suggest ways that science might aid in promoting humanistic values. As well, some of the amazing phenomena of the scientific world that inspire wonder will be highlighted.



Einstein (1879-1955)

Up until about the 15<sup>th</sup> century, God was often cited as the originator and cause of natural phenomena. For instance, only an omniscient God knew how to make a tree or knew how conception came about. But as time went by, the need for the divine became less and less as scientists unraveled more and more of the mysteries of the cosmos. Also there developed a very distinct difference between science and religion. Whereas religious beliefs tended to be cast in stone forever and ever, science is self-correcting. As new discoveries are made, old assumptions or beliefs are amended or discarded. For example, it took centuries for the Catholic Church hierarchy to pronounce that Galileo was right when he claimed that the planets revolve around the sun, but when Einstein proved that Newton's laws of motion do not apply at high velocities in outer space, the scientific community was *relatively* quick to accept Einstein's findings.



Newton 1643-1727

Einstein is often described as a "giant" among scientists, but in his typical modest way, he shunned this moniker. Instead, he said that he stood on the shoulders of giants. This has been a historic fact of science. Galileo furthered the work of Copernicus who affirmed the heliocentricity of the solar system. Newton built on Galileo's telescope experiments, and Einstein augmented the laws of Newton. And so it goes. Faraday used the discoveries of Volta, Ampere and Ohm, to discern electromagnetic induction. This led to the prediction of electromagnetic waves by Maxwell that led to the proof of their existence by Hertz. This in turn led to the invention of radio by Marconi and then television by Farnsworth, all monumental scientific achievements. The ensuing pages document these and many more fascinating aspects of science.



Galileo 1564-1642



Copernicus 1473-1542

### Learning About Science

From time to time there are comments in the media lamenting the fact that on a proportionate basis, certain of the Asian countries are training far more scientists and engineers than western countries. The concern is, of course, that western standards of living will not keep pace with other developed countries if we lack the people trained with the skills necessary to be competitive in the fast-moving global economy. For many students the sciences may not be their first love when it comes to selecting courses of study. This could be because some of the sciences require proficiency in mathematics or because the fascination of science itself was not ingrained into their young formative minds. It is the aim of this special edition of *The Enlightenment* to point out a few of the amazing realities of nature and the scientific world in the fields of chemistry, physics, biology, geology, astronomy and microbiology that should pique the interest of everyone, and in particular, young people.



In an effort to stimulate increased interest in science, it is submitted that scientific education must begin with the very young. Instead of teaching young children that God created the universe in six days, they should be made aware of the true age of the cosmos and the processes of biological evolution and geology. While it requires a brilliant mind to fully understand the intricacies of advanced science, the basics as described herein are easily comprehended by everyone. Let's use science as a tool in imparting humanist thinking into the minds of the youth of today and of the future.

### **The Wonders of Chemistry - What Are We Made Of?**

According to a nursery rhyme written in the early 1800s, little boys are made of "Snaps and snails and puppy-dogs' tails," and little girls are made of "Sugar and spice, and everything nice." Today we know a lot more about the composition of matter, both living and inert, than was known two hundred years ago. During this two-century period chemists have laid bare the composition of just about everything -- from the basic elements to the most complicated organic compounds.

For centuries it was known that certain substances could be broken down to form other substances, such as occurs with the smelting of ores to produce metals. In time, experimenters became aware that some substances, particularly metals, could be broken down no further, and the distinction between elements and compounds, which are made up of two or more elements, became known. A huge breakthrough occurred in 1869 when the Russian chemist Mendeljeff noticed that a relationship existed between atomic weights and the properties of the elements. From this observation he developed the Periodic Table of the Elements in 1871. There were many gaps in Mendeljeff's table, and he predicted that eventually elements would be discovered to fill the gaps. This proved to be true, and by the early twentieth century the table contained ninety-two elements, starting with hydrogen the lightest, and ending with uranium, the heaviest. This orderly arrangement of all the elemental substances that make up our solar system, and most likely the whole universe, surely inspires awe and wonder at the simplicity of it all and should help stimulate students to develop an interest in science.

So, what are we made of? We now know that we are made up of a complicated, intricate combination of nineteen elements that originate in air, water and soil. They are:

<u>From Air</u>	<u>From Water</u>	<u>From Soil (Via Plants)</u>	
(Also From Soil)		<u>Major Elements</u>	<u>Trace Elements</u>
Oxygen	Hydrogen	Calcium	Zinc
Nitrogen	Oxygen	Phosphorus	Iodine
Carbon		Potassium	Copper
		Sodium	Cobalt
		Sulfur	Fluorine
		Chlorine	Manganese
		Magnesium	Silicon
		Iron	

Some of these elements exist in the body in elemental form (minerals), or as inorganic compounds, including sodium chloride, calcium phosphate and water, but except for water, bones and teeth, the body is mostly made up of organic compounds in the forms of proteins, carbohydrates, fats and vitamins. Now what could



be more mind boggling that the fact that somehow, through evolution, natural phenomena, with the help of plants, have brought together the inert elements from the three sources listed above, to form the living conscious animals we call human beings? Is this not a truly remarkable happening that should greatly stimulate one's interest in science and, in particular, the interest of curious children?

In times past, God was credited with engineering this miracle. Now we know that the process that led up to the existence of the higher animals occurred over millions of years through evolution. As knowledge of the mechanisms involved increased, the need for God to be involved decreased. There is still, however, a most important gap in this march of events. We do not know precisely how life began. How did the first one-celled living organisms come about? What were the conditions? What was the catalyst that caused inert elements and/or compounds to morph into an organic living entity? Some believers will want to fill this gap with God. Many liberal Christians have accepted the reality of evolution and the time scale involved, but believe God had a hand in getting it all started. This was the belief of the Deists in the eighteenth century. On the other hand, some scientists have predicted that the processes and mechanisms involved will be known before the end of the present century, and the "God of the gaps" will no longer be necessary.

Now as astonishing as the mechanisms that spawned the evolution of humans might be, there is another natural phenomenon that is almost as amazing. It is the process known as photosynthesis, which occurs in the leaves of plants. In this process plant leaves extract carbon dioxide from the air and take up water from the soil to produce simple sugars such as glucose. The simple sugars are then converted into compound sugars, to starches, to fats, to proteins and vitamins, all in the leaves of green plants. And to boot, the leaves produce by-product oxygen, which is essential for animal life. It is imperative that this symbiotic relationship between plants and animals remain in balance in order for humans to survive. This is why there is great concern about the excessive burning of fossil fuels that increase the air's carbon dioxide content, causing global warming, and about the destruction of the rain forests, which reduces the amount of oxygen returned to the atmosphere.

The above discourse just scratches the surface of some of the secrets of nature that chemists have been able to unravel, but perhaps it is enough to illustrate that this branch of science is truly fascinating. In addition to being useful for understanding much of what goes on in the biological sciences, chemistry is a most important tool for doctors in diagnosing medical conditions and for those involved in medical research. Advanced chemistry can get complicated, but the rudiments are fairly straightforward, and can be taught to children at a young age in an effort to teach them the true facts, rather than creation stories based on Biblical myths.

### **The Wonders of Physics**

There are several branches of physics including mechanics, properties of matter, heat, electricity and magnetism, sound, and electromagnetic waves. Much has been discovered and documented in each of these areas, but I would like to touch briefly on just two to illustrate the intrigue of this subject. These are electricity and magnetism, and electromagnetic waves.

The electrical age really got started in 1800, when the Italian physicist Alessandro Volta (1745-1827) invented the chemical battery, the first source of continuous direct current. Another pioneer was the French physicist and mathematician André-Marie Ampere (1775-1836), who worked on electromagnetism experiments. A significant development occurred in 1827, when the German physicist Georg Ohm (1787-



1854) published what became known as Ohm's Law, which defined the mathematical relationship between voltage, current and resistance. It states:

Voltage (measured in Volts) = Current (measured in Amperes) X Resistance (measured in Ohms). It is usually expressed as  $E=IXR$ , where E stands for Electromotive Force (volts), I stands for Current (amps) and R stands for Resistance (ohms).

This simple equation,  $E=IXR$ , defines the basis of every electrical circuit in the universe and is another example of the innate beauty of a law of nature. It has to be modified for alternating current if an inductor or capacitor is introduced into the circuit, but the basic concept remains.

Speaking of inductors, we must move on to the famous English chemist and physicist Michael Faraday (1791-1867) the discoverer of electromagnetic induction, which led to the development of the electric motor, the dynamo, and the transformer. This was really the start of the modern electric age. With the invention of three-phase electrical technology by the Serbian electrical engineer, Nikolai Tesla (1856-1943) and the power dynamos of the American engineer and industrialist George Westinghouse (1846-1914), the electrification of industries and homes became a reality. And of course, the American inventor Thomas Alva Edison (1847-1931) was also highly involved, with the light bulb probably being the most famous of his many inventions. In time, electric power gradually phased out the steam age. The point to be made is that by unlocking some of the amazing laws and forces of nature, a few brilliant early physicists enabled the development of technology that led to all the labour -saving devices we enjoy today. Without these devices there would be much less time for leisure.

As revolutionary as the fruits of electricity, the flowing of electrons *in wires* has been, the legacy of utilizing electromagnetic waves to transmit messages and pictures *through space* is even more astonishing. The existence of electromagnetic waves was first predicted by the Scottish mathematician and theoretical physicist James Clerk Maxwell (1831-1879). He theorized that electricity, magnetism and visible light were all manifestations of the electromagnetic field. His work, which led to the discovery of the electromagnetic spectrum, has been described as the second greatest unification in physics after the first one carried out by Newton. Maxwell was one of Einstein's heroes. He kept a picture of Maxwell on his study wall along with pictures of Faraday and Newton. Maxwell's prediction that it would be possible to transmit electromagnetic waves through space was proved correct in 1887 by German physicist Heinrich Hertz (1857-1894) when he transmitted and received radio waves in his laboratory.

The discovery of the electromagnetic spectrum which consists of low frequency radio waves, microwaves, infrared, visible and ultraviolet light, X rays and gamma rays, is to physics what the periodic table was to chemistry. It is truly an amazing natural phenomenon, and like Ohm's Law can be represented by a simple equation, which is the following:

The speed of light = frequency X wavelength.

Since the speed of light is a constant of 300,000 kilometers per second, the frequency of electromagnetic radiation increases as the wavelength decreases. Thus, radio waves have lower frequencies and longer wavelengths than waves higher up in the spectrum.



As we now know, the groundwork on the electromagnetic spectrum by the nineteenth century physicists cited above, led to a series of inventions of great commercial importance. The Italian inventor Guglielmo Marconi (1874-1937) invented continuous wave radio in the 1890s. The Canadian inventor Reginald Fessenden (1886-1932) was the first to transmit voice in 1900. American inventor Philo Farnsworth (1906-1971) invented the first practical television in the 1930s. And then an event of monumental importance occurred with the invention of the transistor at the Bell Telephone Laboratories in 1947, by John Bardeen, Walter Brattain and William Shockley. For this the three were awarded the Nobel Prize for physics in 1956. We all know the rest of the story. The substitution of the bulky vacuum tube by the miniature transistor, followed by the development of chips and integrated circuits, spurred on the space program, sped up the computer revolution and resulted in the creation of numerous miraculous devices such as cell phones, iPods, iPads, the amazing internet and PCs or Macs in most homes.

All of the developments cited above are the result of the work of brilliant pioneering individuals who, over a period of two centuries, had an intense interest in science and technology, and brought about monumental changes in the way we live. Surely these exciting events should be enough evidence to entice more students to engage in scientific studies.

### **The Science of Biology**

Biology encompasses the sciences of Botany, Zoology and Genetics, all extensive subjects in themselves. Because of space limitations, I want to touch on just two very important events in these disciplines. The first is the publication of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* in 1859 and the other is the discovery of the double helix by Watson and Crick in 1953.

Prior to Darwin's ground-breaking publication, most western Christians believed in the creation story in the book of Genesis. Asking people to switch from a six-day creation a few thousand years ago, to a process of evolution through natural selection stretching over millions of years, has proved to be a long drawn out process. Even today, 150 years later, as many as half the people in the United States still believe dinosaurs and people walked the earth together 6000 years ago. This is a perfect example of how the young impressionable minds of some Christian children can be indoctrinated with untruths that they may firmly believe for life.

Most scientists, however, readily accepted the theory of evolution and it has aided biologists in classifying the plant and animal kingdoms. All living things, both plants and animals, can be slotted into the pyramidal classification system of Phylum, Class, Order, Family, Genus and Species.

The year 2009 marked the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Darwin's birth (Feb. 12<sup>th</sup>) and the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of *On the Origin of Species*. Many humanist organizations celebrated these events in various ways. The Humanist Association of London and Area, along with the University of Western Ontario and the London Public Library, arranged for a series of four Darwin lectures held at the Wolf Performance Hall at the library.

For many years, biologists have known of the existence of chromosomes and the part they play in heredity and in the reproductive process of mitosis. They have also know of RNA and DNA, but it was not until Watson and Crick uncovered the double helix structure of chromosomes and the possible countless combinations of the four nucleotide bases linking the helixes, that reproductive processes were fully understood. The need for God's role in reproduction disappeared. Watson and Crick received the Nobel Prize for their discovery.



Their work enabled the eventual completion of the mapping of human genome as well as advances in the field of gene therapy. The potential for medical breakthroughs is huge as long as ethical issues are resolved in situations such as stem cell research. Perhaps the biggest ethical issue is human cloning. It is almost certain that the techniques necessary to clone a human being now exist, and it is also possible that some wealthy person would be willing to have himself or herself cloned. I don't think, however, as intriguing as it might be, that humanity is ready for this eventuality at this time in our history.

Just as the invention of the transistor in 1947 brought about undreamed of changes in the way we now live in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the discovery of Watson and Crick in 1953 has the same potential to bring about great breakthroughs, particularly in the fields of medicine and plant breeding. In both cases ethical and safety issues are involved. Let's hope that these issues can be resolved sensibly and unselfishly for the future benefits of humankind.

### **The Science of Geology**

Geology is the science and study of the materials that make up the earth, or in simple terms, the study of rocks. It is a very useful and practical science because an understanding of geology is of great commercial importance in the search for minerals and oil in the mining and petroleum industries. For humanists, geology is of interest because it gives support for Darwinian evolution and challenges creationism.

Although various people have been interested in the make-up of the earth since Grecian times, geology is a relatively young science that started to come together in Great Britain when Scottish physician James Hutton (1726-1797), often viewed as the father of modern geology, published *Theory of the Earth* in 1775. He theorized that the earth had to be much older than previously supposed in order to allow enough time for mountains to be eroded and for sediments to form new rocks which in time were raised up to become dry land. A little later in England, William Smith (1769-1839) began to observe the various strata of sedimentary rocks throughout the country. From his observations and findings, he created a geological map of England using colours to differentiate the various kinds of rocks. As with Hutton, it became evident to him that the earth had to be much older than previously thought, because it had to have taken millions of years for the various strata to have been laid down by natural processes one layer after another. Of particular interest to him was the observation that the fossils in the strata became more developed as they progressed from lower to higher levels. Another Scotsman, Sir James Lyell (1797-1875) trained as a lawyer, but in 1827 he abandoned law and embarked on a geological career. He published three major books on the subject. *Principles of Geology* was published in 1830. Darwin took a copy of this book with him on his voyage on the *Beagle*. The second was *Elements of Geology* published in 1838 and the third, *Geological Evidence of the Antiquity of Man*, was published in 1863. Lyell asked Darwin to take note of any "erratic boulders" while sailing on the *Beagle* and on his return in 1836, Darwin and Lyell became close friends. The findings of one supported the other. Unlike Darwin, who considered himself an agnostic, Lyell was a devout Christian and had great difficulty reconciling his beliefs with natural selection. He was of course not alone. Even today, many devout Christians cannot accept evolution despite so much biological and geological evidence to the contrary.

From its early beginnings, geology has developed into a vast subject and has even branched out to the moon and the planets. The purpose of including geology in this discourse is to briefly point out the connection with evolution and the support it gives to Darwin's theories.



## **The Science of Astronomy**

Astronomy is the oldest, and one of the most fascinating of the sciences. The ancients observed the stars and in the northern hemisphere noticed that one star, Polaris, the North Star, seemed to remain stationary while the other stars revolved around it every twenty-four hours. They also noticed that most stars remained fixed in their relation to other stars, but the two brightest “stars” (which became known as Venus and Jupiter) moved over time in relation to the other stars in an arc similar to the paths of the sun and the moon. These two moving “stars,” along with three others that were not so bright, were the visible planets and all eventually assumed the names of the Roman gods, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn. Some of the stars, grouped together, seemed to form an outline of animals or humans and became known as constellations with names like Ursa Major, Ursa Minor, Orion, Cassiopeia and many others. Those constellations on the ecliptic, the path of the sun, became the twelve signs of the astrological zodiac. Also noticed in early times was a concentration of stars in a band that became known as the Milky Way. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century it was confirmed by the Magellan expedition that the earth was spherical, and it was postulated by Copernicus that the earth revolved around the sun.

Modern astronomy, as we know it, began with the invention of the optical telescope and Galileo’s discovery of the moons of Jupiter and the rings of Saturn in the seventeenth century. By the start of the twentieth century it was known that we live in a solar system consisting of eight planets and that all the planets revolved around the sun. (Uranus was discovered in 1781 and Neptune in 1846. Pluto is no longer considered to be a planet). It was known that our sun was in fact a star, similar to the others that were far far away. During the twentieth century tremendous advances occurred. Newtonian reflecting telescopes became larger, and many galaxies, similar to our Milky Way galaxy, were discovered by astronomer Edwin Hubble, using the 100 inch telescope at the Mount Wilson observatory in California in the early 1920s. Employing a spectroscopic Doppler technique known as the red shift, he discovered that most galaxies were moving away from us at great speeds. Thus, it became known that the universe was extremely vast and was expanding rapidly. Many more exciting discoveries ensued. The invention of the radio telescope, along with other newer techniques, has allowed the discovery of phenomena that optical and reflecting telescopes could not detect. New objects such as white dwarfs, quasars, supernovae and black holes, were discovered. The orbiting Hubble telescope also enabled many new discoveries. The Big Bang theory was proposed, and it was determined that the universe is nearly fourteen billion years old, with our solar system being four and a half billion years old.

The forgoing brief account barely scratches the surface of this exciting branch of science, but surely astronomy is an area that should be of great interest to the young and entice a few brilliant students into a very rewarding career. It should be noted that the International Year of Astronomy was celebrated in 2009 to commemorate the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first recorded astronomical observation using a telescope by Galileo in 1609.

## **The Science of Microbiology**

Just as astronomy deals with the very large, microbiology deals with the very small. This science has its beginning with the invention of the microscope and the discovery of bacteria by the Dutch researcher Antonie van Leeuwenhoek in 1676. He is regarded as the father of microbiology. Probably the most famous of the microbiology pioneers is the French microbiologist Louis Pasteur, who among many other things, created the first rabies vaccine and developed a process for preventing sickness from drinking raw milk, that became known as pasteurization. Prior to the discovery of bacteria, the causes of plagues and many related



diseases were unknown. As a result of research in this very important science, many human lives have been saved through improved hygiene and immunization using vaccines. Devastating diseases such as small-pox, diphtheria, and polio have been practically eliminated, and others such as scarlet fever, mumps and measles have been greatly reduced. As is well known, the discovery of antibiotics has also enabled many lives to be saved. The greatest challenge facing microbiological science at the present time is, of course, finding a vaccine and/or a cure for AIDS. Finally, it must be mentioned that not all microbes are bad. They serve useful purposes in the fermentation process in the production of alcoholic beverages and in the breakdown of organic wastes into simpler, less harmful substances.

### **Albert Einstein**

Any review of major scientific achievements, however brief, would not be complete without special mention of Albert Einstein. It was in 1905 while employed at the Bern Switzerland Patent Office that he wrote five papers that would make him famous and change science and the world forever.

His first paper proved that light was propagated not only as a wave motion, but also as bundles or quanta, that later became known as photons. This work was based on the photoelectric effect and won him the Nobel prize in 1921. The second paper, which became his doctoral thesis, dealt with the sizes of atoms. The third provided an explanation for Brownian movement (the continuous random movement of particles in a liquid or gas medium). Then came the big ones. The fourth introduced the hard-to-grasp theory of special relativity, which includes time as the fourth dimension. As if that were not enough, he then devised the most famous equation in physics,  $E = mc^2$  which eventually led to nuclear fission and the bomb that changed the world.

Special relativity deals with the relative motion of bodies at a constant speed of motion, but not if they change velocity or direction. It took Einstein another ten years to develop the equations that would fit all conditions of movement, and this theory became known as general relativity. By this time he was thirty-six years old, and his most creative years were behind him. He spent the next forty years trying to prove that there was a mathematically explainable connection between gravity and electromagnetism. This search, for what he termed the unified field theory, never did come to fruition.

Of special interest to humanists is Einstein's slant on God and atheists. He said, "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." When asked if he was religious, he replied, "try and penetrate with our limited means the secrets of nature and you will find that, behind all the discernable laws and connections, there remains something intangible and inexplicable. Veneration for this force beyond anything that we can comprehend is my religion. To that extent I am, in fact, religious."

Unlike Sigmund Freud, Bertrand Russell or George Bernard Shaw, Einstein never felt the need to denigrate those who believe in God; instead he tended to denigrate atheists. He said, "What separates me from most so-called atheists is a feeling of the cosmos. The fanatical atheists are like slaves who are still feeling the weight of their chains, which they have thrown off after a hard struggle. They are creatures who – in their grudge against traditional religion as the 'opium of the masses' – cannot hear the music of the spheres." And he went on, "You can call me an agnostic, I do not share the crusading spirit of the professional atheist



whose fervor is mostly due to a painful liberation from the fetters of religious indoctrination received in youth. I prefer the attitude of humility, corresponding to the weakness of our intellectual understanding of nature and our own being.” Einstein the agnostic, had no objection to being labeled a humanist.

Special note: It must be mentioned and emphasized that the most important discipline of mathematics has been extremely valuable in aiding in the development of many of the scientific activities and achievements outlined above.

## **Conclusions**

Even though, in the last five hundred years, science and technology have bestowed many benefits on humankind, there have also been negative consequences; witness the fact that wars are becoming more destructive and more barbaric -- not to mention the fact that in the wrong hands, nuclear weapons could destroy civilization. While science has advanced, human nature seems to be stuck in the Stone Age. Neither religion nor philosophy has done much to discourage certain power-hungry, greedy individuals from killing other human beings. In fact, religions have often been the cause and justification for much killing. It is my submission that our situation will not improve until young people the world over are no longer taught religious untruths. Perhaps, if *instead*, they are taught the rudiments of the sciences, and inspired by the awe and wonder of our natural world, they will develop a reverence for the miracle of human life and shun violence. As Carl Sagan said, “We are made of star stuff.” We are of the elements of the universe that, by some not-yet fully understood natural phenomena, came together on our planet to form conscious human beings. If everyone were made fully aware of this astonishing miracle, we might think twice about taking a human life, and in the process bring about an end to wars. This will not happen soon, but if science is used to play an active role in the early education of young people, it might help to hasten a more peaceful world for our descendants. It is recognized, of course, that in addition to science, the education of the young must include a basic grounding in the arts as well as instruction in ethical and moral values. Young children are curious and providing them early with a well-rounded introduction to the realities of our world, in a form they can assimilate, is perhaps the only long-term hope for improving our societies. (DAH).

## **A Few More Scientific Articles**

### **Climate Change**

In an article in the London Free Press (LFP) on Friday, September 13, Canadian journalist, columnist and military historian Gwynne Dwyer warns that dire days lie ahead if humans do not begin to take drastic efforts to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. He notes that the current level of CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere is about 400 parts per million (PPM) and if levels were to increase to 450 ppm, global average temperatures would increase by 2 degrees Celsius. Dwyer warns that this would be a climate apocalypse. At the present rates of CO<sub>2</sub> increases, 450 ppm will occur around the year 2050. So, as Dwyer points out, there is time, but less than 30 years, to take necessary actions to reduce and eliminate greenhouse gas emissions, and then draw down the excesses we have already put into the atmosphere. The burning of fossil fuels must be greatly reduced. As well, continuing technological developments will be necessary to achieve these goals. Coal-fired generating plants must be eliminated with electricity being generated by non-polluting hydro, nuclear, wind, and solar means. Electric cars with practical range will need to be the norm. Current farming methods generate sizable amounts of greenhouse gases, and perhaps switching away from beef and pork to organic meat-like products will help reduce pollution on the farm.



Yes, it is possible to save the planet for our descendants, but only if the political will to do so is present. Unfortunately, however, there are powerful forces afoot denying that global warming is real, despite what the majority of climate specialists are saying. These negative forces with political clout – especially in the U.S., a country that has dropped out of the Paris Climate Accord – claim global temperatures have been going up and down for millions of years. They say we are now at the peak of a cycle and temperatures will naturally begin to decrease. It is true temperatures have cycled between ice ages and warm periods for millions of years, but during all those eons, CO<sub>2</sub> concentration never rose above 300 ppm. It is only since the start of the industrial revolution that CO<sub>2</sub> levels began to rise, most precipitously since about 1940.

During the past few years, we have heard the word *Anthropocene* more and more often. This is a new word coined to designate the years since mankind has influenced the climate of the earth through industrialization. It is because of mankind's technological inventions that for the first time in all of human history, humans have the means to destroy civilization, either through nuclear warfare or by allowing climate change to make the world too hot to survive. Fortunately, if common sense and political will prevails, we do have the means to prevent either of these catastrophes. Yes, speaking out about the threats of global warming is another worthwhile cause for humanist organizations. It ties in with humanists' concern for the well-being of all humanity. (DAH).

## **Gaia – Goddess of the Earth**

In a later LFP column, Gwynne Dwyer told how about every five years, he travels down to Devonshire England to visit and chat with James Lovelock, the brilliant 100-year-old scientist, engineer and inventor. He is famous for working with NASA on moon landings and on developing instruments for analysing the soil on Mars. He invented the electron capture detector, using it to detect the wide spread of chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) in the atmosphere, associating CFCs with the increasing hole in the ozone layer. The use of CFCs in air conditioners and aerosols was subsequently banned and the ozone hole shrunk.

On top of these achievements, Lovelock is famous for inventing the Gaia hypothesis. First formulated by Lovelock during the 1960s as a result of his aforementioned work for NASA concerned with detecting life on Mars, the Gaia hypothesis proposes that living and non-living parts of the Earth form a complex interacting system that can be thought of as a single organism. Named after the Greek goddess Gaia, the hypothesis postulates that the biosphere has a regulatory effect on the Earth's environment that acts to sustain life.

As one would expect, there has been opposition in scientific circles about the existence of Gaia, partly because it cannot be easily explained or substantiated. Lovelock readily admits that Gaia is not easy to explain “because it is a concept that arises by intuition from internally held and mostly unconscious information.” It is something like quantum mechanics. No one can explain all of it, but there is consensus among most scientists that the phenomenon does exist.

Lovelock has of course written many books. His latest is entitled *Novacene*, a word he coined to describe what he believes will replace the present Anthropocene, thanks to the increasing use of Artificial Intelligence (AI). The subtitle is: *The Coming Age of Superintelligence*. This aspect of the book is, I believe, speculative and perhaps a subject for a future article, but Gaia and global warming are also an integral part of *Novacene*.



Regarding climate change, Lovelock agrees with much of what has been stated in the article on page 68. He agrees the problem is real, but says it is not too late to start taking decisive action. He puts it this way: "It is Gaia who pumps the excess heat out into space to preserve life, and it is for her sake that we must change our way of thinking." I personally do not know if Gaia is real or not, but I like to think she is, and if so, she warrants being protected for the sake of all humanity.

William Wordsworth, the English Lake District poet (1770-1850) lived during the early years of the Anthropocene. While he never heard of Lovelock's Gaia, he was genuinely concerned about the effect the Industrial Revolution would have on the natural world. He expressed this concern beautifully in two different sonnets. Here are the opening lines from each:

### **The World Is Too Much with Us**

The world is too much with us; late and soon,  
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers; —  
Little we see in Nature that is ours;  
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!

### **On the Projected Kendal and Windermere Railway**

Is then no nook of English ground secure  
From rash assault? Schemes of retirement sown  
In youth, and 'mid the busy world kept pure  
As when their earliest flowers of hope were blown,  
Must perish; – how can they this blight endure?

I think it is helpful and satisfying from time to time to fall back on poetry as a means of clarifying thoughts rather than resorting to prose. I believe the lines quoted above accomplish this. As Wordsworth himself affirmed: *Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity.* (DAH).

### **A Conscious Universe**

In the past 40 or so years, a strange fact about our Universe gradually made itself known to scientists: the laws of physics, and the initial conditions of our Universe, are fine-tuned for the possibility of life. It turns out that, for life to be possible, the numbers in basic physics – for example, the strength of gravity, or the mass of the electron – must have values falling in a certain range. And that range is an incredibly narrow slice of all the possible values those numbers can have. It is therefore incredibly unlikely that a universe like ours would have the kind of numbers compatible with the existence of life. But, against all the odds, our Universe does. Here are a few of examples of this fine-tuning for life:

The strong nuclear force (the force that binds together the elements in the nucleus of an atom) has a value of 0.007. If that value had been 0.006 or less, the Universe would have contained nothing but hydrogen. If it had been 0.008 or higher, the hydrogen would have fused to make heavier elements. In either case, any kind of chemical complexity would have been physically impossible. And without chemical complexity there can be no life.



The physical possibility of chemical complexity is also dependent on the masses of the basic components of matter: electrons and quarks. If the mass of a down quark had been greater by a factor of 3, the Universe would have contained only hydrogen. If the mass of an electron had been greater by a factor of 2.5, the Universe would have contained only neutrons: no atoms at all, and certainly no chemical reactions.

Gravity seems a momentous force, but it is actually much weaker than the other forces that affect atoms, by about  $10^{36}$ . If gravity had been only slightly stronger, stars would have formed from smaller amounts of material, and consequently would have been smaller, with much shorter lives. A typical sun would have lasted around 10,000 years rather than 10 billion years, not allowing enough time for the evolutionary processes that produce complex life. Conversely, if gravity had been only slightly weaker, stars would have been much colder and hence would not have exploded into supernovae. This also would have rendered life impossible, as supernovae are the main source of many of the heavy elements that form the ingredients of life.

The foregoing is taken from an essay by Philip Goff, assistant professor in philosophy at the Central European University in Budapest. The essay appeared in an Aeon publication on the internet. Goff is fascinated by the fine tuning of the universe described above and seeks for an explanation. He notes that believers in the divine claim that only God could create such a remarkable combination of precise characteristics, but he quickly refutes the God argument and looks for a more plausible explanation.

In his 2017 book, *Consciousness and Fundamental Reality*, he develops an argument for Panpsychism, the view that all matter has a consciousness-involving nature. In the essay he asks, "Is it not a case of oversimplification to ascribe fundamental consciousness to the universe?" "Not at all," he says. "The physical world must have some nature and physics leaves us completely in the dark as to what it is. It is no less a simplification to suppose that the Universe has a consciousness-involving nature than to propose it is more of a simplification that it has some non-consciousness-involving nature. If anything, the former proposal is simpler insofar as it is continuous with the only thing we really know about the nature of matter: that brains have consciousness."

In the final paragraph of the essay Goff states, "the idea that the Universe is a conscious mind that responds to value strikes us a ludicrously extravagant cartoon. But we must judge the view not on its cultural associations but on its explanatory power. Agentive cosmopsychism explains the fine-tuning without making false predictions; and it does so with a simplicity and elegance unmatched by its rivals. It is a view we should take seriously."

So, we have Lovelock's *Gaia* and Goff's *Panpsychism*, both ascribing a conscious nature to the universe. Perhaps some day there will be some sort of substantiation for these hypotheses, but in the meantime, maybe it is not too much of a stretch to imagine that these hypotheses might be true, because this might inspire us humans to think of our planet earth as something sacred that must be cared for. (DAH).

### **Accepting Darwin – Why is it Taking so Long?**

In 2009 the Royal Ontario Museum staged a Charles Darwin exhibit in the new Michael Lee-Chin Crystal. This exhibit was a cooperative effort of the New York Museum of Natural History, the ROM, and science museums in Boston, Chicago and London England. It offered both showmanship (live tortoises, iguanas and frogs) and an engrossing intellectual biography. A copy of the first edition (1859) of *On the Origin of Species*



was on display along with 260 artifacts, including some of Darwin's original specimens, his hammer, manuscripts and notes. The display also traces events in his life, including the voyage aboard HMS Beagle and his experiences and discoveries in the Galapagos. It took a committed visitor a minimum of two hours to do justice to this exhibition that represents contemporary museum programming at its most convincing.

Surprisingly, when this exhibition opened in New York in 2005, there was not a peep of protest out of the creationists. Nevertheless, neither the ROM, nor any of the other venues, was able to enlist a corporate sponsor brave enough to underwrite the show. Just why is it that corporations consider this exhibit "too hot to handle?" Perhaps examination of the results of a recent Pew Research Centre survey will shed some light on the matter. The poll showed that 42% of Americans reject evolution outright, saying they believe humans and other living things have existed in their present form since the creation. About 51% believe that evolution has occurred, but many think it was guided by a supreme being or a higher power, i.e., by intelligent design. Only 26% of this group believes in evolution by natural selection. These are of course American statistics; surely, we Canadians are not so naïve. But don't feel too smug. An Angus Reid poll in 2008 found that only 59% of Canadians believe in evolution and 22% believe that God created humans in their present form within the last 10,000 years. And 19% were not sure. With this revealed amount of ignorance and disbelief in what is now regarded as hard scientific fact, it is not so surprising that corporate sponsors for the Darwin exhibit are hard to come by. Even though modern DNA evidence substantiates Darwin's remarkable insight, corporate executives reasoned they just cannot risk alienating so many customers. What a pity that not even one corporation had the courage to help promote such a worthwhile educational cause.



Darwin was fascinated by the similarities of embryos. Left to right, a horse, a mouse, a bat.

Why has there been so much misunderstanding and skepticism about evolution among a significant segment of the population? Two things immediately come to mind. First, our schools (particularly American schools) have failed to generate sufficient interest in science, and second, the evangelical/fundamentalist churches have been remarkably successful at convincing their followers that "only God can make a tree," (or a human). It is going to take at least another generation for these beliefs to wane. The process will be slow because even though the mainline denominations are losing members, the fundamentalists are growing. Nevertheless, surely in the long run, reason and common sense should prevail. (Much of the information for



this article and the picture was gleaned from the Saturday March 8<sup>th</sup>, 2009, edition of The Globe and Mail). (DAH).

## **A Momentous Breakthrough – Discovering the God Particle**

Early in July of 2012, scientists at Europe's CERN research centre announced that they have found a new subatomic particle that appears to be the one predicted by theoretical physicist Dr. Peter Higgs forty-eight years ago and named after him. It is called a boson and is considered to be a basic building block of the universe. The discovery also provides evidence of the invisible Higgs field. The Higgs theory explains how particles clumped together to form stars, planets and life itself. Without the Higgs boson, the theory goes, the universe would have remained a formless soup of particles shooting around at the speed of light.

Eighty-three-year old Dr. Higgs was on hand at the scientific seminar when the announcement was made. He said, "I had no expectation that I would still be alive when it happened. For physics, in one way it is the end of an era in that it completes the Standard Model." The Standard Model is the basic theory physicists currently use to describe what they understand so far of a cosmos built from twelve fundamental particles and four forces.

Scientists are slightly embarrassed that the Higgs boson is sometimes referred to as the God particle. The inference is that since the boson allowed for matter to be created, there is no longer a need for a creator God. As Stephen Hawking has said, "I believe the simplest explanation is, there is no God. No one created the universe, and no one directs our fate. This leads me to a profound realization that there probably is no heaven and no afterlife either. We have this one life to appreciate the grand design of the universe and for that, I am extremely grateful."

Yes indeed, we all should be exceedingly grateful that we are living during a period when scientists are unraveling many of the mysteries of the universe. And I can imagine that no one has experienced a higher level of elation than the physicists who worked so tirelessly to prove the existence of the Higgs boson, with virtually 99.99 percent certainty. Now it is time to move on to solving other mysteries of the universe, including the nature of dark matter, dark energy and the true nature of gravity.

As a person who has always been intrigued by the intelligence and perseverance of people in the top echelons of the scientific community, it concerns me that some governments and industries are cutting back on the financing needed to insure that basic scientific research can continue. Instead, their priorities seem to be directed more toward research that will bring immediate results, with accompanying financial benefits. Perhaps worst of all, some of this research is directed toward the military. It is amazing that there always seems to be money available from somewhere to fight wars, but never enough to adequately finance academic research, education, and social safety nets. Nevertheless, we are blessed that in this world there are dedicated selfless people with brilliant minds wishing to discover new things that can lead to a better understanding of the universe. Surely these great minds need to be supported. Who knows what their new discoveries might lead to?

If we look back to the early 1800s, we can get an idea of the effects the discovery of another "field" had on the way we live today. This is the electromagnetic field, discovered by the Danish chemist and physicist Hans Christian Oersted in 1820. Almost immediately, the great English chemist and physicist Michael Faraday began experimenting with this phenomenon, and he succeeded in achieving electromagnetic rotation leading to the invention of the electric motor, the dynamo and the generator. In 1830 Faraday discovered



electromagnetic induction, resulting in the invention of the transformer. Thus, began a whole series of discoveries and inventions culminating in industrial and home electrification, radio, television, computers, the internet and I phones. In a like manner, the proving of the existence of the Higgs boson and the Higgs force field could well lead to equally fabulous discoveries and inventions in the future. Again, the research required should receive the necessary support. (DAH).

## **The Greatest Show on Earth**

*A Book By Richard Dawkins*

What a fabulous and appropriate title for a book on evolution! The adjectival phrase, “The Greatest Show,” is by no means an exaggeration, because evolution and natural selection are high on the list of scientific subjects that engender and instill feelings of awe and wonder in those that study these phenomena. Many lay readers also experience these same feelings.

At the outset Dawkins states that this book is not an anti-religious discourse. This subject was thoroughly dealt with in his last book, *The God Delusion*. He wrote *The Greatest Show on Earth* because none of his previous books on evolution dealt specifically with the “evidence” for evolution and this gap needs to be filled. And what better time to issue this beautifully illustrated volume than in 2009, the year celebrating Darwin’s 200<sup>th</sup> birthday and the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of *On the Origin of Species*.

In the Appendix of *The Greatest Show on Earth*, are two tables listing the results of surveys conducted by Eurobarometer in 32 different European countries. Table 1 lists the responses to the question, “Do you believe in the proposition that human beings, as we know them, developed from earlier species of animals?” The answers ranged all the way from 85% who replied affirmatively in Iceland to only 27% in Muslim Turkey. Western European countries were the highest, the eastern countries the lowest. Great Britain was a respectable 79%. The question posed in Table 2 was, “Do you believe the proposition that the earliest human beings lived at the same time as dinosaurs?” The replies ranged from 9% in Sweden and Switzerland to 42% in Turkey. Great Britain was surprisingly high at 28%. A recent Gallop poll in the U.S. revealed that 44% of Americans believe humans and dinosaurs coexisted some time between 6,000 and 10,000 years ago. Yes indeed, this gap of ignorance needs to be filled. Dawkins knows, of course, that brain-washed died-in-the-wool creationists will not likely be inclined to read his latest best seller, while at the other end of the spectrum, he knows that in many instances he will be preaching to the converted. His hope is, however, that the undecided in the centre will read his book and become convinced that the evidence for evolution through natural selection is so overwhelming that it is impossible to refute.

One of the most convincing proofs for evolution lies in the fossil records. Over the eons the fossilized remains of both plants and animals have been laid down in multiple layers of sedimentary rocks, the oldest at lower levels and the younger at higher levels. In various parts of the world these layers are exposed and accessible for paleontologists to examine. In no case have fossils of more developed forms of life been found in the same or lower levels than less developed forms. The challenge for evolution scientists is, of course, to establish accurate dates for when the various layers of rock were laid down. Fortunately, there are a number of “clocks” available for dating the rocks and subsequently the fossils. These include radioactive decay, including carbon 14 techniques, and even tree rings. Using these and other methods, scientists have now determined that the universe is close to 14 billion years old, our solar system is about 4 ½ billion years old. Simple life forms developed on earth around 2-3 billion years ago, dinosaurs lived 60 million years ago, homo erectus first appeared about 1 million years ago, and homo sapiens (we) appeared much later, about



100,000 years ago. Organized civilizations did not emerge until around 5,000-6,000 years ago in Mesopotamia and Egypt. These time frames are vastly different from the 6,000-10,000 years that creationists like to claim as the age of the earth.

In *The Greatest Show on Earth* Dawkins makes an important distinction between natural evolution and what he calls artificial evolution. All wild animals and non-domestic plants have evolved over long periods of time through natural selection. As Darwin realized from observing tortoises and finches in the Galapagos, different species evolved over extended periods of time under differing conditions. Artificial evolution, on the other hand, occurs over much shorter periods of time and is brought about by human involvement. Domesticated animals, agricultural crops and horticultural plants are all the result of artificial evolution. The numerous breeds of farm animals and domestic pets we observe today are the result of humans influencing the selection of breeding stocks for specific desired qualities. Likewise, the varieties of grains, grasses and legumes now grown by farmers are the result of artificial evolution.

One of the most striking examples of artificial evolution is found in the canine family. All the domestic breeds of dogs are descendants of one wolf or perhaps a few wolves. The contrast we observe today in the difference between a Chihuahua and a Great Dane is truly amazing. And these breeds evolved over relatively short periods compared to the time frame for natural evolution. The same contrasts are evident in the plant kingdom. As a result of plant breeding most domestic agricultural and horticultural plants are larger than their natural ancestors. Look at the difference between wild strawberries and those we purchase in the supermarket. And look at the wide variety of roses that have been developed. Yes, the current plethora of domestic animals and plants provides another substantiation that evolution is real.

Another convincing proof for evolution cited in *The Greatest Show on Earth* is the brilliant research carried out over more than twenty years by Michigan State University scientist Richard Lenski and his colleagues using e coli bacteria. Bacteria reproduce very rapidly and so far, 45,000 generations have occurred during this research. This is equivalent to about one million years of human evolution. Over twenty plus years Lenski and his associates have been able to observe the evolution of new strains of e coli, thus confirming the reality of natural selection and the phenomena of random mutation.

For further proof of evolution, we can look to the work of Russian geneticist Dimitri Belyuev who has bread silver foxes for tameness. After only six generations some of the offspring exhibited signs of tameness, and after thirty-five generations, most of the offspring resembled tame dogs in many respects.

Dawkins' scientific writing ranks right up there with the work of Isaac Asimov and Carl Sagan, both of whom sought to educate the general public about the wonders of science. Anyone objectively reading *The Greatest Show on Earth* would be hard pressed not to be convinced of the reality of evolution through natural selection while discarding any thoughts of believing the spurious arguments of creationists. This book is sorely needed, especially in the United States, where incredibly 150 years after the publication of *On the Origin of Species*, 44% of the population believes in creationism thanks to the teachings of the religious right constituency.

The question is, however, how many of the readers Dawkins is trying to influence, will persevere and take the time to absorb all the details? Only time will tell. Even though I have taken courses in biology and genetics, I found that it took considerable effort to absorb some of Dawkins' more complicated explanations, and I feel there is a danger that the book is written a bit above the level of the readers he is trying to reach.



But I trust I am wrong. The book was at or near the top of many best-seller lists, so it is to be hoped that a good number of doubting readers will be convinced that Darwin indeed was right. (DAH).

## **Defiant Earth: The Fate of Humans in the Anthropocene**

*by Clive Hamilton*

### **A Book Review 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.



## **Section IV - Philosophy**

### **Why Study Philosophy?**

*By Oxford Professor – Peter Hacker*

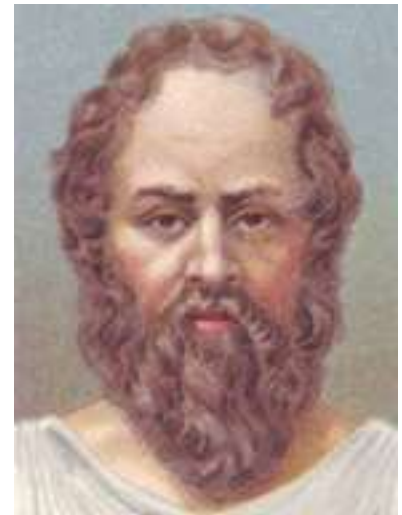
The history of philosophy is a capital part of the history of ideas. To study the history of philosophy is to study an aspect of the intellectual life of past societies, and of our own society in the past. It makes a crucial contribution to the understanding of the history of past European societies. Equally, to understand our contemporary forms of thought, the ways in which we look at things, the study of the history of philosophy is essential. For we cannot know where we are, unless we understand how we got here!

The study of philosophy cultivates a healthy scepticism about the moral opinions, political arguments and economic reasonings with which we are daily bombarded by ideologues, churchmen, politicians and economists. It teaches one to detect 'higher forms of nonsense', to identify humbug, to weed out hypocrisy, and to spot invalid reasoning. It curbs our taste for nonsense and gives us a nose for it instead. It teaches us not to rush to affirm or deny assertions, but to raise questions about them.

Even more importantly, it teaches us to raise questions about questions, to probe for their tacit assumptions and presuppositions, and to challenge these when warranted. In this way it gives us a distance from passion-provoking issues – a degree of detachment that is conducive to reason and reasonableness.

### **Where Philosophy Began**

The discipline of philosophy began in the fifth century BCE among early Greek scholars known as the pre-Socratics. The first of these was Thales (625-545 BCE). These men, numbering about twenty in total, were among the first to start asking important questions such as – What is the universe really made of? Who am I? How did we get here? Do humans have souls? If so, is the soul immortal? And do the gods really exist? Some of these men surmised that the world was made up of air, fire, earth, and water, but Democritus and Leucippus, the last of the pre-Socratics, believed the universe to be made up of atoms. Also prominent in this group was Pythagoras.



**Socrates**

Western Philosophy as we know it, essentially revolves around Socrates (469-399 BCE). All who came after him were called post-Socratics. He did not leave any of his many pearls of wisdom in writing, and he was eventually forced to drink poison hemlock for opposing the authorities of the day. Fortunately, his pupil Plato, and other contemporaries, did record much of what he said. Plato's voluminous writings, including *The Republic* and *The Laws*, are classical treasures, as are the influential writings of Aristotle, who was a tutor to Alexander the Great. And later there were the Stoics, the Sceptics and the Epicureans. The tragedy the Greek philosophical era is that it came to an end in 529 CE when the Christian Emperor Justinian issued an edict forbidding the teaching of pagan philosophy. It would remain dormant until Renaissance when it was rediscovered.



## **A Few Philosophers of a Humanist Bent**

### **Confucius – Chinese Sage and Humanist**

The Chinese thinker and social philosopher Confucius was born in 551 BCE in the Lu state. His philosophy emphasized personal and government morality, correctness of social relationships, justice and sincerity. He is often credited as being the originator of the Golden Rule, and along with the Buddha, being one of the world's first humanists. His teachings may be found in the *Analects of Confucius*, a collection of aphoristic fragments, which was compiled many years after his death.



**Confucius**

After becoming a government official with a retinue of followers, he had a successful ministerial career. Following a breach with the ruler, he spent several years as an itinerant sage, and then spent his later years teaching and writing. He basically replaced religious teachings with ethical and moral values. He championed strong familial loyalty, respect for elders by their children and the family as a basis for an ideal government. His political thought is based on ethical thought. He argued that the best government is one that rules through people's natural morality rather than by using bribery and coercion. Truth and honesty are of primary importance. Confucius died in 479 BCE.

There are many aphorisms containing wisdom and foresight attributed to Confucius. A few are quoted below:

- *Knowledge is recognizing what you know and what you do not know.*
- *To know your faults and be able to change is the greatest virtue.*
- *What you do not wish for yourself, do not do to others.*
- *The superior man is modest in speech but exceeds in his actions.*

While Confucius was alive in China, Buddhism was developing in India, and Greek philosophy, a perspective that led to the humanism of Epicurus, was beginning to be formulated in ancient Greece. What a pity that these seeds of democracy and non-religious ethical and moral living were not able to grow and blossom. In the west, they were snuffed out by the Roman Church during the so-called dark ages.

### **Plato – Greek Philosopher – 428 BCE – 348 BCE**

Plato's writings are all in the form of dialogues and much of the wisdom in his many books comes from the lips of his mentor Socrates. I have read only three of Plato's books, namely *The Laws*, *The Symposium*, and *The Republic*, which is probably the best known of Plato's numerous works. *The Laws*, Plato's last and longest dialogue, describes in rich and fascinating detail an imaginary Utopia proposed for Crete in the middle of the fourth century BCE. *The Symposium* examines the varieties of love in ancient Greece and culminates with Socrates extolling the virtues of the love of wisdom. But neither of these dialogues provided me with a satisfying understanding of what Plato was really all about. On the other hand, *The Republic* did help, at least to some degree, in this regard.



The Republic begins with the participants in the dialogue attempting to define justice, but not arriving at a firm conclusion. It goes on to describe the ideal city state consisting of three classes of citizens, the producers (craftsmen, artisans, merchants, farmers, etc.), auxiliaries (warriors), and guardians (rulers), each possessing the required aptitude and skills for their position. The rulers must undergo a rigorous education process including the study of philosophy in order that they will become philosopher kings, so to speak. Plato then digresses into a series of three analogies, the allegories of the sun, the line and the cave, along with his theory of forms. He next compares four types of imperfect societies, Timarchy (think Sparta) Oligarchy, Democracy, and Tyranny. (Neither Socrates nor Plato were admirers of the Athenian direct democracy). Plato then proceeds with some derogatory remarks about poets, and ends by relating the myth of Er, describing the path of the soul after death.



**Plato**

Plato may have been one of the first to contemplate the concept of a soul that leaves the body after death. It has even been said that he could be called the founder of Christianity because it is entirely possible the early Christians picked up this idea of a soul and an afterlife from Plato. The afterlife was not a big issue for first century Jews.

A challenge presented in Plato's dialogues is to discard aspects that would not be acceptable in today's democratic societies and ferret out the concepts that would be helpful.

The philosopher **Aristotle** (385-323 BCE) is mentioned above. I believe he rates more than a short summary of his prodigious amount of work, so a somewhat lengthy account of the life and output of this great man is presented later in this Section. And the philosopher **Epicurus**, (341-270 BCE), sometimes called the first humanist, also, I believe, deserves special attention and he is featured later as well.

## **Marcus Aurelius – Roman General, Emperor and Stoic Philosopher**

The Stoic Marcus Aurelius Antonius, (121-180 CE), reigned as Emperor of the Roman Empire from 161 to 180 CE. During his reign, Marcus had to deal with many vexing problems including a disastrous plague, floods, famine, and wars in various parts of the empire. His last war was fought at the Danube, where he died in 180 CE. It was during this war that he somehow found time to pen the *Meditations*, which were written in Greek, and reflected his noble and self-sacrificing life in which he shunned the pomp and ceremony and the trappings of the imperial court. His last words were, "Weep not for me, think of the pestilence and the death of so many others."



**Bust of Marcus Aurelius**

The *Meditations* consists of twelve books, each containing numbered verses. In some respects, it is reminiscent of the Bible, but there is one important difference. We know that the words in the *Meditations* were actually written by Marcus, unlike the words of Jesus in the gospels that are second or third hand, with many of his sayings being questionable as to their authenticity. The philosophical verses in the *Meditations* exude much wisdom and the word "reason" appears over and over again. Marcus Aurelius was indeed a humanist. A few quotes are listed below:



*Life, in a word, is short; then snatch your profit from the passing hour, by obedience to reason and just dealing, but be temperate.*

*I seek the truth, which never yet hurt anybody. It is only persistence in self-delusion and ignorance that does harm.*

*To a reasoned being, an act that accords with nature is an act that accords with reason.*

And there are many more pearls of wisdom. The *Meditations* is a highly recommended read. It is a grave misfortune that the *Meditations* did not become the Bible of the Western world instead of the canon we have today because in first and second century Rome, morality was the domain of philosophers, not the priests. The role of the priest was to perform such appropriate rites as ensuring the protection of the gods for the well-being of the state and to prevent their displeasure. It was the philosophers who were concerned with the nature of humans, their duties and their destiny thereafter. They pondered about the composition of the universe and how it came into being. What a pity that this science and secular morality was later suppressed by the Roman Catholic Church that emerged after the Roman Emperor Constantine declared that Christianity was to be the official religion of the Roman Empire.

Most regrettably, this Roman Catholic Church, organized along military and authoritarian lines, suppressed the philosophy, democracy and other positive attributes of Greek and Roman culture and even burnt down the famous Alexandrian library that contained countless scrolls recording the wisdom and knowledge acquired in ancient times. During the so-called dark ages, no philosophers of note emerged.

But fortunately, much of the content of these scrolls was preserved by Arab scholars and by a few monks before the library was destroyed. Many of these writings were rediscovered, translated and recorded at the time of the Italian Renaissance (1300-1500) providing us today with a great deal of the classical literature of Greece and Rome. This revival is sometimes described as the humanism of the Italian Renaissance.

After the beginning of the Protestant Reformation in 1517, the influence of the Roman Catholic Church began to wane allowing for the incubation of science and technology and eventually democracy. Also, in these times, the validity of Christian beliefs and doctrines and the existence of God began to be questioned by various philosophers. A number of these, featured in various *Enlightenments*, are listed below.

**Michel de Montaigne** - (1533 - 1592) Philosopher and Essayist

**Benedict De Spinoza** - (1632 - 1677) Philosopher and Lens Maker

**David Hume** - (1711 - 1776) Philosopher, Historian, Economist and Essayist

**Les Philosophes** - **Baron d'Holbach** (1723-1789) and **Denis Diderot** (1713-1784)

Les Philosophes met regularly in Paris to discuss and question what they considered to be the absurdities of religion and belief in God. Part time attendees were Voltaire, David Hume and Benjamin Franklin.

**Arthur Schopenhauer** - (1788 - 1860) German Philosopher.



**Thomas Paine** - (1737 - 1809) Intellectual Scholar, Revolutionary and Idealist.

**John Stuart Mill** - (1806 - 1873) Philosopher, political economist and defender of women's rights.

**Marie Curie** - (1867 - 1934) Physicist, Chemist and Agnostic. One of only two people to win two Nobel prizes on the same category. The other was John Bardeen, co-inventor of the transistor.

**Julian Huxley** - (1887 - 1975) Evolutionary Biologist, Author and Humanist.

**Robert Green Ingersoll** - (1833 - 1889) American Orator, Lawyer and Agnostic

**Friedrich Nietzsche** - (1844 - 1900) Philosopher (Famous for stating "God is dead" in 1882).

**Bertrand Russell** - (1872 - 1970) Mathematician and Philosopher.

**Jean Paul Sartre** - (1905 - 1980) French philosopher, political activist, novelist and playwright.

**Simone de Beauvoir** - (1908 - 1986) French Philosopher and Author.

**Isaac Asimov** (1920 - 1992) and **Carl Sagan** (1934 - 1996). Because these two men were so well known in relatively recent times, a brief biography of each of them is warranted.

### **Isaac Asimov – Professor of Biochemistry, Author and Humanist**

Isaac Asimov was born of Jewish parents in Russia in 1920. When he was three years old his family emigrated to the United States and settled in Brooklyn N.Y. Isaac attended New York City Public Schools and then went on to Columbia University where he graduated in 1939. He later returned and obtained a PhD in biochemistry in 1948. He then joined the faculty of the Boston School of Medicine but ceased teaching in 1958 to devote full time to writing. He became one of the most prolific writers of all time, having written or edited more than five hundred books. He wrote in many areas, including science fiction, astronomy, mathematics, the Bible, the works of Shakespeare and, of course, chemistry and other scientific subjects. Perhaps most surprisingly, he composed clever jokes and limericks, some of which are rather spicy.



**Isaac Asimov**

Isaac was a long-time member and Vice President of Mensa International albeit reluctantly; he described some members as "brain proud and aggressive about their IQs," but also admitted that the only people he ever met, whom he considered more intelligent than himself, were Marvin Minsky and Carl Sagan. He actually preferred to be labeled as a Humanist rather than anything else. He considered the term atheist to be inadequate, as it described what he did not believe, rather than what he did. In 1984 he was named Humanist of the Year by the American Humanist Association (AHA) and from 1985 until his death in 1992, he served as president of the AHA.



In her book *The Road to Reason*, Pat Duffy Hutcheon describes Asimov's humanism as follows: "The underlying message in all of Asimov's writings is one of thoroughgoing humanism. He confronted the issues of supernaturally based religious claims in his typically direct fashion, noting that no evidence has been uncovered by science that in any way points to divine guidance in the workings of the universe. Nor is there evidence of the existence of a soul or any other non-natural essence setting humans apart from other animals and departing at death." She goes on, "He argued that humanity can no longer afford to seek refuge in the false security of supernatural fantasy, for continued reliance on heavenly solutions could kill us all. Just as it is human beings alone who are destroying the world, he said, so it must be we alone who save it." Humanism needs more outstanding people like Isaac Asimov to promote its agenda.

### **Carl Sagan – Astronomer, Author and Humanist**

Anyone who watched Carl Sagan's PBS TV series *Cosmos* in 1980 will remember how Carl stressed the "b" in billions in order to distinguish from millions. This series, seen by more than 600 million people in over 60 countries, was the most widely watched PBS program in history.

Carl was born of Jewish parents in Brooklyn N.Y. in 1934. He earned a Ph.D. in astronomy and astrophysics at the University of Chicago in 1960. He lectured at Harvard until 1968 when he went to Cornell University. From 1972 to 1981 he was Associate Director of the Center for Radio Physics and Space Research at Cornell. He worked closely with NASA in the field of planetary research, helping to send probes to Venus, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn. Like his colleague Isaac Asimov, he was very concerned with the growth of scientific illiteracy in the population at large.



**Carl Sagan**

Sagan wrote frequently about religion and about the relationship between science and religion, expressing his skepticism about many conventional conceptualizations of God. He once stated, "The idea that God is an oversized white male with a flowing beard, who sits in the sky and tallies the fall of every sparrow, is ludicrous. But if by 'God' one means the set of physical laws that govern the universe, then, clearly there is such a God. This God is emotionally unsatisfying... it does not make any sense to pray to the law of gravity."

In her book *The Road to Reason*, Pat Duffy Hutcheon describes Sagan as "one of the greatest humanists that ever lived, a man of our times whose life and work personifies the intellectual and ethical approach of modern humanism." The following excerpts from her book detail some of Sagan's thoughts on religion and his scientific agnosticism. He thought that religion could make a positive contribution to modern society only if it forsook myth and mysticism and concentrated on activities having to do with reverence for life, awe at the wonders of nature, ethics and morality, community, the *celebration* of life's passages and striving for social justice. For him, this was spirituality, of which he said, "Science is not only compatible with spirituality; it is a profound source of spirituality. The notion that science and spirituality are mutually exclusive does a profound disservice to both."



Carl Sagan died much too young from pneumonia at the age of 62 in 1996 after a long fight with myelodysplasia. In the end his final message was that it is only the candles lit by the scientific method that stand between us and the gathering darkness. (DAH).

## **Aristotle**

It may well be impossible to declare who was the greatest philosopher of all time, but on any list, Aristotle will be at or near the top. Because of his importance I believe he deserves special recognition. The following is a condensation of Edith Hall's book entitled: *Aristotle's Way: How Ancient Wisdom Can Change Your Life*.

### **Aristotle's Way: How Ancient Wisdom Can Change Your Life**

*By Edith Hall*

In the 100<sup>th</sup> issue of the *Enlightenment* published in February 2018, it was mentioned that thirty-eight philosophers and people of note ranging from Confucius to Carl Sagan had been featured on the front pages of various *Enlightenments*, over a period of thirteen years. It was also mentioned that Aristotle was not one of them, the reason being that I was not fully aware of the many implications of Aristotle's greatness. Having read *Aristotle's Way* by Edith Hall, this has now changed, and I will attempt to distill the essence of this book into a few pages.

The book consists of an introduction and ten chapters. The subjects of the chapters are: Happiness, Potential, Decisions, Communications, Self-Knowledge, Intentions, Love, Community, Leisure, and Mortality. Edith Hall capably elucidates how Aristotle's wisdom on each of these topics can be useful in helping us to live a more flourishing and virtuous life in our modern era.



**Aristotle**

Aristotle was born in Stageira in northern Greece in 384 BCE, fifteen years after the death of Socrates. His father was Nicomachus, a physician. In 367 BCE he went to Athens to study in Plato's Academy. In 343, Aristotle moved to Macedon to tutor King Phillip II's son Alexander, later to become known as Alexander the Great. In 336, Aristotle founded his Lyceum in Athens. In 322 he was prosecuted for impiety at Athens and immediately thereafter moved to Chalcis on the island of Euboea in the Aegean Sea, where he died in that same year. Aristotle had two biological children, a daughter Pythias by his wife Pythias, who died in 336, and a son Nicomachus by his concubine Herpyllis. He also adopted a nephew, Nicanor. All these family members received a substantial inheritance from Aristotle's estate. His will also stated that his slaves were not to be sold, but instead were to be freed and given generous legacies.

Edith Hall is the daughter of an Anglican priest. At the age of thirteen she lost her religion. She says, "I just couldn't get in touch with the invisible friend I had previously called God any more." But she did not know what to put in His place. She tried experimenting briefly with astrology, Buddhism, transcendental



meditation, and even psychotropic drugs as well as spiritualism. While an undergraduate, she discovered Aristotle and he supplied the answer. “He explains the material world through science, and the moral world by human standards, rather than those imposed by an external deity.” Near the end of the introduction she quotes the words of philosopher Robert J. Anderson who wrote in 1986: “There is no ancient thinker who can speak more directly to the concerns and anxieties of modern life than can Aristotle. Nor is it clear that any modern thinker offers as much for persons living in this time of uncertainty.” Edith Hall’s last sentence in the introduction is: “Aristotle’s practical approach to philosophy can change your life for the better.” In today’s world it is not likely that many people will be inclined to look toward Aristotle to help them lead happier and more contented lives, but perhaps it is time more people did! Edith Hall is a professor at Kings College, London.

**Happiness** – Aristotle believed the ultimate goal of human life is simply happiness, which means finding a purpose in order to realize your own potential and also working on your behavior to become the best version of yourself. The Greek word for happiness is *eudaimonia* which implies well-being or prosperity as well as contentment. But it is far more active than contentment. You “do” *eudaimonia*: it requires positive input and planning on the part of each individual. It is essential to plan your life in order to obtain the education needed to enjoy a satisfying career and provide for the essentials of life including food, clothing and shelter. In this regard, Aristotle preceded Maslow by 2300 years. Aristotle places a lot of emphasis on virtue. A virtuous person will be much happier than a dishonest or scheming person. Helping others can bring happiness, as can learning about how the world works. Selecting a compatible mate is also important. And appreciating and enjoying the arts including music, drama and literature can bring enjoyment.

Aristotle points out that the pursuit of pleasure for its own sake is not conducive to happiness. For example, bodily pleasures are short-lived, whereas true happiness is the pursuit of long-term contentment. Desiring and achieving fame and fortune also does not guarantee long-term happiness according to Aristotle.

**Potential** – It is desirable for every person to determine what they like doing and have an aptitude for, and then stick with it, in order to realize their full potential. This is because the creation of happiness means, above all, spending our lives doing what we are best at and enjoy. All parents have a duty to help their children identify their potentialities and actualize them. To help realize this aim, legislators must insure the provision of accessible public education facilities, staffed by qualified and dedicated teachers.

**Decisions** – Most people have no training in basic decision-making at all. Aristotle outlined nine rules for deliberation before making a decision. They are:

- Don’t deliberate in haste. Impulsiveness has no place in deliberation.
- Verify all information. A correct decision can never result from incorrect knowledge.
- Consult and listen to expert disinterested advisors.
- Consider all parties who might be affected – not just yourself.
- Examine all known precedents, both personal and historical.
- Calibrate the likelihood of different outcomes. Then prepare for all.
- Think about the not inconsiderable factor of luck.
- Don’t drink and deliberate.
- Do not waste time worrying about things you cannot control.



**Communication** – An important distinction between humans and other animals is that humans are endowed with the ability to communicate using speech and the written word for imparting information or for engaging in the art of persuasion. Aristotle revolutionized the use of verbal persuasion in his *Rhetoric* because of its emphasis on what makes speech or writing work and achieve the desired end. Edith Hall uses the example of job applications and interviews to elucidate how Aristotle's advice can be utilized. Aristotle offers three ABCs of effective communication: audience, brevity, and clarity. Carefully research your audience, be as brief as possible, and speak or write with absolute clarity. Avoid long sentences.

The same rules apply when speaking to an audience. Sometimes analogies or comparisons are helpful and if you resort to humour, it should not be deprecating.

**Self-Knowledge** – The chapter on self-knowledge is really about self-improvement. It involves not only examining your vices and virtues in order to make people around you happier, but also to increase your own happiness. Virtues are of extreme importance because individuals deficient in basic virtues can never attain true happiness.

Every now and again in this long chapter, Aristotle brings up the issue of moderation or the search for the middle road or the mean (*Meson*) by taking a vow of self-control when facing decisions and challenges. For example, since humans are animals, they have sexual appetites. This is a good thing in proportion, but both too much or too little sexual appetite can cause unhappiness. Being magnanimous or generous can lead to happiness, but again in the right amount. It is unwise to give excessively to your own detriment.

Aristotle advocates that we should strive to remedy unfairness of any kind in society, bringing to mind the inequality that exists today with the huge gap between the rich and the poor. He regrets that more humans are by nature avaricious rather than generous and that greed seems to take on a variety of forms. If he were alive today, Aristotle would be the first to rebuke loan sharks and credit card companies who encourage people to spend more than their income and amass debt, which they are then required to pay back at crucifying rates of interest. He says it is desirable to avoid criticizing others and opines that people who constantly criticize others have a problem with respecting themselves.

This chapter ends by getting back to achieving the mean by stressing "nothing in excess," as well as avoiding vice and maximizing virtue. Aristotle uses sex to make his point. "Adulterous sex for example, is likely to be much more pleasurable than avoiding sex altogether, both of which would be going to the extreme. The *meson* is to stick to monogamous sex, which may give you less pleasure than adulterous sex, but make you happier in the long run."

**Intentions** – Is it ethical under certain conditions to do bad things to achieve good things in the end? Aristotle says yes. For example, a person would be justified in doing whatever is required to act in self defence, or equally so if someone was threatening one of your loved ones with persecution or death. The means may normally be considered extreme, but under the aforementioned conditions, would be justified and the intentions acceptable. And there also may be conditions under which telling a lie is preferable to telling the truth if the end justifies the means. In this respect, Aristotle preceded Machiavelli by 1850 years.

A substantial part of this chapter is devoted to weighing the choices of commission or omission. Sometimes failing to carry out or omit an action can produce dire consequences, when on the other hand, carrying out or committing the action would prevent undesirable results. Obviously, procrastinating would be the wrong



thing to do. In another situation a person may be faced with the moral decision of intervening or not acting at all. If you discover one of your colleagues is embezzling company money, do you report it or say nothing for fear of being called a snitch. You have a moral decision to make.

The chapter ends with: "There are few easy choices to make in life, but adding equity to our intentions when it comes to both justice and equality can help us immeasurably to do our best as we struggle to find a walkable path through the ethical jungle of everyday human life."

**Love** – At a relatively young age we experience the first excitement of discovering sexuality and romance and the first "love" relationships. So how are we to maximize our chances of finding happiness through our close relationships with others?

Aristotle regarded love as essential to human life, and although all relationships with people we love require effort, the rewards are inestimable. For him love involved not only love in family relationships, but also various kinds of friendships. He describes the marital unit as the most natural, but extremely intense form of partnership. He envisages a heterosexual husband and wife brought together for mutual support with complementary spheres of competence and interests. They also need one another if the human race is to reproduce itself. As mentioned earlier, monogamy should be the norm; adultery is unacceptable. While heterosexuality is the predominate form of partnership, Aristotle recognized the reality of gay and lesbian relationships.

Strong bonds occur between close kin, with bonds between parent and child the strongest. Losing a child is the most devastating thing that can befall a parent. Losing a close friend can also result in a great deal of grief.

Toward the end of this chapter Aristotle talks about three kinds of friendship: utility friendships, pleasure friendships, and permanent friendships. Utility friends are those you can call on in times of a practical need, and of course you should be willing to be available when your friend requires help. Pleasure friendships are those where friends share similar interests such as playing golf together. Permanent friendships are long-term, whereas the first two categories tend to be shorter.

Aristotle considers friends to be one of the greatest of all good things, and friendlessness and solitude very terrible things, because the whole of life and voluntary interactions are with loved ones.

**Community** – We are all members of communities which extend beyond our families and close friends. Our happiness depends partly on whether we are at ease with our fellow citizens in our nations and the citizens in other nations across the planet.

But when Aristotle was thinking of community, he was of course referring to the Greek city-state and the style of government best suited to a community of 150-200,000 people. For him it was the duty of statesmen to provide the best possible well-being and happiness for all citizens in a morally conscientious way. This requires a foundation of friendship between citizens who share things equally. Everyone should share in the community's welfare. Citizens who take advantages at the expense of others are not to be tolerated. Above all, corruption is to be avoided at all costs. Aristotle believed that communities should not become overpopulated because overpopulation can lead to poverty.



Aristotle refers to four kinds of government: democracy, tyranny, aristocracy, and kingship. Democracy is the best, and the worst is tyranny. Edith Hall points out humanity's lack of progress in this regard, in that although democracy is generally considered to be the best system of government, today less than 40% of the world's population lives in countries which respect basic human rights and the rule of law. (What a sad comment on humanity. No doubt theocracies and the greed of dictators are part of the problem).

Aristotle admits that democracies are not perfect. Regulation of property ownership can cause problems and excessive inequality can creep in. This exorbitant inequality is plainly evident today in that some executives are earning 5000 times as much as a warehouse worker.

Aristotle did not neglect the homeless and the disadvantaged in a community, and stated it is the most ethically minded person that will want to help the disadvantaged and physically handicapped. Those who are well off should aspire to assume a responsibility in this regard.

**Leisure** – Surprisingly, Aristotle insisted that leisure is more important than working or earning a living when it comes to enjoying a flourishing and happy life. But to make the best use of leisure time, it is important to develop constructive pastimes in order to fill in the time because boredom is the enemy, not only of peace but also of happiness. Therefore, leisure is wasted if we do not use it properly. Aristotle went so far as to argue that good use of leisure time in an ideal society would be the main goal and objective of education.

Aristotle was an enthusiastic walker who valued bodily health and pleasure highly. He encouraged pastimes which involved exercise and creative pursuits including literature, drama, music, and the enjoyment of fine food and drink. He was the first philosopher to argue that the arts could be wonderfully educative. Aristotle advocated that some leisure time should involve community activities such as volunteering and engaging in political activity.

The important point to take away is that leisure is not a secondary matter. Making full use of it requires even more thought and effort than our working lives. For it is at leisure that we will find our true selves and our greatest happiness.

Surely this wisdom is telling us today that not using all our allotted vacation time is not a good practice, and that being a workaholic may not necessarily lead to optimum happiness.

**Mortality** – When I was young, I considered death to be a morbid subject and did not want to talk about it. But now as I am in my ninety-first year, the subject can hardly be avoided because it is necessary to get my estate in order so that making the required arrangements will be as easy as possible for my family to carry out when I am no longer here.

In my early years I was exposed to the Christian belief that I possessed a soul that would survive death and, providing I lived a virtuous life, this soul would live on eternally in some kind of idyllic heaven. In other words, I was immortal. This belief was supposed to give comfort as the years progressed and peace of mind as the time of death approached. Later in life I began to doubt and question Christian tenets and eventually came to the conclusion that these beliefs made little sense and that this life on earth is all there is. The logical conclusion from this realization is that one should strive to live life to the fullest in the here and now so that when the end time comes, it will be possible to look back and conclude that it has been a “good” life.



It would then follow that it would be advantageous to be born into a loving secular home without any religious baggage and belief in the supernatural. Instead of being sent to Sunday school, a child should gradually be made aware of how the world works and the need to acquire an education in order to be able to live a satisfying secular life in future years. Sound guidance from parents and teachers will be essential. Then when the end is near, there should be few regrets. (In reality, there will be regrets, but hopefully few).

Aristotle would agree with all of this. Unlike Plato, he did not believe in a soul that survives death. He believed when life on earth is over, it is truly over. He did not rule out the existence of some vestige of higher power in the universe, but if it did exist it did not influence events on earth.

Aristotle placed emphasis on leading a morally good life here on our planet, rather than speculate about an afterlife somewhere else. Therefore, acknowledging our mortality can be a good thing because it can help us to live well and to die well, realizing that while we are alive, we have the potential for great happiness acquired through living in the right way and in loving relationships. We can hope to live in pleasant homes, work toward goals, experience constructive work and recreation, enjoy pleasurable sensations, wonder at the variety and beauty of the natural world, and think for the larger portion of our lives about things other than death. Nietzsche, like Aristotle, saw that confronting our mortality and rejecting hopes of an afterlife made it necessary for us to assume full adult responsibility for the state of our reality, which in turn requires us to live better and with great vigour.

Although the last chapter of the book may be slightly on the gloomy side, the general tone of all the other chapters is positive in tone in that Aristotle is advocating a philosophy of how to live a happy virtuous life in a democratic society. His was not a philosophy for ivory tower academics, but for the masses. But it is most regrettable, thanks to the Roman Catholic Church, that this advantageous style of living remained dormant for more than a thousand years, until the coming of the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and the Protestant Reformation. Since then, democracy and individual freedom have slowly crept into Western societies as they became more secular and less religious. There is still a distance to go, particularly in the United States, before religions fade away and before secularism becomes the norm. Ensuring that this advancement continues is the challenge facing the West today. (DAH).

## **Aristotle Versus Plato - Is Plato Responsible for the Founding of Christianity?**

Aristotle believed the philosopher's job was to explain how the world works and how as human beings we can find our proper place in it. He was the true father of modern science, logic, and technology. Plato, by contrast, is the spokesman for the theologian, the mystic, the poet and the artist. He shaped the contours of Christianity, while Aristotle shaped the ideas of the Enlightenment.

Jesus of Nazareth did not found Christianity. He was a fully human Jewish rebel (not the supernatural son of God) opposing the establishment in the Temple. For this they crucified him. The true founder of Christianity was the apostle Paul and his associates. Paul was a Jew, but a Roman citizen fluent in Greek. It is known that he visited Athens and as a scholar would almost certainly have read the Greek classics including Plato. Paul would have picked up on Plato's concept of a human soul and some form of afterlife. This could well have influenced him in the establishment of his teachings in his Epistles. These teachings, in addition to an emphasis on faith in a supernatural Jesus, include a redemption of the soul and an afterlife.

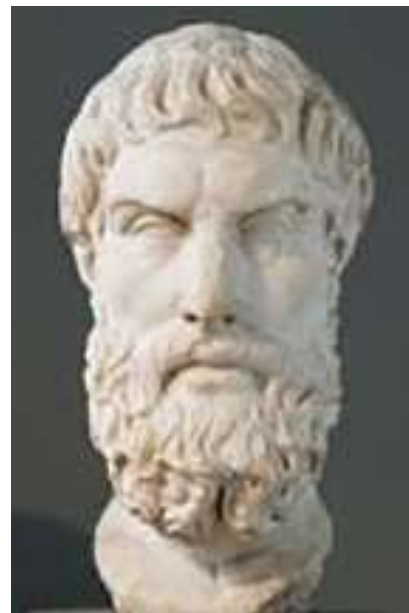


Is it too much of a stretch to claim that without Plato there would be no Christian religion? Maybe not! It would seem almost certain that Plato had a significant influence on Paul. And it is known that St. Augustine, bishop of Hippo (354-430 CE) and a man of great influence in the formation of the early Christian Church, was himself significantly influenced by Plato. To quote Nietzsche, “Christianity is Plato for the masses.” (DAH).

## **Epicurus – Philosopher and Scientist**

The Greek philosopher Epicurus (341-270 BCE) was the consummate scientist of his time. From observations of the world around him, he reasoned that all the matter in the universe was composed of indestructible atoms and that space was a vacuum devoid of atoms. He believed the universe was not created by divine power because it is full of imperfections. His declared purpose was to free humankind from religious fears by proving that the soul is material, not spiritual, and is born and dies with the body. He also believed that if gods exist, they cannot intervene on earth to help or harm humans. He points out the absurdity of a spiritual soul entering the body at birth when he states:

*“It is surely ridiculous to suppose that spirits are standing by at the mating and birth of animals – a numberless number of immortals on the look-out for mortal frames, jostling and squabbling to get in first and establish themselves most firmly. Or is there an established compact that first come shall be first served, without any trial of strength between spirits.”*



Epicurus placed great importance on the necessity of living a moral, ethical and **Bust of Epicurus** balanced life. Unfortunately, he is often depicted as living a life of gluttony and debauchery, totally given over to the pleasures of the flesh without any scruples when it came to responsibility; but this is far from being the case. He asserts that the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain are the driving forces behind our volitional and appetitive behavior. Basic instinctive pleasure is essentially the removal of the pain of need. For instance, if a person through his or her own efforts, attains the basic necessities of food clothing and shelter, this can result in a feeling of satisfaction providing it does not lead to excesses such as gluttony or greed. Moderation is the key word. He then says there is a higher pleasure, which is the pleasure of contentment and serenity, the absence of both need and desire, resulting in a feeling of tranquility.

And then there is Epicurus' famous paradox...an argument against the existence of an all-powerful providential God. – “God either wants to eliminate bad things and cannot, or can but does not want to, or neither wishes nor can, or both wants to and can. If he wants to and cannot he is weak – and this does not apply to God. If he can but does not want to, he is spiteful – which is equally foreign to God's nature. If he neither wants to nor can, he is both weak and spiteful and so not a god. If he wants to and can, which is the only fitting thing for a god, where do bad things come from? Or why does he not eliminate them?” (DAH).



# The Swerve

*By Stephen Greenblatt.*

We would know very little about Epicurus today were it not for the Roman poet Lucretius. Sometime around 50 BCE he composed a lengthy poem entitled *On the Nature of Things*. This poem, consisting of six books written in Latin, is mainly about the humanist-like reflections of the Greek philosopher Epicurus, who is often regarded as the world's first humanist. After the establishment of the Christian religion in the Roman Empire, attempts were made to destroy all literature that was considered to be of a pagan nature. So we would never have heard of *On the Nature of Things* were it not for a papal apostolic secretary named Poggio Bracciolini who discovered a copy of Lucretius' poem in a monastery in southern Germany in 1417 CE. The events concerning this fortuitous discovery are well documented in a recent book by Stephen Greenblatt entitled *The Swerve*. Greenblatt also summarizes the humanist philosophy of Epicurus that is recorded in *On the Nature of Things*, with the following headings.

- Everything is made of invisible particles.
- The elementary particles of matter – the seeds of the things – are eternal.
- The elementary particles are infinite in number but limited in size and shape.
- All particles are in motion in an infinite void.
- The universe has no creator or designer.
- Everything comes into being as a result of a swerve.
- The swerve is the source of free will.
- Nature ceaselessly experiments.
- The universe was not created for or about humans.
- Humans are not unique.
- Human society began, not in a Golden Age of tranquility and plenty, but in a primitive battle for survival.
- The soul dies. There is no afterlife. Death is nothing to us.
- All organized religions are superstitious delusions.
- Religions are invariably cruel.
- The highest goal of human life is the enhancement of pleasure and the reduction of pain.
- The greatest obstacle to pleasure is not pain; it is delusion.
- Understanding the nature of things generates deep wonder.

Poggio was considered to be the greatest book hunter of early Roman classic literature during the Italian Renaissance, but he also possessed one further gift that set him apart from other book hunters. He was a superbly well-trained scribe with exceptional handwriting. With these talents he became apostolic secretary to several popes. On the occasion of a confrontational papal succession being held at Constance in southern Germany, the pope he served was ousted and he had time to search for ancient manuscripts in monasteries in this alpine area. It is uncertain exactly where he found *On the Nature of Things*, but find it he did. He had it copied and made it available to the world. Greenblatt avers that this revelation changed the course of history, shaping the thoughts of Galileo, Freud, Darwin, Einstein and Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson had five Latin copies of the poem along with translations into English, Italian and French. Humanists everywhere owe Lucretius an enormous debt of gratitude for recording the humanist philosophy of Epicurus, and we owe an equal debt of gratitude to Poggio Bracciolini for discovering and copying *On the Nature of Things*. *The Swerve*, by Stephen Greenblatt, is highly recommended reading. (DAH).



## The Future Role of Philosophy

Philosophy can be defined as: a love of, and a search for wisdom, intertwined with truth, beauty and goodness. But what good is a definition if philosophy remains in ivory towers and is not used as Socrates would say, as a way of pointing us in the direction of the good life? And why does modern philosophy sometimes have to be so “gawddamned” complicated that even academics cannot agree on its meanings?

In his fairly recent book *A Brief History of Thought* (2003), French philosopher Luc Ferry suggests that a well lived life should consist of three basic attributes, namely *theory*, *morality*, and *salvation*. By theory he means understanding how the world works, or in other words, knowing how to obtain the education necessary for a person to earn a comfortable living working in a field or occupation of their choice. This involves accepting a measure of responsibility on the part of each individual to become proficient in a career that suits their aptitude and abilities.

Leaving morality to last and moving on to salvation, for Ferry, salvation simply means learning how to die. For those who do not believe in an afterlife, salvation is living life as fully as possible in the here and now, accepting death as a natural part of the journey of life. We are born, we live, and we die.

Morality is the most difficult attribute to deal with. It must start with the teaching of children in their critical formative years. In the past, as noted earlier, religions have played a major role in imparting moral principles to children, but unfortunately children have been learning untruths based on supernatural phenomena, and they have also had instilled into them a sense of fear about what may happen in the afterlife. It is time these religious prevarications ceased with parents and teachers being responsible for ethical and moral instructions to children. But of what should the instructions consist?

My suggestion is that these instructions should be based on the miracle of life in all its aspects. Life *per se* does not begin in the womb. Life began about three and a half billion years ago and has been evolving ever since. Each human is the result of chance happenings occurring over eons and eons, and each living being is truly a miracle. It is a *living* sperm uniting with a *living* ovum that initiates the formation of a live human being. And once born, each human should be entitled to loving parents, food, shelter, clothing, a prosperous society to live in with liberty and justice for all, an education, and an opportunity to enjoy Socrates’ “good life.” This is what morality should be about; helping to provide environments where all forms of life are considered sacred and where the most unpardonable sin is to destroy another life. Not only human life, but life in general! We must preserve and protect the natural environment in order that our descendants will be able to survive with clean air, food, and sufficient potable water. The challenge for political leaders throughout the world is to provide living conditions that enable *all* their citizens to partake of the “good life.” Their first concern must be the welfare of the populace, not their own personal gain. And this is where Plato’s philosophy comes into the picture.

In Athens in the fourth century BCE, Plato set up his Academy, the world’s first institution of higher learning. One of his aims was to provide prospective political leaders with a grounding in philosophy among other things. Plato recommended that potential leaders (guardians) be subjected to a rigorous training process and a period of practical experience that would not end until the participant was fifty years old. Then the “philosopher king or queen” would be ready to govern in a selfless altruistic manner, being concerned only with the welfare of all citizens, and not in creating wealth or other advantages for himself or herself.



Surely this is one of Plato's greatest recommendations. Political leaders should receive a certain amount of requisite training, including some philosophy, as well as practical experience, before assuming positions of leadership. And then their primary concern must be the welfare of all citizens, not their own personal gain. Have there been any leaders that met these criteria? Perhaps a few, including Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius and Nelson Mandela. If philosophers are to play a useful role in the future, maybe they should be reminded of Socrates' dictum: Philosophy is about living the "good life." This is a good place to start. (DAH)

## **More Quotes**

**Elizabeth Cady Stanton**, women's suffragist leader stated, "The Bible and the Church have been the greatest stumbling blocks in the way of women's emancipation.■"

**Journalist H.L. Mencken** stated, "The Christian religion is fundamentally opposed to everything I hold in veneration — courage, clear thinking, honesty, fairness, and above all, love of the truth."

**Astronomer Carl Sagan** said, "My view is that if there is no evidence for it then forget about it. An Agnostic is somebody who doesn't believe in something until there is evidence for it, so I am an agnostic."

**President Abraham Lincoln** said, "The Bible is not my book, nor Christianity my profession. I could never give assent to the long, complicated statement of Christian dogma."

**Pantheist Albert Einstein** said, "I cannot imagine a God who rewards and punishes the objects of his creation, whose purposes are modeled after our own — a God, in short who is but a reflection of human frailty. Neither can I believe that the individual survives the death of his body, although feeble souls harbor such thoughts through fear of ridiculous egotism."

**President Thomas Jefferson** said, "The Christian god can easily be pictured as the same god as the many ancient gods of past civilizations. The Christian god is a three headed monster, cruel, vengeful and capricious. If one wishes to know more of this raging three-headed beast-like god, one only needs to look at the caliber of people in the clergy who say they serve him. They are always of two classes: fools and hypocrites."

**President James Madison** said, "During almost fifteen centuries has the legal establishment of Christianity been on trial. What have been its fruits? More or less in all places, pride and insolence in the clergy; ignorance and servility in the laity; in both, bigotry and persecution."

**Agnostic Robert Ingersoll** said, "The notion that faith in Christ is to be rewarded by an eternity of bliss while dependence on reason, observation and experience merits everlasting pain, is too absurd for refutation, and can be relieved only by that unhappy mixture of insanity and ignorance called faith."

When philosopher **Bertrand Russell** was asked; what if you died and found yourself face to face with God, what then? The doughty old champion said, "I would say, Lord, you should have given me more evidence."

**English Poet Christopher Marlow** (1564-1593) said, "I count religion but a childish toy and hold there is no sin but ignorance."



## **Section V - Religions**

Right up front it is necessary to ask. Why should humanists, secularists and freethinkers be concerned with learning anything about religions, when many believe the world would be better off without them? Well, if one is being critical about something, I think it is prudent to know something about it. And I maintain you cannot understand religions, and their impact on humanity, without knowing their actual history. Why? Because what actually occurred is quite different from what has been and is still being taught in Sunday schools and preached from pulpits. Therefore, readers should find the following to be of interest.

### **How Did Religions Come About?**

Apparently most, if not all, primitive peoples practised a minimal form of religion referred to as animism, defined as a belief in spiritual beings. Primitive people saw spirits in plants animals and features of the landscape. From such elemental notions all religions evolved as humans sought explanations for the origin of the universe and for the creation of humankind. This quest for explanations brought about the creation of various myths and the invention of a god or gods capable of influencing events on earth while at the same time demanding adoration, obedience, and respect, as well as sacrifices for appeasement. As early as 3000 BCE the Sumerians had established a priesthood for the purpose of offering appeasements while at the same time supervising agricultural practices. Perhaps gods were created because people could not find any other way to console themselves in times of tragedy, bringing to mind Voltaire's quote, that "If God did not exist, he would have to be invented." Thus, it can be argued that gods were indeed a necessary invention, implying that God was created in the image of man rather than the other way around. As time passed, a number of individuals including Abraham, Moses, Buddha, Zoroaster, Lao Tzu, Confucius, Jesus, Mohammed, and others, came forward and brought about, or influenced, the founding of the world's major religions. In time, the pagan gods of the great civilizations of Egypt, Greece and Rome slowly faded away and were replaced in the western world by the one God of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. What follows is a brief history of Judaism and Islam and two articles on Christianity. Christianity receives more attention because it has been the dominate religion of the Western world for two millennia. The oriental religions have not been included.

### **Three Religions – One God?**



**Jewish Yahweh**



**Christian Jesus –son of God?**



**Islam's Allah**

Judaism, Christianity and Islam are often referred to as Abrahamic religions because their adherents believe the patriarch Abraham to be their founding father. Abraham worshiped a deity known as Yahweh who reputedly told him he would be the father of an eventual great nation through his son Isaac, his grandson



Jacob and Jacob's twelve sons. This nation, consisting of twelve tribes, became known as Israel. But Abraham had an older son Ishmael, birthed by Hagar a handmaiden to his wife Sarah. Muslims regard themselves as descendants of Abraham through his son Ishmael, calling their deity Allah rather than Yahweh. A couple of millennia after Abraham, Christians claim a virgin named Mary gave birth to a baby they called Jesus, the son of God, with God being synonymous with the Jewish deity Yahweh.

Non-believers regard the three monotheistic religions as human inventions incorporating a supernatural deity to satisfy a human need to account for the unexplainable. These religions still exist today, and one could well ask, if there really is an all-powerful, all-knowing benevolent deity common to all three religions, why does he, she or it allow so much fighting among them? This is similar to the age-old theodicy question, why does this all-powerful, all-knowing, benevolent deity allow so much suffering in the world? The logical answer is of course - this supposed supernatural deity does not now, nor has ever existed. He, she or it is also a human invention, and therefore unable to influence events on earth.

Nevertheless, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, all based on supernatural phenomena, make up about half of the world's population and must be reckoned with. These religions are not going away anytime soon, and one of them, namely Islam, merits attention because of the various atrocities that have happened and are still happening today.

These atrocities include 9/11 in the U.S., beheadings of Western captives by Islamic State fundamentalists, kidnapping of Protestant school girls by Boko Haram in Nigeria, the killing of two soldiers in Canada and killings in Paris France. They have all precipitated increasing concerns about Islam. These despicable events present a quandary because many Muslims claim that Islam is a religion of peace and that only a small minority is involved in carrying out the barbaric terrorist actions reported in the news. Evidence, however, tends to suggest otherwise because the atrocities are so widespread. There is not only Al Qaeda and the attacks on 9/11, there is the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, threats in Yemen, bombings in Nairobi, Lisbon and London England, Boko Haram and others in northwest Africa, constant hatred between Sunnis and Shias, civil war in Syria, unrest in Libya and Egypt, as well as threats against Jews in Israel by Hamas in Gaza. And in Canada, besides the recent killing of the two soldiers, we have had honour killings, an attempt to instil Sharia law in Ontario, (fortunately unsuccessful) and three youths who went to Africa to join the Islamist cause apparently received their indoctrination and training in London Ontario. (How scary!) And to boot, there are long-established customs including the subordination of women and the cruel act of female circumcision that do not belong in our modern world.

So, can anyone be blamed for wondering if there is not more than just a small minority causing all the problems with Islam? And why are only a very limited number of moderate Muslims speaking out and condemning the perpetrators? The reality is, we non-Muslims have no idea what proportion of Muslims are peace-loving and wish to respect the values of others living in the countries where they reside, and what portion of Muslims wish to establish and live in Islamic states under Sharia law. Another concern is the Qur'an. Just how much do the teachings therein influence the actions of the terrorists? Probably quite a lot! There is just so much we do not know with any certainty.

On balance, surely it is not illogical to conclude that a religion fostering the kinds of violence and atrocities cited above, is out of place in the twenty-first century and is sorely in need of reform. Both Judaism and Christianity have undergone periods of violence through wars and inquisitions but have also embraced



reform. Therefore, perhaps examining the histories of Judaism and Christianity could prove helpful in pointing the way toward badly needed reform in Islam.

## **A Brief History of Judaism**

Judaism began in the area that is now called Israel as early as four millennia ago. The early history of the Jews, beginning with the creation story of Adam and Eve, is well documented in the *Hebrew Scriptures*, known to us as the Old Testament, which can be divided into four sections: 1. the first five books or Pentateuch; 2. the history books telling the history of the Israelites from their conquest of Canaan to their defeat and exile to Babylon circa 586 BCE; 3. the poetic and “Wisdom” books dealing in various forms with questions of good and evil in the world; 4. the books of the biblical prophets, warning of the consequences of turning away from God.

Today most people, other than devout religious fundamentalists, regard the stories in Genesis including the creation story and the flood as myths. Furthermore, there is little archaeological or other non-biblical evidence to confirm that the sojourn in Egypt or the Exodus ever occurred. It is most likely that the peoples who became known as Israelites were living in Canaan as far back as 2000 BCE. By about 1000 BCE, the Israelites were ruled by King David. He was succeeded by his son Solomon who was then succeeded by his son Rehoboam. During Rehoboam’s reign, the Kingdom split into Northern and Southern entities with ten tribes in the north and two in the south. Jerusalem was the capital in the south. The ten northern tribes disappeared (the so-called ten lost tribes) and those people in the south, mostly from the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, became known as the Jews. In 586 BCE, the Babylonian leader Nebuchadnezzar captured Judea and hauled off a number of the Jews to Babylon as slaves. It was there that much of parts 1 and 2 of the *Hebrew Scriptures* cited above were compiled from earlier writings and oral traditions. In 539 BCE, Persian King Cyrus captured Babylon and allowed the Jews to return to Judea where they resided, sometimes peacefully, sometimes not, until the Roman general Pompey captured Palestine in 63 BCE. The Jews were not content under Roman rule and revolted in 66 CE. In 70 CE the Romans sacked Jerusalem and destroyed Herod’s magnificent Temple. This ended the traditional Jewish Temple worship. It was replaced by Rabbinic Judaism which has continued to this present day. In the centuries following the Roman victories, the Jews were dispersed and settled in various countries throughout the known world, sometimes in ghettos, sometimes being referred to as “Christ killers,” and often persecuted. The barbaric holocaust in Germany during WW II being one of the most horrendous persecutions suffered by the Jewish people, but there were others that occurred in previous centuries.

During the later years of the 19th century there was a movement called Zionism that encouraged Jews to return to their homeland Palestine, and by the start of WW II there were close to half a million Jews living relatively peacefully among Muslim Palestinians. After the war there was much sympathy toward the Jews due to the revelation that six million were killed in the holocaust. An official Jewish state was formed in 1948 and Jews migrated into Palestine while many native Palestinians were forced into Gaza and the West Bank. Ever since there has been never ending off and on conflict and it continues to this day.

Judaism is not only a unique religion, but it is also a culture. For example, it is perfectly acceptable for a person to be an atheist Jew if he or she desires. And it must be stressed that Jews have made contributions to humanity way out of proportion to their fifteen million numbers (six million in Israel). Comprising less than 0.2 percent of world population, Jews have won 41% of Nobel prizes in economics, 28% of medicine,



26% of physics, 19% of chemistry, 13% of literature and 9% of peace awards. Quite an outstanding achievement! Who knows how many budding Albert Einsteins or Jonas Salks were killed in the holocaust?

On reading the *Hebrew Scriptures*, one will find in the Pentateuch (the first five books) 613 commandments that were to be adhered to by the Israelites. There are positive commandments with instructions on how to perform certain acts and negative commandments saying what acts or practices to avoid. While there may be orthodox Jews who still attempt to live according to many of these commandments or laws, modern reformed Jews will observe only a few of them. The point to be made is that Judaism has evolved, or has been reformed, in order to coincide with the realities of today's world. For example, Judaism no longer advocates stoning for adultery. It is suggested that it is time for Islam to reform as well.

## **A Brief History of Islam**

Although as indicated at the outset, there is a supposed link to Abraham, Islam is actually the youngest of the three major monotheistic religions dating from 610 CE. In that year, an Arabian merchant named Muhammad reputedly received a message from Allah through the angel Gabriel who commanded him to recite. For the next 22 years until his death in 632 he did just that. After Muhammad died, the revelations were collected together into the Qur'an from the accounts of those who memorized them or wrote them down. Before he died, Muhammad had taken up arms and converted all of Arabia to Islam. After his death, Muslim warriors embarked on a series of conquests unprecedented in their breadth and swiftness. Syria and the Holy Land fell in 637, Armenia and Egypt in 639, Cyprus in 654, and North Africa by the 660s. Today Muslims inhabit a vast area from north-west Africa to the Philippines, and there is a sizable Muslim population in many European countries causing great concern because Muslim birth rates are so high. Muslims could quite possibly outnumber native Europeans in the not too distant future and take control. A frightening thought!

Also frightening are the problems radical fundamentalist Muslim jihadists are causing today, particularly in North Africa and Syria/Iraq where the rebels are attempting to establish caliphates. They are beheading western journalists and kidnapping and killing non-Muslims. Sunnis are killing Shias and vice versa. As if this were not enough, western Muslim youth have joined terrorist groups abroad and threaten to return home and carry out jihad

Before concluding the section on Islam, it must be mentioned that the comments apply to the religion of Islam, not to the many peace-loving Muslims in the world. It is regrettable that the religion has been tarnished by theocratic countries like Iran and by those misguided individuals who engage in jihad.

## **The Nicene Creed - The Basis of Christianity**

Every Sunday in Anglican Churches, and in churches of some other denominations, either the Nicene Creed or the Apostles Creed is recited. The words of the Nicene Creed are printed below.

We believe in one God,  
the Father, the Almighty,  
maker of heaven and earth,  
of all that is, seen and unseen.



We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,  
the only Son of God,  
eternally begotten of the Father,  
God from God, Light from Light,  
true God from true God,  
begotten, not made,  
of one Being with the Father.  
Through him all things were made.  
For us and for our salvation  
he came down from heaven:  
by the power of the Holy Spirit  
he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary,  
and was made man.  
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;  
he suffered death and was buried.  
On the third day he rose again  
in accordance with the Scriptures;  
he ascended into heaven  
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.  
He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,  
and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,  
who proceeds from the Father and the Son.  
With the Father and the Son he is worshiped and glorified.  
He has spoken through the Prophets.  
We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.  
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.  
We look for the resurrection of the dead,  
and the life of the world to come. Amen.

This creed was invented at the Council of Nicaea in 325, a synod ordered by the Emperor Constantine charged with the task of arriving at one unified Christian Church. The enigmatic Trinity was also invented at this time. Any atheist, humanist or free thinker reading these words would surely conclude that this Creed is a collection of supernatural gobbledygook. But for Christians the world over, this is not gobbledygook. It is the gospel truth. And to top it off, these beliefs have endured for two millennia. How has this happened?

## **The Invention of Christianity**

### *A Coincidental Combination of Events*

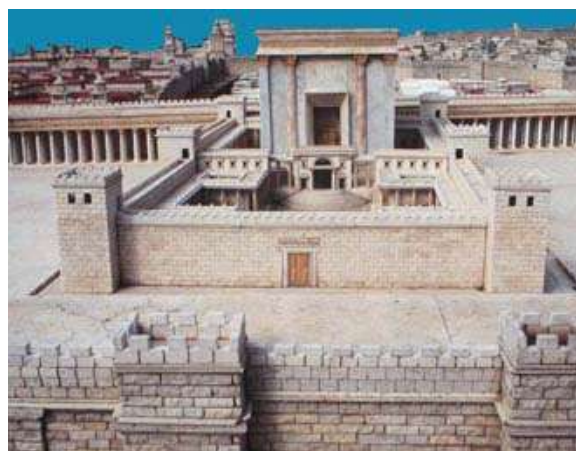
It is virtually certain that Jesus was not the founder of Christianity. He was a first century, fully human Jew whose preached a message of salvation and redemption and an afterlife. What eventually became Christianity was invented after his death as a result of the coincidental, combined efforts of the apostle Paul, the Gospel writers, the Emperor Constantine and the early Roman Catholic Church. In order to get as close as possible to what really occurred in the first four centuries of the Common Era (CE), it is necessary to examine the historic conditions that prevailed before and during the time Jesus was alive, as well as Jesus the man and his teachings, the writings and exploits of the apostle Paul, the compilation of the four Gospels,



the influence of Constantine, the assembly of the New Testament by the early Roman Church fathers and the expansion of the Roman Catholic Church. Each of these matters will be examined separately.

**Leading up to the First Century CE** – The Israelites were among the most literate of nations in the ancient world and they managed to compose a holy scripture that became known as the Old Testament, a truly amazing piece of literature. The earlier books were codified during the Babylonian captivity, and the final books of the Old Testament were written about four hundred years before the birth of Jesus. Subsequent to that time, a number of other books were written including the seven in the Apocrypha, (the Apocrypha is included in the Catholic Bible), the Pseudepigrapha, and other writings that became available after the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. These documents reveal that a number of concepts, seldom mentioned in the Old Testament, began creeping into the beliefs of some of the Jewish sects. These ideas include belief in a Messiah, a devil, an underworld, angels, a judgment, and an afterlife. Monotheism, the worship of the single God Yahweh, was also firmed up during that period. These concepts, that were carried over into the New Testament, did not originate with Jesus. They would have been present in some, but not all parts of first-century Judaism, even without him.

**The First Century CE** - At the time Jesus lived, there were four main Jewish sects: the Sadducees, who controlled commerce and oversaw the Temple; the Pharisees, who were the educators; the Essenes, who were the monkish Dead Sea Scroll people, and the Zealots, who resisted the Roman occupiers and were the holdouts at Massada. There were also a number of smaller, somewhat radical groups such as those led by John the Baptizer and the one led by Jesus himself. Common to all of these groups was Herod the Great's magnificent Temple, the pillar of Jewish worship. It supposedly contained the "Ark of the Covenant." These were the conditions existing in Roman-controlled Palestine when Jesus and the apostles were spreading his message.



**Herod's Magnificent Temple**

But a drastic change occurred in 70 CE when the Romans destroyed the Jerusalem temple during the Jewish Rebellion of 66-73 CE. Only one of the Jewish groups survived the rebellion in the long term. These were the Pharisees who replaced temple worship with the Rabbinic Judaism that still exists today.

**Jesus, the Fully Human Man** - Devout Christians believe that Jesus was the supernatural son of God, born of a virgin and bodily resurrected. These supernatural qualities, prevalent in a number of ancient myths, were obviously picked up and employed by the Gospel writers to characterize Jesus as the supernatural Christ. But even if we eliminate the supernatural, it is not easy to establish a profile of the human Jesus with any certainty, because we know so little about his life until he was about 30 years of age. Some say he was an Essene who left the cloistered environment to reform Judaism. Others say he might have been trained as a Rabbi. We know he spoke Aramaic, the language of Galilee, but could he speak and read Greek and/or Hebrew? Some say he probably had a working knowledge of one or both languages. In any case, he appears to have had a firm understanding of the Old Testament, available in Greek (The Septuagint), Aramaic, and Hebrew. Could he write? We do not know, but like Socrates, he left nothing in writing. We do not know



who his father was (some speculate it was a Roman soldier) but we believe his mother was Mary. According to the Gospels he had four half-brothers, James, Joses, Simon and Judas, and an unknown number of half-sisters. We do not know whether he was married (it has been speculated that he could have been married to Mary Magdalene). He had no intention of preaching to the Gentiles, (Matthew 10: 5-6). Historical references to Jesus exist, but they are very scant, so we must rely on the Gospels to try to determine just what he believed his purpose to be. Reading through the three synoptic, or similar Gospels, and the Book of John, makes one realize that this is an almost impossible task because of all the ambiguity, contradictions, and supernatural events. Nevertheless, over the last 250 years there have been numerous attempts to determine the characteristics of the real historical human Jesus of Nazareth.



### **Jesus of Nazareth**

In 1761 Baron d'Holbach published a convincing treatise entitled *Christianity Unveiled*, exposing some of the illogical aspects of Christianity. In 1835 David Freidrich Strauss published *The Life of Jesus, Christianity Examined* expressing serious doubts about traditional Christian beliefs. Although it was not published until 1895, at some earlier date Thomas Jefferson compiled *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*, later known as the *Jefferson Bible*. By rearranging the gospels in chronological order and removing all references to the supernatural, Jefferson revealed the non-mystical essence of Jesus' teachings.

One of the more recent attempts at defining the historical Jesus is that of the Jesus Seminar. This is a group of Biblical scholars based in California that has attempted to determine which of the recorded words of Jesus in the gospels were most likely spoken by him, using a technique employing red, pink, gray and black beads. Some erudite scholars call the Jesus Seminar methodology embarrassing, but others find the results that have been published to be quite acceptable.

But there is now another source that may lead us closer to the real Jesus than do the four Gospels in the Bible. The Gnostic Gospel of Thomas, discovered in a cave at Nag Hammadi in Egypt in 1945, makes no mention of a virgin birth, a bodily resurrection, original sin, repentance, or an afterlife. Instead Jesus is portrayed as an enlightened prophet and spiritual leader as well as being fully human and engaged in the world. God's Kingdom is here on earth, existing as a transformed consciousness or enlightenment. Salvation is through the accumulation of knowledge and by way of good works, not through belief in blood atonement.

I think the gospel of Thomas gets us closer to the real historical Jesus than anything in the traditional Gospels, and I do not think it is too much of a stretch to suggest that Jesus was a fully human, intelligent, verbally spry Jewish sage, in the same sense that Socrates was a sage. Both left nothing in writing, and both were put to death for defying the authorities of their day.

**The Apostle Paul** - The earliest recorded writings about the teachings of Jesus are the 14 Epistles contained in the New Testament, at least 7 of which, were by the apostle Paul: I Thessalonians, I and II Corinthians, Philippians, Philemon, Galatians, and Romans. Paul was a Jewish Pharisee, a Roman citizen living in the Diaspora, who supposedly had a vision (some speculate it was an epileptic seizure) in which he claims to have received a message from Jesus telling him to preach the gospel to those living in the Diaspora, both Jew and Gentile.



After the death of Jesus, his half-brother James became the leader of a group that included Jesus' other half-brothers and some of the disciples, including Peter and John. They considered Jesus to be fully human. Their mission was to continue promoting the messages of Jesus to the Jews in Palestine. Paul met with this group and let it be known that he intended to convey the teachings of Jesus to both Jews and Gentiles in the Diaspora. Despite some opposition from the Jerusalem group, who, unlike Paul, still believed it was necessary to observe many of the Mosaic laws, including circumcision, Paul set out to preach a reformed gospel of "faith" (Romans 1: 16-17) to citizens in the Eastern Mediterranean area.



*This was the first phase in the invention of Christianity.* James was martyred in 62 CE, and his faction that became known as the Ebionites, eventually died out, but Paul's Christianity was destined to have a gripping influence on Western civilization for many centuries to come and continues to this day.

### **The Apostle Paul**

Paul's message was somewhat different from the message of James and his small group. He espoused the following:

1. Gentiles need not adhere to the Mosaic laws. Salvation could be obtained by a profession of "faith," believing that Jesus died to atone for the sins of believers. In particular, circumcision was no longer necessary in order to be a follower of Jesus. Paul also softened Jesus' divorce laws.
2. Believers would be guaranteed some form of life after death.
3. Jesus was the son of God, the Messiah who would return in the near future to judge all of humanity and establish God's kingdom on earth.
4. Paul promoted the celebration of the Eucharist. (See the wording in I Corinthians 5: 7-8).

Despite many beatings and time in jail, Paul and his associates were amazingly successful at establishing a number of Gentile Christian churches in various parts of the Roman Empire. Apparently, the promises of redemption and some sort of afterlife without going through the painful circumcision procedure was attractive to many. Also, some of Paul's Epistles contain elegant prose; his beautiful passage on love in I Corinthians 13 is legendary. But in the end, he irritated authorities in Jerusalem, and he was put on trial. Since he was a Roman citizen, he insisted he be tried in Rome where he was convicted and executed in 68 CE. By then the die was cast. Christianity was destined to exert a momentous influence on the western world, as it eventually became the world's most populous religion.

**The Influence of the Gospels** - In each of the Gospels, Jesus predicts the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple that occurred in 70 CE during the time of the Jewish Revolt. The Gospel of Mark is believed to have been the first one, written soon after 70 CE. It was followed by Matthew, Luke and John in that order. Obviously, the words supposedly spoken by Jesus concerning the destruction of the Temple were "put into his mouth" by the Gospel writers after the Temple was destroyed. Similarly, all the words supposedly spoken by Jesus after the resurrection were also put into his mouth, since a physical resurrection is impossible. These post-crucifixion words, that were never really spoken by Jesus, include his instructions to go into all the world and preach the Gospel to the Gentiles. The accounts fulfilling the Old Testament prophecies were also likely fabrications.



The first three Gospels have many similarities and are known as the synoptics. The Gospel of John is quite different and introduces the born-again concept that is now the central belief of some Christians, especially the fundamentalists.

A significant problem with the Gospels is that they were written long after Jesus died. With this time lag, how accurate can they be? And since they were transcribed so often by hand, how many errors or deliberate interpretations crept in? How did the authors get their information? Was it, word of mouth or was there a lost written gospel that is known as “Q” or the “Source”? We may never know for certain, but more importantly, the authors embellished the teaching of Jesus and advocate concepts similar to Paul’s, adding the supernatural virgin birth and a physical resurrection? When these writings were assimilated by the early churches, the *invention of the supernatural Jesus Christ the Savior was almost complete*. But still to come were the formation and development of the Trinity and the Creeds by the Roman Church fathers.

**The Influence of Emperor Constantine** - After the establishment and expansion of the Roman empire, Latin became a prevalent language, replacing Greek in some areas. Roman culture also evolved in areas of literature, philosophy and architecture. (The Romans made extensive use of the arch). A renowned philosophical work of the period was the *Meditations* written by the stoic Emperor Marcus Aurelius (121-180 CE). As in Greece, ethics and morality in the Roman Empire resided in the domain of philosophers, not the priests. At the time of Marcus Aurelius, Christian Churches were present, but they were scattered, and Christians were generally looked down upon by the elite as being ignorant. Their adherents often suffered persecutions and the Christian religion might have died out were it not for the Emperor Constantine (274-337 CE). According to legend, Constantine had a vision or a dream indicating that if he fought the next day under the banner of the Christian cross, he would



**Emperor Constantine**

win the battle of Milvian Bridge. He won the battle and subsequently declared Christianity to be the official religion of the Roman Empire. In this effort, he was aided to no small extent by his mother Helena, who carried out archeological work in Palestine, where she is reputed to have unearthed some early Christian relics.

Constantine soon realized that there was dissension concerning beliefs in the various Christian factions. Some believed Jesus to be the son of God; others considered him to be fully human. Reasoning he must have unity in order to rule without religious conflict, he convened the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE in order to sort out the differences and obtain common agreement. It was those who believed in a supernatural Jesus who won the day. Other groups such as the Arians and the Gnostics that believed Jesus was fully human, faded away. It was at this time that the enigmatic Trinity and the Nicene Creed were born. The Creed defined the basic tenets of the Church. Then, after several synods, the books of the New Testament were selected from the writings available at the time. There were a number of texts available, but only those that dovetailed with the tenets of the Roman Church were selected. They were then adjoined to the Old Testament, and the Christian canon was complete. With the backing of Constantine and future Emperors and Kings, the Roman Catholic Church prospered and grew. *The invention of Christianity was now complete* and with political endorsement and support, the Catholic Church had a monopolistic patent on an *exclusive* Christianity. This monopoly enabled the Church to exert undue influence and power, both religious and political, on Western civilization until the Protestant Reformation. Sadly, this dictatorial, top-down,



autocratic organization suppressed the democratic, philosophical, and humanistic qualities of the Greeks for many centuries.

**The Roman Catholic Church** - Catholics believe their Church was founded by the apostle Peter. They cite Jesus' telling Peter that he is the rock on which he will build his church. (Matthew 16: 18-20). Peter, like Paul, preached to Jews and Gentiles in the Diaspora. He was put to death in Rome in 67 CE. He is regarded as the first pope and is reputed to be buried under St. Peter's Basilica. The Catholic Church is organized along military lines, with a hierarchy headed by the pope, whose army consists of cardinals, bishops, monsignors and priests. Their message is simple: salvation and a guaranteed



**Saint Peter's Basilica**

entry into heaven is achieved only by becoming a Catholic and observing the sacraments of baptism, confirmation, partaking of communion at mass, confession to a priest, marriage, and the last rights. The theology, doctrines, dogmas, tenets, liturgy, and rituals have been influenced over time by various scholars including St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas. The Catholic religion was no doubt, of some comfort for the illiterate masses who lived with drudgery and hardship during the dark ages that resulted from the decline and fall of the Roman Empire, and the invasions of the barbaric Visigoths and Huns. In this dark period, lasting up to one thousand years, the church was the only unifying force. The peasants were told that life, though miserable now, would be immeasurably better in the next life.

Throughout the centuries, the Catholic Church has, on occasion, been the cause of much harm. An early black mark was the destruction of the 700-year-old Alexandria Library, "the storehouse of all the worlds knowledge," preserved on thousands of papyrus scrolls. In 391 CE, on papal orders, the library was destroyed by Archbishop Theophilus because it contained so-called pagan documents. This unforgivable act of destruction was a huge disservice to humanity. The Crusades, the Inquisitions, and the burning of witches are legendary as is the vindictive persecution of the Jews for supposedly being "Christ killers." Another scourge is the religious wars of the past and those that are still with us to this day. And regrettably, the Church discouraged the development of science (think of Galileo) and democracy. The Church's close association with the rulers of the day gave it undeserved power and influence in these matters. The Catholic Church is still causing harm today with its refusal to allow abortion and artificial birth control, both restrictions that further the spread of AIDs. The Church also opposes gay and lesbian marriage and has serious sexual-abuse issues with certain wayward priests. Their stubborn refusal to allow married priests or women priests is senseless, as is the concept of an infallible pope. The Catholic hierarchy will do almost anything to maintain its power.

At this point it is only fair to point out that the above criticism is directed at the Vatican and not at the Catholics in the pews. I know Catholics who get great solace from attending mass and confession. And today there are liberal Catholics who favour married priests as well as women priests, but unfortunately, as mentioned above, the Vatican turns a deaf ear. This reluctance to reform is causing attendance to drop in western Catholic churches, and indeed some Catholic churches are closing.

**Protestantism** – Up until about 1500 CE, Christianity occupied a significant place in the lives of most European citizens, but thanks to the Protestant Reformation, aided by the invention of the printing press and the Enlightenment philosophers, more and more secularization began to emerge. Most importantly, science and democracy began to advance and gradually through mechanization, much of the drudgery of the past was reduced or eliminated. This progress was aided by the development and utilization of water,



wind, and steam-power, which significantly increased productivity. These advancements gave people the opportunity to be more secular, and less religious and to enjoy life in the here and now, rather than in a supposed next life.

Most Protestant churches today operate in a democratic manner whereby the congregants have some say in the beliefs and running of their church, as opposed to the autocratic ways of the Catholic Church. This freedom has many advantages, and it has allowed Protestants to make many positive contributions to society (think of the Protestant work ethic), but there is one undesirable outcome: it is possible for anyone who wishes, to leave a traditional mainline Protestant denomination and set up his or her own church. More often than not, these people are radical fundamentalist/evangelicals who may threaten to infiltrate governments to aid in fulfilling their theocratic missions and jeopardize the separation of church and state. This most undesirable situation has caused problems in the United States with some evangelical politicians threatening separation of church and state.

**The Legacy of Monotheistic Christianity** – While much of the foregoing dwells on the shortcomings of Christianity, there have certainly been benefits. Throughout the centuries church teachings have been a source of ethics and morality for citizens. During the dark ages they were the main source of scholastic knowledge and later were instrumental in establishing universities. The construction of cathedrals helped advance both Gothic and Romanesque architecture. Most churches have been, and still are, involved with outreach to the underprivileged. And for many, their church is the centre of their social life.

At the present time, the condition and popularity of Christianity varies a lot from one area of the world to another. In many Western Europe countries, it has dwindled to almost insignificance as people lost interest and secularization gradually took over. But in many areas of Central and South America and parts of Africa, Roman Catholicism is still influential. In the United States, the most religious country in the West, Protestant fundamentalist/evangelical big-box churches are growing, while Catholic and mainline Protestant churches are not. In China of all places, Christianity is creeping in, to the displeasure of Communist leaders. But overall, in the western world, except in the United States, Christianity and mainline denominations are on the wane.

But just who was this man Jesus who influenced the founding of a religion that today claims over two billion members and adherents? What follows is an attempt to answer this question.

## **Jesus of Nazareth: Son of God, Wise Teacher...or Impostor?**

*The following is a talk presented by Donald Hatch at the April 13<sup>th</sup>, 2016, meeting of the Humanist Association of London and Area. There will be some duplication from the preceding articles.*

My talk will center on the second and third chapters of my book *The Road Not Travelled*. These chapters are entitled *The Evolution of Christianity* and *The Search for the Historical Jesus*. But before getting into the contents of these chapters, a brief explanation of the two themes present in the book is in order. The first theme is about two roads, the Athenian, and the Jerusalem. Considering the Athenian road first, great things were happening in Athens around the year 400 BCE, where a prosperous democratic and basically secular society flourished. Later the Romans adapted many, although not all, of the Athenian attributes. Like in Athens, there was no state religion in Rome and morality was in the domain of the philosophers rather than being the dictates of any church. Unfortunately, this condition came to an end after Roman Emperor



Constantine declared Christianity to be the official religion of the Roman Empire in the early 4<sup>th</sup> century CE. Regrettably, Western society left the Athenian road behind and adopted the Jerusalem road, which was then actively and successfully promoted by the Catholic Church for one thousand years. But after the Renaissance, the Protestant Reformation and the Enlightenment, Western societies began to get back on the Athenian road as democracy as well as science and technology developed, particularly in Protestant countries. It is my contention put forth in the book that now is the time for the West to get fully back on the Athenian road, promoting the desirability of secular societies with a minimum of religiosity, as they now exist in Scandinavia.

The second theme in the book concerns Jesus of Nazareth. What was he really like and why is understanding his true origin so important? It is important because this man, Jesus, has influenced Western societies more than any other person, and he is the main reason the West left the Athenian road and embarked on the Jerusalem road, slowing progress for at least a thousand years. This is why the subtitle to my book is: *How the democracy, science and humanism of the Greeks was suppressed by the early Christian Church and how that obstructed the progress of humanity.*

Although there are few non-biblical references to Jesus, I do believe a human Jesus of Nazareth actually did exist, but not as the supernatural Jesus-the-Christ of the Gospels. Instead, I believe a clever, fully human Jesus of Nazareth founded a cult with a few Jewish followers, roamed the countryside around Nazareth claiming to be the promised Messiah, preached a message of salvation, and in doing so aggravated the Jewish leaders in the Temple who persuaded the Roman authorities to have him crucified and buried. I do not believe he rose from the grave nor ascended into heaven.

Most scholars who attempt to determine what Jesus was really like look mainly to the Gospels and the Epistles, because there is little else to go on. And they nearly always try to portray Jesus in a positive manner as a uniquely virtuous individual. But there are always two sides to every story. The other side is that of the Jews, and there we get a much different picture. The Jews believed Jesus was an impostor, who claimed to be the Messiah promised in their scripture. The majority of Jews obviously agreed he was an impostor because, after the death of Jesus, his followers were unable to attract many other Jews to the Jesus movement and this group of followers eventually died out. (It was left to the apostle Paul and his associates to successfully promote a Christianity based on a supernatural Jesus-the-Christ throughout parts of the Roman Empire. And the rest, as they say, is history). More on this later!

And there is much more to be learned from the Jews, because there are references to Jesus in the Babylonian Talmud and in other writings where it is claimed Jesus was illegitimate, with his mother being a young maiden named Miriam and his father being a Roman soldier, an archer named Panthera. Records show Panthera was transferred to Germany in 9 CE where his grave was discovered during railway construction in 1859. According to his tombstone, he died at age 62. And there is more. The Talmud states Jesus studied in a Yeshiva to become a rabbi but was expelled for sexual misdemeanors. It is most likely that Jesus did study to be a rabbi, because it is clear from the Gospels that he was very knowledgeable about the Hebrew Scriptures.

So how credible is the scenario described above? I believe it is more credible than the Christian scenario involving a supernatural Jesus-the-Christ. Nevertheless, it is the supernatural scenario that survived throughout the dark ages and until the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when doubts began to appear.



After the Protestant Reformation and during the Enlightenment, various scholars began to question the validity of traditional Jewish and Christian beliefs. One of the earliest was the Dutch Jewish philosopher Benedict Spinoza, who rejected belief in a supernatural God and thought of God as the natural laws and forces of nature. Another doubter was the Scottish philosopher David Hume. In France, there was the philosophe Baron d'Holbach, who anonymously published a short treatise entitled *Christianity Unveiled* in 1761, and in Germany, the Deist philosopher Herman Samuel Reimarus authored *The Aims of Jesus and His Disciples*, in which he called Christianity a fraud and reasoned that the Gospel of John should not be taken seriously.

And there was King Frederick the Great of Prussia who aspired to be, among many other things, a Platonic philosopher king like the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius. To Frederick, "Christianity was stuffed with miracles, contradictions and absurdities, was spawned in the fevered imaginations of the Orientals and then spread to Europe, where some fanatics espoused it, some intriguers pretended to be convinced by it, and some imbeciles actually believed it." In the nineteenth century the German theologian and author David Friedrich Strauss published *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* in 1835-36, questioning many of the traditional Christian beliefs. The works of Strauss and other German scholars are well documented in Albert Schweitzer's book *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*, published in 1906. Being a recent graduate in theology, Schweitzer set out to disprove Reimarus' conclusions, but after studying the works of various nineteenth century German philosophers, particularly those of David Friedrich Strauss, he concluded that Reimarus was right: "The Jesus of Nazareth who came forward publicly as the Messiah, who preached the ethic of the kingdom of God, who founded the kingdom of heaven upon earth, and died to give his work final consecration, never existed." Albert Schweitzer was one of the most remarkable multi-talented men who ever lived. Perhaps best known for his work as a medical missionary at Lambaréné in what is now Gabon, he was also an accomplished organist, a theologian and a philosopher. He was astute enough to realize that the supernatural Jesus-the-Christ portrayed in the Gospels could not possibly have been a reality. He did, however, believe that the human Jesus of Nazareth, a Jewish prophet, did in fact exist early in the first century CE.

After the publication of Schweitzer's book, there was not a lot of interest in exploring the nature of the historical Jesus until the latter part of the twentieth century. In that era, a number of books were published by various scholars and liberal theologians suggesting that it was time for a fresh evaluation of the man who has had such a profound influence on the course of Western history. Among them were Bishop John Robinson, Don Cupitt and A.C. Grayling in the U.K., Lloyd Geering in New Zealand, Bishop John Shelby Spong and Marcus Borg in the United States, and Tom Harpur and Greta Vosper in Canada. And there were also the Jesus Seminar people in California, including co-founders Robert Funk and John Dominic Crossan. In general, they all concluded that Jesus was a fully human Jewish teacher who was not born of a virgin, and not bodily resurrected. They also reasoned that the Bible was a human construct rather than the divine word of God. Some did not believe in God or an afterlife, while others hedged on these issues. On the other hand, they all appeared to believe that Jesus was a compassionate teacher with a credible ethical and moral message, and that he was a role model worthy of emulation. This has been the conventional wisdom, but this depiction of Jesus is being challenged, particularly now that the English-speaking world is aware of the *Testament* of Jean Meslier (1664-1729).

Meslier was a French curate who composed his *Testament* outlining his radical views on Christianity and the Catholic Church over a ten-year period ending in 1728, a year before his death. We are now most fortunate that in 2009, Paris translator Michael Shreve published Meslier's *Testament* in English in its entirety for the



first time. Meslier did not want to become a priest but became one to please his parents. Once inside the priesthood, he saw the spuriousness of the Catholic faith and beliefs and also observed the corruption therein. He was well versed in the classics as well as the Bible, and over a period of ten years he prepared his *Testament* that was, understandably, not to be published until after his death. In it, Meslier dismisses the incarnation right away by stating that Jesus was just a man, a mortal man like other men. He then calls Jesus low born, a wretched fanatic, and a host of other derogatory terms. He describes Jesus as a lunatic who imagined he was the son of God, born to deliver the Jews from captivity, become king of the Jews and after death would return to rule over God's Kingdom eternally on earth, where justice would reside. Meslier says the visions and wild thoughts of the famous fanatic Don Quixote were never as crazy as those of Jesus. He calls Jesus mentally deranged because he so vainly imagined and predicted many great and beautiful things that never happened. Regarding the teaching of Jesus, he explains that he feels "safe in saying that even the fables of Aesop are certainly more ingenious and instructive than all those crude and low parables that are told in the Gospels."

Meslier claims that in the beginning, Christianity was considered to be nothing but madness, a vile and despicable fanaticism. He mentions, too, that in the early days of Christianity there was a saying in Italy that, "you have to be crazy to be a Christian." Meslier averred that there was no God, and no heaven or hell, and that the Catholic Church was corrupt and fraudulent. Meslier's assertions may well be overstated, but he forces us to consider at least that Jesus may not have been the paragon of virtue commonly accepted in Christian circles.

If one analyzes the synoptic Gospels from Meslier's perspective and eliminates all aspects of the supernatural, including God, angels, Satan (the devil), demons, miracles, heaven, a virgin birth and a physical resurrection, there is very little left of Christianity. There are the sayings of Jesus, some inspirational, some containing wisdom and some contradictory. There are also the somewhat confusing Beatitudes, the Golden Rule (that did not originate with Jesus) and the parables, a few of which make little sense. So how is it that Christianity became so well established? Well, there are enough good things in the synoptic Gospels and the Epistles to persuade believers to view Jesus as a unique paragon of virtue and a role model worthy of admiration. Providing one ignores the contradictions and the ambiguities, by cherry-picking the Gospels, as many Christians do, it is not difficult to portray Jesus as a saintly and wise teacher.

So, we now come to the question: How did Jesus of Nazareth morph into the fictitious Jesus-the-Christ? For me, the best explanation is that Jesus of Nazareth must have been an incredible promoter. He appears to have been remarkably successful at convincing a relatively small number of Jewish people to believe he possessed supernatural powers. In the same way that evangelical preachers have always been able, and still are able, to gull people by the thousands to believe in a message of salvation and eternal life, Jesus of Nazareth was able to sway the disciples, and enough other followers to believe his message, and also believe that he was indeed the promised Messiah possessing the power of redemption. Then after his death, the apostle Paul and others successfully promoted Jesus' message throughout parts of the Roman Empire.

All this, I believe, leads to the conclusion that Jesus-the-Christ, the supernatural being revered and worshipped by devout Christians, was a fiction concocted by the human Jesus of Nazareth himself! Then, this Jesus-the-Christ was further embellished at the Council of Nicaea, in 325 CE, when he was declared to be the centerpiece of the Holy Trinity, the invented enigma consisting of the father, son and holy spirit. Also aiding in the embellishment at this time was the issuance of the Nicene Creed. Considering the final outcome of his activities, Jesus of Nazareth was one of the greatest salespersons or self-promoters of all time.



My final question is: can one credibly regard, as both Reimarus and Meslier did, the Christian religion as a fraud? I would argue that one certainly can. If both the supernatural Judeo-Christian God and the supernatural Jesus-the-Christ are fictional entities, as we have outlined, it follows that the religion based on such delusions or misrepresentations cannot be regarded as anything but fraudulent.

Naturally, there will be those who challenge my conclusions about Jesus being an impostor and contend that it would be impossible for an impostor to have been the inspiration for the founding of the most populous religion on earth. Some will even call my conclusions blasphemous. But such charges are not difficult to dismiss because impostors founding religious cults and sects are not all that rare. In our own times, we have seen the likes of Jim Jones' People's Temple Agricultural Project in Guyana, and David Koresh's Branch Dividians in Waco Texas, create religious cults. These two impostors and many of their followers perished in bloodshed, but not all such delusional enterprises come to a dramatic bad end. Some, like Christianity and Mormonism flourish, and demonstrate that there always seems to be a significant number of people in the world willing to accept outlandish beliefs.

At last, my quest to uncover the real historical Jesus comes to an end. I spent years searching for an answer that would satisfy my curiosity, but with little satisfaction. Then I realized there had to be two Jesuses, not just one. There was a human Jesus of Nazareth and a fictitious supernatural Jesus-the-Christ who had to be an invention. But who was the inventor? Finally, after learning that Jean Meslier proposed that Jesus of Nazareth was an impostor, eureka! The inventor of Jesus-the-Christ was Jesus of Nazareth himself. My search was over! The conclusions of my investigations are summarized below:

- Since there is not, nor ever has been, an omniscient, omnipotent, benevolent God, capable of answering prayer and controlling events on earth, Jesus of Nazareth cannot possibly have been the supernatural son of a non-existent God. He was fully human.
- Since no fully human person could be born of a virgin, perform miracles, possess the power to forgive sins and rise from the grave, Jesus the supernatural Christ had to be an invention.
- But who was the inventor? It is postulated that the inventor was Jesus of Nazareth himself, who was able to convince a small number of Jews that he was indeed the promised Messiah. Then after his death, this small band was able to convert a few more Jews to the Christian faith.
- Although these Jewish Christians must have believed in Jesus' supernatural powers, the majority of Jews did not, lending credence to the conclusion he was in fact an impostor. Furthermore, to this day Jews do not believe Jesus was the Messiah. The early Jewish Christians were a spectacular failure at converting fellow Jews to their brand of Christianity. They just could not find many naive Jewish converts.
- On the other hand, the apostle Paul and his associates were amazingly successful at converting significant numbers of mainly peasant Gentiles (but not the Roman elite). These early leaders were also great salespersons and promoters, and in spite of hardships and persecutions, were able to establish and maintain a number of Christian churches in the eastern Mediterranean area.
- Then with Constantine's edict, the Councils of Nicaea and Chalcedon, and the formation of the Roman Catholic Church, another formidable promoter, Christianity grew over a couple of millennia to become the most populous religion on earth, now numbering over two billion members and adherents. Luther's and Calvin's Protestantism also assisted in the proliferation.



- Conclusions: Jesus the supernatural Christ was an invention concocted by Jesus of Nazareth himself, who was fully human and either deluded or a clever impostor or both. Therefore, is it not logical to conclude that Christianity, based on a fictitious Jesus-the-Christ, is a hoax?

All of the foregoing suggests that it is time to move away from outdated religious beliefs and practices, and work toward the establishment of a more secular society based on non-theistic Epicurean humanism. As evolutionary biologist E.O. Wilson states in his recent book, *The Social Conquest of Earth*.

“Surely there exist ways to find spiritual fulfillment without surrender and enslavement to religions. With an ethic of simple decency to one another, the unrelenting application of reason, and acceptance of what we truly are, our dreams will finally come home to stay.”

Finally, I admit my conclusions will certainly not be accepted by many, particularly devout Christians, but they should generate interesting discussion after the break.

### **Addendum**

A lively discussion ensued after the break. One HALA member rightly pointed out that no mention was made about the positive aspects of Christianity. There are two paragraphs in Chapter 3 of my book dealing with this aspect but were not included in the talk because of time restraints. To provide some balance, these paragraphs are printed below.

Before concluding this Chapter, I want to acknowledge that despite its delusional character, Christianity has made positive contributions to Western society in the past. The beneficial influence of the Protestant Reformation has already been mentioned in Chapter 2. Another attribute often cited is that Christian teachings have been a steady source of moral and ethical instructions for adherents of the Christian faith. Many people have received great comfort from their beliefs and from consoling passages in the Bible, often in times of grief and sadness. It is also a fact that many church members are actively involved in outreach work in both their communities and abroad. Then there are the social benefits of belonging to a community of like-minded people that some will say is the main reason they belong to a church. And the great wealth of Christian music merits special mention. Some of the greatest music ever written was composed for Christian church services. Composers like Bach, Handel, Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms and others, wrote inspiring religious music along with their secular compositions. And there are the many great tunes in the hymnbooks of the mainline churches and the southern gospel music of the U.S. will get your toes tapping.

Along with music, Christianity has also inspired great architectural works. Many churches and monasteries are impressive expressions of religious sentiment as well as monumental buildings. There are also impressive literary works, like Dante’s *Divine Comedy* and Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, that have immensely enriched the literature of the imagination. Last, but not least, there is a magnificent wealth of paintings inspired by the religious sentiments engendered by Christianity. This art is a powerful manifestation of the human spirit, and we are indebted to religion for inspiring such great works



## The Evolution of Mormonism

It would be remiss in any discourse on religions to include only those of ancient origin because sizable religions have sprung up in relatively recent times, Mormonism in the 1820s and Baha'i in the 1840s. Today, Mormonism boasts about 15 million members and Baha'i about half that. Because Mormonism is more prominent, it will be chosen over Baha'i.

In the early 1800s, northern New York State was known for its fiery religious revivals. Joseph Smith (1805-1844) was one of dozens of charismatic preachers who claims they "heard the voice of angels outside their window at night." Smith claims the angel Moroni directed him to a nearby hill where he unearthed a stash of gold plates on which was supposedly written a book. Miraculously, Smith was somehow inspired to translate the contents of the plates into English and dictate the details to an accomplice. He then arranged for publication of a 500 plus page volume that came to be entitled *The Book of Mormon*. This book chronicles the following story.

Around about 600 BCE, at the time of the prophet Jeremiah, the Lord commanded another prophet named Lehi to leave Jerusalem with a small band, proceed to the seacoast and build a ship. In this ship Lehi's family and a few others sailed to the west coast of South America. After landing safely, the band grew and prospered. As they moved northward, the story of their happenings and travels were recorded on brass plates. (Later the plates were described as being made of gold). The book is written in chapter and verse very similar to the Bible. Each book is named after the authors who wrote their story on an expanding number of plates. The authors had names like Nephi, Jacob, Enos, Jarom, Omni, Mormon, Mosiah, Alma, Heleman, Ether and finally Moroni. The dates of all the events are listed in footnotes and the last date entered is 421 CE, the supposed date of the death of Moroni. Fast forward to the early 1800s when Moroni supposedly appears as an angel and tells Joseph Smith where to find the plates.

Surely this incredible tale will immediately suggest to any logical thinker that all of this is fiction, and indeed it is not difficult to scrutinize the details in the book and conclude without much fear of contradiction, that it is nothing more than a fantasy. Consider the following:

In the sixth century BCE, it would have been impossible for a small group of inexperienced people to build a ship capable of sailing, laden with supplies, on an ocean voyage lasting several months.

And after the ship supposedly arrived at the "promised land," they found "beasts in the forests of every kind, both cow and ox, and the ass, and the horse, and the goat and all manner of wild animals." In reality, none of the domestic animals described were present in the western hemisphere until imported after the time of Columbus, two thousand years later.

Many of the phrases and even whole chapters are lifted directly from the King James Version of the Bible. For instance, the phrase, "and it came to pass," occurs over and over again and at least fifteen chapters from the book of Isaiah are repeated word for word. Passages supposedly written long before the beginning of the Common Era, describe the birth, crucifixion and the atonement powers of Jesus Christ.

There is no archeological evidence that the people described in the Book of Mormon ever existed in South or North America. Clearly the *Book of Mormon* is a not so clever fabrication using the King James Version of the Bible as crib notes.



So much for *The Book of Mormon*. Now on to the shenanigans of Joseph Smith. After publishing *The Book of Mormon* in 1830, Smith organized the Church of Christ, saying he was chosen by God to restore the early Christian church. Church members were called Latter Day Saints or Mormons. He attempted to establish churches in Kirkland, Ohio and in Missouri. Settlers in Missouri, fearing the rapid growth of Mormon communities, fought and defeated them in 1838. Smith was imprisoned but escaped and then set up a Mormon community at Nauvoo Illinois. There he was criticized for the practice of polygamy and eventually put on trial. While awaiting trial he was murdered in 1844.

After Smith's death there was a power struggle before Brigham Young was chosen President in 1847. He had been leading his group westward and they arrived in the Salt Lake Valley in August 1847. He almost immediately organized the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. He founded Salt Lake City and served as the first Governor of Utah Territory. He formed the precursors of the University of Utah and Brigham Young University. He died in 1877. Several presidents succeeding Brigham Young refused to outlaw polygamy, but after disputes with the U.S. Government, polygamous marriages officially ceased in 1896 when Utah became a State. Eventually, members practicing polygamy were excommunicated from the mainline church.

The Mormon Church, an unorthodox branch of the Christian faith, grew rapidly in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and today there are as many as 15 million members, 134 Temples, 28,660 congregations in 176 nations and over 52,000 missionaries. Modern Mormons are family oriented and practise strong moral and ethical values. They abstain from tobacco, alcohol, coffee and tea. They often have large families. The Mormon Tabernacle Choir is world renown. I once attended a Sunday service in the Salt Lake Tabernacle. The choir began with the Gloria from Mozart's 12<sup>th</sup> Mass and I was blown away. It was a truly transcending experience that brought tears to my eyes. Yes, despite questionable beginnings and some unorthodox beliefs, Mormonism does have some good qualities.

I believe the foregoing account demonstrates how a relatively small cult-like movement, based partly on a contrived text of questionable merit, developed into a full-scale world-wide religion, albeit one with certain idiosyncrasies. But not only Mormonism began as a cult. Christianity did as well, and this reality invites and merits investigation into the relationship between cults and religions. This investigation follows. (DAH).

## **Cults and Religions – Was Jesus Celibate?**

At the outset, it must be recognized that despite small beginnings, the achievements of both Christianity and Mormonism have been quite remarkable. After evolving for two millennia, Christianity now claims over 2 billion members and adherents and in a period of only two centuries, Mormonism has acquired around 15 million members. Nevertheless, in spite of these achievements, we cannot sweep under the rug, the reality that both Christianity and Mormonism began as cults. This begs further investigation.

A cult is defined as: "a minority religious group holding beliefs regarded as unorthodox or spurious." When thinking of cults, it is former groups that may come to mind, including Jim Jones' Peoples Temple Agricultural Project in Guyana, David Koresh's Branch Dividians in Waco Texas, or Heaven's Gate's people traveling to a UFO following Comet Hale-Bopp, all ending in disasters with loss of life. Then there are present day cults including Warren Jeffs' Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (FLDS) and Winston Blackmore's colony in Bountiful British Columbia.



All cults of course, do not end in disaster. Some evolve into permanent religions like Christianity and Mormonism. But why do cults form in the first place? Most begin with charismatic leaders, some claiming to be prophets. Many cult leaders are polygamous, often having many wives or concubines, some as young as twelve. Cult leaders often sire many children, thus helping to ensure the growth of the cult. Did these polygamous cult leaders form their cult essentially in order to enjoy the services, both sexual and otherwise, of many women?

Yes, it is hard not to conclude that these phony charlatans formed cults mainly for the purpose of enjoying a harem. This was certainly the case with Joseph Smith, who is purported to have had as many as forty wives, using a concocted story of being a latter-day prophet able to converse with angels, in order to recruit followers. The twentieth century cult leaders already mentioned, certainly possessed harems. So, what is the next question? You guessed it. Did Jesus of Nazareth possess a harem? Obviously, we cannot provide a yes or no answer, but on looking at the little evidence we have, it is certainly probable. Let's investigate.

The invention and evolution of Christianity as well as an attempt to arrive at the true nature of Jesus of Nazareth, are both documented above and need not be repeated here. What we now need to ask is, knowing that Jesus' followers were members of a cult and that cult leaders often have harems, was Jesus celibate? I realize that for many people, this question will sound preposterous, outlandish, and blasphemous, but as already mentioned we know that almost two hundred years ago, Joseph Smith set up a cult, based essentially on nonsense, in order to possess a harem of as many as forty wives, and subsequently this cult evolved into a religion that today boasts about fifteen million members world-wide. And we also know that Jesus of Nazareth established a band of followers who were attracted by a message based on intriguing supernatural phenomena that spawned a religion claiming over two billion members and adherents today. Relatively speaking, not too different from Mormonism, but on a much larger scale.

It is stated above in the article entitled "Jesus of Nazareth – Son of God or Imposter?" that it is most probable that a scholarly Jesus of Nazareth attend a yeshiva, a school to train rabbis, because where else would he gain the knowledge he obviously had of the Old Testament that he displays in the gospels? What we now call the Old Testament was available to Jesus in Hebrew, in the Greek Septuagint and possibly in Aramaic. It would be in the yeshiva that he would learn about the prophecies of a coming Messiah and use this knowledge to enhance his message claiming he was the promised Messiah. If it is correct that he was in fact expelled from a yeshiva for sexual misdemeanors, as reputedly stated in the Babylonian Talmud, then there is the probability that Jesus did form a cult in order to enjoy a harem, as many cult leaders have done in more recent times? We cannot of course, know for certain, but we do know Jesus did not discourage women from being among his followers because the gospels state clearly that women were part of Jesus' entourage.

In Judaism, women were limited in the ways they could participate in religious rites, so Jesus was an exception in that he accepted women amongst his followers. Sixteen women are named in the gospels and six, including his mother, were named Mary. But the one most prominent is Mary Magdalene. She appears in all the canonical gospels mentioned about a dozen times, and in the gospels of Thomas and Philip where in each she is described as the follower closest to Jesus. In Philip it states, "Christ loved her more than all the disciples and used to kiss her often on her mouth." In the gospel of Mary Magdalene Peter says to her, "Sister we know that the Savior greatly loved you above all other women, do tell us what you remember of his words." Yes, it is clear Mary Magdalene was not the "fallen woman" portrayed by Pope Gregory I in 591 CE. (Much of the information in this paragraph was obtained from an article by Anne Thériault in the April 2020 issue of *Broadview* entitled, *The Myth of Mary Magdalene*).



In recent years it has been suggested from time to time that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene and I see no reason to discard this possibility. And even though we cannot know for certain that Jesus of Nazareth was married to Mary Magdalene, or possessed a harem, the evidence would indicate that Mary was a very close friend, and being a red blooded human male, Jesus was most probably not celibate.

And think of the implications. If Jesus was not celibate, then the required celibacy of Roman Catholic priests is a contrived hoax. A hoax that has caused so much suffering and grief to victims of sexual predation by priests over many centuries. Add to this the fact that the Catholic Church suppressed the democracy and the science of the Greeks for a thousand years, it becomes easy to conclude that the Catholic Church has not been a boon for Western civilization.

### **Some Biblical Humour**

The following statements about the Bible were written by Catholic schoolchildren during a test about the Old and New Testaments. The wording has not been corrected. Read aloud for maximum chuckles.

The first book of the Bible is Guinness. God got tired creating the world, so he took the Sabbath off.

Adam and Eve were created from an apple tree.

Noah's wife was Joan of Arc. Noah built an ark and the animals came on as pears.

Lot's wife was a pillar of salt during the day, but a ball of fire at night.

The Jews were a proud people and throughout history they had trouble with unsympathetic Genitals.

Sampson was a strong man who let himself be led astray by a Jezebel like Delilah.

When Mary heard she was the mother of Jesus she sang the Magna Carta.

Jesus was born because Mary had an immaculate contraption. St. John the blacksmith then dumped water on his head.

Jesus enunciated the golden rule. Which says to do unto others before they do one to you. He also explained a man doth not live by sweat alone.

The people who followed the lord were called the 12 decibels. The Epistles were the wives of the Apostles.

One of the opossums was St. Mathew who was also a taximan.

St Paul cavorted to Christianity and he preached holy acrimony which is another name for marriage

Christians have only one spouse. This is called monotony.

Sampson slayed the Philistines with the axe of the Apostles.



Moses led the Jews to the Red Sea where they made unleavened bread which is bread made without any ingredients.

The Egyptians were all drowned in the dessert. Moses then went up to Mount Syanide to get the Ten Commandments.

The first Commandment was when Eve told Adam to eat the apple.

The seventh Commandment is Thou shalt not admit adultery.

Moses died before he ever reached Canada. Then Joshua led the Hebrews in the battle of Geritol.

The greatest miracle in the Bible is when Joshua told his son to stand still and he obeyed him.

Solomon, one of David's sons had 300 wives and 700 porcupines.

David was a Hebrew king who was skilled at playing the liar. He fought the Finkelsteins, a race of people who lived in Biblical times.

When the three wise guys from the east side arrived, they found Jesus in the manger.

It was a miracle when Jesus rose from the dead and managed to gat the tombstone off the entrance.

### **More Quotes**

- Organized religion is like organized crime; it preys upon people's weakness, generates huge profits for its operators. and is almost impossible to eradicate. – Mike Hermann
- Jesus was a Jew, yes, but only on his mother's side. – Archie Bunker. (Probably true. See page 114)
- The first clergyman was the first rascal who met the first fool. - Voltaire.
- Lighthouses are more helpful than churches. – Benjamin Franklin
- Man could not make a mite, yet he makes gods by the dozens. - Michael de Montaigne.
- Give to every human being every right that you claim for yourself. – Robert Ingersoll.
- God helps those who help themselves. – Benjamin Franklin.
- I am prepared to die, but there is no cause for which I am prepared to kill. – Mahatma Gandhi.
- They've got it all wrong. The people of the world only divide into two kinds. One sort with brains who hold no religion. The other with religion and no brain. – Abu-al-Ala-Marri. 10th century Syrian poet.



## **Section VI - Ethics and Morality**

### **Sources of Ethics and Morality**

Every Saturday the *London Free Press* displays a Spirituality and Ethics page. One of the regular contributors to this page is former HALA member Goldie Emerson, whose articles appear from time to time. Also contributing on a regular basis is Bruce Tallman, a practising Catholic who offers spiritual advice to people who feel they are in need of counseling.

On January 24<sup>th</sup>, 2015, the *London Free Press* published an article authored by Goldie entitled "*Humanism Essential to Good Religion*." In this article Goldie listed twelve humanist principles from the 2002 Amsterdam Declaration, the most recent world consensus on the definition of humanism. The gist of Goldie's article is that these principles are compatible with the teachings of many religions. In rebuttal to Goldie's article, the *Free Press* published an article on February 7th, 2015 by Bruce Tallman, entitled "*All the Truths of Humanism Come From God*." Tallman states that while most of the humanist principles are "motherhood and apple pie," and would be accepted by many religious people, principle 10 would not. This principle states: "A fundamental principle of humanism is the rejection of beliefs held in absence of verifiable evidence, such as beliefs based (solely)\* on dogma, revelation, mysticism, or appeals to the supernatural." Tallman states that principle 10 would not be accepted by religious people because it rejects the existence of God and he further claims. "God is the source of all religious, scientific, and humanistic truth.

On February 14<sup>th</sup>, 2015, the *Free Press* published an article by Goldie entitled, "*Goldwin Emerson Responds to Bruce Tallman*." Unfortunately, the article that appeared in the *Free Press* was edited and shortened, but among other things, Goldie mentioned that it is sometimes more useful to discuss issues of contention on a one-on-one basis rather than back and forth in print. So, he suggests: "Bruce maybe it is time we met one-on-one for coffee and conversation again." In fact, Goldie and Bruce did meet for coffee on March 17th, 2015, but no views were changed. Bruce adamantly insisted on the simplistic idea that all ethics and morals come from God.

The purpose of the above preamble is just to reiterate that there are people "out there," who like Tallman, sincerely believe that all morality does in fact originate with God and is then propagated by religions. They maintain it is the duty and responsibility of religions to impart these God-given commandments and rules to all of humankind, and without these mandates, humanity would degenerate into lawlessness. The rest of this discourse is dedicated to the premise that all rules of morality are human creations and certainly did not originate from on high.

To begin with, it should be useful to define ethics and morality and explain how they differ because the words are often used interchangeably. A good analogy is science and technology. Science discovers things and establishes laws and principles. Technology takes the fruits of science and uses them to produce gadgets that make living easier. Ethics are rules defining right and wrong, and morality is living according to the rules of ethics knowing the difference between right and wrong

One of the earliest recorded attempts to prepare an outline for the purpose of maintaining law and order in a society was the Code of Hammurabi, established in the third century BCE. Its purpose was:



- to cause Justice to prevail in the land,
- to destroy the wicked and the evil
- that the strong might not oppose the weak
- to light up the land.

Another early source of moral and ethical principles was the teachings of Confucius (551 BCE-479 BCE) that were concerned not only with the ethical and moral living habits of individuals, but also with the moral and ethical actions of rulers of the state. There are many aphorisms containing wisdom and foresight attributed to Confucius. A few are quoted below:

- Knowledge is recognizing what you know and what you do not know
- To know your faults and be able to change is the greatest virtue.
- What you do not wish for yourself, do not do to others. (The Golden Rule).
- The superior man is modest in speech, but exceeds in his actions.

In about the same time frame as Confucius, the Old Testament became available to the Hebrew people, providing sets of guidelines to live by. The most famous pronouncement was the Decalogue or Ten Commandments, supposedly given by God on top of Mount Sinai to Moses during the Exodus.

- You shall have no other gods before Me.
- You shall not make idols.
- You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain.
- Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.
- Honor your father and your mother.
- You shall not murder.
- You shall not commit adultery.
- You shall not steal.
- You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.
- You shall not covet.

In addition to the Decalogue, there are 613 laws contained in the first five books of the Old Testament (the Pentateuch) giving instructions on what to eat, what to wear and a host of other requirements. Orthodox Jews will try to adhere to many of these guidelines, but Reformed Jews will observe only a few of them.

Also, in roughly the same era as Confucius, about 1500 kilometers to the northwest of Palestine, philosophical rationalism was evolving in Greece. The pre-Socratic philosophers were pseudo-scientists, attempting to describe how the world works. Then along came Socrates (470-399 BCE) whose emphasis was on how to live “the good life.” This theme was picked up by Plato (427-347 BCE) and Aristotle (384-322 BCE). Some scholars (but not all) consider Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* to be one of the most comprehensive books ever written on the subjects of ethics and morality. Later, the Stoic, Sceptic and Epicurean philosophers continued on this theme.

Then, in the first century CE, a movement began that charted much of the course of Western history and continues to have influence even to this very day. This movement was created by one Jesus of Nazareth, who claimed he had a mission to reform the Judaism of his day. But the Jewish authorities resented this upstart and had him crucified. His followers attempted to convert fellow Jews to the Jesus movement, but



in the long run were unsuccessful. Then a Jewish Pharisee named Saul, who became known as the apostle Paul, undertook to take Jesus' message of salvation to the gentiles. Despite persecutions, he and his associates experienced considerable success in this endeavour and a religion that became known as Christianity evolved over the next few centuries, eventually spreading throughout Europe, North and South America and other areas as well. This propagation was due to the efforts of the Roman Catholic Church, and after 1500, due to the efforts of the many Protestant denominations as well.

The ethical and moral teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, in the form of sayings and parables, are documented in the four Gospels and the Epistles of the New Testament. Some of Jesus' messages contain wisdom while others are confusing and contradictory. Over time, the human Jesus of Nazareth morphed into the supernatural Jesus-the-Christ, the son of the Jewish monotheistic God, and a member of the Holy Trinity consisting of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Creeds were invented to strengthen the supernatural aspects of Jesus and promote the concept of an afterlife. Christians were encouraged to believe that if they adhered to Christian morals, ethics and beliefs, and believed in the redemptive power of Jesus, they would be guaranteed a reward in an idyllic heaven. This promise had mass appeal and today Christianity boasts at least two billion members and adherents.

During the period in which early Christianity was evolving, the Roman Empire was in full swing. As was the case in Greece, Roman morality was not the purview of religion, but was in the domain of philosophers. The Roman elite by and large were stoics and this stoicism was perhaps best exemplified by the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius. In his *Meditations* he put forward a plethora of common-sense aphorisms to live by. Here are a few of them:

- Contentment comes from doing a few things and doing them well.
- Life is short; then snatch your profit from the passing hour, by obedience to reason and just dealing. Unbend, but be temperate.
- Observe how transient and trivial is mortal life; yesterday a drop of semen, tomorrow a handful of ashes. Spend therefore these fleeting moments on earth as Nature would have you spend them, and then go to your rest with a good grace, as an olive falls in its season, with a blessing for the earth that bore it and a thanksgiving to the tree that gave it life.
- In this life one thing only is of precious worth: to live out one's days in truthfulness and fair dealing, and in charity even with the false and unjust.
- To a reasoned being, an act that accords with nature is an act that accords with reason.

The Stoic Roman elite were not attracted to Christianity, but the Christian churches did attract the downtrodden peasants. And, despite periodic persecution, the churches managed to survive partly by promising a better life in the hereafter. In the early years of the fourth century, Christianity received a great boost when the Roman Emperor Constantine declared Christianity to be the official religion of the empire. Over time, the polytheism of the Stoics was replaced by monotheistic Christianity hijacking the teaching of morality from the philosophers, and claiming morals and ethics were ordained by God. And to this day many, but not all, Christians believe the Bible is divinely inspired, hence their belief that all morality comes from God.

Now it is a certainty that individuals such as Hammurabi, Confucius, the Greek philosophers and Marcus Aurelius, were all real human beings and that their concepts of morality originated in their own minds, not from on high. And if as humanists and other secularists claim, the chances of there being a God are extremely



remote, then the Bible is a human construct and its moral teachings also originated in the minds of humans. In fact, only about half of what came to be regarded as the fundamental ingredients of Christianity came from the Old or New Testament. The other half came from Greece. It is likely that most Christians have no idea of the amount of Greek thought that influenced the fundamentals of Western Christianity. Many also probably do not realize that the concept of body and soul was also not exclusively Christian. Certainly, the Egyptians believed in an afterlife and Plato was known for his dualism, among many other things.

So, where are we? I believe I have made a credible case that anyone who believes that God is the source of all morality is sadly mistaken. All formulations of how to live a moral and ethical life, even the Ten Commandments, originated in the minds of human individuals.

But there is something else that must be dealt with, and that is the claim of some religious people that without religious moral guidance, societies will degenerate into corruption, debauchery and violence. Now it must be admitted that most people raised in a religious home do acquire the guidelines necessary to live a moderate, compassionate and ethical life, and it must also be admitted that these guidelines have contributed to the stability of societies in the past and will continue to do so. There is, however, also strong evidence that societies that are largely secular can function just fine without a lot of religious instruction on morality.

Author Phil Zuckerman deals with this situation in his book *Society Without God*, describing life in secular Denmark and Sweden. In this book he says, "contrary to the claims of certain outspoken, conservative Christians who regularly argue that a society without God would be hell on earth: rampant with immorality, full of evil, and teeming with depravity, in reality Denmark and Sweden are remarkably strong, safe, healthy, moral and prosperous societies." He then adds, "It is crucial for people to know that it is actually quite possible for a society to lose its religious beliefs and still be well-functioning, successful, and fully capable of constructing and obeying sound laws and establishing and following rational systems of morality and ethics. Worship of God can wane, prayer can be given up, and the Bible can go unstudied, yet people can treat one another decently, schools and hospitals can still run smoothly, crime can remain minimal, babies and old people can receive all the care and attention they need, economies can flourish, pollution can be kept to a minimum, and children can be loved in warm homes--without God being a central component of everyday life."

Finally, we must answer the question. If children do not receive instructions on moral living from a religious institution, where will they get it? Of course, the answer is obvious, at home and at school. But what should they be taught? What they should not be taught are religious untruths such as the existence of an afterlife, and the threat of hell fire if they live a sinful life. These kinds of instructions are not productive and as A.C. Grayling states in his book *The God Argument*, "the major reason for the continuance of religious belief in a world which might otherwise have moved beyond it, is the indoctrination of children before they reach the age of reason." In addition to accepted common sense instructions on how to live morally in a civilized society, children should be taught that their life is precious and they should live every day to the fullest, knowing that there is no God watching over them and judging their actions. They should be made aware that all guidelines for moral living have been devised over centuries by intelligent caring people. (DAH).



# **You May be Moral, But Are You Ethical?**

*By Goldwin Emerson*

The words morality and ethics are often used interchangeably, but there are times when they should be viewed differently. To understand ethics, a good starting point is with the concept of *other*. It is when we imagine ourselves in another person's situation that we begin to sense the meaning to others of justice, equity, truth, or fairness.

Although *moral* thought and actions often resemble ethical thinking, morality is more often influenced by customs, mores, and taboos within a particular society, group or culture. Consequently, actions that seem moral to one group may be considered immoral by another. Practices such as honour killing, denial of medically approved blood transfusions for children, and ceremonies of exorcism are occasionally accepted as moral customs by some religious groups, although these practices are viewed as immoral by other religions. The concept within some religions that they are especially favoured by God, may seem strange, immoral, or abhorrent to those of other religions. Such a clash of views can result in disagreements among competing religions and, in extreme cases, may even spark holy wars.

Of course, different views of morality may also occur among secular groups. For example, different moral practices may be the product of ethnic origin, financial status, occupation, educational background, and other secular groups.

*Ethics*, on the other hand, embraces broader principles of right thinking and correct behaviour, being guided by concepts of justice, equity, fairness, and the pursuit of truth. Ethical leadership is often provided by philosophers, statesmen (or stateswomen) or by religious leaders who take a broader, more universal view of ethical issues.

The "golden rule" is shared by most of the world's major religions. In Christian terms, the golden rule instructs adherents to think and act toward others in the way they themselves wish to be treated. The golden rule is stated in slightly different words within each religion, but it is an ethical principle that encourages followers to view the whole of humanity as one family. It promotes acceptance of others regardless of differences in race, culture, religion or language.

Regarding ethical principles, secular philosophers, from Aristotle to more recent thinkers, arrive at conclusions similar to the golden rule. For example, the utilitarian concept, the humanist view, and pragmatist philosophy require us, in ethical decisions, to consider the needs of others. Immanuel Kant stated his view of the golden rule in secular language when he advised those who would be ethical to consider the needs of others. His test for ethical behaviour was to ask whether the intended action would be acceptable behaviour for all others in similar situations. That is, he believed that any action, to be ethically worthy, must be universally applicable.

Imagine a caring mother watching her child at play. She notices behaviour that she believes is unethical. She has seen her son push a younger child, causing her to fall down and cry. Instead of physically punishing her child, the mother encourages him to think of others by asking how he would feel if he had been knocked down like his playmate and how his playmate must now feel. By asking these questions, she is pointing her child in an ethical direction. Her questions, if considered seriously, introduce her son to the principle of the golden rule.



In their use of the golden rule, a secular utilitarian will consider which actions lead to the greatest happiness for the greatest number; the pragmatist will strive to be rational and think about the likely consequences of his or her action; the humanist will consider each individual, striving to accept the worth and dignity of all. The follower of Kant will ask whether his or her action would be ethical if everyone else were to act in a similar manner. The Christian will ask, "Is the way I am about to treat another the way I want to be treated?"

There is some irony in the fact that when we encourage people to think of *others*, the golden rule requires them to acknowledge their *own* feelings. But when people put themselves into another's situation, they become aware of how the *other* feels. And that is the way ethics works best.

## **Bullying is no Fun for the Victim**

*By Goldwin Emerson*

Bullying occurs in many forms and places. It can be aggressive teasing, sarcastic comments, making jokes at someone's expense, gossiping about fellow students, put-down comments, simple pranks, and many other similar harmful actions. While the perpetrators feel they are acting in good fun, the victims may see very little humour even though they may feign a smile or a pretense that they are not affected. These milder forms of bullying may appear harmless to observers and to the person doing the bullying, but it is the victims themselves who are badly affected. In the worst cases, even the victims may not fully understand the harmful effects that can stay with them for many years or occasionally end in tragic suicides.

Bullying also takes more severe forms such as hazing, physical violence, harassment through the internet or other electronic means. Gang attacks, physical violence, damage to the victim's property, threats to one's family, or even in a few religions, shunning and rejection, can have severe consequences.

Unfortunately, bullying is on the rise. In Canadian high schools, depending upon the location, about thirty per cent of male students report instances of being bullied and a similar number have participated in bullying others. The figures for female students are slightly lower and not as violent, but nonetheless, emotionally damaging. Researchers speculate that part of the reason for lower figures for females may be that bullying is less physical and therefore harder to confirm and less frequently reported.

Increase in student bullying may be accounted for in a number of ways. It is easier for the perpetrators to do their work secretly by cyber bullying, than would be the case years ago. Often, unfortunate targets of bullying are high school students whose sexual preferences are homosexual. While more homosexuals today are appropriately accepted within the general population, there are also more homosexuals who have the courage to declare their sexual orientation. This may account for a larger target group for those who perpetrate bullying.

Today, female students may have more money available for buying clothes and keeping up with the "in" fashions. Thus, students who don't have money, nor interest in the latest fashions, may stand out as targets for bullying. Again, females are more at risk than males in this area while males may be judged more by the kind of motorcycles or cars they drive. Ironically, students with very high marks may also suffer abuse from students whose marks are closer to the average or lower.

Sadly, bullying is not confined to secondary schools. To a lesser extent, elementary schools and universities too are affected. Furthermore, bullying occurs among adults in the workplace, often by those in positions of authority or also from harassment of women by men.

There are some societal causes that exacerbate the problem of bullying. On television, advertising of new products, such as new cars, new fashions and new styles appeal to elitism. Advertisements encourage those with lots of money to feel superior and those with less money or less education to feel like failures.



In the workplace there are usually rules to prevent harassment, but the rules may not be enforced. Too often movies stereotype the heroes and the villains. The heroes are either strong athletic Caucasian males who are good at everything, or else they may be attractive fashionable women who have reached managerial positions. The villains and “losers” on the other hand are often unfairly presented as foreigners who carry knives, are out of work, and lack ambition. Sometimes, our best athletes who are models for students let us down by using drugs, or by messing up their own personal lives.

Finally, teachers, have influence and opportunity to treat all students as having equal worth and dignity. Teachers busy with other tasks may sometimes fail to fulfill their important role of combating bullying in society. Many parents wish that they had the same chance to work for several hours a day with their children seated in front of them, so that they may offer help, encouragement, and good ethical advice about getting along with each other. Let’s all do our part to combat bullying.

## **Capitalism Needs Controls to be Moral**

*By Goldwin Emerson*

Extreme differences between wealth and poverty raise important ethical questions about equality, justice, and compassion. In general, good ethical principles urge those with great wealth to share some of it with those who have little. The definition of wealth could be extended beyond money and include housing, food, health care, education, and other measures of well-being. These features represent wealth, but their absence constitutes poverty.

Government policies such as the collection of income taxes are meant to equalize, or at least narrow the gap between the rich and the poor. Whether this approach is effective in limiting the highest income earners is questionable. It may, however, reduce the differences between the living standards of middle and lower income earners. On the other hand, harmonized sales taxes (HST) do *not* have the effect of bringing the poor and the rich closer together.

Except for the relatively few philanthropists, those who are wealthy argue that they have worked hard to acquire their wealth. Many prosperous citizens credit wise management such as planning ahead, judicious decisions, and expedient savings. Lower income citizens see the world differently. They view their work as being at least equally hard and with few luxuries or comforts. Some educational goals lie beyond their reach and health care such as dental work, eye examinations and nutritious food may not be within their means.

The wealthy speak fondly of the *capitalist* system, a term used almost synonymously with democracy, although capitalism also flourishes within both communism and dictatorships. Unfortunately, the inequalities between wealth and poverty in western world capitalism have grown in the past forty years.

Long ago, Adam Smith (1723-1790) in his *book Wealth of Nations* addressed the problems caused by extreme capitalism. Although Adam Smith is frequently quoted by hard-nosed capitalists, he was conscientious in his desire to help the poor. As well as being a distinguished economist, Adam Smith was for a time a moral philosopher at the University of Glasgow. He empathized with the burdens of the labouring class and wrote about the need to develop systems of sharing. To paraphrase his plan, it can be described simply as the government developing controls that worked like a “bungee cord.” When the wealthy became too far above the middle wage earners, the government could use regulations to draw the wealthy back down to a level closer to the middle wage earners. When the poor became too needy, regulations pulled their level up like a bungee cord, towards the middle wage earners.



Another writer of the same era, John Ruskin (1819-1900), expressed, in his book *Unto This Last*, the need to restrict the limits of extreme capitalism. He tells the story of a village blacksmith who shoed horses for the price of \$1.00 per shoe. When a stranger came through town with his horse, which had lost a shoe, the unfortunate traveler was more or less at the mercy of the blacksmith. There was no solution except to replace the missing shoe before he could travel further. In this case, the unethical blacksmith put his most aggressive capitalist impulses to work and charged \$10.00 per shoe. Ruskin used this story to point out that capitalism needs controls if it is to be a moral system.

We can't easily make comparisons between today's prices and those of 100 years ago, but we can question how much is too much for today's highest paid workers. An interesting article appeared in the Jan. 7<sup>th</sup> London Free Press about Senator Raymond Lavigne, who earned nearly \$390,000 in salary over the past three years and ran up an expense account of approximately \$320,000 for the same period, a total of \$703,855. Also, in the Free Press, we read of Canadian executives earning over \$24,217,040 in one year. In 2009, Hunter Harrison earned \$17,343,160 as Chief Executive Officer of Canadian National Railways. Reading this, I thought about the old rusty green CNR overpass on Oxford Street. I wondered how much it would cost Hunter Harrison to arrange for a much-needed new paint job.

Since the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer, perhaps it is time to bring out that ethical bungee cord again.

## **The Ethics of War**

*By Goldwin Emerson*

The reason that countries, tribes, ethnic groups, religions, and those who hold varying political or philosophic ideas fight wars with each other are complex. Nevertheless, it is a common aim of war to assert one group's power and ideology over those with whom they disagree. These disagreements may be over the acquisition of land, property, resources or ideas, and ironically over convictions concerning which course of action is more ethically correct.

Civilized societies try to resolve arguments through logic, reasoning and persuasion. Whenever opposing sides have a good measure of respect for their fellow human beings, they stand a reasonable chance of resolving their disagreements. In one sense, going to war often means that more peaceful methods have broken down or have not been tried. In most cases, it is when better ways of behaving toward others have failed that we consider war as a last resort. Sometimes leaders talk about preventive wars. That is, wars that if they were not fought would lead to more injustices. But those who know war well remain hesitant, as did President Eisenhower. In his words, this military commander of the Allied forces in World War II said, "When people speak to you about a preventive war, you tell them to go and fight it. After my experiences, I have come to hate war. War settles nothing".

Because wars involve suppression, violence and killing, making one side winners and the other side losers, wars often include secrecy, intimidation, lying, deceit, and cruelty. War is a blunt ineffective means of persuading dictatorships to adopt democracy or improve education or religion, or develop a more inclusive political system.

Some thoughtful people say that war is not justified when the initiators stand to gain at the expense of the defenders. They claim that war can be justified only when one is fighting to defend oneself. But the situation can be more complicated than that. Sometimes countries start wars in order to assist other countries to



defend democracy, promote freedom of speech, support citizens facing harsh dictatorships, or to change extreme religious beliefs that have gone astray. In these cases the perpetrators of war believe they are defending an ethical path towards justice.

I have two brothers who have served in the military. When I ask them or their comrades about the ethics of war they state that, for the most part, soldiers follow strong ethical principles. They cite examples of courage, determination, bravery, trustworthiness, duty, self-discipline, responsibility and camaraderie as the essential qualities of good soldiers, even though they know that their opponents feel they too are on the side of justice. They may not fully understand or agree with the principles of their enemies, but they know that people do not willingly put their own lives at risk without believing that what they are fighting for is a just cause.

So what are some conclusions about war that rational, caring, ethical people can accept? One is that war is a very blunt, brutal and expensive way to solve disputes. If we can find other ways to resolve disagreements the world would be a better place.

Also, it is a very easy mistake for countries that have the strongest armies, the most sophisticated military equipment, and the belief that they are well-prepared for war, to find reasons to use their military might against weaker countries whose customs and cultures are different from their own. Countries that are most likely to win a war, are the most likely to start a war. When one country is much stronger than another it is easier for the stronger country to believe that they are on the side of justice. They feel they are acting out of pure ethical principles. For them, might makes right. On the other hand, militarily stronger countries such as China, United States, or Russia are more willing to tolerate the differences they have with their formidable adversaries.

When we think about going to war, let's first make sure that we are considering it as a last resort. In conclusion, I very much agree with the words of another United States President, Barack Obama: "War is never glorious. It's a manifestation of human folly."

## **Ethics and Integrity in Politics**

*By Goldwin Emerson*

Our upcoming federal election will be held on October 19, 2015. Thoughtful Canadians who are eligible to vote will be considering which candidates they wish to choose. In order to vote wisely we will need to inform ourselves about current issues and the positions taken by the various politicians. In addition, we should do our best to assess the general qualities that we would like to see in candidates running for office.

Over 2300 years ago Greece was the cradle of democracy. Ancient wise men of the day pondered the same questions about their politicians. Plato, born in 427 BCE, talked and wrote about good qualities of leadership. In his *Republic*, he stated that politicians should be chosen from the wisest and most reliable citizens. Political systems ought to be organized in such a manner as to prevent political corruption. Aristotle, born 384 BCE, was a student of Plato and later he too lectured and wrote about the need to choose the most ethical politicians. In *Nichomachean Ethics*, and his *Politics*, Volume 1, Aristotle stressed the importance of prior experience in the work-a-day world. He believed politicians should have the highest ethical principles and be known as virtuous characters.



Today, we too, are faced with questions about what qualities we want to see in our candidates for the upcoming election. Here are a few of my choices of desirable characteristics:

- \*Honesty and integrity which means people who can be trusted to spend our tax money wisely for our citizens' benefit.

- \*Caring and concerned candidates; people who have been involved in work other than full-time politics. If a candidate has worked at occupations that are necessary for the betterment of society this is a good indication of their political usefulness. These tasks need not always be charitable organizations, but also those who do important work in businesses, or trades or social work or health care, education, or other helping professions.

- \*Respectful of others. I am not favorably impressed with politicians who run negative advertisements or make negative statements about other competing candidates rather than presenting plans and clear statements about what policies they would promote. \*Candidates who can explain their policies clearly and avoid political bafflegab. Granted some policies and goals are not easy to describe. For example, a system of "proportional representation" requires further explanation as to how and why Canadians could benefit by this new approach.

- \*Candidates who take an interest in world affairs. Politicians ought to have carefully thought out opinions on topics such as the following: climate change, environmental welfare, Canada's military actions against ISIS, safety in disposal of nuclear wastes, a healthy balance in trade and economic policies and immigration policies that work towards Canada's benefit.

- \*Policies which would bring fairness in dealing with our First Nations people.

- \*Openness toward supporting scientific research that can lead towards progress in understanding and sharing knowledge needed to make Canada a world leader in the development of science.

- \*Economic policies that lead towards stability and financial growth.

- \*Support for public radio and television services such as our CBC.

- \*Openness in sharing goals and policies with the general electorate, both before and after being elected.

- \* Policies that continue to make our health care a priority rather than policies that may erode publicly funded health care.

- \* Laws that control political perks and special entitlements provided to politicians.

- \* A clear policy on how to either abolish our unelected Senate or control the excesses of the Senate.

- \* Politicians who are actively involved in creating job opportunities for citizens who are eager and willing to work.

No doubt there are important points that could be added to this list or some with which thoughtful readers may disagree. Some politicians have not served us well, but there are others who have given their entire commitment to improving government. The latter group has often behaved as true statesmen or stateswomen. They have worked far beyond the majority of politicians and have made lasting contributions to Canadian welfare.

We as voting citizens can improve our political system by selecting the best candidates for Canada's first fixed-date election, October 19, 2015. Collectively, it is our responsibility as voters to choose the best political leaders for the next four years.



# **Who is Right and Who is Wrong About Rights?**

*By Goldwin Emerson*

Recently a Brantford judge, Justice G. Edwards, decided that in the case of an eleven year old native child who has cancer (acute lymphoblastic leukemia) it is her parents and not the courts that will choose the manner of her treatment. The parents have chosen to ignore the overwhelming medical advice of doctors at McMaster Children's Hospital who estimate that with chemotherapy her chances of survival are as high as 95%, or more.

On the other hand, the parents believe that as aboriginals they have the right to use other methods. At the court hearing, the judge mentioned the long history of aboriginal medicines which preceded the arrival of Europeans to North America. According to unconfirmed reports, the parents have already enlisted the services of the Hippocrates Health Institute in Florida at a cost of approximately \$18,000. When viewed from the perspective of Canadian doctors, the approach used is not likely to be effective although it is not well known at Canadian cancer treatment centres. Among other things, this unique treatment emphasizes the consumption of raw vegetables, infrared rays and a hypobaric chamber.

This court case brings up the philosophic question as to where do rights come from. In Canada, we are fortunate to enjoy many freedoms and rights. These include the right to the choice of one's religion, the right to vote under specified conditions, freedom of the press, freedom of speech, health care, educational rights, equal protection under the law and many other additional rights. In fact, Canadians usually assume that these rights are something we are born with. It is as though we believe our rights float down to us from on high. Some would go so far as to say they are "God given rights". Others simply believe we are born with certain inalienable rights.

In actual fact, the rights we enjoy are the rights given to us by the societies where we live. Do women have a right to vote? Only in certain countries, and in Canada, only in fairly recent Canadian history (since 1918) women are allowed to vote. Should women have the right to vote? Yes, they should in a fair and just society, but the decisions about rights are human-made and come from the laws of the communities in which they reside. Until these freedoms and privileges are recognized in law and in general acceptance, they do not really exist other than as ideals yet unrealized.

If this young 11 year old native girl were instead in her adult years, many of us would feel more at ease about her being able to make her own informed choice as to whether to use traditional aboriginal treatments or instead to choose the best of more modern treatment based on present day medical knowledge. But since she is so young, she is really at the mercy of her parents' decision no matter how much she is loved and cared for by them.

Let's assume for the moment that she was an eleven-year old non-aboriginal girl with non-aboriginal parents. Very likely, her parents would choose chemotherapy treatments at McMaster Children's Hospital. They would make that choice believing it to hold the best chance of curing, controlling, and surviving her cancer. In fact, in a court of law, the judge would be likely to insist on that kind of treatment whether or not her non-aboriginal parents agreed. The court could order that she should be offered the best medical treatment presently available to her.



If that is the best course for non-aboriginals it is ironic that the judge in this present case is basing his decision on the rights of aboriginals. Having said that, I do believe that there are many other cases in which aboriginal rights ought to prevail. Yet, in the case of life and death matters, court decisions have previously been made in favour of using the best medical treatments. In the past, the cases for blood transfusions for Jehovah's Witnesses have already set precedents in these matters.

It would be unfortunate if the judge in an effort to uphold aboriginal rights did so at the expense of risking the life of an eleven-year old aboriginal child. Let's hope that does not happen and that this judgment may be overturned.

**Editor's Note.** Goldie submitted this article in November 2014. Since then Makayla Sault, an 11-year old aboriginal girl, was taken off chemo treatments in accordance with Justice Gethin Edwards finding that "aboriginal parents have a constitutionally protected right to choose traditional forms of treatment". Sadly, Makayla Sault died in the week of January 19th, 2015 from leukemia.

## **The Silver Rule**

I have heard of the Golden Rule all of my life, but I had never heard of the Silver Rule until I read a review by Dale DeBakcsy, in the December 2015/January 2016 *Free Inquiry*, of the recent re-issue of Walter Kaufmann's book *The Faith of a Heretic*. Much of the book is about what Kaufmann calls the gerrymandering of the Old and New Testaments. Or putting it another way, the cherry-picking of the Bible in order to eliminate the negative and accentuate the positive. Kaufmann lays out the moral shortcomings of Christianity, both in its original form and as it is mundanely practiced in America, using as one example, the difference between the Golden Rule and the Silver Rule. The Golden Rule of Jesus states: "Do unto others as you would have done to you." The Silver Rule of Confucius states: "Do not do unto others what you would not have done to you."

Kaufmann points out; "the negative version (the Silver Rule) can be put into practice while the positive version (the Golden Rule) cannot; and anyone who tried to live up to Jesus' rule would become an insufferable nuisance. For example, try to derive a sexual ethic from Jesus' rule."

I Googled "Silver Rule" and the Golden Rule came up, but the negative version was listed alongside the positive version, although it was not labeled as the Silver Rule. Obviously, the term Silver Rule is not in wide-spread use, but Kaufmann is right: the negative version can be put into practice whereas the positive version has its shortcomings. (DAH)

## **More Quotes**

- By the year 2000 we will, I hope, raise our children to believe in human potential, not God. – Gloria Steinem. (Said some time ago. Regrettably, we are not there yet).
- To you I'm an atheist; to God I'm the loyal opposition. - Woody Allen.
- Question with boldness even the existence of God, because if there is one, he must more approve of the homage of reason than that of blindfolded fear. - Thomas Jefferson.



## Section VII - Equality and Inequality

### Equality

*We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.*

So states the first line in the second paragraph of the American Declaration of Independence, pronounced on July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1776, and approved on July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1776, which became known as Independence Day. The principal author was Thomas Jefferson, although John Adams and Benjamin Franklin also had input. This sentence has been called one of the best-known in the English language.

When the authors proclaimed, “all men are created equal,” what they were saying, I believe, is that every citizen should have equal rights as well as an equal opportunity to enjoy “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” You cannot argue with this premise, but the reality is, in other respects, all men (and women) are **not** created. equal. There can be considerable physical and mental differences.

Some people are stronger, or more beautiful or more handsome than others. Some have higher IQs than others. Some people are unfortunately, through no fault of their own, born with a handicap, or an incurable disease, or have mental challenges, while others may live their whole life hardly ever getting sick. Also, humans are born with a variety of talents or aptitudes. Some may be artistic, while others may have scientific or mathematical leanings. Some will become leaders, others will be followers. Some will be introverts, and some will be extroverts. Some will have mechanical skills while others may be all thumbs. And a select few will rise above the rest. Mozart and Einstein immediately come to mind.

I think what Jefferson was trying to imply is this: despite all the different characteristics, abilities, and talents of individual humans, all are entitled to live in an environment encompassing liberty and the pursuit of happiness, thus providing an equal opportunity for everyone to productively use whatever talents they were born with, regardless of race or creed or social standing. (However, there is irony here. It must be pointed out that some of the signers of The Declaration of Independence owned slaves).

America succeeded in establishing a land of opportunity. After forming a democracy from scratch, with separation of powers, it eventually became possible for American citizens who worked hard, to achieve the “American Dream,” while the country became the most powerful nation the world had ever seen.

Nevertheless, equality for all has not been achieved. Poverty and homeless are problems waiting to be solved as the gap between haves and have-nots increases, while the middle class shrinks. Societies face a huge challenge in determining how to allow every able-bodied person to achieve a meaningful existence, while at the same time looking after those unfortunately born with a handicap.

This challenge is even greater now with the digital revolution and artificial intelligence upon us. Is guaranteed annual income and the wealthy paying higher taxes part of the solution? (DAH).



## Inequality

For sometime now, we have been hearing about the increasing wealth of the 1%, causing less prosperity for much of the remaining 99%. So, how do we reverse this increasing inequality that is occurring? Surely, we must begin by looking at the root causes of our follies. And I believe the first place to look is the way our economies have been mismanaged by the greedy desires of businesses and financial institutions to maximize profits for the short term without considering the long-term effects on people or on the environment. Furthermore, Big Business and Big Money have influenced governments and forced them to reduce taxes for the rich and reduce the regulations necessary to keep businesses and banks in check, particularly in the U.S. To illustrate what is happening in our economy today, Jill Richardson has devised a special rigged version of monopoly. See below. (DAH).

### Imagine our Economy as a Game of Monopoly

*By Jill Richardson\**

*Yes, the games the thing,  
That tells us how and why the world is floundering.*

If you set up the board game like our actual economy, the poorest players quickly run out of money and the rich run away with the game. It's unfair, boring, and exactly what happens in real life.

As a sociology professor in community college, I have my students play Monopoly. Only, I give them a special, rigged version.

There are five players. The wealthiest begins with \$5,500, all of the railroads, and the two most valuable properties (Boardwalk and Park Place). The least wealthy begins with about \$200 and no property. The remaining three are in between.

Each time the players pass Go, the wealthiest player gets \$500. The poorest gets \$30.

It doesn't take long before the poorest two players run out of money entirely. It's an unfair, boring game. This is the game all Americans are playing.

The wealthiest player's starting assets are proportional to the wealthiest 20 percent of Americans. The poorest player's starting assets are proportional to the poorest fifth of the U.S. population. The remaining three are proportional to the remaining three fifths of the country.

Likewise, the money they receive as they pass Go is linked to the income of each fifth of the U.S. population.

For the richest players in the game, it's probably the best Monopoly game of their lives. For the rest, especially the two poorest, it's a nightmare. I'm sick of playing this game in real life.

Where I live, in California, about one fifth of the population lives in poverty, and another fifth lives just above the poverty line. And the official poverty line doesn't even consider the cost of living.



Since I moved here, nearly 12 years ago, the cost of rent has doubled. Areas that used to be affordable no longer are. You could once find a way to make it work by living far from the beach in an un-trendy neighborhood or suburb. Now you can't.

Some speculate that Airbnb is driving up rental costs, and everyone speaks of an "affordable housing crisis." But nobody's doing anything about it.

For the wealthy, life here is great. We've got beaches, mountains, desert, and year-round good weather. For the people who serve them their food, clean their homes, or landscape their lawns, the cost of rent alone is strangling.

In the U.S. overall, wages haven't kept up with either inflation or productivity over the years. Since 1973, productivity has increased by 77 percent while wages increased by only 12.4 percent. Taking inflation into consideration, wages have remained stagnant since the 1960s, while most of the gains go to the wealthiest.

Average pay keeps up with cost of living better in some parts of the U.S. than others. California isn't even the worst.

I watch my students try to complete a college education while struggling to make ends meet. The middle-class vision of parents paying for their children's college education and their living expenses isn't a reality for many students. For some families it's the opposite — the child works to put him or herself through school while contributing to the family budget.

Attending school and working at the same time is difficult, and sometimes impossible. Some students attempt it while raising children or caring for sick or elderly family members. In the end, most community college students never get a four-year degree.

We need to make our country fairer than my rigged Monopoly game. In a game, it's just a bummer when the poorest players go broke first. In life, the costs are in human misery.

*\* Jill Richardson is pursuing a PhD in sociology at the University of Wisconsin – Madison. She lives in San Diego. This article is distributed by OtherWords.org*

## **Looking for Solutions**

Can we look to history to determine the conditions that prevail when a country possesses optimum equality? Yes, we can. The so called "Golden Age" of the 30-year period following WW II gives us a few clues.

- A prosperous economy with near full employment.
- A social/democratic society with adequate social safety nets.
- A government that is concerned with the well-being of individual citizens as well as with ensuring the protection of freedoms and the rule of law.
- A government that provides conditions for commerce to prosper, but also provides rules and restrictions within reason where necessary.



- A citizenship that is willing to accept the level of taxation necessary to finance infrastructure, government services and safety nets. Businesses must also be willing to pay their share of taxes.
- A government that will promote the best utilization of natural resources in order to create new wealth, while being concerned with preserving the country's natural environment.

These are some of the requisites necessary for the existence of a sizable prosperous middle-class and optimum equality. But as Jill Richardson's rigged monopoly game (above) demonstrates, conditions today are not as rosy as during the Golden Age. Inequality is increasing as the middle-class shrinks and the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. And this is not only a problem in far off places. It is right here at home.

In the London Free Press of July 27, 2018, there was an article entitled "Worsening poverty traps more in pessimism," by Glen Pearson, codirector of the London Food Bank. Glen quotes an Angus Reid survey stating that a quarter of all Canadians are facing financial hardship. Of respondents, 21% say they can't afford dental care and a slightly higher number say they recently had to borrow money to pay for groceries. The article goes on to state, "It is neither acceptable or right, yet Canadians tolerate it because of the lack of political and economic leadership and the unwillingness to press for change. For all the wealth moving in and through this country, there is little solace to offer those seeking better economic opportunities."

So, what are the causes of this pessimism? Looking at our immediate area, I believe a significant cause of increasing poverty is that southwestern Ontario has become a rust belt. On August 31, 2018, the Economist magazine published an article on the weakness of Canadian manufacturing with emphasis on southwestern Ontario. The factory closings are well-known. A few are: GM Diesel (Caterpillar) and Kellogg's in London, Ford and Sterling Trucks in St. Thomas, Siemens (wind turbines) in Tillsonburg, Navistar (trucks) in Chatham, Heinz in Leamington, and GM in Windsor. With shutdowns of this magnitude and the resulting unemployment, it is inevitable that many families are going to experience difficulties as inequality increases.

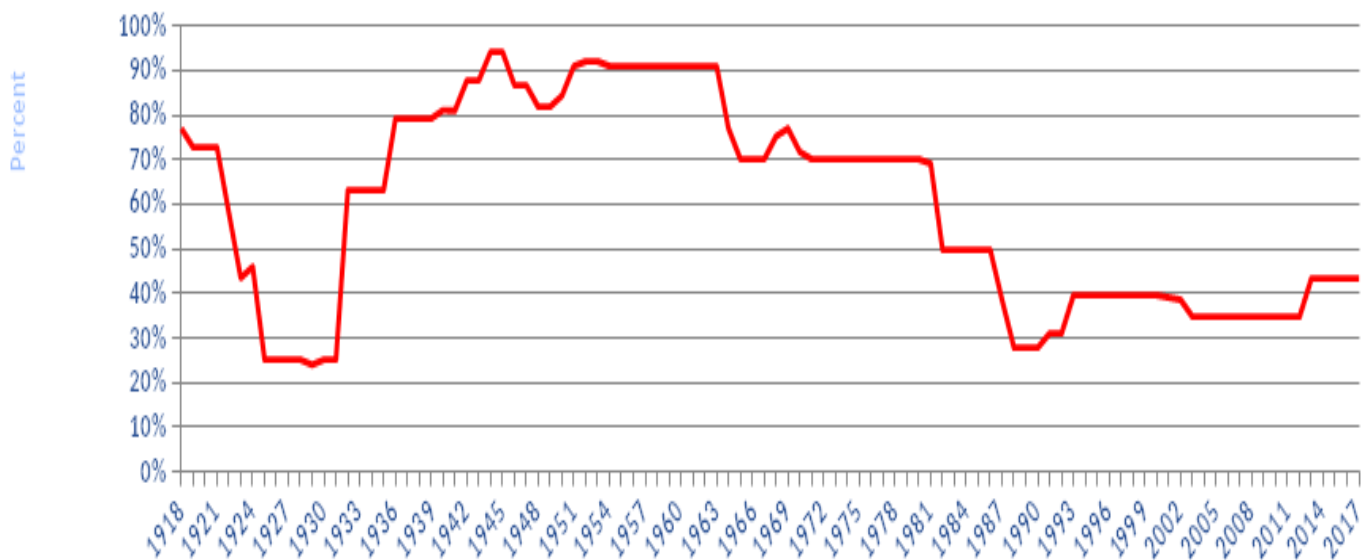
Why are these shutdowns happening? I submit a major cause is corporate greed. Profits can be increased by moving factories to areas with lower worker wages whether it be to Mexico, or off-shore. Higher profits generate greater bonuses for executives and greater dividends for shareholders. Employees be damned! They are often left with no severance or pensions.

Many years ago when steel magnate Andrew Carnegie was asked, which of customers, employees or shareholders is the most important in a business, he is reputed to have asked, "which is the most important leg on a three-legged stool?" In other words, they are all of equal importance. But this is not the case today. For many companies, only the shareholders matter and often shareholders are financiers or venture capitalists who have no interest in the business except the short-term profits they generate. They couldn't care less about the hardship they cause in a community when they leave the town or city that provided them with the essential services they needed to operate, nor do they care that factory closures can cause increasing inequality.

Yes, increasing inequality! Can it be stopped and reversed, or is it here to stay? Perhaps looking at conditions that prevailed during the 1945 – 1980 period when the middle class was thriving will provide a clue. A condition that stands out is the top federal tax rates. The graph on page 140 shows that these rates in the U.S. were at their highest levels during this 35-year period and then began to fall. The lower tax rates and the relaxing of financial regulations since 1980, along with sub-prime mortgages, sadly resulted in the financial Collapse of 2008, causing greater inequality as the 1% grew wealthier.



# Top Federal Tax Rates



Along with the lowering of top tax rates there is another problem. Money that should be going into national coffers to finance infrastructure and social safety nets is going into foreign tax havens, allowing the wealthy to get wealthier. It is estimated that globally, between 190 and 225 billion dollars ends up in tax havens each year. In total, the amount of global money stashed in tax havens is estimated to be between 21 and 32 trillion dollars. It is sometimes stated as 10% of world GDP.

Since inequality was low when the top federal tax rate was high, would raising these rates reduce inequality? There are those that think so. Chris Hughes, one of the co founders of Facebook has stated the wealthy 1% should be taxed at a higher rate in order to pay for a basic guaranteed annual income to those who have lost jobs due to automation. In England, Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby is part of a commission entitled, "Prosperity and Justice: A Plan for the New Economy," that is advocating higher taxes for the rich among other things. A few years ago, billionaire Warren Buffett, chairman of Berkshire-Hathaway holding company, discovered his secretary was, on a percentage basis, paying taxes at a higher rate than he was. He said this was not right and stated the system should be changed so the wealthy pay more. In France, former president François Hollande attempted to raise taxes for the rich, but there was so much opposition he backed down.

And that is the problem, the rich have so much influence on governments that increasing their taxes is almost an impossibility. In fact, in the U.S., taxes for the rich were recently lowered, adding to the national debt. But surely it is patently obvious, higher taxes for the wealthy would result in switching money from tax havens into national treasuries, making more money available for needed government expenditures.

A look at the graph shown above reveals an interesting story. At the start of the Great Depression in 1929, top tax rates for the rich were as low as 25%. When Franklin Roosevelt became president in 1933, he began to raise taxes for the rich as he began to instigate his so-called New Deal. The New Deal was a series of work



projects that put people to work as well as financial reforms and regulations including the Glass-Steagall act that limited commercial bank securities activities and affiliations between commercial banks and securities firms to regulate speculation. It also established the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) which insured deposits for up to \$2,500, ending the risk of runs on banks. Top tax rates were gradually increased and after the U.S. entered WW II, reached close to 95%. They dropped to 80% after the war for a brief period and rose to 90% until 1963, dropping to 70% until 1981 when deregulation began during the Reagan era. Thus, during the period when a large middle class was thriving, top tax rates were relatively high. Surely this tells us something. The Glass-Steagall act gradually became toothless and now top tax rates are around 35%. Unfortunately, the relaxation of financial regulations, the advent of derivatives, and low interest sub-prime mortgages led to the financial collapse and recession of 2008.

So, what is to be learned from this history? It seems that only drastic situations like a serious depression or a major war can trigger drastic action. And when drastic actions are required, only exceptionally strong leaders can undo the mess.

We are now living in uncertain times. The Digital Revolution is upon us and the long-term effects are unknown. The job market is changing as old jobs disappear and new jobs require special training. Populism is on the increase and religious conflicts are still occurring. Global warming is beginning to cause food shortages and storms appear to be getting more intense. In some countries big money is adversely influencing governments and political parties are refusing to work together and compromise. Under these conditions, inequality is increasing and prompts the question: Will things get so bad that revolutions are in the offing?

It seems to me that the only hope is for super-qualified strong leaders to come forward that will be able and willing to take the actions necessary to establish a world with as much equality as is reasonably possible. This will certainly involve making the 1% pay their fair share of taxes. Can this happen without a serious world depression or a revolution? Let's hope so, but at present, few capable leaders appear to be on the horizon. Nevertheless, I hope things will turn out okay for my descendants and all others. (DAH).

### **More Quotes**

- Skepticism, like chastity, should not be relinquished too readily. – George Santayana.
- Fundamentalism isn't about religion. It's about power. - Salman Rushdie
- I do not believe in an afterlife, although I am bringing a change of underwear. – Woody Allen.
- I'm an atheist, but we people of the sixties were very spiritual in our own way. – Camile Paglia.
- Nothing in life is to be feared, it is only to be understood. – Marie Curie.
- The environment is a moral issue. – Al Gore.



## **Section VIII - Four Book Reviews**

There have been as many as thirty book reviews in fifteen years of *Enlightenment* publications. Some are interspersed in various article in this compendium. In this Section, are reviews of four books that I particularly enjoyed. They are: *A Personal History of Awe*, *The Bonobo and the Atheist*, *The Age of Greed* and *A Review of Democracy and Its Crisis*.

### **A Personal History of Awe**

**By Scott Russel Sanders**

Some people are raised in a religious family and remain loyal to their inherited denomination throughout their entire lives. Others are raised in a strictly secular environment and never become interested in, or associated with, any kind of religion. Then there are those who are raised in a church-going home, but as they grow older begin to doubt and question the articles of faith of their religion and the validity of the Bible. These feelings of uncertainty often cause these people to embark on a journey searching for a life stance or world view that will bring them peace of mind and a non-religious form of spirituality while living as a non-believer. One such person is author and English literature professor Scott Russell Sanders. He has documented his journey, or metamorphosis, in a beautifully written book entitled *A Personal History of Awe*, as he progresses from believer to doubter to skeptic to non-believer.

Scott spent his early years living on a farm near Memphis, Tennessee. When he was five years of age the family moved to Ravenna in northeastern Ohio, where his father was employed at a military arsenal. Scott's mother was a devout Presbyterian. His father was a Baptist, so they compromised and attended a small Methodist church in the hamlet of Wayland, Ohio. His mother saw to it that he got a good dose of religion while growing up. Long before he could read, he "took the Bible in through his ears in sermons and hymns, in the way he took in air, water and food." But at an early age during the Korean War, he began to have doubts. He could not understand how a benevolent all-powerful God could allow the rampant killing of fellow humans in barbaric warfare. The more he read the Bible, the more confused he became. Instead of answering his questions, the Bible deepened them.

Later on as a teenager, he became passionately interested in science and believed that science could explain away the mysteries of the Bible and religions. His faith in science crowded out any faith he had in religions. He contemplated that the only role left for God, if there was one, was to spark the Big Bang and frame the laws that governed how everything from quarks to quasars would eternally behave. Nevertheless, he kept reading the ancient book seeking comfort and illumination but became more and more troubled by the undercurrent of cruelty. From beginning to end, while preaching love and forgiveness, the Bible envisions a God given to spite.

Scott's fascination with science prompted him to enroll at Brown University in Rhode Island, majoring in physics. By this time he was estranged from the church because he could not understand why the clergy was not speaking out against so much of the nation's wealth being spent on more and more destructive weapons while children were going hungry and the poor were living in the streets. He no longer believed in the Apostles' Creed, noting that it said nothing about justice, healing, peace making or compassion. Nor did it say anything about *awe*, the kind of satisfaction he experienced communing with the natural world. And there was also the *awe* of the miraculous universe revealed by science: a cosmic entity cohered



magnificently from the tiniest atom to the largest of galaxies, “all bound together by the rules of an ancient elegant dance.” Here was a vision of grandeur far greater than anything imagined by the authors of the Old and New Testaments. His awesome reverence for science outdated everything he had read in the Bible or heard from the pulpit. Toward the end of his sophomore year, however, Scott began to realize that science might not provide all the answers to life’s perplexing questions. The more he studied the more he realized that uncertainty is woven into the very fabric of the universe.

Scott’s ambition after graduation from university was to enter into scientific research in the field of physics, but when told that the money to finance his research would most likely be supplied by the industrial-military complex, he became troubled. He abhorred wars and wanted no part in helping to invent and produce weapons that kept becoming more and more destructive. Now he was forced to face the question: if he did not wish to become a researcher in a physics lab, what were the alternatives? Just what was he called to do?

In the fall of 1965, he took a class called, “Literature of the American Renaissance,” reading the works of Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville and Whitman. He considered Emerson to be the intellectual grandfather of the group, but it was Thoreau that thrilled him the most because he was a man who sought to live a purposeful life with a keen sense of *awe*. It was through studying these five great writers that Scott was able to see how literature could address his deepest questions and most powerful yearnings. His mind was made up, he decided he wanted to become a professor of English literature and also take a stab at being an author.

In his final year at Brown, 1967, Scott learned he had won a Marshal scholarship to study at Cambridge University in England. While still in high school, Scott had attended a science camp in Bloomington, Indiana, where he met Ruth McClure, a fellow science student. They soon fell in love and corresponded constantly, while meeting whenever conditions allowed. After graduating from university, they both intended to do graduate work at Harvard, she in biochemistry and he in English Literature, but the scholarship to Cambridge changed their plans. They decided to get married and then together they embarked for England. Four years later Scott received his PhD. His thesis was based on the novels of D.H. Lawrence.

On returning to the U.S. Scott assumed the position of Assistant Professor in English Literature at Indiana University in Bloomington. He remained at this institution throughout his career. In addition to teaching he authored nine books, the most recent being *A Personal History of Awe*.

The central theme of *A Personal History of Awe* is, of course, Scott’s metamorphosis from believer to doubter to skeptic to non-believer. But there is another metamorphic theme interwoven throughout the book. Scott has a daughter Eva who has a daughter Elizabeth. After Elizabeth was born, Scott regularly enjoyed babysitting his granddaughter and observing her progress as she learned to talk and walk and go through all the fascinating phases of childhood. All this instilled in him a profound sense of *awe* that he describes almost poetically with deep emotional feeling. At the same time as Elizabeth was growing up, Scott was tending to the needs of his aging mother who was slowly losing her faculties in a nursing residence. The chronicles of these two individuals, one at each end of life’s cycle, exemplify experiences that many of us will undergo during our lifetime. On one occasion Scott’s mother asked him if he believed in heaven. He said yes, even though he had long ago stopped believing in the supernatural and the hereafter. It was, of course, the compassionate and right thing to do.



Scott never uses the word humanist in the book, but through his metamorphosis he became, without question, a consummate humanist. As a lover of nature, a pacifist who abhorred war, a proponent of scientific inquiry, a non-believer and a man who substituted a sense of *awe* for religious spirituality, he was indeed a humanist. He experienced his profound sense of *awe* through a loving marriage, the birth of his children and grandchildren, a keen love of the natural world, a reverence for all forms of life, and a fascination with literature, science and the need for a more secular and less religious society. (DAH).

## **The Bonobo and the Atheist**

### **In Search of Humanism Among the Primates**

*By Frans De Waal*

Frans de Waal was born in Den Bosch, an ancient Netherlands city. The artist Hieronymus Bosch, best known for his triptych, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, took the name of the town in which he was born. This work is thought to have been painted around 1504 CE, before the Protestant Reformation. It is now in the Museo del Prado in Madrid, Spain. De Waal devotes a lot of space describing the painting in his book, offering his interpretation of small sections in the three panels

Why does de Waal begin his book mentioning Bosch's triptych? Perhaps it is because having grown up with Bosch's statue in the market square, he became fascinated by the surreal imagery and symbolism of Bosch's paintings, and contemplated how it relates to humanity's place in the universe under a waning influence of God. Bosch was no fan of the Church and its avarice, and perhaps in the painting he is questioning religion's place in society and suggesting in the centre panel that a world without God would be a good world. De Waal also questions the relevance of religion and God in society and devotes two chapters in the book to the God question. Chapter 4 is titled "Is God Dead or Just in a Coma," wherein de Waal, among other things, comments critically on the "neo-atheists" Dawkins, Hitchens and Harris who merely shout from the rooftops that there is no God and bash religions. What is the point of getting all worked up about the absence of something as esoteric as God? And rather than just bash religions, realize that they will be around for some time, while advocating the building of better humanistic secular societies based on natural human abilities. Chapter 7's title is "The God Gap." The gist of this chapter is that the gap between belief in God and non-belief is getting wider as societies become more secular.

Concerning the subject of morality, in *The Bonobo and the Atheist*, de Waal argues that morality is not imposed from on high, but instead comes from within. Moral behaviour does not begin and end with religion but is in fact a product of evolution and existed among primates (and a few other animals) before humans came on the scene. And indeed, morality certainly existed among humans before the major religions originated. Whatever role religious moral imperatives have played in society, de Waal sees this as a "Johnny-come-lately" role that emerged only as an addition to our natural instincts for cooperation and empathy.

Now on to the bonobos. While there is a wealth of information concerning the behaviour of chimpanzees, both in the wild and in captivity, bonobos have not received the same amount of attention, partly because they are very reclusive in the wild and also because fewer studies have been conducted about them in captivity. Nevertheless, enough work has been done to know that there are striking differences between the two species. To begin with, chimp societies are patriarchal with dominant alpha males in charge, whereas bonobo societies are matriarchal with the females in charge. Chimps are more aggressive, as killings can take place during territorial disputes, while in contrast, bonobos will engage in sex with neighbouring



tribes. They mix freely, turning potential enemies into friends. This is not to say that bonobos never have conflicts. But when they do, they usually make up afterwards and engage in sex. So de Waal proffers that the bonobos, living by and large with compassion and empathy toward each other, present firm evidence that morality was not invented by religions, but is instead a product of evolution. Furthermore, he maintains that if bonobos could talk, they would have a message for all people, and in particular the so called “neo-atheists.”

The bonobo would urge the atheist to take a long-term perspective, realizing that the surest way to cause a lessening of belief in God, and a decline in organized religion, is to work toward the establishment of prosperous secular societies. As de Waal points out, this is happening in the West, particularly in northern Europe. The bonobo would further suggest that the atheist become an advocator rather than a protester and move forward beyond religion and top-down morality. People need to be made to realize that religions were not the wellspring of morality; instead, religions were invented by humans to bolster it. Morality had much more humble beginnings, which are recognizable in the behaviour of other animals.

In conclusion, if I were asked to suggest in a few words, what advice bonobos would want to impart to humans, I think they would say, “make love not war.” (DAH).

## **Age of Greed: The Triumph of Finance and the Decline of America**

*By Jeff Madrick*

A short while ago a book entitled *Assholes: A Theory*, by Aaron James appeared on bestseller lists for a number of weeks. In this book the author provides us with a delightful romp through the world of assholes, analyzing various types such as smug assholes, royal assholes, corporate assholes, reckless assholes and numerous others. One type of asshole that particularly caught my attention was the delusional banker asshole, represented by the individuals who precipitated the financial crisis of 2008. Through mathematically sophisticated “innovation,” investment firms and traders were allowed to take on too much risk with the result that society assumed the risk, while investment bankers reaped huge financial rewards. Some of these assholes, with no concern for the welfare of those they adversely affected, felt they were entitled to these unconscionably large payouts because they were smarter than the next guy. It was this appalling situation that prompted me to read *Age of Greed*, the principal focus of this review, and learn more about these greedy characters.

In the years following WWII, most Americans believed the federal government was good for them. Partly thanks to the far-reaching financial, social and economic reforms of the Depression, the country prospered after the war and living standards improved. Highways were built, men were sent into space, Social Security was expanded and progressive taxation to pay the bills was widely accepted. But things changed in the 1970s, possibly due to high inflation as much as anything, as Americans began to wonder if governments had gone too far. The new refrain was that big government was holding Americans back and consequently regulations were weakened and social programs were curtailed. As reforms went blindly ahead, the “age of greed” began. This book is about how this shift came about, and how profound its influence has been since this “new age” came about, citing the damage that was done along the way. Part I tells the story of business pioneers who fought government regulation, or through innovation escaped government oversight, all the while diminishing the power of government and reinforcing the changing national attitudes. Part II tells the story of how government was no longer a counterweight as financiers led the way. Wall Street changed radically. Debt more than innovation and technical progress became the economy’s driving force. Financial



businesses doubled in size compared to the economy and their profits grew still faster. Hundreds of billions of precious American savings were wasted.

The book describes in considerable detail the activities of over twenty individuals who actively participated in the events that took place in this era. The list includes names such as Walter Wriston, Milton Friedman, Richard Nixon, Ivan Boesky, Ronald Reagan, Ted Turner, Sam Walton, Jimmy Carter, Paul Volker, Michel Milken, Alan Greenspan, Tom Peters, Jack Welch, and George Soros. Not all these individuals were blatant practitioners of greed. Some were not in the game to get rich and some who made fortunes gave much of their fortunes away. Most were not wholly destructive, but nevertheless they participated in taking the economy along an unfortunate tragic path for their own purpose, from which it may not be possible to turn back.

In the Epilogue, the author details how so much capital has been wasted in the “Age of Greed.” As Wall Street investors got fabulously rich, hundreds of billions of dollars were channeled into wasteful investments that could have been spent on energy, infrastructure, transportation, communication, health care, medical research, education, technical and business R&D, and new truly innovative consumer products and business equipment. And the money spent bailing out financial institutions could also have been put to much better use, although some of this has been paid back.

At one time business managers were not subject to the whims of investors who now force managers to meet financial forecasts in order that share values can be maintained and increased. This undesirable thinking has caused businesses to operate for the short term by trimming costs on such things as R&D, which is needed for long-term growth. Businesses were also adversely affected by the financial crisis of 2008 as it caused the loss of eight million jobs, resulting in a sharp fall in GDP, reducing Federal revenue and increasing the deficit.

It should now be clear to all that tighter government regulations are urgently required to bring Wall Street under some semblance of control, in order to prevent a repeat of the recent disasters. Controls that will force the financial institutions do what they are supposed to do. That is, eschew excessive greed and channel savings to productive use. But Wall Street continues to complain about how new regulations would undermine its profitability and has threatened to leave those financial capitals that impose restrictions they deem damaging. America has not yet turned the page. As long as Wall Street has Congress under its thumb, the page will be difficult to turn.

I have included a review of *Age of Greed* in this compendium because it describes the economic conditions of the last thirty or more years that were at least partly responsible for the rise of the Religious Right and for their increasingly damaging political influence in the United States. Surely it is a no-brainer to conclude that a strong thriving economy with a large middle class is the surest way of diminishing the influence of the Religious Right, leading to a more secular society. Unfortunately, as outlined in the paragraph immediately above, the challenges that lie ahead are daunting to say the least, making the existence of a more secular and less religious society in the U.S. difficult to achieve in the short term, but what about the long term? The following article attempts to answer this question. (DAH).



# **A Review of Democracy and Its Crisis**

*A book by A. C. Grayling*

This book is divided into two sections. In Part I Grayling documents the history and evolution of democracies and in Part II he examines democracy today and why it has gone wrong in the U. K. with Brexit and in the U.S. with the election of Donald Trump as president.

The history of democracy, of course, begins in Athens in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE. In this era Pericles summarized the essence of Greek democracy with these words:

*“Our constitution is called a democracy, because power is in the hands not of a few, but of the whole people, everyone is equal before the law. The man who holds himself aloof from public life is useless.”*

In Athens, all citizens were members of the assembly and could vote directly on legislation proposed by the council. Similarly, all citizens could be placed on a jury to judge their peers, a majority vote leading to conviction. Further, a significant majority vote could ostracize any citizen for ten years. Most citizens could obtain the higher administrative offices since most of these positions were filled by lot. Power and authority clearly lay with the citizens of Athens.

But to be a citizen, a person had to be male, at least 18 years of age, and born of Athenian parents. This meant that the majority of Athenians, including women, resident aliens and slaves, were barred from participating in the democratic process. Of the 310,000 people living in Athens, only 43,000 participated in government, fewer than one-seventh of the total population. Nevertheless, the Athenians laid a foundation that would eventually be resurrected and developed by others. Citizenship, shared power, equality, and participation, would in time be hallmarks of democracies around the world.

In Part I Grayling comments on most of the major philosophers who influenced the evolution of democracy from ancient Greece until the nineteenth century. These include Plato, Aristotle, Machiavelli, Locke, Spinoza, Montesquieu, Rousseau, Madison, Constant, De Tocqueville, and Mill. He also comments on a succession of major events, mostly in England, France and the United States, beginning with the Magna Carta followed by a number of occurrences including the English Civil War, the end of divine right of kings, the ascension of William and Mary, the American Revolution, and the French Revolution.

Grayling states that those readers who might not be interested in the history of democracy, but more interested in contemporary events, are free to skip Part I and begin with Part II, but for those skipping Part I, a few individuals from the past deserve mention. The first is Plato. He was not a fan of Greek democracy, after all it killed his teacher Socrates. And he had concern that democracy could deteriorate into what he called an *ochlocracy* leading to a hidden oligarchy, possibly followed by a revolution then leading to a restoration of order by a strong man, a tyrant. The French Revolution and the fascism of Nazi Germany and Italy followed parts of Plato's prediction, as did the United States where Congress is now controlled by big money. The U.S. is not now a functioning democracy but is a hidden oligarchy.

Plato believed that governments should be led by what he called philosopher kings, men who studied philosophy, served an apprenticeship in government and lived almost like monks, not being interested in any personal gain. Aristotle realized that this utopian arrangement would not be practical but did state that it was the duty of all politicians to provide good government for the benefit of all citizens.



Another person from the past worth mentioning is John Locke, who is regarded as one of the founders of liberalism. His work had considerable influence on the writing of the United States Constitution with the introduction of the separation of powers between branches of government.

The first chapter of Part II is entitled, "Alternative Democracies and Anti-democracies." Grayling cites the differences between the British Parliamentary system and the system in the U.S. Republic with its separation of powers. The Parliamentary system has evolved over many centuries to its present state and has served the U.K. and Commonwealth countries including Canada, Australia, and New Zealand reasonably well. The Prime Minister is usually the leader of the political party that controls a majority of seats in the House of Commons, rather than being elected in a general election as is the case with the President of the United States. When the ruling party holds a majority in a Parliament, it has a monopoly on power and can pass any legislation put forward by the Prime Minister and the Cabinet. If there happens to be a minority government, then compromises are required, and this is not necessarily a bad thing. In Canada, however, with three major parties and the first-past-the-post system, the party in power often does not represent a majority of the voters. This is considered to be a major shortfall by those who desire a more equal representation system.

After the American Revolution, the founding fathers created a Constitution outlining a new form of democracy based on three branches of government. Namely, the Administrative consisting of the President and cabinet, the Congress, and the Judiciary, each with separate powers. The Congress consists of the House of Representatives and the Senate. The Senate is elected, not appointed. The members of the Judiciary, however, are appointed. Under the U.S. system, the President, the Congress and the Senate are not always of the same political party, necessitating compromise to enable the government to create and pass legislation efficiently. Without consultation and compromise between the two political parties, stagnation can occur. In less than two centuries, this newer form of democracy enabled the United States to become the most powerful nation in the world, but today there are serious problems.

Grayling points out, using Brexit and the election of Donald Trump as examples, that democracy in the U.K. and the U.S. is in crisis. In Britain, the first-past-the-post system and low voter turnout caused the nation to begin a process of separation from the European Union with only 26% of eligible voters voting in favour. Grayling describes Brexit as "a politically illegitimate effort by the right wing of a political movement to effect dramatic constitutional changes by referendum which they could not achieve as a self-standing political party in a standard general election." And he goes on to state, "in the United States there is a new President who by a long chalk is one of the worst qualified and worst equipped individuals ever to be voted into the White House, courtesy of the electoral college, with three million votes less than his better qualified opponent."

Grayling further comments that "something has gone seriously wrong in the state of democracy. Democracy must be reclaimed, in the form worked out by some of the best minds in the history of our civilization, before the opportunity to reclaim it passes." He mentions that there are alternative forms of government including communism and benevolent dictatorships, but he, like Winston Churchill, considers democracy the least bad of all other systems and feels strongly that, with modifications, democracy can be salvaged and reformed into an improved system that truly represents the wishes of the majority. Grayling warns that "although by all measures the citizens of democracies (the Western democracies at least) today are safer, wealthier and freer than humans have ever been anywhere in history, there is no guarantee that social



dissatisfactions such as income inequality and unfair distribution of opportunities will not arise and rankle the electorate.” Because of these dangers he argues reforms are required. But, what kinds of reforms does he recommend?

1.The first suggestion is to get rid of the first-past-the-post system. It should be replaced by some system that allows the majority of the voters to have fair representation, but he does not spell out what this alternative might be. We all know that the present Canadian Liberal government promised to reform the system, but they were unable to fulfil this promise. They found out it is not an easy problem to solve to everyone’s satisfaction.

2.Another suggestion is to better educate all students in civic and government matters while still in high school, so that when they reach voting age (Grayling suggests it should be 16), they are ready to make wise judgements when deciding on the best qualified candidates to elect.

3.Grayling is unequivocal in his conviction that voting should be made compulsory by all qualified voters, as it is now in Australia.

4.Without question, the financing of political candidates is badly in need of reform because big business, big money, and special interests have undue influence today, particularly in the U.S. This is well documented in Jane Mayer’s recent book entitled *Dark Money* that spells out the reality that “dark money” has turned the United States into a hidden oligarchy, aided by the U.S. Supreme Court ruling that allows billionaires to give unlimited amounts of money to campaigns at all levels. “Political office in the U.S. is bought and sold like a pair of socks,” Grayling says.

5.An additional problem is the practice of gerrymandering, rigging constituencies to give one party an advantage over the opposition. This has been a long-standing problem, and has recently aided Republicans in the United States.

So, will the world’s democracies attempt to carry out the reforms necessary to overcome the current shortfalls and reverse the ongoing trend toward increasing inequality, or will it take something drastic like an uprising to bring about reform? No matter what happens, the road ahead, with the digital revolution and increasing use of Artificial Intelligence, will not be easy, and skillful leaders will be required to navigate successfully into the future. Will these leaders be found, or will democracy be overtaken by another system that is more efficient? (DAH).

### **End of Quotes**

- Only two things are infinite, the universe and human stupidity, and I am not sure about the universe. –Albert Einstein.
- Both read the Bible by day and night. But thou read’st black while I read white. – William Blake
- Wherever law ends, tyranny begins. – John Locke.
- I am the inferior of any man whose rights I trample underfoot. – Robert Ingersoll.



## **Section IX - The Last Days**

### **The Last Days**

For many, death is a morbid subject, not something to want to talk about, particularly in one's younger years. But for those of us who are getting up in years, it becomes necessary to get one's things in order, as the saying goes, and begin to do some estate planning. It is also a time to ponder. Is there some form of existence after death, or is this life all there is? Devout believers in an afterlife may receive comfort from their beliefs, but non-believers must accept the fact that this life is all there is. We are born, we live, and we die. That's it! So how do we non-believers cope with this realization as they approach the last days?

Well, we simply have to look back and ask, did we get the most possible satisfaction out of life as we proceeded on our Journey? Some will say yes, others will say no, I could have done better. When I look back at my own life, I feel I would have had a fuller life if I had been raised in a secular home rather than a religious one. I would not have had the nagging doubts that did not disappear until I became a non-believer. Now I am relieved of any concern about going up above or going down below. I have no fear of death. My body will go back to the good earth from whence it came. (DAH).

### **Aging With Optimism**

*By Goldwin Emerson*

From the moment of our birth we begin to age. And with aging comes an inevitable and inescapable progression towards death. For those who think about it at all, and many prefer not to, death becomes a part of our lives. The reality of death reminds us that we have limits upon our activities, our hopes and our dreams. Death circumscribes our lives and thoughtful people include the reality of death in our outlook about life.

Of course, there are many ways of dealing with the fact of death. Usually when we are young, death seems so far away that we don't give it much thought. For most young people, their own individual death seems so many years into the future that it is difficult to contemplate even if one tries hard to do so. Unless a classmate or a friend of our own age dies, the idea of death doesn't touch our lives very much. For many children, the death of a grandparent or a favourite aunt or uncle may force them into an abrupt encounter with death. They might wonder, perhaps for the first time, how could it be that their friend who was so very much alive yesterday is no longer with them today. Where could she/he be? Thus, a limited number of young people are forced into recognizing the death of a friend. However, even this recognition falls far short of thinking about one's own death. If I am a teenager and my friend is killed in a traffic accident or an accidental drowning, I could be shocked and saddened, but I am still unlikely to think much about my own personal death. I will leave that thought for another day and a future time.

When we are middle aged, we will have had more time to encounter the deaths of friends, colleagues, parents or relatives. These experiences may have given us reason to think about the reality and finality of death. But we are also likely to be busy in the ongoing matters of developing our career plans, paying off our house mortgages, raising and educating our children, establishing good relationships with our spouses or partners or any number of other things that we will encounter in the daily business of living. If we are



adherents of a traditional religion, we may possibly be comforted by the hopes and promises of an eternal afterlife. These religious promises can help to alert us to the inevitability of death but the everyday demands on our time and energy might convince us that thinking about death is something that we will choose to defer until a later time.

As we become senior citizens the question of our own death emerges more eminently. By this time in our lives more friends, relatives, former colleagues and acquaintances will have died. Our physical and health problems will be more frequent and prominent. Perhaps we will take longer to think through fairly simple problems as clearly and as accurately as we once did. Our energy levels will decrease and learning to operate new inventions and electronic gadgets becomes more challenging. Hooking up a new digital video disc player or installing a new program on our computer may turn a half hour job into a half day project. Since we are probably retired, we will have more time by ourselves to contemplate our achievements and our disappointments.

As seniors, we may have a traditional religious faith. But once again, we may not be comforted by the thoughts and promises of an afterlife, especially if these hopes are balanced against the possibility of eternal damnation. Our increasing age could cause us to hope more enthusiastically that such religious promises are well founded, but the urgency of questions about death might demand more certainty than our reasoned scepticism will permit us to accept. It is possible that even after adhering to such traditional religious answers for many years of our lives we cannot bring ourselves to hope and believe in such ethereal promises.

If we are humanists, and seniors at that, it is unlikely that we will find much comfort or value in the religious promises of an eternal and glorious afterlife. We will find that too many mental gymnastics are required in order to convince ourselves. Our tradition of using our reasoning and common sense will not permit us to be comforted by religious faith that promises so much on so little evidence.

So what can we do, or more importantly, what can we think that will help us to fit the reality of our personal death into this life? What will provide our lives with fullness and meaning given the fact that we, and everyone else whom we know, and don't know, will die? What will permit us to say, "I know I am getting older, and I know that I will die, but that's okay"?

These are hard questions to answer. They are even difficult questions to ask in the first place. I suppose that in the long run, each person must find her or his own answers to this most personal event of our lives, our very own deaths. So, the answers that follow are given with the full recognition that they are my answers and they may not make sense or give comfort to others although I hope that many of them can resonate favourably with fellow humanists.

1. Practise using your past strengths and talents to create a better world in the here and now. Use your senior years to improve society, and you will feel better about your own accomplishments. This will help you from becoming discouraged about modern events and ongoing changes in society. You will feel more valued as you become more useful to others.
2. Recognize your own talents, but equally important, be aware of your own limitations. As you notice more demands upon your energy, be willing to set realistic goals about what things you can achieve well and



which tasks are too taxing for you to succeed in the way that you and others would like. If you can afford to do so, let others help you with difficult jobs such as outdoor painting or mowing the lawn or housework.

3. Enjoy each day to the fullest. Consider it a true gift each day that you are free from pain or worry or poverty or calamity. If you are religious, then thank God for life. But if you are not religious be equally thankful for your life and happiness and for the universe we live in. Remember that every atom in your body was once inside a star.

4. Change your interests and activities in keeping with your energy and abilities. If you used to run a couple of kilometres a day, it's okay to walk instead, even if you do so only a few times a week. If you are tired after you baby-sit your grandchildren for one day don't be surprised or disappointed in yourself. It's a normal feeling for grandparents to experience.

5. As we age, problems with our health or our finances or our relationships may develop. Try not to burden others unduly with our own problems. When people ask, "How are you?" they are not asking for a long recital of all the aches and pains we have daily. As Dr. Andrew Mason observed, "Sainthood emerges when you can listen to someone else's tale of woe and not respond with a description of your own."

6. Try to remain flexible both physically and mentally. Don't alienate yourself from your family and from best friends by insisting on doing things in the same way that you have become used to. Be willing to consider new ideas, attempt new approaches or visit new places.

7. Be happy in the achievements that you have already accomplished. Let younger people take on some of the responsibility for the tasks that you have been doing even if they will do these activities and tasks in a way which is different from your own.

8. Accept less. That is, be willing to become a little less demanding of yourself. With this more relaxed approach comes more peace of mind and an acceptance of the finality of life. Avoid the desperate belief that the future success of society or of your family depends upon you.

9. Let reasonableness and not blind faith or fantasy be your guide. Having a clear mind and an acceptance of the inevitability of death is important in the understanding of the nature of life. This realization actually helps you to get more out of daily living as each day becomes more precious.

10. Be comforted in the thought that, although you are personally not immortal, much of what you accomplish in your life can live on in the lives of your family and your acquaintances. Others can learn from your examples of good living, good attitudes, and constructive actions. There is a meaningful kind of immortality to the good things that you have accomplished during your life because these attitudes and achievements will live on in all the people whose lives you have touched. "No act of kindness, no matter how small, is wasted". (Aesop)

11. Be happy in what you can do. Don't be afraid to downsize your activities according to your energy and abilities. If you can do any one of the following things, such as write a letter, phone or visit a friend, read a book, take a daily walk, or engage in your favourite hobbies, be content.



12. To the extent possible, forgive others. It is damaging to ourselves to dwell on the offences of others. Parents, siblings, spouses, and fellow workers were not likely perfect in all things, but on balance, they probably did the best they could. And even if they didn't, hanging onto old grudges and feelings of unfair treatment will eat away at our own happiness. Even more important, forgive yourself for your own mistakes. After you have done the best you can to remedy your own errors and to learn from them, put these concerns behind you and move on.

13. There is a built-in acceptance of death that automatically comes about with down-sizing of abilities and ambitions. As we become less capable there is, psychologically, less life to give up. This feeling occurs in a natural way, and it can be found in younger people as well. For example, a child who is starving to death, as many thousands do daily, will have less desire to live and less resistance to death. Similarly, patients who have terminal illnesses come to a natural and rational conclusion that death is a welcome event. Of course, these two examples are much more extreme than what normally happens in our old age, but the principles involved are the same. In other words, death becomes less feared and less traumatic as we age.

14. People fear the process of dying more than they fear being dead. This phenomenon has often been talked about throughout history. One of the most notable examples is that of the death of Socrates who according to Plato, said, "There is great reason that death is a good; for one of two things.... either there is not consciousness, but a sleep like the sleep of him who is undisturbed even by dreams..... (If so) death will be an unspeakable gain.... for eternity is then only a single night; Or death is a journey to another place, and there, as men say, all the dead abide... what good can be greater than that?" In a lighter vein, Mark Twain expressed a similar idea in these words: "I do not fear death in view of the fact that I had been dead for billions and billions of years before I was born and not suffered the slightest inconvenience from it." It is often the process of dying, and in particular the possibility of pain while dying, that people fear. This is a fear that is just as likely to be present among those who believe in eternal life as among those for whom death is regarded as the end of life.

15. Traditional religion offers the hope of eternal bliss in heaven, but it counter-balances this happy promise with the ominous threat of eternal damnation, as stated in Matthew 7, verse 13, "Enter ye in at the strait gate; for wide is the gate, and broad is the way that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it." In its most literal sense, the alternative to heaven is eternal burning in hell, and in its most fundamental interpretation this dual package of promises can hardly offer much comfort, even to its adherents, without assurance as to which route one's own soul is headed. Many people who have converted from traditional religion to humanist thinking find a great sense of relief when they are able to put such starkly contrasting promises behind them.

16. We can be comforted in the thought that we have lived a good life. There is joy and happiness in being able to look back on the events of living and the decisions we have made, which on balance, have been more positive than negative. If our families, our places of work, our communities, or perhaps even the world, have been made even a little better because of us, this is cause for satisfaction and hope. This is cause for believing that our life has been worthwhile.

17. Rejoice in the thought of our own unique lives. It could very easily have happened that we had never been born. What a wonderful opportunity it has been to have the chance to be alive. It was not a decision



of our own doing that we came into existence. Our life is a gift from our parents, or more accurately, from nature. The fact that we exist at all means that we are truly children of the universe.

18. There are few aids to healthy aging that are more important than an optimistic attitude and a sense of humour. Finding humour in the normal frustrations of life can help to keep us from dwelling too much on the discouraging aspects of aging. Humour may actually lengthen our lives and increase our enjoyment of the relatively brief time we have in this wonderful experience of living. Finally, in the words of Mark Twain, "there is no cure for birth or death except to enjoy the interval".

## **Hume's Deathbed - No Recanting for David**

*By Dennis Rasmussen\**

As the Scottish philosopher David Hume lay on his deathbed in the summer of 1776, his passing became a highly anticipated event. Few people in 18th-century Britain were as forthright in their lack of religious faith as Hume was, and his skepticism had earned him a lifetime of abuse and reproach from the pious, including a concerted effort to excommunicate him from the Church of Scotland. Now everyone wanted to know how the notorious infidel would face his end. Would he show remorse or perhaps even recant his skepticism? Would he die in a state of distress, having none of the usual consolations afforded by belief in an afterlife? In the event, Hume died as he had lived, with remarkable good humour and without religion.

The most famous depiction of Hume's dying days, at least in our time, comes from James Boswell, who managed to contrive a visit with him on Sunday, 7 July 1776. As his account of their conversation makes plain, the purpose of Boswell's visit was less to pay his respects to a dying man, or even to gratify a sense of morbid curiosity, than to try to fortify his own religious convictions by confirming that even Hume could not remain a sincere non-believer to the end. In this, he failed utterly.

'Being too late for church,' Boswell made his way to Hume's house, where he was surprised to find him 'placid and even cheerful ... talking of different matters with a tranquility of mind and a clearness of head which few men possess at any time.' Ever tactful, Boswell immediately brought up the subject of the afterlife, asking if there might not be a future state. Hume replied that 'it was possible that a piece of coal put upon the fire would not burn; and he added that it was a most unreasonable fancy that we should exist for ever'. Boswell persisted, asking if he was not made uneasy by the thought of annihilation, to which Hume responded that he was no more perturbed by the idea of ceasing to exist than by the idea that he had not existed before he was born. What was more, Hume 'said flatly that the morality of every religion was bad, and ... that when he heard a man was religious, he concluded he was a rascal, though he had known some instances of very good men being religious.'

This interview might show Hume at his brashest, but in the 18th century it remained mostly confined to Boswell's private notebooks. The most prominent and controversial public account of Hume's final days came instead from an even more famous pen: that of Adam Smith, Hume's closest friend. Smith composed a eulogy for Hume soon after the latter's death in the form of a public letter to their mutual publisher, William Strahan. This letter was effectively the 'authorised version' of the story of Hume's death, as it appeared (with Hume's advance permission) as a companion piece to his short, posthumously published autobiography, *My Own Life* (1776).



Smith's letter contains none of the open impiety that pervades Boswell's interview, but it does chronicle – even flaunt – the equanimity of Hume's last days, depicting the philosopher telling jokes, playing cards, and conversing cheerfully with his friends. It also emphasises the excellence of Hume's character; indeed, Smith concluded the letter by declaring that his unbelieving friend approached 'as nearly to the idea of a perfectly wise and virtuous man, as perhaps the nature of human frailty will permit'.

Though relatively little-known today, in the 18th century Smith's letter caused an uproar. He later proclaimed that it 'brought upon me 10 times more abuse than the very violent attack I had made upon the whole commercial system of Great Britain' – meaning, of course, *The Wealth of Nations* (1776). Throughout his life, Smith had generally gone to great lengths to avoid revealing much about his religious beliefs – or lack thereof – and to steer clear of confrontations with the devout, but his claim that an avowed skeptic such as Hume was a model of wisdom and virtue 'gave very great offence' and 'shocked every sober Christian' (as a contemporary commented).

Boswell himself deemed Smith's letter a piece of 'daring effrontery' and an example of the 'poisonous productions with which this age is infested'. Accordingly, he beseeched Samuel Johnson to 'step forth' to 'knock Hume's and Smith's heads together and make vain and ostentatious infidelity exceedingly ridiculous. Would it not,' he pleaded, 'be worth your while to crush such noxious weeds in the moral garden?'

Nor did the controversy subside quickly. Nearly a century later, one prolific author of religious tomes, John Lowrie, was still sufficiently incensed by Smith's letter to proclaim that he knew 'no more lamentable evidence of the weakness and folly of irreligion and infidelity' in 'all the range of English literature'.

In the 18th century, the idea that it was possible for a skeptic to die well, without undue hopes or fears, clearly haunted many people, including Boswell, who tried to call on Hume twice more after their 7 July conversation in order to press him further, but was turned away. Today, of course, non-believers are still regarded with suspicion and even hatred in some circles, but many die every day with little notice or comment about their lack of faith. It takes a particularly audacious and outspoken form of non-belief – more akin to the Hume of Boswell's private interview than to the Hume of Smith's public letter – to arouse much in the way of shock or resentment, of the kind that attended the death of Christopher Hitchens some years ago. (Indeed, there were a number of comparisons drawn between Hitchens and Hume at the time.) The fact that in the 18th century Smith endured vigorous and lasting abuse for merely reporting his friend's calm and courageous end offers a stark reminder of just how far we have come in this regard.

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## **When Those Death Thoughts Intrude**

What Would the 16th Karmapa do?

*By Duncan Watterworth*

Some events in the last few months have got me thinking about death. My death. What should I do with that? I did read years ago that some Buddhists believe that thinking about death is a good thing. They even recommend loitering in graveyards. Surely a bit strange.



The groundwork for my deathly thoughts must have been laid by my years of twice-weekly visits to my mother, still ongoing, at the end of that long hall in Dearness Nursing Home. And perhaps my 65<sup>th</sup> birthday had something to do with it. And that pesky heart condition that is a gold mine for my travel medical insurance company. Whatever the reasons, the death thoughts began nibbling at my consciousness in the lead-up to my trip to India last fall. I had a twinge of apprehension about the trip. I joked that, if I died there, I fancied being cremated in the holy city of Varanasi, with my ashes released into the sacred Ganges River.

Before I left, I made attempts to “put my affairs in order”. My daughter was visibly impatient when I told her, once again, where the “important papers” are kept. I had a small life insurance policy I was going to cancel, but then decided to keep. I returned alive, of course, but then Leonard Cohen died. I mourned the writer of my epitaph, chosen long ago, always on standby:

*Like a bird on a wire,  
Like a drunk in a midnight choir,  
I have tried, in my way, to be free.*

And then there was an interment of some of the ashes of my brother-in-law John. This led to a discussion with Barb when we were walking the dog. I told her I’d like my ashes spread in the water along the north shore of Georgian Bay. My kayaking country. It was when I was reminding her of how she and Brooke would have to walk out the trail along the Chikanishing Creek, the only access point to the shoreline, that it got too real. I started to choke up.

With all this death stuff in my head, I went to my bookshelf for another look at “The Big Questions: A Buddhist’s Response to Life’s Most Challenging Mysteries” by American-born Lama Surya Das. Specifically, chapter eight on Death.

Now if you’re expecting strange, I can offer this: Das writes that his personal guru was the 16<sup>th</sup> Karmapa of the Karma Kagyu lineage of Tibetan Buddhism. That meant nothing to me before. But when I read it this time I was shocked. It meant that Das must have spent a lot of time at Rumtek Monastery in the Indian Himalayas, a compound that Barb and I visited last September. We even viewed the “relics” of the late 16th Karmapa, on display in the stupa at the back.

Anyhow, back to brooding about Death. For all the Big Questions, Das writes in the book’s introduction, “There are simply no definitive answers”. But he does recommend, in the Death chapter, to “take solitary, unhurried, contemplative walks in local cemeteries.” And he explains why.

“To avoid the subject ... leaves us wide open to unnecessary, often unconscious, fears and suffering.” He continues, “keeping death in the forefront of consciousness helps us to face the facts of life, such as impermanence and change. This helps us to let go a little, prioritize things ... experience reverence, gratitude and awe. Such awareness helps us to cherish life and value time, energy, and the inconceivable magic of aliveness itself.” Our culture tries to ignore death. Perhaps there is a better way.



## Is Death Really the End?

Because there is most likely no kind of afterlife, it does not necessarily mean that humans do not live on in some other way. Humans live on in the memories of their children and grandchildren. We also live on in the memories of loved ones and friends.

And those who contribute to the improvement of human well-being live on in name long after their death. Examples are medical scientists like Louis Pasteur and Jonas Salk. Scientists like Isaac Newton and Charles Darwin. Inventors like Thomas Edison and Alexander Graham Bell. And the list goes on. All we need to do is compare the way people live today with those who lived for hundreds of generations before the industrial revolution, in order to realize the contributions of countless outstanding creative individuals, famous and otherwise, who are no longer with us. And we must not forget the arts. Famous authors, poets, artists and musical composers also live on through their creative contributions, legacies that we all can enjoy. (DAH).

## How We Will Live On

*By R. J. (Bob) Thompson*

*Following up on the preceding article. I don't think anyone has expressed what we leave behind any better than R. J. (Bob) Thompson, the former co-editor of Progressions, the Journal of the Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity. Bob, a retired United Church minister, and his wife Winn became members of Humanist Canada in 2012. In May 2013 he was diagnosed with acute leukemia and received maintenance chemo-therapy injections which extended his life for four years. He passed away on May 1<sup>st</sup> 2017 at age 78. Below are Bob's reflective and profound thoughts on what his and our legacy can and will be, printed with his permission shortly after he wrote these words. (DAH).*

Let no one say that I have gone elsewhere, for....

- I remain in the genetic pool passed to me and through me.
- I remain in the memory of those affected enough to remember.
- I remain in the unique life story written with my intimates and confidants.
- I remain "in the voices of our children" but never again my own voice.
- I remain in the human histories of both my fore and after bearers.
- I remain in the long line of still evolving humanity.
- I remain in whatever of me was useful for research or anatomical training.
- I remain an earthling and I return to the soil.

Let no one say that death, though occasionally regrettable, is anything but natural.

- I do not believe my life is part of any "otherworldly" plan just a rivulet in life's great river.
- I do not believe my life story is the result of any intervention beyond this life itself.
- I do believe in a spiritual dimension of human evolution but no "theistic" Creator Spirit.
- I do believe my life came the way of all babes and my death the way all living things cease.

Let no one speak of deservedness for the setting or situation of life.

- To say "*it's more luck than good management*" reminds me of my good fortune.
- Of parents and sibling, chance gave me of the good ones.
- Of partner, I have rejoiced in gracious love, and fulsome acceptance.



Of offspring and grandchildren, I could not ask for better.  
Of in-laws and children's spouses, I liked them all.  
Of opportunities, I received many and missed few.  
Of citizenship, I am proud to be Canadian, to have served, been elected and volunteered.  
Of history, I benefited from its best and suffered little of its worst.  
Of vocation, it [my church] offered room, even when I grew beyond its [theological] traditions.

Let no one speak of ultimate truth or of superior faith.

"Remember all the best of our past moments and forget the rest" is indeed best advice.

I would that we [Christians] be known for our love, not for beliefs that can so hurtfully divide.

I regret that the golden rules of all faiths have been obscured by religious rhetoric.

I have often asked:

"What did the manner of this life teach?"

"What then did I learn about my living and my dying?"

Now when I have died, be not tied to me with tears, but thankful for our life and love filled years.

I gave to you my love; you can only guess how much you gave back in happiness.

I thank you for the love you've shown me, but it is now time to journey on without me.

So, grieve awhile, if grieve you must, but let your grief be comforted by trust.

We shall not meet again on some ethereal other side,

it was here and now we knew life, love and being.

The time has come for me to be remembered through you,

so bless the memories should you choose to do so;

I'll be as close as an example deemed worthy of following,

or one of my stories you think worth recycling. ~ Robert J. (Bob) Thompson

## **Addendum**

I began to put this compendium together in January 2020. As I was working on it, the world changed. By late January, it became known that an outbreak of a deadly virus was raging through the Chinese city of Wuhan, and was beginning to spread throughout the world.

This virus, COVID-19, is a threat to everyone, rich and poor alike. Some have suggested the virus is a wakeup call. They say that growing inequality, putting greed ahead of compassion, and putting money ahead of the well-being of all humans, is putting the world on a path to revolution or even the extinction of humanity. Will the pandemic cause a change in thinking and put compassion ahead of greed? Or is this too much to hope for. Only time will tell, but the opportunity to change for the better is here.

Coincident with the COVID-19 pandemic there has been the death of a black man, George Floyd at the hands of a white police officer in Minneapolis. This has sparked a world-wide protest under the banner of "Black Lives Matter," presenting an opportunity for improving race relations. Again, only time will tell if significant positive changes do occur. (DAH).



# **Appendix I**

## **Declaration of the Principles of Humanist Canada**

1. Humanism aims at the full development of every human being.
2. Humanists uphold the broadest application of democratic principles in all human relationships.
3. Humanists advocate the use of the scientific method, both as a guide to distinguish fact from fiction, and to help develop beneficial and creative uses of science and technology.
4. Humanists affirm the dignity of every person, and the right of the individual to maximum possible freedom compatible with the rights of others.
5. Humanists acknowledge human interdependence, the need for mutual respect, and the kinship of all humanity.
6. Humanists call for the continued improvement of society so that no one may be deprived of the basic necessities of life, and for institutions and conditions to provide every person with opportunities for developing their full potential.
7. Humanists support the development and extension of fundamental human freedoms, as expressed in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights and supplemented by UN International Covenants comprising the United Nations Bill of Human Rights.
8. Humanists advocate peaceful resolutions of conflicts between individuals, groups and nations.
9. The humanist ethic encourages development of the positive potentialities in human nature and approves conduct based on a sense of responsibility to oneself and to all other persons.
10. A fundamental principle of humanism is the rejection of beliefs held in absence of verifiable evidence, such as beliefs based solely on dogma, revelation, mysticism or appeals to the supernatural.
11. Humanists affirm that individual and social problems can only be resolved by means of human reason, intelligent effort, critical thinking joined with compassion, and a spirit of empathy for all living things.
12. Humanists affirm that human beings are completely a part of nature, and that our survival is dependent on a healthy planet which provides us and all other forms of life with a life-supporting environment.

Enlightenment web site – [www.humanists-london.org](http://www.humanists-london.org)

Humanist Canada web site – [www.humanistcanada.com](http://www.humanistcanada.com)