



# The Enlightenment



**The Newsletter of the  
Humanist Association of London and Area**

An Affiliate of the Humanist Association of Canada (HAC)

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## Baron d'Holbach – Philosopher, Author and Encyclopedist

Born Paul Heinrich Dietrich in Germany in 1723, Baron d'Holbach lived and worked mainly in Paris. He is most famous as being the first self-described atheist. As a young man he inherited two large fortunes and would remain wealthy for the rest of his life. For the *Encyclopedie* he authored a large number of articles on topics such as politics, religion, chemistry and mineralogy. He was better known, however, for his philosophical writings. These writings expressed a materialistic and atheistic position. In 1761 he published *Christianity Unveiled* in which he attacked Christianity and religion as counter to the moral advancement of humanity. This work was translated from French into English in 1819 by W.M. Johnson, who wrote the following Editor's Preface.



“In this philosophic age, when nature, reason, and the rights of man have resumed their empire; when the genius of a great, generous and brave people is giving the last blow to superstition and despotism, the publication of a work which has greatly contributed to these glorious events, must be highly acceptable, not only to the literary world, but even to the community at large, who eagerly seek after instruction, the moment they believe it necessary for their happiness. This publication bears a conspicuous rank among those works whose free and independent sentiments have introduced a happy change in public mind, and concurred with the writings of Rousseau, Malby, Raynal and Voltaire, in bringing forward the French Revolution: a revolution which will probably prove the harbinger of the triumph of reason. Persecutions and wars will then cease forever throughout the civilized world.”

After the Napoleonic wars, Europe did indeed enter a period of relative peace, but alas the hoped for triumph of reason expressed above, was dashed by the violent wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the threats of terrorism in the 21<sup>st</sup>. Barbarism, hatred, greed and ignorance still exist in a significant segment of humanity, and humanistic ideals have not yet prevailed.

As would be expected, Baron d'Holbach's writings were condemned by the Catholic Church and did not receive the attention they deserved. What a pity, because he was a true exponent of humanism as the following quote demonstrates: “If we go back to the beginning we shall find that ignorance and fear created the gods; that fancy, enthusiasm, or deceit adorned them; that credulity preserves them, that weakness worships them, and that custom, respect and tyranny support them, in order to make the blindness of men serve their own interest.” Baron d'Holbach died in 1789. *Christianity Unveiled* is well worth reading. Google Christianity Unveiled or go to: [www.ftarchives.net/holbach/unveiled/cucontents.htm](http://www.ftarchives.net/holbach/unveiled/cucontents.htm)

## President's Remarks

In the January Enlightenment it was with regret that we reported on the deaths of two of our long time members, Harold Koehler and Nancy Symonds. It is also with profound regret that we now must report the death of another long time faithful member, Dr. Murray Hoover, on January 13<sup>th</sup> 2008. A memorial funeral service was held on January 17<sup>th</sup> with the Reverend Jane Bramadat conducting the service. A short biography of Murray's eventful life is printed on page 3.

At the HALA Annual General Meeting held on January 10<sup>th</sup> the 2008 Board of Directors was elected by acclamation. The composition of the Board is shown below. We are pleased to have new member Dr. Rod Martin on the Board, and we are most grateful that Kate Balogh is now acting as our official Secretary. A review of the meetings held in 2007 revealed that we have had a most interesting variety of speakers followed by good discussions. The attendance at our meetings is growing steadily, so we can conclude that, thanks to our Program Committee of Bill Chefurka and Goldie Emerson, we are obtaining the kinds of quality speakers that our members find to be of interest. Until now we have concentrated mostly on holding quality meetings and have not become actively involved with very much outreach. HAC is currently surveying Local Associations in order to determine what kinds of outreach programs would be beneficial and help make humanism more visible in each community. We will await the results and conclusions of this survey and see what actions we might want to take. (DAH)

### The Board of the Humanist Association of London and Area (HALA)

President – Don Hatch – (519) 472-6167 – e-mail – [dahatch@rogers.com](mailto:dahatch@rogers.com)

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The Humanist Association of London and Area meets at the Cross Cultural Learner Centre, 505 Dundas Street in London, on the second Thursday of the months September to July inclusive at 7:30 PM. Please use the rear door off the parking lot. The Enlightenment is published quarterly in January, April, July and October.

Visit our web site at [www.humanists-london.org](http://www.humanists-london.org)

**New members are welcome.** Contact Membership Chairperson Ed Ashman at (519) 457-9982 [edward017@sympatico.ca](mailto:edward017@sympatico.ca) . Membership fees are listed below.

	<u>HAC</u> <u>Basic</u>	<u>HAC Limited</u> <u>Resources</u>	<u>Humanist</u> <u>Perspectives</u>	<u>HALA</u> <u>Basic</u>	<u>HALA Limited</u> <u>Resources</u>
Single	\$30	\$15	\$22	\$20	\$10
Family	\$35	\$20	\$22	\$25	\$15
Life	\$500				

## Dr. Murray Pearson Hoover

We were most saddened to learn of the death of long time HALA member Dr, Murray Hoover on January 13<sup>th</sup> 2008 at Parkwood Hospital in London after a short illness. He was 94 years old.

Murray graduated in Medicine from the University of Toronto in 1940 and immediately joined the British Medical Corps. He served in Madagascar, Kenya, India and Burma. After the war he moved to London, married Joan Scott and set up a family medical practice. Sadly, Joan passed away when their two daughters were quite young. Murray then very capably raised daughters Susan and Barbara on his own. In 1959 he joined the Addiction Research Foundation in London as Medical Director, a position from which he retired.

I first met Murray twenty years ago through our mutual interest in collecting antique radios, and I soon learned that he had many other interests. These included preservation of heritage properties, preservation of the environment, Habitat for Humanity, collecting books and records, choral singing, kite building, collecting crokinole boards, studying philosophy, and he had a keen interest in humanism. He was a long time member of the Unitarian Fellowship of London.

Often when I called on him at his large William Street residence he would be reading books on philosophy. This he was doing in preparation for the next session of the Plato Society, a small group that meets monthly in Grand Bend to discuss philosophical subjects. A few years ago he asked me if I would like to join this elite group and replace a member who had dropped out for health reasons. I was honoured to be asked and have since thoroughly enjoyed attending these meetings.

About six years ago he asked me to attend a meeting of the London Humanist group that at that time met monthly at the Unitarian Fellowship. Prior to then I had no idea what humanism was all about, but I liked what I saw and have been attending meetings ever since. The group has steadily grown and a few years ago became the Humanist Association of London and Area. I am greatly indebted to Murray for introducing me to humanism as well as to philosophy. Both activities have been immensely rewarding.

We have lost a most intellectual and likeable man who was known for coming up with witty one-liners and various aphorisms. These became known as "Hooverisms." He could quote many quatrains from the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam. One he often quoted was the following:

The Moving Finger writes; and having writ,  
Moves on: nor all thy Piety and Wit  
Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,  
Nor all thy Tears wash out a Word of it.

He was buried with a copy of the Rubaiyat in his hands.

The quote I heard him cite most often was one by Arthur C. Clarke: "The worst tragedy to befall humankind is the high-jacking of morality by religions."

How true. You can't be more humanistic than that. (DAH)

## Do Humanists Experience Wonder?

by Goldie Emerson

One of the frequent, but mistaken, perceptions of our non-humanist friends is that humanists lack emotional feelings such as joy, compassion, humour, awe, and wonder. They sometimes accuse humanists of lacking the ability to participate in the intangible experiences of wonder, which they label “spiritual.” For them, these spiritual experiences are expressed in traditional religious terms, as though spirituality and religion were interdependent and inseparable. Their view seems to be that if you are not a religious person you cannot experience the emotions of awe and wonder. Moreover, if you are not religious you will not even be a caring person. You will be without joy, hope, love and happiness. Even though this reasoning is fallacious, it is a matter of some concern to humanists. It becomes a barrier between humanists and non-humanists in understanding and communicating with each other.

When humanists use the term “wonder” as in the title above, they are referring to the natural world, which offers experiences of wonder and awe as well as excitement and joy in the present. Humanists have a vision of how a peaceful and environmentally healthy world might operate, and they have hope that people will make use of good sense, good values, and their ability to be rational in order to make positive things happen in the here and now. We are talking about improvements in our lifetime and not in a heavenly afterlife.

Religious friends sometimes ask me, “What gives you hope?” They seem to be asking how I can be hopeful about the thinking and actions of my fellow human beings when there is so much around us that is not right about the world. To be sure, it is not difficult to find examples of poverty, pollution, global warming, disease, war, hunger, and crime. But these unfortunate conditions have come about over the years, not by accident, but as a result of poor decisions made by humans. If these problems are ever to be solved, it must be through better decisions in the future. But in order for us to apply our best efforts to finding remedies, we need to have confidence that we human beings are capable of recognizing and implementing solutions.

So the question of hope for both humanists and non-humanists alike remains. I am convinced that, like my fellow humanists, I share in the joys and the concerns of the world, at least as readily as my religious friends. I feel as passionately and as deeply emotional about improving this world as do non-humanists. Why do I believe that I experience wonder and awe, as well as a sense of responsibility, at least to the same level as my religious counterparts? Here are but a few of the experiences that my fellow humanists and I share with non-humanists: joy at the birth of a baby; happiness at the sound of children playing in the first snows of winter; satisfaction in helping those in need; gratefulness when I receive an unexpected offer of help from a stranger; tears at the bedside of a dying friend; or wonder at the metamorphosis of a caterpillar turning into a beautiful butterfly. Like other humanists I feel the satisfaction of a job well done. I am thrilled by the music of Mozart, the nature paintings of Robert Bateman, the beauty of the Taj Mahal, and I am delighted by the colours and songs of the goldfinches and chickadees that come to our bird feeder. I am emotionally enriched by the gift of human love, and I am optimistic and hopeful when I hear political leaders talk of peace rather than war. A scientific discovery promising a cure for a medical problem or a new way of looking at the world gives me hope.

As a humanist, I do not often use the term “spiritual” to describe these feelings because the word seems to carry so much religious baggage with it. For example, my enthusiastically religious friends are prone to attributing the wonders I have mentioned to a God dwelling outside

of nature. I sometimes question whether giving the credit to God, regardless of the situation, may lessen their appreciation for the gifts of nature, the achievements of their fellow humans, and the role of luck, good or bad, in our lives. I question, too, whether their belief in the ever present power of God may encourage them to hand over the task of improving the world to this powerful entity.

I believe that humanists share the emotions of joy and wonder with all other humans, both religious and non-religious. We share these emotions, not because they flow from God, but because they are part of being human.

**Please Note** We encourage readers to respond, comment on, and express their views on any Enlightenment article.

## **Future Meetings**

**March 13<sup>th</sup>** The speaker will be Dr. Christopher Viger. Topic: Is Cognitive Science Undermining our Humanity? Dr. Viger will consider recent work in cognitive science and philosophy of mind, and ask how this might impact on our conception of ourselves as human beings. In particular he will discuss the nature of meaning in a physical world, consciousness and free will. Dr. Viger is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Philosophy at UWO.

Humanism and Religion. Our HALA member Dr. Rod Martin will discuss the nature and function of religion and will explore ways in which a natural theistic humanism might be able to address the spiritual needs that seem to be an essential aspect of human nature. He will argue that humanism offers a viable alternative to the dominant religions in the world today. Dr. Martin is a Professor of Clinical Psychology at UWO. Prior to studying psychology, he completed a bachelors degree in theology.

Meetings are held at the Cross Cultural Learner Centre, 505 Dundas Street, London on the second Thursday of every month except August, at 7:30 PM. Enter from the parking lot at the rear.

## **HALA Website**

Take a look at the HALA website at [www.humanists-london.org](http://www.humanists-london.org) It contains a declaration of Humanist Principles, notices of up-coming meetings, articles by our members (under Submissions) and many great quotes among other things. Some of these quotes are printed below.

“A man’s most valuable trait is a judicious sense of what not to believe.” Euripides.

“The whole problem with the world is that fools and fanatics are always so certain of themselves, and wiser people are full of doubts.” Bertrand Russell.

“We Americans have no commission from God to police the world.” Benjamin Harrison.

“Faith is believing something you know ain’t true.” Mark Twain.

## **Declaration of Humanist Principles**

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.

### **More Quotes**

“Those who can make you believe absurdities, can also make you commit atrocities.” Voltaire.

“I don’t believe in God because I don’t believe in Mother Goose.” Clarence Darrow.