



The Enlightenment



**The Newsletter of the
Humanist Association of London and Area**
An Affiliate of Humanist Canada (HC)

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Arthur Schopenhauer, German Philosopher 1788-1860

Arthur Schopenhauer was one of the greatest philosophers of the nineteenth century. He believed that human action is determined, not by reason, but by “will” – the blind and irrational desire for physical existence. He wrote on many subjects including religion, ethics, politics, women, suicide, books, law, aesthetics, homosexuality and psychology. His writings depict humanity as locked in a struggle between good and evil, with each individual absolutely free within a Godless world in which art, morality, and self-awareness are our only salvation. This innovative – and pessimistic – view has proved powerfully influential on philosophy and art, directly affecting the work of Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Wagner and Freud among others. In his early years, Nietzsche considered Schopenhauer to be his mentor and Carl Jung said, “Schopenhauer was the first to speak of the suffering, which visibly and glaringly surrounds us.” He was concerned not only with human suffering, but with that of animals as well.



Of special interest to humanists are Schopenhauer’s views on religion. He was well versed in oriental religions and spoke quite favourably about Buddhism, but was very critical of Judaism and Christianity. In particular he was concerned that young minds were being indoctrinated with religious untruths. He claimed that, “religious propositions are hammered into everyone’s head in his childhood so earnestly and so deeply and firmly that, unless it is of a miraculous degree of elasticity, it retains their impress forever, so that his capacity for thinking for himself and for making unprejudiced judgments – a capacity which is, in any case, far from strong – is once and for all paralyzed and ruined. The power of religious dogmas imprinted in early years is such that they are capable of stifling conscience, and finally, all pity and humanity.”

While Schopenhauer’s views on religion were ahead of his time, the same cannot be said of his condescending views about women. He stated that women are inferior to men, suited to being nurses and teachers of our earliest childhood, being childish themselves. He never married but had relations with many women. Nevertheless, despite his backward thoughts about women, he was very progressive on most other matters and studying Schopenhauer is a most interesting endeavour. (Much of the above information was obtained from the Penguin book, *Arthur Schopenhauer - Essays and Aphorisms*, translated by R.J. Hollingdale)

President's Remarks

We have three changes to report: The first is a change in the name of the national organization; the second is a change in the way membership fees are paid: the third is an increase in membership fees for the national organization.

Name Change "Humanist Canada" is now the name of the national organization replacing the old name, "Humanist Association of Canada." Check out their excellent new web site at www.humanistcanada.com

Membership Fee Payments In the past, members belonging to the national organization as well as a local association could pay both fees by sending the total to Ottawa. A portion was sent back to the local group. Fees are now separate. Anyone can be a member of either or both.

HALA Membership Fees. HALA membership fees have not increased for 2009 and are listed at the bottom of the page. For those who have not already paid their 2009 fee, a form to be sent to Membership Secretary Dave Mabee is included with this newsletter. Alternatively, fees may be paid at any of our regular meetings. It is not necessary to be a member of HALA to attend meetings or to receive copies of the Enlightenment, but all support will be appreciated.

Humanist Canada Membership Fees The new increased Humanist Canada membership fees are shown at the bottom of the page. A form for submitting these fees to Ottawa can be obtained from the Humanist Canada web site. (Address shown above)

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

President – Don Hatch – 472-6167 – e-mail – dahatch@rogers.com

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Member at Large –Dave Mabee – 697-6010 – e-mail – davemabee@rogers.com - Membership

Member at Large – Dr. André Lachance – e-mail – lachance@uwo.ca

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. Please note: We reserve the right to edit and publish articles at our discretion.

Visit our web site at www.humanists-london.org

New members are welcome. Contact Membership Secretary Dave Mabee at (519) 697-6010, e-mail davemabee@rogers.com Membership fees are listed below.

| | <u>HC</u> <u>Basic</u> | <u>Humanist</u> <u>Perspectives</u> | <u>HALA</u> <u>Basic</u> | <u>HALA Limited</u> <u>Resources</u> |
|--------|---------------------------|--|-----------------------------|---|
| Single | \$40 | \$22 | \$20 | \$10 |
| Family | \$50 | | \$25 | \$15 |
| Life | \$700 | | | |

Book Review

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)

The Default Position

By Goldwin Emerson

Are you a born atheist? Whether or not you consider yourself to be an atheist, the correct answer is probably "yes". That is, whether you now believe in God or you presently do not believe in God, it is likely that you were born an atheist. Here I am using Webster's New World Dictionary definition of an atheist as "someone who does not believe in God". In computer terminology, one could say that the *default* position regarding belief in God is that newborn babies are non-believers or atheists.

Having stated this initial position, I should hasten to add that, while we are born atheists, we are easily programmed to use readily accessible brain functions to receive many different theistic views. In the words of Robert Buckman in his book, *Can We Be Good Without God?*, it seems true that in a certain sense we are "hard-wired" for interpreting the world in religious terms. Unless we are particularly skeptical, our brains can be easily programmed to believe in many gods or in many views of one God.

In Charles Taylor's large tome, *A Secular Age*, Taylor is convinced that humans are searching for answers beyond their immediate grasp. Putting this idea in different words, we can say that people reach out into unknown and unknowable territory. We seek answers that go well beyond certainty and evidence. For Taylor, this search for certainty appears to be not only inevitable, but also a desirable part of the human condition. I might add that it is not only part of the human condition, but also part of human "conditioning."

Whether we accept Buckman's view or Taylor's, either position offers some answers as to why so many different religions exist. A quick search on Google indicates that counting both the

larger religions and the smaller ones, which some people regard as cults rather than full-blown religions, there are approximately four thousand three hundred religions at the present time. Why are there so many? Such a plethora of religions exists partly because of the nature of religions. For the most part, religious believers rely heavily on faith and are not bothered by the lack of evidence to support their views. Such an approach allows religions to exist and co-exist even in the face of many contrary views of other religious beliefs. This reliance on faith also allows for many contradictory opinions within each denomination.

Like many humanists, I have been involved from time to time in debates about whether or not a loving God actually exists and whether the theory of evolution is well-supported by scientific evidence. I am often struck by the irony that my opponents require so little evidence to bolster their position. On the other hand, the same opponents are persistent in their demands for evidence from me wherever they perceive a possible “gap” in the theory of evolution. I wish my debating opponents would be equally concerned about the lack of evidence for God or for the lack of evidence of an afterlife. It is difficult to maintain a rational discussion when my opponent uses “the power of faith” as a substitute for evidence.

Imagine for a few moments that an intelligent young woman (or man) in her or his early twenties has grown up in a society and culture where the idea of God has never been mentioned in her relatively short life. Because this young person has not been exposed to religion, she sets her moral compass in such a manner as to follow the customs of the society in which she was raised. At the age of twenty this same woman travels to a university somewhere in the Western world to begin to study how things are done outside her own society. On the first day of classes she encounters a seemingly friendly Christian who asks her if she has been saved. Her new-found friend tells her that she needs to accept Jesus in order to have everlasting life where she will be able to enjoy living eternally with the creator God and with Jesus his son. The young woman is understandingly a bit confused and skeptical about what she has just been told. She asks for more information about Jesus. In order to convince her, the Christian acquaintance is delighted to fill her in and begins by explaining that Jesus was born of a virgin. Jesus was able to turn water into wine, he calmed the stormy seas, and then was able to walk on the water. On some occasions Jesus was able to bring people who were dead back to life as he did on the occasion of his own death as well as that of others. Jesus was also able to heal people who were sick although he was rather selective in using this special miraculous power He restored sight to the blind. On another occasion Jesus fed multitudes of people by distributing a few loaves and a couple of fish that was sufficient to feed thousands of hungry people. The young woman is assured that nothing special is required of her even though she is told that she was born in sin. All she needs to do is believe what she has been told and she will be given the gift of everlasting life. She cannot bring herself, however, to believe all that she has just been told. It is all too mysterious and has been presented to her so abruptly that it seems incredible.

Herein lies an important lesson for Christian proselytizers. If they wish to be successful in converting others to Christianity they will need to begin much earlier. It will be crucial that they spread the stories of Jesus to very young children who have not yet acquired the skills of critical thought. In fact, if they are to be successful in converting others, their task will be much easier if they can find children who attend private Christian schools, where the stories of Jesus can be repeated often at a young age. It is Christians who believe that children are born atheists, and that’s the way they will grow up unless considerable effort is made to change what is natural to them. Ironically it is among such enthusiastic Christians that one finds support for the idea that we are all born atheists.

On the Buses

It all started in London England. Last summer British comedy writer Ariane Sherine saw a sign on a London bus proclaiming that only the followers of Jesus would be saved, and everyone else should be prepared for eternity in hell. Ariane was raised a Christian, but is now a non-believer. Reacting to the “Jesus” ads, she decided to organize a counter campaign of her own and asked for 5 pound donations (about \$9.00). She was astounded at the response and eventually raised 140,000 pounds. (Richard Dawkins coughed up 5,500 pounds) Now there are 800 buses across England carrying the sign THERE’S PROBABLY NO GOD. NOW STOP WORRYING AND ENJOY YOUR LIFE. Adamant atheists wanted to avoid the word “probably” but the advertising agency said the word probably is required by the British advertising regulatory body that insisted the slogan needed to acknowledge a “grey area,” with regard to the presence of the almighty. This softer approach is probably wise at this stage of the promotion.

The campaign has spread to Barcelona Spain, to Washington D.C. and now to Canada. The Freethought Association of Canada is sponsoring a similar program with the same wording on buses in Toronto and Calgary. An attempt was made to place ads on Ottawa and Halifax buses, but the bus companies turned them down. The American advertising agency that controls ads on the London Ontario Transit buses has also turned down the ads, claiming that they could cause vandalism. The Free Thought Association is considering an appeal, but they are also relying on free speech advocates to raise objections in those cities where the ads are banned. In London there have been Letters to the Editor deploring the fact that an American advertising company is deciding what should or should not appear on Canadian busses.

Humanist Canada is placing placards at Toronto bus and subway terminals proclaiming YOU CAN BE GOOD WITHOUT GOD. The United Church of Canada is planning cheeky counter-ads. Justin Trottier, president of the Freethought Association of Canada says he welcomes cheeky counter-ads because they will encourage dialogue and that’s what this is all about.

The London Memorial Society - We Still Exist

The London Memorial Society was started many years ago by members of the Unitarian Fellowship and others. Some people who joined years ago may not realize that this group still exists. Its mandate is to ensure that people know that they have choices in end-of-life decisions, to suggest that they pre-plan their arrangements, and to encourage dignity, simplicity and moderate cost in these arrangements.

The London Memorial Society was originally associated with a co-operative funeral home, also started by UFL members. That funeral home is called the Memorial Funeral Home, but although it retained the name, it is no longer a co-op. It is a now member of a chain of funeral homes and is not connected with the Memorial Society.

The Society has a kit that is available free of charge to members. Membership costs only \$20 and is a lifetime membership. Those who joined years ago may like to acquire one of these kits, which include a handbook with information about funeral/burial arrangements, pre-arrangement forms and a vital information record for next-of-kin. If you would like to become a member or, being already a member, would like to receive a kit, please call Amelia Wehlau who is our telephone volunteer (519 649 1014, afwehlau@astro.uwo.ca) or Reno Dehaan who is in charge of sending the kits (renodehaan@yahoo.com)

The London Memorial Society sends out an annual newsletter containing fascinating and sometimes controversial information. Every second year the newsletter includes an up-to-date price list from local funeral homes, transfer operators and cemeteries.

Notice of London Memorial Society Annual Meeting:

When: Earth Day, Apr. 22nd at 7:30 PM

Where: At Hospice of London, 837 Talbot St. (north of Oxford on the west side)

Note that free parking is available.

Speaker: Michael Salisbury of the Natural Burial Coop Based in Guelph.

Topic: Green Burial.

This meeting is open to the general public. We encourage you to come and learn more about this growing trend.

Future HALA Meetings

Darwin Lectures

The first two Darwin lectures were well attended and details of the next two are listed below. These lectures are being held in the Wolf Performance Hall at the main branch of the London Public Library at 251 Dundas Street in London at **7:00 p.m.**

Monday March 9th Speaker - Dr. Brian Alters – Professor at McGill and Harvard Universities.
Topic - Intelligent Design, Creationism and Biological Evolution.

Monday March 16th Speaker - Dr. Jerry Lieberman – President of the Humanists of Florida.
Topic - The Future of Evolution.

Regular Meetings

Thursday April 9th Speaker – David Winninger
Topic – “The Republic” Revisited: How Plato’s Legacy has Fared Under the Lens of Modern Political Philosophers as Seen From a Humanist Perspective.
David Winninger is a practicing lawyer and is currently serving his 3rd term as Councilor for Ward 11 in London. He is a former M.P.P. for South London in the Ontario Legislature.

Thursday May 14th Speaker - Dr. William Hopper
Topic – The work of Sir Isaac Newton.
Dr. Hopper is Professor Emeritus, Department of Philosophy at the University of Western Ontario.

Thursday June 11th Speaker – Dr. James Rinehart
Topic – Building the “Creative Economy”: An Assessment of Proposed Solutions to Ontario’s Economic Crisis.
Dr. Rinehart is Professor Emeritus, Department of Sociology, UWO, Specializing in labour studies.

All regular Thursday meetings are held at the Cross Cultural Learner Centre at 505 Dundas Street in London at 7:30 p.m.