



# The Enlightenment



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## The Curse of Religious Fundamentalism

While reading my daily newspaper a few weeks ago, I came across a picture of a man in northern Mali whose hand had been amputated because he was convicted of stealing. In the article accompanying the picture, there were reports of floggings for minor offences and suggestions that women accused of adultery were being stoned to death. More recently, a television newscast showed French forces entering Timbuktu and encountering another man who had his hand amputated for stealing, and in the same segment a woman who had been mercilessly flogged described her ordeal as so horrendous she wanted to die. And regrettably, these atrocious deeds are not confined to far away places. Recently in Canada, we were appalled at the honour killings that occurred in the Shafia family, and of course we were all stunned in disbelief as we watched the twin towers of the New York Trade Centre collapse on 9/11, 2001.

Why, in this supposedly enlightened twenty first century, are these barbaric acts carried out by Islamic religious fanatics and terrorists occurring? Are these atrocities the works of just a few radicals who have been brainwashed to proselytize and implement *sharia* law, or is there a more widespread undercurrent of Islamists who are hell-bent on establishing a Caliphate in as wide an area as possible? Unfortunately the reality portends toward the latter rather than the former. In an article in the Winter 2012/13 issue of *Humanist Perspectives* entitled *The Islamic Tipping Point*, author Tim Murray states, "Muslims are obliged to accept that the ultimate goal is the establishment of a universal Caliphate." And the Islamic militants in North Africa that have connections to Al-Qaeda have touted that their objective is to establish a Caliphate stretching from the Red Sea to the Atlantic.

In the *Humanist Perspectives* article mentioned above, Tim Murray describes how Muslims gradually build up their population in a given area until they reach a "Tipping Point" when they begin to demand special privileges such as their right to practise *sharia* law. This tipping point is considered to be as low as 7-8% of the population. France is already at this level and the problems in that country are continually in the news. But what about Canada, now at about 3%? Should we be concerned about increases in the Muslim population that are occurring in certain localities (GTA is at 5%)? Does this phenomenon pose any kind of threat to our freedoms?

Fortunately, in Canada we have a few moderate Muslims who are well aware of the realities existing in Canadian Muslim communities, and they have grave concerns about what is taking place while still remaining Muslims. Their anxieties are made known in the following pages.

## President's Remarks

In January we began the new year with a bang by putting on a debate at Western on the resolution that government funding of Roman Catholic schools be abolished. Arguing for the resolution was Justin Trottier, well-known author, speaker, and advocate of Humanism and secularism, while Patrick Dunne, past director of education of the London Catholic School Board, took the opposing view. The event, which was co-sponsored by the student Atheist and Agnostic Association, attracted a good number of UWO students, as well as members of the broader community, including quite a few teachers from both the Catholic and public school systems, as well as many of our HALA members. I'm particularly pleased that we had this opportunity to work together so successfully with the student group on campus, and I hope this will lead to more joint activities with them in the future. In addition, the debate was an excellent forum for increasing awareness of Humanism on campus and throughout London, and indeed we were very happy to welcome several new visitors to our February HALA meeting who had just learned about us at the debate. I'd like to thank all those who helped to make this event a success, particularly Jon Hore, who did much of the organizational work. In this issue of the *Enlightenment*, Don Hatch presents a very informative and well-researched discussion of fundamentalism – both Muslim and Christian – and the way it threatens the rights and freedoms that we enjoy in democratic Western societies. In addition, Goldie Emerson has a very thoughtful and sensible article on the possibility and necessity of finding ways for nations to resolve conflicts without resorting to war. As usual, the *Enlightenment* offers HALA members and friends some informative, provocative, and, yes, *enlightening* reading. ~ Rod Martin

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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 Wednesday of the months September to July inclusive at 7:30 p.m. Please use the rear door off the parking lot. *The Enlightenment*, edited by Don Hatch, 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](http://www.humanists-london.org)

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## Muslims in Canada

On June 2<sup>nd</sup> 2006, eighteen Muslim youth, members of an Al-Qaeda Islamic terrorist cell, were arrested in the Greater Toronto Area. They were accused of plotting to detonate truck bombs, to open fire in a crowded area, to storm the Canadian Broadcasting Centre, the Canadian Parliament buildings, the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) headquarters, to take hostages and behead the Prime Minister and other leaders. They were subsequently tried and sent to prison.

This incident raises alarm bells and causes one to wonder just how widespread are these kinds of activities in Canadian Muslim communities? We would hope that these jihadists are a very small minority and that the majority of Canadian Muslims are law-abiding citizens thankful and appreciative of living in a modern democracy. But what is the reality and how can we find out? Perhaps a start would be to look to those Muslims who declare themselves to be moderates and find out the nature of their concerns. I have heard talks by three of these moderates, Tarek Fatah, Raheel Raza and Salim Mansur, and their concerns are briefly outlined below. Then I recently discovered a book entitled *Unveiled: A Canadian Muslim Woman's Struggle Against Misogyny, Sharia and Jihad* by Farzana Hassan. Some of her revealing thoughts on Islam are also presented below.



**Tarek Fatah**

Tarek Fatah is a Canadian writer, broadcaster and a secular Muslim anti-Islamic activist. He was the speaker at the HALA Wolf Hall event in the spring of 2012. He is the author of *Chasing a Mirage: The Tragic Illusions of an Islamic State*. He suggests that the idea of an Islamic state is merely a mirage that Muslims have been made to chase for over a millennium. He is the founder of the Muslim Canadian Congress, which because of its liberal agenda, is not supported by many of the more conservative mainstream Muslims. Fatah advocates gay rights, a separation of church and state, opposition to *sharia* law, and is an advocate for a “liberal progressive form” of Islam. His approach has generated considerable criticism from various Canadian Muslim groups that do not share his views.



**Raheel Raza**

She is the author of *Their Jihad, Not My Jihad: a Muslim Canadian Woman Speaks Out*. She opposes terrorism committed in the name of Islam and is particularly outspoken on inequality toward Muslim women. She is against segregated prayer as well as prayer in schools and opposes veiled clothing for women, including the burka and niqab. She speaks out vehemently against honour killing and *sharia* law, stating that it is degrading for women. I listened intently as she expressed her liberal views very convincing in the spring of 2012 at Wesley-Knox United Church in London.

Both of these individuals have received death threats for their criticisms of conservative Islam, but they have elected to keep their Muslim faith in the hope that their efforts will eventually result in beneficial reform. Another person who has received death threats is London Political Science professor Salim Mansur, and he is next on our list of Muslim critics.



**Salim Mansur**

Salim Mansur is an Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Western Ontario. He is a columnist in *The London Free Press* and the *Toronto Sun*. Mansur, a Sunni Muslim, was ostracized after writing columns condemning the Taliban and comparing it to the Khmer Rouge of Cambodia. This severe backlash prompted him to stop going to his local mosque. He stated, "Islam is my private life, my conscience, but my faith does not take precedence over my duties to Canada and its constitution, which I embrace freely. I am first and foremost a Canadian; only in a free society will you find Islam as a faith and not a political religion." Mansur is perhaps best known for his criticism of multiculturalism as it exists in Canada. In his recent book, *Delectable Lie: a liberal repudiation of multiculturalism*, he warns that allowing immigrants to import cultures that do not correspond to Canadian values is very dangerous and can lead to demands by conservative Muslims to incorporate *sharia* law into our society. As we all know, there was an attempt to impose *sharia* law into Muslim communities in Ontario in 2005. This demand was fortunately turned down by Premier Dalton McGuinty, but there could well be further attempts to bring this about. In October of 2012, Salim Mansur spoke at a meeting of the Humanist Association of London and Area, and very forcibly warned that if Canada is to remain a liberal (small l) democracy, it needs to rethink its policy on multiculturalism and shun cultures that do not adhere to Canadian values.



**Farzana Hassan**

Farzana Hassan's book *Unveiled* documents a Canadian Muslim woman's struggle against misogyny, *sharia* and *jihad*. It is the testimony of her personal struggle to oppose radicalism and misogyny within her faith community. She challenges the ideas that breed such pathologies among some of Islam's adherents and denounces not just terrorism itself, but also excuses for it. She investigates specific reasons behind the prevalent anti-western sentiment among Muslims and attempts to dispel some of their misconceptions. She also speaks out against brutal honour killings and takes an honest look at political Islam's pernicious symbols such as the burka and niqab. The book is an earnest cry for reform within Islam and for all Muslims to reconcile their faith with life in Canada today. The foreword to the book is by her good friend Tarek Fatah. His concluding sentences are: "If the book upsets you, then good, Farzana Hassan has done her job and the book has played its part in making one think and question. Imagine if only a few more Muslims would question, instead of parroting solutions offered in medieval times. Imagine."

Farzana was born into a well-to-do family in Lahore Pakistan. Her paternal grandfather obtained a law degree in England and married an English woman, making Farzana in fact one quarter English. In 1970 she moved to Fall River Massachusetts with her family and attended a Catholic convent school as she had also done in Lahore. She later obtained an MBA at the University of Massachusetts. After marriage she moved to Canada. She has two sons and a daughter. Initially the sons were enrolled in ISNA, Canada's Islamic school where they would come home reciting verses from the Quran. This prompted her to study the Quran herself and she became aware of the ambiguities and contradictions in the Quran and the hadiths. She noted that the earlier Mecca verses of the Quran were much more liberal than the later harsher Medina verses. She began to be troubled in learning that children in the Islamic school were being forced to observe gender differences at a young age and eventually she removed her children from the ISNA school, and enrolled them in the public system where diversity was prized rather than being shunned, and children were chided gently rather than having their ears pulled.

Along the way she became friends with other liberal Muslims including Tarek Fatah and Raheel Raza, and for a time she was president of the Muslim Canadian Congress. She also acted briefly as director of religious education for the Unitarian Congregation in Mississauga. And recently she obtained a doctorate in Education from the University of Phoenix.

The preceding gives only a smattering of the contents of *Unveiled*, and it must be read in its entirety (it is only 143 pages long) to grasp the clear thinking and warnings of this perceptive and intelligent author. In summing up, a few comments from the last two chapters of *Unveiled* are in order. Farzana states, “as a liberal and reform-minded Muslim, I am deeply concerned over the dents in Canada’s liberal democracy. I believe it risks being greatly compromised by Islamist influences, due to an influx of Muslim immigrants from conservative backgrounds. Unfortunately, many Muslims, whether actively religious or not, believe that Islam will eventually prevail over all other worldviews and that the state must be based on *sharia* law as an acknowledgement of God’s sovereignty on earth.” But despite these warnings, Farzana ends on a hopeful note. “Islam is what it is. But can it be moderated? I believe it can. In the end I urge all Muslims, fundamentalist and liberal, to think long and hard about these issues. It is now time to shun bigotry and obscurantism to enable a better future for all. I also urge Muslims to embrace Canadian values of equality, pluralism and dignity for all human beings. They must discard their anti-Western sentiment. They have chosen Canada as their home and they owe allegiance to it.”

Now unlike the well known Somali native Ayaan Hersi Ali, who has left Islam behind and proclaimed that she is an avowed atheist and an apostate, the four Canadians mentioned above have elected to remain in the Muslim fold, believing they must try to convince fellow Muslims that it is time for reform. Time to leave archaic beliefs and customs behind and move into the twenty-first century. As Farzana says in her book, it is time to call a spade a spade. But what are the chances of success? Are these liberal Muslims naïve in thinking that significant change for the better is possible?

The reality of course is that the task is horrendously difficult. The majority of Muslims that have been indoctrinated with Islamic fundamentalist beliefs and hatreds are not likely to be convinced to change their minds any time soon. This is the curse of religious fundamentalism. Perhaps the only hope is with the Muslim youth, who now, through social media, have the opportunity to observe how life can be lived in a secular liberal democracy. It was the young people who played a significant role in the “Arab spring” in North Africa, but unfortunately they were not a cohesive enough group with credible leaders who could prevent the likes of the Muslim Brotherhood from seizing power and attempting to establish theocratic, undemocratic States.

Getting back to Canada, Canadian Muslim youth already know what life is like in a liberal democracy and some, like the three murdered Shafia girls, wanted to reject many of the antiquated Islamic practices and live like the majority of Canadians. So maybe Canadian liberal Muslims, who wish to bring about reform, should concentrate on the youth within their ranks and convince them that it is time to abandon archaic *sharia* practices that emphasize, among other things, the superiority of males, and proclaim that *jihad*, hatred toward the West and the proselytizing of Islam have no place in the modern world. By pointing out that Muslims deserve something better than *sharia*, and pointing out the spuriousness of religious fundamentalism, perhaps the desired reforms can occur, at least in Canada. But at the same time, we must continue to be aware of the opposition that conservative Muslims will mount against reform.

## **Christian Religious Fundamentalism**

While Christian religious fundamentalism is less insidious than that of Islam, Christian fundamentalism can be harmful as well, and nowhere is this more evident than in the United States. In that country, opinion polls reveal that up to 44% of Americans deny that humans evolved from other animals, and believe that all forms of life were created by God within the last 10,000 years. This alarming statistic causes one to wonder why this high level of belief in creationism exists in the United States, but not in other western democratic countries. One reason has to be the substantial influence of the so-called "Christian Right."

The Christian right has been a notable force in both the Republican Party and American politics since the late 1970s, when Baptist pastor Jerry Falwell and other Christian leaders began to urge conservative Christians to involve themselves in the political process. After Falwell formed his Moral Majority organization, other groups including Pat Robertson's Christian Coalition and his Christian Broadcasting Network, as well as James Dobson's Focus on the Family, came into being. It is the aim of these and other like-minded institutions to promote their agendas through gaining political influence at election time. Their agendas include opposing abortion, gay rights, the teaching of evolution in schools, and even getting involved in issues such as health care and the economy.

Much of the Christian right's power within the American political system is attributed to their grass roots activism and their extraordinary turnout at the polls. These voters are highly motivated and willing to do the electoral work needed to see their candidate elected. Because of their high level of devotion, they do not require monetary compensation for their efforts. The success of their endeavours can be illustrated by George W. Bush's electoral victories. White evangelical voters comprise just 23% of the vote, in 2000 68% of these people voted for Bush. That percentage rose to 78% in 2004. Without the support of the Christian right, the born again Bush would not have been elected and the American people could have been spared the gargantuan expense of the Iraq war and many lives would have been saved.

A topic of particular interest to humanists is the teaching of evolution in school science classes. The Christian right does not support this and is attempting to insist that teaching creationism and Intelligent Design should be taught along side evolution in order that students can form their own conclusions. The Discovery Institute of Seattle, through their Intelligent Design initiative called *Center for Science and Culture*, has tried to foster this dual approach, which was fortunately recently turned down by Judge John E. Jones III in *Kitzmiller v. Dover Pennsylvania Area School Board*. Nevertheless, the well-financed Discovery Institute will keep trying to further their agenda under their guise as a scientific organization.

The foregoing, I believe, sufficiently illustrates the dangers that exist when religious fundamentalists of all stripes obtain political clout. The frustrating aspect is that monotheistic religions are based on a fallacy that a supreme supernatural being, able to influence events on earth and command respect and worship, does in fact exist. And furthermore, this supreme being sent two prophets, Jesus of Nazareth and Muhammad, to tell their followers how to live and even, in some cases, kill those who do not believe their questionable teachings. Somehow, humanists, freethinkers, and other secularists need to find effective ways of blunting the swords of all fundamentalist movements, and cause them to gradually fade away.

## The Path to a World Without War is Possible

*By Goldwin Emerson*

When asked if wars are inevitable many people say, "Yes, we've always had wars and we always will." Unfortunately, a "yes" answer to this question may be a self-fulfilling prophesy. As long as we fail to have an ethical vision of how we can get along without wars, they are likely to remain as one of our ways of attempting to "settle" disputes.

If we can imagine other means of resolving disputes, we can consider new avenues of thought and new hopes for a peaceful future. An enlarged perspective and flexibility can play important roles in eliminating many of the conflicts that in the past led to war.

Let us begin by restoring confidence in international organizations such as the United Nations. In the past thirty years, faith in the UN has been replaced by trust in military alliances such as the North American Treaty Organization (NATO) or smaller partnerships that work for the welfare of a few powerful trading nations such as those within the G8 or G20 group. These organizations are more likely to be concerned with trade, security, military strength, and economic advantage for the comparatively few nations involved than searching for a global vision that includes the welfare of the whole planet. War or extraordinary preparations for war overwhelm considerations for the environment, global warming, decreasing arable land, starvation, loss of species, pollution of our oceans, diminishing forests, scarcity of water, poor air quality, and decreased natural resources.

Religion can, and often does, play influential roles in bringing ethical perspectives to global disputes. In the best cases, moral principles of justice, fairness, and equity, are presented by enlightened leaders. Unfortunately, the best efforts of religion are sometimes diminished by internal disputes and divisions. Many wars have arisen from narrow theological perspectives and inter-religious conflict, not only throughout history, but in modern times.

Military forces sometimes play a mixed role, especially in the past. But the countries most likely to start a war are those who see themselves most likely to win a war. Smaller, poorly equipped countries are less likely to start wars even though their grievances may be greater because of hunger, lack of health care, scarcity of jobs, and fewer resources.

Ideally, political leaders should act as statesmen. Doing so enables them to envision peaceful solutions. Yet, there is much about politics that makes it a competitive enterprise. This is just as true for the aggressive side of capitalist systems as for communist systems. Each system works most effectively in its own interests when the economy is growing, when resources are plentiful, when citizens are proud of the successes of their own country, and when people experience patriotism sometimes resulting in feelings of superiority over citizens of other countries. While their own approach may appear to be working well, at least for the leaders of each political system, unfortunately it does not promote peace and understanding among nations.

The more we think of world disputes, the more the need for sound ethical principles becomes evident. To solve big problems we need to think more clearly about the needs of others. *Doctors Without Borders*, an organization that cares about global health, reports that approximately one-seventh of the world's population is starving. This is a huge problem. Its solution begins with the ethical principles of caring and sharing.

If developing countries need nuclear power for energy and medical research, asking for our cooperation seems to be a fair request. It is also a request that the co-operation of under-developed nations can support. The ethical principle of trust in our fellow humans could occur much easier if international inspection teams have access to all countries, including those of the more powerful nuclear nations.

The first step to learning to live without wars is to believe that this goal is possible. To believe that, we need an ethical vision of how the world might function at its best. That vision can begin through promoting ethical principles of truth, justice, compassion, sharing, and equity. In the words of President Obama, "War is never glorious. It's a manifestation of human folly." Peaceful solutions to international human-made problems are surely not beyond the intelligence of humankind.

### **Debate on Public Funding of Catholic Schools**

On January 24<sup>th</sup>, 2013, the Humanist Association of London and Area and the UWO student Atheist and Agnostics Association sponsored a debate held at the Health Sciences Building at the University of Western Ontario. The topic: **That Government Funding for Roman Catholic Schools be Abolished**. Debating on the pro side was Justin Trottier, Skeptic, Secularist and Media Personality from the Centre for Inquiry. On the con side was Patrick Dunne, Professor, Kings College, Past Director of Education for the London Catholic School Board. The event was considered to be a success with about 250 people in attendance. Although a winner was not officially declared, the consensus was (at least among the pro side) that Justin out-pointed Patrick Dunne.



**HALA President Rod Martin, Debater Justin Trottier and Debate Organizer Jon Hore**