



The Enlightenment



The Newsletter of the
Humanist Association of London and Area

(An Affiliate of the Humanist Association of Canada)

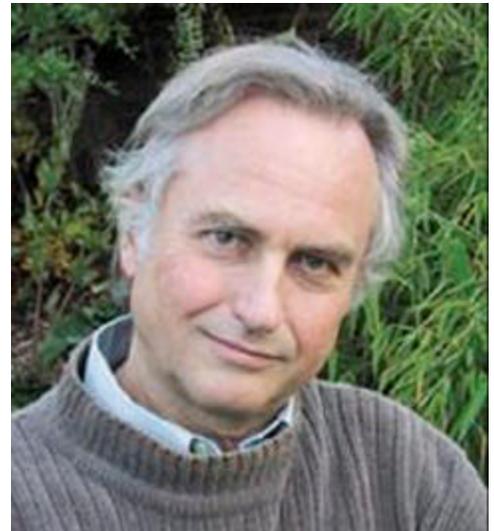
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Richard Dawkins – Evolutionary Biologist, Ethnologist and Author

Richard Dawkins DSc, FRS, FRSL was born on March 26th, 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.



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 11th 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*, will appear in September 2006.

President's Remarks

First I want to express my appreciation to the HALA Board and to Web Master John Pope for handling meetings in May, June and July, during my absence while recovering from a heart attack that occurred in late April. I expect to be back taking part in activities in September. For the first time meetings were held in June and July, and Derek Kaill and John Pope will give a report on the Vancouver HAC Convention on Thursday August 10th.

In the past, humanists have been active and vocal on causes such as women's right to choose, euthanasia, prohibiting the teaching of creationism in science classes and other important topics. Now we face a new threat in the form of radical religious fundamentalism of all stripes. This concern is the subject of an article entitled, "Why Is It Taking So Long?" in this issue of The Enlightenment. Members are invited to offer their own ideas on how to combat this threat.

Best Regards, Don.

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The Humanist Association of London and Area meets at Cross Cultural Learning Centre, 505 Dundas Street in London, on the second Thursday of the month at 7:30 PM. Please use the rear door off the parking lot. The Enlightenment is published quarterly in February, May, August and November.

Visit our web site at www.Popamoto.net/Humanist/Humanists.html Our Web Master is John Pope, jpope@wwdc.com

New members are welcome. Contact Membership Secretary Ed Ashman at (519) 457-9982 or 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				

Editorials

Three Not So Little Words

It is not likely that there are many individuals that detest humanists more than the TV evangelists who often proclaim that *secular* humanists are *atheistic* agents of the devil. Furthermore, they claim that humanists lack any sense of *spirituality* and are out to destroy the moral and ethical fabric of society.

Now we humanists know that nothing could be further from the truth. Humanists are actually *worldly non-theists or agnostics*, guided by principles of rational thought, scientific inquiry, responsibility, compassion, fairness and equality. We are also emotional beings possessing profound feelings of *a we and wonder* at the natural environment of which we are all a part.

It will be noted in the paragraph above that the three words *secular*, *atheist* and *spirituality*, have been substituted by *worldly, non-theists or agnostics* and *awe and wonder*, respectively. This may be merely a matter of semantics, but *worldly* and *non-theists and agnostics* have, I think, a better ring to them, and do not have as negative a connotation as *secular* and *atheist* in the minds of the general public. Also substituting *awe and wonder* in place of *spirituality*, eliminates the possible association of *spirituality* with religion. Another possible substitute for *atheist* suggested by Paul Kurtz is, “*a skeptic about religious claims.*” Kurtz states that this term, which I like, is more appropriate than *atheist* because it emphasizes inquiry.

Perhaps more use of these alternative words and phrases could help improve the image of humanists in the public domain.

Humanist by Choice

Humanist Tony Hewitt of Grand Bend has suggested that “Humanist by Choice” would be a good motto for all humanists, and this suggestion certainly merits some consideration.

For those people fortunate enough to be reared in a humanist home, the choice would be fairly straight-forward. They would examine the alternatives and most likely choose to adhere to humanist principles and possibly join a humanist organization.

For those of us raised in a religious home, the situation is more complicated. If we have doubts, we must make a choice between the religion of our parents and some plausible alternative such as humanism. This will not likely happen overnight. A gradual doubting of the articles of faith, as expressed in the Apostle’s Creed and elsewhere, will possibly occur and cause a person to investigate alternatives. But what are the chances of discovering humanism as an alternative when it is hardly known in the public sphere? In my own case, discovering humanism was almost accidental. A few years ago I became acquainted with a member of the Unitarian Fellowship of London, and out of the blue he invited me to a humanist meeting held at the Fellowship. I was impressed with the humanist philosophy and principles devoid of the supernatural and subsequently became a member of the local group. I also joined the Humanist Association of Canada. In other words, I became a “Humanist by Choice.” To help more people who may be doubting the imposed tenets of their religion, humanists face a daunting challenge in making humanism more visible in our society so that these doubters will be aware of us and may well wish to become “Humanists by Choice.”

Some Humanist Thoughts About Morality

By Goldie Emerson

Morality is a system of conduct and beliefs designed to guide people in the customs, taboos, and mores of society. While the moral codes of one society may differ from those of another, there is considerable overlap in the moral ideals of most societies. For example, compassion, care, trustworthiness, and honesty are common moral values, while murder, deceit, greediness, and violence are moral taboos in most societies.

Many philosophers and moral thinkers use the terms morality and ethics almost interchangeably. For those who use the terms differently, moral principles arise from the everyday working out of situations which result in harmony within a society. For example, honesty is good because it works out best.. On the other hand, ethics takes a slightly more cerebral approach in determining which principles are the best ones to follow. Ethics attempts to seek out universal principles such as truth, justice, and equality, while morals are more concerned with codes and rules which result in an harmonious society. Thus the ethical principles of Aristotle differ in their emphasis from the moral imperatives of Immanuel Kant. However, in the end, these differences are more matters of approach than of substance.

Kant's moral system emphasizes duty, responsibility, and obligation, a view that ties in well with the moral codes of traditional religions, which also emphasize duties, guilt, sanctions and rewards. Religious believers, rather than concentrating on a strictly cerebral quest for high ethical principles, are often encouraged to look to God through scriptures or prayers to guide them in finding good morals. Kant's secular "categorical imperative" directed people to act in such a manner that their actions could become universal moral principles. His philosophy closely parallels the "golden rule" which can be found within the world's major religions.

A secular view of morals can be found in philosophies such as Utilitarianism, Pragmatism and Humanism. The goal of these three philosophies is to bring about the greatest harmony, the greatest happiness, or the greatest good for society. The emphasis here is to arrive at good morals by observing and practising those actions which will result in a benefit to society. Humanists believe that, while sacred scriptures can guide people in moral principles, these scriptures can also sometimes be divisive and destructive as is the case when justifying holy wars, rejection of blood transfusions in saving lives, or the belief that God favours one religious or ethnic group over another. So while sacred scriptures are a guide to moral behaviour, we need also to be aware that too literal or too narrow an interpretation of scriptures can actually result in immoral behaviour.

One of the great gifts we have as human beings is our ability to reflect upon our own human condition and to use our freedom to make choices about our actions. The wise use of freedom also carries responsibilities which we share with others. Humanists take this moral responsibility conscientiously. We have a moral obligation to consider how our actions and choices affect the planet and humankind. For Humanists, such problems as global warming, pollution, poverty, starvation, homelessness, and the spread of HIV are moral problems that can be understood and addressed through scientific knowledge and a caring attitude towards people of all races and religions. A good start in following humanist moral principles is the recognition that the problems others have are also our problems. We are all in this together.

Why Is It Taking So Long?

By Don Hatch

In 1934, philosopher and educator John Dewey published a small volume entitled, *A Common Faith*. In this book he outlined the fallacies of religions centered on faith in a supernatural deity and proposed an alternative based essentially on humanist principles. In 2004, philosopher and neuroscientist Sam Harris published his best seller, *The End of Faith*, pointing out the fallacies of religions centered on faith in supernatural deities. Like Dewey, Harris also proposes an alternative based essentially on humanist principles. This raises the question, why during the last seventy years, has the humanist movement not been a more significant factor in helping to improve conditions in our troubled world? Why is humanism not more prominent on the radar screen of the general public? Thus it would seem appropriate to examine Dewey's proposals and attempt to determine why they have been largely ignored by most, and also examine Harris' proposals for changes and speculate as to whether or not there is any likelihood of them producing meaningful beneficial results.

The first chapter of *A Common Faith* is entitled, "Religion Versus the Religious," wherein Dewey attempts to make a case for a distinct separation between the two. He quotes the following definition of religion - "recognition on the part of man of some unseen higher power as having control of his destiny and as being entitled to obedience, reverence and worship." He goes on to emphasize the dominance of the supernatural in religions and points out the reality of the very significant differences in the various denominations of Christianity, concluding that none of them is worthy of consideration as a universal religion. All of them should be abandoned therefore, and replaced with something better, something entirely devoid of the supernatural.

Dewey's hypothesis is that a person can be religious without the baggage of a religion because "religion stands in the way of an effective realization of the sweep and depth of natural human relations." He rejects aggressive and militant atheism as lacking in emotion and what he calls "natural piety." He also rejects agnosticism as, "a shadow cast by the eclipse of the supernatural, being only a half way elimination of the supernatural. What he advocates instead is a celebration of the store of human values that are prized and cherished by traditional religions, including a passionate intelligence for values such as honesty, love and compassion, but minus concepts such as redemption, atonement, creeds, dogmas, rites and belief in a supernatural deity. In other words, he proposes a religious way of living, practicing something akin to the principles of humanist organizations.

Strangely enough, Dewey sees the long-term continuation of churches, though operating in a non-traditional way, by abandoning the supernatural aspects, rites and dogmas. He suggests churches should turn away from issues such as drunkenness and divorce and actually deal with challenges such as the prevention of wars, political injustice and oppression.

On reflection, it is really not surprising that Dewey's idea of using churches as a tool for promoting his theories never caught on, because the concepts of a supernatural deity, along with the traditional rites and ceremonies, are so entrenched that very few Christian churches would consider abandoning them. It really falls to humanist organizations and others like them to undertake the task, but unfortunately these kinds of organizations have not been all that successful and have been of little influence in the big picture.

The premise of Sam Harris's *The End of Faith* is similar to John Dewey's *A Common Faith*. Blind, unconditional faith in supernatural deities is causing no end of problems in our troubled world, or as Harris bluntly puts it, "Our enemy is nothing short of faith itself." While Dewey dealt only with faith in the Christian God, Harris is forced to deal with Islam and, to a lesser extent with Judaism. He goes out of his way to emphasize the seriousness of Islamic fundamentalism, with five pages of the chapter on Islam devoted to passages from the Qur'an that encourage violence and death for the infidels. He maintains the problems caused by Islamic fundamentalists are so serious that, "the west must either win the argument or win the war. All else will be bondage."

In the last chapter entitled Epilogue, Harris sums up his thoughts and conclusions with a few pithy statements, some of which are printed below.

"Religious faith is the one species of human ignorance that will not admit of even the possibility of correction; it is sheltered from criticism in every corner of our culture."

"Faith leaves otherwise well intentioned people incapable of thinking rationally about many of their deepest concerns; at worst it is a continuous source of human violence.'

"Many people are eager to sacrifice happiness, compassion and justice in this world for a fantasy of a world to come."

"It is obvious that an utter revolution in our thinking could be accomplished in a single generation if parents and teachers would merely give honest answers to the questions of every child. This is an absolute necessity because there is no reason whatsoever to think we can survive our religious differences forever."

"If religious wars are ever to become unthinkable for us, it will be a matter of dispensing with the dogma of faith."

"The God of Abraham is not only unworthy of the immensity of creation: he is even unworthy of man."

"The only angels we need invoke are those of our better nature: reason, honesty and love. The only demons we must fear are those that lurk inside every human mind: ignorance, hatred, greed, and faith, which is surely the devil's masterpiece."

"No personal God need be worshipped for us to live in awe of the beauty and immensity of creation."

The last two sentences of the book are – "The days of our religious identities are clearly numbered. Whether the days of civilization itself are numbered would seem to depend, rather too much, on how soon we realize this."

I think it can be safely stated that a great deal of Harris's thinking is closely allied to humanist principles and we are now faced with the important question, how can humanists play a significant and meaningful role in employing humanism to help relieve some of the world's problems, many of which are caused by religious differences and blind faith?

Sam Harris is now a contributor of articles to the Free Inquiry magazine published by the Council for Secular Humanism, and he was also a participant in the Towards a New Enlightenment conference held in Amherst New York in the autumn of 2005. There were some excellent papers delivered at this event by keynote speaker Richard Dawkins and others, and also some that were of less interest. As Sam Harris and journalist Susan Jacoby remarked, a great deal of the proceedings were preaching to the converted or preaching to the choir. Attempts were made in panel discussions to formulate modes of action that might bring about beneficial changes, but nothing of much significance resulted. There was, however, a considerable amount of "Bush bashing." The conference was covered by the Buffalo media, but apparently not by the national media, and this is very disappointing.

Determining and deciding on practical actions that humanist organizations can engage in to bring about desired beneficial changes on the world stage is a daunting challenge, and this is obviously "why it is taking so long." I think humanists need to pay more attention to the observations of Sam Harris and Susan Jacoby, mentioned above, that too much time is spent preaching to the converted. Since a significant proportion of humanists are well-educated academics and other professionals, it is not surprising that humanist articles and papers are directed mainly to other humanists rather than to the general public. Very little humanist material reaches the audiences that watch prime time television. There has to be, however, people in this group who do not accept the spurious messages of the TV evangelists and are looking for something more plausible and credible. So how can they be reached and convinced that humanism has something good to offer and that can help improve society?

Perhaps humanists should be looking at the successes of other organizations and determining if there are lessons to be learned. For instance, every weekend in Huston Texas, pastor Joel Osteen preaches to over 30,000 people at several services in a former basketball arena seating 16,000 people. The crowd at the half-hour TV broadcast appears to be a balanced mixture of white and black well-dressed middle class people. How does he do it? His beliefs and messages are the same as any Pentecostal or evangelical or fundamentalist preacher. The Bible is the divine word of God; Jesus atoned for the sins of believers, who can expect rewards in an idyllic heaven after death. So how does he attract such large crowds when many other churches are struggling? It is because he is a convincing, superb orator delivering an uncomplicated message, telling people in a straightforward manner how they can improve their lives. Don't look back: God wants you to look ahead. He will give you a new beginning if you will just have faith in Him. Intermixed in the message is a lot of just plain common sense advice on how to live a happy life. Osteen's style is reminiscent of a motivational speaker at a business conference. There is a lot of emphasis on the power of positive thinking, and the congregation just laps it up.

What can humanists learn from this? I think humanists need to find a charismatic credible well-known orator who is visible in the media, delivering a convincing message based on Christopher Hitchens dictum, "what can be asserted without evidence can be dismissed without evidence." There needs to be a public dialog challenging traditional religious beliefs while suggesting and promoting better alternatives. What better alternative for promoting world peace than humanism? Humanists are sitting on a gold mine, but have not learned how to extract the gold and put it to good use for the benefit of our threatened civilization. True, humanists have been active and vocal while supporting causes such as women's right to choose, same sex marriage, euthanasia, and opposition to Sharia law, but have not been effective in challenging all stripes of religious fundamentalism. This was the main thrust of the Towards a New Enlightenment conference, but there was, as already mentioned, no exposure in the national media.

When it comes to challenging religious fundamentalism, there are two schools of thought. One approach is not to be too critical of the adversaries, and instead present a positive view of humanism as a better alternative. The other avenue is to take the bull by the horns and actively point out the spuriousness of supernatural beliefs. I think a combination of both will be the only effective approach in the long run.

Since the religious right threat is greatest in the United States, that is where the confrontation should be concentrated. The US humanists and others of like mind should unite and somehow find the money to hire a dedicated, qualified spokesperson to stimulate discussion and controversy and hopefully start people thinking. Canadian humanists can lend support where appropriate. Progress will be slow at first, but it's time for a start. The long-term solution is, of course, to cease teaching religious untruths to children.

The threats of religious fundamentalism are so serious that there are members in the U.S. Congress who wish to turn the government into a theocracy. Some even say there is no need to be concerned about global warming because the conflict in Israel is an omen of the imminent coming of Armageddon. Why do we encounter these backward nonsensical views in our modern age? The challenge is daunting, but the threats must be confronted.

I invite readers to comment on the opinions expressed above and offer their thoughts or criticisms. There are no doubt other approaches to promoting humanism. Let's hear them.

Up-coming Meetings

Thursday August 10th – A report on the 2006 HAC Convention by Derek Kaill and John Pope.

Thursday September 14th – “Jest For the Health of It” - by Dr. Rob Martin from the UWO Department of Psychology

Thursday October 12th – “Nature versus Nurture” – by Dr. Bill Chefurka

Thursday November 9th – A discussion on religious and non-religious spirituality. Participants – Dr. Bruce Tallman and Don Hatch. Moderator Dr. Goldie Emerson.

All meetings are held at the Cross Cultural Learning Centre, 505 Dundas Street at 7:30 PM. Please use the rear entrance off the parking lot.

The Witty Senior Citizen

A college student at a recent football game challenged a senior citizen next to him, saying it was impossible for their generation to understand his.

“You grew up in a different world,” the student shouted loud enough for the whole crowd to hear. “Today we have television, jet planes, space travel, man has walked on the moon, our spaceships have visited Mars, we even have nuclear energy, electric and hydrogen cars, computers with light-speed processing and, uh...”

Taking advantage of the pause in the student's litany, the geezer said, “ You're right. We didn't have those things when we were young; so we invented them you ingrate. Now what are you doing for the next generation? We may be old but we are not stupid.”

Pantheism

Recently our Secretary Harold Koehler came across some information on pantheism as it relates to the American Unitarian Universalist Association, and he suggested that pantheism could be the topic for the July meeting of the Humanist Association of London and Area. The speakers at the meeting were Goldie Emerson and Harold Koehler. A very lively discussion, ably moderated by Bill Chefurka, followed the presentations. The following article contains some information taken from the World Pantheist Movement web site.

What Can Humanists Learn From Pantheism?

Pantheism is the doctrine that the universe conceived as a whole is God, or that God may be conceived as the combined laws and forces that are manifest in the universe. The latter is the same concept that I formulated on my own about fifteen years ago when I began to question the supernatural aspects of religions. I was just unable to make the leap to stark atheism, and when I learned that people such as Spinoza and Einstein had similar views, it reinforced my thinking.

The World Pantheist Movement is a relatively new organization headquartered in Colorado. Membership fees are \$30.00 US per year. These people possess a naturalistic reverence for nature and promote a naturalistic spirituality or a spirituality without absurdity that:

- Does not require faith in miracles, invisible entities or supernatural powers.
- Accepts and affirms life joyously. It does not regard this life as a waiting room or a staging post on the way to a better existence after death.
- Has a healthy and positive attitude to sex and life in the body.
- Teaches reverence and love and active concern for nature. Nature was not created for us to use or abuse – Nature created us, we are an inseparable part of her, and we have a duty of care toward her.
- Enthusiastically embraces the picture of a vast creative and often violent universe as revealed by the Hubble Space Telescope. We need a spirituality in keeping with this new knowledge, not the one that seeks to deny or explain away parts of it,
- Does not simply co-exist uncomfortably with science: it fully embraces science as part of the human exploration of the awesome universe. However, this does not mean we believe that science can answer all questions, nor that we endorse all modern technologies regardless of their impact on nature.

Everything stated in the aims listed above is certainly compatible with humanist principles and emphasizes the importance that Pantheists place on their reverence for nature.

Now one may ask: what is the difference between World Pantheism, atheism and humanism? WPM explains it this way:

Atheism simply makes the statement that there is no creator God, or personal God, no judging God. Beyond that atheists can be nature lovers or nature haters, they can see life as, and the universe as, joyful or absurd.

Most people look for more than just a negative from a religious philosophy. Recognizing this, humanists have added statements of ethics, morality and principles.

World Pantheism goes one step further and recognizes that most people feel a need for something that is greater than the human race. That greater whole is nature on this earth, and on a wider scale the entire universe or Multiverse of all that exists. Pantheists also promote a positive and joyful approach to life.

World Pantheism has many members who would describe themselves as atheist, and/or humanists, but to these positions they add a profound and satisfying spiritual (emotional and esthetic) dimension in their connection with nature, the universe and their fellow humans.

It has long been the writers contention that there is something lacking in the general conception of humanism, and this is the expression and exhibiting of a sense of emotional awe and wonder at the miracle of life and the beauty and bountifulness of nature. This is the very thing that the pantheists emphasize and we should learn from this. Too often humanist are depicted, especially by the religious right, as unemotional atheistic agents of the devil. Humanists face a real challenge in erasing whatever negative image may exist in the minds of the general public. A good start would be to cease using the word atheist because of the red flag it raises. Now even Paul Kurtz is becoming concerned about this reality and he is suggesting using the term, "a skeptic about religious claims," in place of atheist, because it emphasizes inquiry. I think it is a term that should be used in the future, because it can include both atheists and agnostics.

Yes humanists can learn something from the pantheists and we should work with them whenever appropriate. (DAH).

A Little Bit of Humour

There were two nuns. One was known as Sister Mathematical (SM) and the other was known as Sister Logical (SL). One dark night they were returning to the convent.

SM: "Have you noticed that a man has been following us for the past thirty minutes. I wonder what he wants?"

SL: "It is logical. He wants to rape us."

SM: "Oh no! At this rate he will reach us in fifteen minutes at the most! What can we do?"

SL: "The only thing we can do is walk faster."

SM: "It's not working."

SL: "Of course it's not working. The man did the only logical thing. He started to walk faster too."

SM: "So what shall we do? At this rate he will reach us in one minute."

SL: "The only logical thing we can do is split. You go this way and I'll go that way. He cannot follow us both."

So the man decided to follow Sister Logical. Sister Mathematical arrives at the convent and is worried about what has happened to Sister Logical, but fortunately she soon arrives unscathed.

SM: "Thank God you are here! Tell me what happened."

SL: "The man couldn't follow us both so he followed me. I started to run as fast as I could and he started to run as fast as he could. He reached me and I did the only logical thing I could think of. I lifted up my dress."

SM: "Oh Sister! What did the man do?"

SL: "He did the only logical thing. He lowered his pants."

SM: "What happened then?"

SL: "Isn't it logical Sister? A nun with her dress up can run faster than a man with his pants down."