



The Enlightenment



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Immanuel Kant – German Philosopher (1724-1804)

Immanuel Kant is the central figure of modern philosophy, and he set the terms by which all subsequent thinkers have had to grapple. He argued that reason is the sole source of morality and his thoughts continue to hold a major influence in contemporary thought, especially in fields such as metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, political philosophy and aesthetics.

But Kant's works are not an easy read. Commenting on his first attempt to read Kant's major work, *Critique of Pure Reason*, French author Luc Ferry stated, "For several years I understood almost nothing of Kant." But Ferry persevered and he interprets Kant's thinking on morality in this manner. "Moral virtue resides in actions that are disinterested and not for private or selfish gain." In other words, the two principles of morality are disinterestedness and universality. Kant expressed his views in the form of absolute commandments known as *categorical imperatives*, the essentials of which are freedom, the virtue of disinterested action (good will) and concern for the general welfare of humanity. Note that there is no reference to, or a need for religion in these definitions.



Immanuel Kant

This mini-journal is called *The Enlightenment* and Kant made the following interesting comments on enlightenment.

"Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's understanding without guidance from another. This immaturity is self-imposed when its cause lies not in lack of understanding, but in lack of resolve and courage to use it without guidance from another. Sapere Aude! [dare to know] — 'Have courage to use your own understanding!'— that is the motto of enlightenment . . . Nothing is required for enlightenment except freedom; and the freedom in question is the least harmful of all, namely, the freedom to use reason publicly in all matters. But on all sides I hear: 'Do not argue!' The officer says, 'Do not argue, drill!' The tax man says, 'Do not argue, pay!' The pastor says, 'Do not argue, believe!'"

President's Remarks

Many religious believers argue that, without belief in a life after death, the present life is not worth living and death can only be a source of fear and revulsion. The very thoughtful and moving meditation by Bob Thompson, printed in this issue of *The Enlightenment*, demonstrates that belief in an afterlife is not necessary for us to contemplate death with serenity and even joy, looking back with satisfaction and thankfulness on a life well lived. In other articles in this issue, Don Hatch reviews the book *How to be Secular: A Call to Arms for Religious Freedom*, and also offers some cogent thoughts about the re-opening of the assisted suicide debate with recent legislative developments in Quebec, and Goldie Emerson gives some well-considered suggestions for bringing together both sides in the abortion debate to seek some level of respect and common ground. As usual, *The Enlightenment* focuses light on a range of topics of particular interest to Humanism, with a good dose of reason combined with compassion and openness of spirit. As I write this, we are enjoying warm summer weather and many are relaxing on vacation. Earlier in July, we had a most enjoyable time of conversation, food, and games at our annual summer potluck picnic. It was great to see so many of our members and friends there and to enjoy such a warm time of fellowship. I thank Walter Heywood and Lorrie Lefebvre for so graciously opening their home and beautiful backyard for this occasion. I hope you all have a safe, relaxing, and refreshing summer, and I look forward to seeing you again at our meetings in the Fall. ~ Rod Martin

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How We Will Live On

By R. J. (Bob) Thompson

Humanists are sometimes asked how they cope with thoughts of dying when, unlike believers, they do not believe in an afterlife. A common answer is – since this life is all there is, it behooves us to live every day to the fullest extent possible, and realize that we do in fact live on in many ways. I don't think anyone has expressed what we leave behind any better than R. J. (Bob) Thompson, the retiring co-editor of Progressions, the Journal of the Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity. Bob, a retired United Church minister, and his wife Winn became members of Humanist Canada in 2012. In May 2013 he was diagnosed with acute leukemia and is currently receiving maintenance chemo-therapy injections. Here are Bob's reflective and profound thoughts on what his and our legacy can and will be, printed with his permission. (DAH).

Let no one say that I have gone elsewhere, for...

I remain in the genetic pool passed to me and through me.

I remain in the memory of those affected enough to remember.

I remain in the unique life story written with my intimates and confidants.

I remain "in the voices of our children" but never again my own voice.

I remain in the human histories of both my fore and after bearers.

I remain in the long line of still evolving humanity.

I remain in whatever of me was useful for research or anatomical training.

I remain an earthling and I return to the soil.

Let no one say that death, though occasionally regrettable, is anything but natural.

I do not believe my life is part of any "otherworldly" plan just a rivulet in life's great river.

I do not believe my life story is the result of any intervention beyond this life itself.

I do believe in a spiritual dimension of human evolution but no "theistic" Creator Spirit.

I do believe my life came the way of all babes and my death the way all living things cease.

Let no one speak of deservedness for the setting or situation of life.

To say "it's more luck than good management" reminds me of my good fortune.

Of parents and sibling, chance gave me of the good ones.

Of partner, I have rejoiced in gracious love, and fulsome acceptance.

Of offspring and grandchildren, I could not ask for better.

Of in-laws and children's spouses, I liked them all.

Of opportunities, I received many and missed few.

Of citizenship, I am proud to be Canadian, to have served, been elected and volunteered.

Of history, I benefited from its best and suffered little of its worst.

Of vocation, it [my church] offered room, even when I grew beyond its [theological] traditions.

Let no one speak of ultimate truth or of superior faith.

"Remember all the best of our past moments and forget the rest" is indeed best advice.

I would that we [Christians] be known for our love, not for beliefs that can so hurtfully divide.

I regret that the golden rules of all faiths have been obscured by religious rhetoric.

I have often asked:

"What did the manner of this life teach?"

"What did the manner of this death teach?"

"What then did I learn about my living and my dying?"

Now when I have died, be not tied to me with tears, but thankful for our life and love filled years.

I gave to you my love; you can only guess how much you gave back in happiness.

I thank you for the love you've shown me, but it is now time to journey on without me.

So grieve awhile, if grieve you must, but let your grief be comforted by trust.

We shall not meet again on some ethereal other side,

it was here and now we knew life, love and being.

The time has come for me to be remembered through you,

so bless the memories should you choose to do so;

I'll be as close as an example deemed worthy of following,

or one of my stories you think worth recycling. ~ Robert J. (Bob) Thompson

Book Review

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

By Jacques Berlinerblau

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

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

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

Later on in the first section, Berlinerblau defines what secularism is not. *Secularism does not equal atheism!* The author makes it clear that one of the goals of this book is to disarticulate secularism from atheism in order that secularists and atheists can pursue their legitimate and worthy agendas and work together when their interests overlap (which is often). The common "enemy" is not religion per se, but the fundamentalist religious right constituency that after thirty years of effort has gained political clout in the United States and is threatening the separation of church and state. To date the "New Atheists" have been totally ineffective in combating this menace and Berlinerblau suggests the only means of halting and reversing the influence of these misguided revivalist individuals is for liberal Protestant believers, plus those who declare they have "no religion," along with avowed atheists, to work together in this common cause. And don't forget the Jews and liberal Catholics.

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

In his quest, Berlinerblau goes farther back than the nineteenth to the sixteenth century and Martin Luther (1483-1546) as his starting point. The Protestant Reformation not only paved the way for The Enlightenment that allowed science and democracy to develop, but also unlike the Catholic Church, advocated the separation of church and state. Luther maintained that the church should concentrate on saving the souls of men and leave matters such as maintaining civil order, collecting taxes and waging war to the state. He recognized the distinction between what is due to Caesar and what is due to God.

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

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

The zenith of modern American secularism was in the era between 1940 and 1980. It was during this period that significant decisions favouring secularism were made in the U.S. Supreme Court. In 1947 it was firmly established that the wall separating church and state “must be kept high and impregnable.” And there were later decisions regarding public schools that included the prohibition of release time for religious instructions, nondenominational prayer, and Bible reading to start the day. Then of course there was the *Roe v. Wade* decision in 1973 allowing legal abortions. And it was in this time period that the “anything-goes” 1960s prevailed, generating feelings of increasing freedom and optimism.

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

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

The plan of attack must be an economic one. It was not until the penultimate page of the book that the author notes that the zenith of secularization occurred during the post WWII period of “confidence, introspection and plenitude.” It is the economy stupid!!! Experience in certain Western European socialist

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

So it is virtually impossible, or at least very difficult, to reverse the trend toward more religiosity and less secularism in the U.S. without involving politics. Unfortunately, the immediate future does not bode well because the Republicans, who control the House of Representatives, abhor socialism and will do everything in their power to delay a system of adequate social safety nets. Furthermore, Congress is heavily influenced by lobbyists on Wall Street who, rather than having concern for the will of the majority of citizens, seem to be concerned only with the prosperity of the wealthy at the expense of the middle class and the poor. So unless the Democrats can get control of all three branches of the government, and get more liberals on the Supreme Court, the status quo of gridlock will continue and secularists can do little to change things. Yes, capitalism has run amok in the supposedly democratic U.S.

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

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

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

Euthanasia in Canada

On Wednesday June 12th 2013, euthanasia emerged front and centre in Canada as Veronique Hivon, Quebec’s Minister of Social Services and Youth Protection, tabled legislation on the right to die in dignity. Quebec has entered uncharted waters in becoming the first province to propose legislation that

allows a dying patient with an incurable disease, “at an advanced state of irreversible decline and suffering unbearable physical and psychological pain,” to decide their moment of death.

Strict protocol and criteria are outlined in the bill that calls for continuous medical supervision of patients, who must meet specific conditions in order to be eligible for end-of-life treatment. For instance, a paraplegic, despite suffering intolerable pain, would not be admissible.

The Social Services Minister insisted that the bill was compatible with the Federal Criminal Code because the proposed end-of-life treatment was part of a “continuum” of health care. “I want to repeat that euthanasia, for example, is not provided for...is not forbidden in the Criminal Code. There are general provisions and there is something specific about assisted suicide but nothing on euthanasia,” Ms. Hivon said, insisting the bill was a health measure that falls under provincial jurisdiction.

She argued the bill was on solid legal footing. She said the government was considering giving an added legal protection to doctors by offering not to prosecute them, similar to the province’s stand on abortions in the late 1970s. “This has nothing to do with criminal matters and everything to do with medical care,” Ms. Hivon said.

Ms. Hivon, however, may be overly optimistic in this regard, because even though the bill would appear to have the backing of a majority of Quebec’s lawmakers, it may face opposition from other quarters. A federal court challenge to any eventual euthanasia law in Quebec would seem a certainty. Federal NDP Leader Thomas Mulcair and Liberal Leader Justin Trudeau, both of whom represent Montreal ridings, issued guarded comments acknowledging the sensitivity of the issue and urging the federal government to also address euthanasia or doctor-assisted suicide for the remainder of the country. “I believe that Ottawa will have its say at some point, because it does affect the Criminal Code.” Trudeau said.

Federal Justice Minister Rob Nicholson said the existing laws are intended to protect all Canadians, including those who are potentially the most vulnerable, such as people who are sick and those with disabilities. He said Ottawa will be reviewing the implications of the proposed Quebec legislation, and acknowledged it dealt with a “sensitive issue for many Canadians with deeply held beliefs on both sides of the debate.”

When Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne was asked about her views on euthanasia, she remarked, “We need to have a chat about ‘end-of-life’ decisions — such as the euthanasia debate Quebec Premier Pauline Marois ignited in her province recently. I consider the debate about euthanasia and end-of-life decisions, the great health-care issue of our time.”

Those who are concerned about dying with dignity are feeling encouraged by these latest developments and will be watching with great interest to see how these issues progress. At a May 15th regular meeting of the Humanist Association of London and Area, Dying With Dignity President Dr. Meg Westley brought us up to date on the latest happenings on the subject of euthanasia in Canada and she ended on a note of hopeful optimism, expressing the opinion that things are beginning to move more quickly. The recent developments in Quebec are a firm indication that her optimism is justified. (DAH).

The Abortion Issue

By Goldwin Emerson

Discussions about abortion can be very polarizing. Nevertheless, the recent death of Henry Morgentaler may have inched Canadians a little closer to re-opening the abortion discussion. There are other reasons that may embolden both proponents and adversaries to visit the abortion topic once more.

To have a productive discussion about abortion, as in other ethical topics, participants should recognize two important premises. The first is those who oppose abortion are serious, thoughtful, caring and conscientious. The second is defenders of abortion are also serious, thoughtful, caring, and conscientious. If we do not accept these two premises, discussions about abortions will be to no avail.

Pope Francis recently made some interesting comments about people in the secular world. I hope I may be able to paraphrase him fairly. I think he was telling his friends in religious circles that people should be judged, not so much by their religious beliefs as by their actions. If I understood Pope Francis correctly, he was putting forth a very important idea. He seemed to be saying that atheists can be correct on some issues, and when they are, let us judge them by their facts and by their actions, and not only by their belief in God or lack of it. To me, this was a remarkable openness on his part that ought to have received more printers' ink than it did. It also gave me hope that Pope Francis may be equally open to examining other religious traditions.

Now, let us add another component that may impinge, albeit tangentially, upon the abortion topic. World-wide hunger, malnutrition, famine and starvation are still present even though there has been a gradual decrease in the numbers of those affected within the past dozen years. Organizations such as World Hunger, Famine Relief, and The World Bank agree that it would be possible for the planet to supply enough food to keep everyone from starving. Yet, as recently as 2010, there were 925 million people either starving or barely existing because they were malnourished. The causes are many, but an expanding world population presents one important challenge to finding alternatives to abortion.

The leading agencies mentioned above agree that effective distribution of food remains a problem. Other main problems are poverty, weather fluctuations and disease, and an increase in world population. So, unless we can put in place effective ways of solving the problem of starvation, it will continue to be with us. Of course, many proponents, both for and against abortion, agree that aborting unborn children is simply a horrible, ineffective method of dealing with birth control.

In some parts of Canada, it seems fairly clear that there is a disconnect between what religion teaches and the actual practices in the bedrooms of the nation. That is, it seems clear that many religious believers do not limit their use of birth control to the rhythm method advocated by leaders of the predominant Christian religious hierarchy.

As starvation stays with us, and as religious thinkers inch their way towards a broader notion of effective birth control, attitudes about abortion will change. Perhaps more Canadians will come to understand how inappropriate and unnatural it is to use abortion as a last-minute form of birth control as other means of birth control gradually become more effective, acceptable, and available.

With changes in future attitudes, more effective birth control may continue to have broader acceptance. Abortion will then be seen as the choice of those who are thoughtless, uninformed, or desperate. It is possible that abortion will be used less, and then only in extreme or exceptional cases. Perhaps, in future, pro-life believers and pro-abortionists will be able to have more productive and respectful discussions. If so, Canadians and the rest of the world will be better off when that time comes. I write this column, knowing that, presently, discussions about abortion do not readily lead to simple solutions, acceptable to both sides. My own conclusion is that abortion should be used only in very exceptional cases. Secondly, a broader acceptance of the most effective use of birth control should become the norm for committed heterosexual partners. What do you think? As usual, I welcome your input. (gandjemerson@rogers.com).