



The Enlightenment



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

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Percy Bysshe Shelley – Poet and Humanist

Percy Bysshe Shelley was born into a noble English family in 1792. His father, Sir Timothy Shelley, was a Whig Member of Parliament. Very early in his life Shelley decried the enslavement of the mind by church, state, law, custom and tradition. He inveighed against priests, kings, soldiers, magistrates and others wielders of institutional authority. He attended the famous Eton Boarding School where he became known as “Shelley the Atheist,” During his freshman year at Oxford in 1811, he and his friend Thomas Hogg were expelled for “contumacious conduct” after they publishing a pamphlet entitled *The Necessity of Atheism*, and after they declined to recant their wicked views. In 1813 he published *Queen Mab*, a stinging critique of Christianity.



In 1814 Shelley’s notoriety mushroomed when he abandoned his first wife Harriet Westbrook and their two children to elope with Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, whom he married two years later after Harriet committed suicide. Mary was the daughter of the famous early feminist Mary Wollstonecraft. Mary Shelley is of course famous herself as the author of *Frankenstein – or The Modern Prometheus*, which was published in 1818 when she was just 21.

In his lifetime Shelley’s poetry was seldom praised, but he is now ensconced in the pantheon of great English poets. His “Ode to the West Wind,” “To a Skylark,” “The Cloud,” “Prometheus Unbound,” and many other works are entrenched in anthologies of literature and studied throughout the world. He had a facility for lyricism. No one else has come nearer to capturing in words the inexpressible surgings of human emotion. Whatever his emotion – whether joy, sorrow, desire or regret – he clothed it in vibrating, persistent, haunting overtones of song.

Shelley’s tracts on religion aren’t sensational or bombastic. They are erudite disquisitions tailored to sophisticated minds. They are grounded in his voluminous knowledge of philosophy, history, languages, literature, logic and science. With Locke and Hume, he held that belief in God derives from three sources: sensory experience, inferences therefrom and testimony. None of these confirms the existence of a creator. God was the “personification of human ideals” – the enduring quest for beauty, truth, love, freedom, wisdom and joy. God was also the universe or the totality of natural phenomena. Shelley was indeed the consummate humanist. Tragically and sadly he drowned in a sailing accident in 1822 off the coast of Italy at the young age of 29. (Sources: Wikipedia and an article on Shelley by Gary Sloan in the October/November 2008 Free Inquiry magazine.)

Nominating Committee Report

Our Nominating Committee of Bill Chefurka and Goldie Emerson has determined that the following persons have agreed to be nominated for the positions indicated below in 2009.

| | |
|-----------------|--------------------------|
| President | Don Hatch |
| Vice President | Rod Martin |
| Secretary | Kate Balogh |
| Treasurer | Claire Van Daele Boseret |
| Member at Large | Dave Mabee (Membership) |
| Member at Large | Ed Ashman (Promotions) |
| Member at Large | André Lachance |

These names will be put forward for election at the HALA Annual General Meeting on January 8th 2009. Nominations from the floor for any of these positions will be accepted, providing the nominee agrees to serve, and providing both the nominee and nominator are members of HALA. If there are other nominations an election will be held. The following non-voting appointed persons attend Board meetings as well.

Ex Officio - Bill Chefurka and Goldie Emerson (Programming)
Ex Officio - Derek Kaill (Humanist/Canada Liaison)

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

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

Past President – Derek Kaill – 432-6122 – e-mail - Derek_kaill@yahoo.com

Secretary - Kate Balogh – 432-6122 – e-mail, olgab36@hotmail.com

Treasurer – Claire Van Daele-Boseret – 451-5962 - e-mail, c.v.d.b@rogers.com

Membership Chairperson – Ed Ashman – 457- 9982 – e-mail, edward017@sympatico.ca

Interim Member at Large – Goldie Emerson – 657-7178 – e-mail gandjemerson@rogers.com

Member at Large – Dr. Rod Martin – 673-6635 – e-mail, ramartin@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 Chairperson Ed Ashman at (519) 457-9982 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 | | | | |

Utopia

Utopia – An imaginary peaceful country with ideal laws and social conditions.

Is it possible for anything approaching Utopia to exist on our planet? Some of the philosophers and intellectual academics of the Enlightenment period thought that it might be. They reasoned that the declining political power of Catholicism and the advent of Protestantism, which helped foster the advancements of science, technology and the growth of democracy, would result in increased personal freedom and prosperity for all. It was even postulated that there would be no need for wars. In some respects, these predictions have come to pass, at least in the Western world. Science and technology have eliminated much of the human drudgery of former times; democracy has expanded, and until recently in the United States, politics has been less and less influenced by religious institutions. What has not happened, of course, is an end to wars. Although we have made scientific and technological progress that continues at an accelerating rate, progress in improving human morality moves at a snail's pace, if it exists at all. It seems that in certain individuals, the negative human traits of greed, aggression and the aphrodisiac of power are as prevalent today as ever. Consequently, the prospect of Utopia appearing anywhere on our planet, might well be deemed unattainable.

Nevertheless, according to American journalist Chris Hedges, author of *I Don't Believe in Atheists*, there are two groups among us that are predicting that Utopia is possible, and, in one case, even immanent. One of these groups is the fundamentalist Christians. They fervently believe that Jesus will return sometime in the future and establish God's utopian kingdom on earth. These claims are most prevalent in the United States, where millions of fundamentalist Christians believe in creationism and in the literal translation of the Bible. Furthermore, some fundamentalist groups believe that the return of Jesus will occur in the very near future because, the current conflict in Israel is an indication that the prophecies in the book of Revelations are about to be fulfilled. On the other hand, there are atheists, agnostics, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims as well as some liberal Christians, who consider these fundamentalist Christians to be fanatics. These are people who think the likelihood of Jesus walking among us is extremely remote. They believe Jesus was completely human, that he died and was not divinely resurrected. They reason that the Utopia envisioned by the fundamentalist Christians is just not going to happen. It would, however, be unwise to ignore the influence of the fundamentalists. The religious right wields political power and there are those who are determined to turn the United States into a theocracy. This must not be allowed to occur. The separation of church and state must be maintained.

None of the above is a surprise to most humanists. What may well be a surprise is that Hedges labels the "new atheists," people like Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, and Daniel Dennett, as naïve authors who believe that if a humanism based on reason and science simply replaced all religions, a utopian situation would prevail. They assert that since most current wars are caused by religious differences, eliminating religions will greatly reduce the likelihood of war. Hedges claims that both the fundamentalist Christians and the "new fundamentalist atheists," promote a dangerous radical agenda, while the moderate majority, those with a commitment to tolerance and compassion, are caught in the middle. Greg Epstein, Harvard University's "humanist chaplain" echoes the same sentiment saying that the militant atheists could drag down the moderate humanists, who feel their movement is on the verge of expansion as has happened in Europe. Perhaps there is some truth in this latter claim.

On the other hand, many avowed atheists consider the “new atheists” to be their heroes, and believe that Hedges goes much too far labeling them as fundamentalists. He has in fact been accused by some of being arrogant and highly hubristic and this criticism has some validity. Surely the recent best selling books of the four authors mentioned above have encouraged more than a few doubting believers to question the articles of faith they were indoctrinated into. These authors should not be dismissed outright because religions have indeed caused much harm in the past; some are still harmful today and changes are needed. What they are attempting to do is make people fully aware of the real dangers of the religious fundamentalist fanatics, both Christian and Islamic and also point out the harmful spurious actions of Catholicism. I doubt if the four authors truly believe that simply eliminating religions will lead to Utopia. It is much more complicated than that. For instance, they must surely realize that economics play a big role, and that a prosperous middle class is one of the prerequisites for any kind of near Utopia.

In addition to heaping merciless criticism on fundamentalists of all stripes, a central theme in Hedges’ book is that Utopia on our earth is an impossibility. He emphatically states the human evil will never allow it to happen. With the sorry state that the world is in at the present time, with unwinnable wars and a global financial crisis, it does seem doubtful that an ideal Shangri-La like country could ever exist on our planet, but I submit that it is possible for a near utopian country to occur, and perhaps some have already existed in the past.

In 1997 Canadian author Pierre Berton wrote a book entitled, *1967: The Last Good Year*. 1967 was the year Canada celebrated its centennial, and what a great celebration it was. Those of us who attended Expo 67 in Montreal reveled in the splendor of the site and in the achievements of Canadians during the previous one hundred years. Now is it too much of a stretch to claim that Canada in 1967 was about as close to Utopia as it is possible to get? We had successfully recovered from World War II, unemployment was low, real income was rising, an important, prosperous middle class was growing, and most working people expected to retire comfortably. Poverty was low, we had universal medicare, and taxes were not excessive. Personal and National debt levels were relatively low, and we were not at war. Thanks to our Prime Minister Lester Pearson, who had won a Nobel Peace Prize, we had an enviable reputation as Peace Keepers. Pearson also gave us a distinctive Canadian flag. All in all, life for the majority was good. Of course everything was not perfect, but if Utopia implies living peacefully, with ideal laws and social conditions, perhaps we can say we were just about there. In many ways we were the envy of the world, and we felt proud to be Canadian. And there were other countries that were similar to Canada. Lists are published from time to time showing the most desirable countries in which to live. The list often includes countries such as Australia and Sweden as well as Canada. Unfortunately though, Canada’s positing has slipped downward in recent years.

Now of course there were many factors that created the conditions that led up to the peaceful and prosperous Canada of the 50s and 60s. Discussing and analyzing them could fill several books, but I want to identify just one. That one is Protestantism, because the advancements of science and democracy in the West would have been much slower, were it not for the Protestant Reformation and the lessening influence of the dictatorial Catholic Church. In his recent book *Consumed*, Benjamin Barber credits the Protestant work ethic as a major factor in bringing about the advances in western civilizations that occurred after the Reformation. I believe that the Protestant work ethic and the liberal Protestant churches helped contribute to the stability of a moral and ethical lifestyle in Canada in the early years and beyond, resulting in Canadians being recognized as modest, caring and compassionate people.

But now Canada is becoming more secular with the liberal Protestant and Catholic churches declining (fundamentalist Protestants are an exception). Encouragingly, more and more Canadians (at least a fifth of the population) say they practise no religion at all. In time Canada should continue to become more secular as has happened in Europe and religions will be less of a factor, having outlived their usefulness, especially if humanism thrives and provides the non-theistic benefits of religions, including the teaching of moral and ethical values to the young.

As we all know, the conditions present in Canada in 1967 did not last. In the autumn of 1970, separatism reared its ugly head in Quebec. In 1974 the first oil crisis occurred and ever since then real income for the middle class ceased to rise. Deterioration has continued to the point that today many families find that two incomes are needed in order for families to survive. Jobs are being lost as they move overseas. Benjamin Barber says the deterioration started in the late 1960s. After World War II people began to purchase items they needed after going without many amenities during the war. By the '60s the demand for goods was slowing down, and manufacturers resorted to enticing advertisements to get people to purchase things they really did not need, often by going into excessive debt. Increased competition caused manufacturers and retailers to look for ways to reduce costs by moving jobs overseas and buying products from countries with cheaper labour. The sad economic results are all around us today. Perhaps worse, unwinnable wars are being waged and Canada is, probably unwisely, involved in a war in Afghanistan. Fundamentalist Islamic terrorists are a serious threat, far worse than fundamentalist Christians. Prospects of returning to the kind of near Utopia we enjoyed in 1967 do not look promising for the present time, nor for the near future.

I think a most important lesson to learn from all this is that a large, prosperous middle-class is a prerequisite for conditions that even remotely approach near Utopia. Today we often hear that the middle-class is shrinking, the rich are getting richer, and the poor are getting poorer. This is particularly the case in the United States, where neo-cons have been controlling and running the government, allowing corporatism to thrive by ignoring the long-term consequences and being concerned mainly with next month's "bottom line" and Wall Street's approval. As mentioned above, this has resulted in jobs being moved overseas in order to maximize profits, causing unemployment to rise. So if politicians are really concerned about improving living conditions for all citizens, they need to formulate plans for actions that will guarantee a prosperous middle class and cease fighting preemptive wars. Near utopian conditions cannot be achieved simply by abandoning religions. It can only be achieved by having a large employed, prosperous, middle class existing in a democracy where governments are headed by statesmen who believe, as Aristotle did, that it is the duty of the statesman (notice he did not say politician) to provide the good life for the people. Our problem today seems to be that there are very few dedicated competent statesmen. Instead we have politicians who make unrealistic promises to get elected and then often proceed to break the promises. Where are the statesmen who will not be influenced by lobbyists when we so desperately need them? The recent collapse on Wall Street reinforces the need to elect leaders with the statesman-like qualities and skills that can get things back on track, as Franklin Roosevelt did with the New Deal in the Great Depression. As Karl Popper, London School of Economics professor and philosopher asked, "*How can we so organize political institutions that bad or incompetent rulers can be prevented from doing too much damage?*" Perhaps Barack Obama can fulfill this role and emulate FDR.

We began the 21st century with great hopes for a better world. We reasoned that the nationalistic wars and the cold war of the 20th century were behind us, and the prospects for a more peaceful world were encouraging. This all changed on September 11th, 2001. The West faced a new enemy in the form of fundamentalist Islamic terrorism and solutions to this problem

are not readily apparent. As is now well recognized, religions are a huge factor in today's wars. Jews are fighting Muslims in Israel/Palestine and Christians are fighting Muslims in Iraq and Afghanistan. There are really no military solutions. The solutions have to be political, and most importantly, economic. Somehow, the Muslims need to feel they are not under the thumb of the west and are able to participate in and enjoy prosperous economic conditions. Then their religion will be less of a factor, particularly if the next generation of Muslim youth observe the West and demand changes that result in a move to a more secular, more egalitarian society.

The prospects for any form of near Utopia in the near future look bleak. There are just too many world problems: political, economic, environmental and religious. If humanists are to make contributions toward making improvements, they need to pick their projects wisely and work alongside other like-minded organizations, and yes, with politicians as well. All the humanist principles taken together offer a sound set of guidelines for moral and ethical living and provide a foundation for working toward a utopian future. Despite the enormity of the challenge, we need to keep working at it. We owe this to our children, our grandchildren and their children. (DAH)

About Humanism in Canada

If you ask the average Canadian what they know about humanism, the majority will likely respond with a question. "Humanism – what is that?" A possible reply could be, "Humanism is a proactive life stance guided by principles of rational thought, scientific inquiry, responsibility, ethics, compassion, fairness and equality, along with a rejection of the supernatural." Perhaps an answer of that sort could begin to let people know what humanism is all about.

A few people might say, "Oh yes humanists, they are nothing but a bunch of atheists that bash religions." You might reply; "Yes many humanists are atheists, but some are agnostics and in any case, of the twelve humanist principles, only one deals with the rejection of the supernatural. The other principles, as mentioned above, are concerned with rational thought, scientific inquiry, responsibility, ethics, compassion, fairness and equality. Many humanists are critical of religions because of the harm they have caused in the past, and many are still causing harm today. Witness the religious wars now in progress. Most humanists are especially critical of religious fundamentalists of all stripes, but many do recognize and laud the non-theistic, positive attributes of the liberal Protestant denominations, such as compassion and concern for the underprivileged. Also, more than a few humanists are Unitarians."

Others might ask, "Why have I never heard of the humanists?" How do we answer that query? Why should it even be necessary for anyone to ask the question? Why is it that with all the publicity Dr. Henry Morgentaler has received over the years in the media, it is seldom mentioned that he is a member of the Humanist Association of Canada (HAC) and is its founding president? Why are the past achievements of Canadian humanists not well known? They have worked on issues such as the legalization of abortion, gay and lesbian rights, including marriage, the rejection of Sharia law in Ontario and opposing the Conservative's attempt to fund all religious schools in Ontario. Humanists in B.C. gave Evelyn Martens much needed moral and financial support in her court case involving assisted suicide, which she won.

If Canadian humanists wish to make the public more aware of what humanism is all about, we need to devise effective action plans. At the present time the membership of HAC is not large, being around five or six hundred. In order to raise the funds needed for education, advocacy work and publicity, the membership should be at least 2500-3000. To achieve this level of

membership, HAC needs a Board of competent people dedicated to formulating action plans to recruit more members, to work on appropriate causes and to make the organization recognizable to the public. No small task, but a necessary one. For instance, two major issues that could be considered as worthy of being tackled, along with other like-minded organizations, are legalized euthanasia and the elimination of public funding for religious schools. These are long-term activities, but no doubt other shorter-term causes will come up from time to time. One more thing. In my view Canadian humanists should put a little less emphasis on atheism. Certainly rejection of the supernatural is important because monotheistic religious fanatics are causing plenty of problems, but I think more members will be attracted if equal emphasis is put on all twelve HAC principles, not just number ten. Liberal believers who are having doubts about the Christian articles of faith are potential converts to humanism and need to get the full picture. (Many of us were brought up to be believers and later became humanists).

Although more members are needed, I don't think HAC will ever consist of more than a few thousand members, and this need not be of great concern. Why? Read on. The composition of Canadian society can be categorized roughly as follows: Twenty percent say they profess no religion, and twenty percent, including the fundamentalists, attend churches on a more or less regular basis. This leaves sixty percent that are only nominally religious, and for the most part they are law abiding moral and ethical individuals. Many of them are affiliated with a church just to avail themselves of the services of christenings, weddings and funerals (water, rice and dust Christians). These people, along with those professing no religion (criminals excepted) are for the most part living ethical and moral lives. They really care little about beliefs and have little interest in joining any humanist movement. They are busy earning a living, raising families, and enjoying sports and entertainment. The trend to lower church attendance in Canada will likely continue on its own, and we should eventually end up akin to Europe's secular society, where the majority are exclusive humanists, as described by Charles Taylor in his book *A Secular Age*. It appears that humanism has happened largely on its own in Europe through a gradual rejection of religious institutions. The same evolution toward secularism or exclusive humanism is happening in Canada and it should gradually become more prevalent because many young people are turning away from religion. This is what organized humanists want to see happen.

So where does HAC fit in to this picture? It seems for the most part that only a minority of intellectuals, academics and a few others are interested in belonging to a humanist organization. This is not necessarily a bad thing, because a relatively small group can achieve much if they are well organized with dedicated people working cooperatively on common agreed causes. Quality is often more important than quantity. Humanists must be interested in doing more than publishing articles and holding conferences. At a Center for Free Inquiry conference in Amherst New York a few years ago, American humanist and author Susan Jacoby chastised humanists for being very good at preaching to the choir or to the converted, but not so good at promoting worthwhile causes or achieving success in the adoption of issues that benefit society. She suggested that humanists should get more political, noting that the fundamentalist Christians now had significant political clout, but humanist had virtually none. She did not, however, get much support from her colleagues. Most seemed content to just continue writing interesting papers and articles for magazines and holding the odd conference to hear these papers. I think Susan is right. Humanists can achieve more if they get involved in ethical and social political issues. Humanists in Canada have done just that when they became involved with abortion, gay rights, assisted suicide, funding of religious schools and Sharia law. Hopefully the Humanist Association of Canada will continue to delve into political issues and work effectively for the betterment of our society. (DAH)

Life, Culture, and Religion

By You-Sheng Li, Ph.D.

In her book *A History of God*, the English author and former nun Karen Armstrong states, "When people began to devise their myths and worship their gods, they were not seeking a literal explanation for natural phenomena. The symbolic stories, cave paintings and carvings were an attempt to express their wonder and to link this pervasive mystery with their own lives; indeed, poets, artists and musicians are often impelled by a similar desire today.....God was a product of the creative imagination, like the poetry and music that I found so inspiring."

Today a low but substantial percentage of our population indicates that they have no religious faith, and it certainly is conceivable that a culture or a society can easily survive without God or religion. Nevertheless, almost all early recorded cultural traditions have had a religious faith in some form or other. In all my extensive reading on primitive human civilizations, I have never come across any non-religious cultural traditions.

Religions, however, are not the only avenue for experiencing awe and wonder; it can also be experienced through the arts and through an appreciation of nature. Nobody condemns the arts or nature, but today there are those who are condemning religions. One of these is the Englishman Richard Dawkins. According to him, "good people do good things and bad people do bad things, but it takes religion for good people to do bad things." Both Karen Armstrong and Richard Dawkins live in secondary societies, where the arts and religion tend to be separated. This was not the case in primary societies. The following is a quote from Chuang Tzu:

In the ancient time, yin and yang were in harmony. 1) Gods and spirits were quiet and did not interfere with people. 2) The four seasons followed their own course. Animals and plants were not harmed. 3) Humans lived to their full life span. People had knowledge but there was no use of it. This is called the big One. (Chuang Tzu, Chapter 16)

Thus according to Chuang Tzu, gods and spirits do not interfere with people in a primary society. It is consistent with Karen Armstrong's view that both art and God are the product of human imagination, inspired by the same feelings of wonder. Neither art nor religions should normally interfere with people. Although Chuang Tzu did not mention the secondary society he was in, he apparently described this happy and peaceful picture of primary society in contrast to secondary society. Thus, it is the opposite in secondary society, namely, 1) gods interfere with people, 2) they damage their natural environment, and 3) people's lives are cut short by their own actions. Both arts and religions can give feelings of awe, but only organized religions can interfere with people with such a power that they are able to make them feel fearful. Thus they have to obey the gods with awe.

In reality, all cultural traditions fall between the two extremes. Nevertheless, we still can determine which tradition is close to which extreme. The early Mesopotamia civilization which started with the advent of cities was nothing but an economic enterprise. They dug canal networks for irrigation and erected huge platforms to build temples, which were not only far the largest buildings in the cities, but were also visible in the landscape miles away and dominated the city's skyline. One scholar offered the following description of their religion: "The importance of a deity was measured by how well his soldiers performed in battle and how much land they conquered...Not much going on in (Sumerian) heaven unless you were a god... the dead spent eternity in a dreary, poorly lit, depressing shadow world... where they wished they were dead." It

was no wonder that archaeology documented shortened life spans associated with the emergence of civilization in the Middle East.

Their neighbouring Egyptians started with rural areas and had a united nation a few hundred years before Mesopotamia. Their religion appeared to be an improvement on the Sumerians. The same scholar states: "Egyptians believed in a continuation of one's earthly condition in one's earthly body after death...The cult of Osiris, which grew rapidly during the Middle Kingdom (c 1900 BC), promised resurrection and eternal life to all, regardless of social status... did not really have a hell..."

The earliest civilization in Europe was created by the Minoans who lived on the island of Crete. They possessed hardly any weapons and had no constructions for defense. They worshiped a goddess. Their shrines were located at homes, in caves, and on hilltops. A scholar says, "In Minoan religion, there is a conspicuous lack of anxiety about death...A hymn to Nature as a Goddess seems to be heard from everywhere, a hymn of joy and life."

At one time Chinese civilization was close to a Taoist ideal society. Their society was quasi-primary society, a society similar to primary society. They consumed what they produced and only rarely bought something from outside. When I was a child in the early 1950s, the gods Chinese peasants worshiped were all natural deities. The only temple for villagers to pay respect to the gods was for the god of earth. Since it was considered as representative of a local god like a tribal leader, a village may have several such temples, each for a clan or a cluster of households. They were usually the size of a room, much smaller than a farmhouse. Even though only a single room, peasants were free to use it for something else. They could be used as gristmills, a public place for meetings, or a playground for children during rainy days. In my village, all the temples for the god of earth had no image of the god. Each household of peasants usually worshiped three additional gods: the kitchen god, the fortune god, and the god of heaven and earth. Except for the kitchen god, who had a paper portrait hung on the wall, the other two had only specific locations, the storage room for the fortune god, and the yard for the god of heaven and earth. The god of heaven and earth was really a god of nature and had thus no image, but the fortune god was a male deity. A Chinese calendar was often printed below a portrait of the kitchen god in order to increase its sale. As a child, I saw clearly that Chuang Tzu was right: gods do not interfere with people, and they do not have power. The Chinese countryside also had temples of Buddhism, Taoism, and even Catholic churches. The power of their gods usually stayed inside their buildings, since the Chinese government was not religious. Most Chinese people worshiped them all, disregarding their difference.

But things changed with the advent of Mao's Communism, which was in fact a powerful religion in all aspects. When I joined a Sunday service in a Church for the first time at Cambridge in 1980, I was amazed to find out all the formality was exactly the same as I went through a hundred times in China to worship nobody else but Mao. A Chinese palmist usually reads the face and the palm to tell one's future. When Chinese peasants saw the awe-inspiring portrait of Mao, with the unusual mole on his chin, they claimed that this man was born a God like Jesus. To be precise, they saw him as another emperor, since they judged emperors as godlike. Mao was not, however, an ordinary emperor, he was much more powerful than any Chinese emperor. He had a much larger bureaucratic machine facilitated by modern communication technology. For the first time in Chinese history, he organized five hundred million peasants to shout with one voice and move in one direction. They did achieve miracles, but their miracles were nothing but harmful.

My junior high school (grade 7-9) was ten miles away, and I walked home on weekends. I still remember the beauty of the isolated Chinese countryside: orchards of flowers and fruits one after another beside the road. The peasants were happy to see someone passing by their fields. They often stopped working to show their hospitality to me. They even offered me the produce of their farms. Once Mao's orders came down, the landscape changed overnight. The flowers and orchards were all gone. I had to cross several canals without even a drop of water in them. One half finished reservoir could be seen miles away. I was enticed to climb up its banks, more than a dozen meter high, and saw hardly any water inside. It was like a huge bowel or open mouth trying to suck water from the blue sky. We did not know how dreadful was the hell Mao devised for his people, because he put them all in hell when they were still alive. One thing is certain; they could no longer live to their full life span because many of them died of starvation. Mao's communist religion pressed its people so hard that a lot committed suicide.

Unfortunately, I heard of suicide again many years later during a recent visit. A young lady told me, "It is better than dying of cancer!" The peasants think all cancers in the village are caused by water pollution. The most infectious is, however, the so-called spiritual pollution: corruption is everywhere, and 90% of Chinese millionaires are from government official families. It is no longer easy to feel happy. If those peasants had the power to devise a hell, they would certainly make one for those corrupted millionaire officials. Certainly huge economic changes are occurring in China, but if all the population is to share in the prosperity, there is a real need, not for Chinese society to adopt any kind of religion, but to revert to the moderate philosophies of Taoism and Confucius, that shun greed, and are based on compassion with love and respect for all humans, and that is what humanism is all about.

You-Sheng Li holds a Ph.D. in laboratory medicine from Cambridge, England. He is the author of *A New Interpretation of Chinese Philosophy, - An Anthropological/Psychological View*. He is a member of the Humanist Association of London and Area.

Up-Coming Meetings

Thursday December 11th Speaker - Ed Corrigan. Topic – The Israeli/Palestinian Stalemate.

Thursdat January 8th Annual General Meeting, election of 2009 Executive and Board followed by a discussion of future HALA activities.

Monday February 23rd First Darwin lecture at the Wolf Performance Hall.

Monday March 2nd Second Darwin Lecture at the Wolf Performance Hall

Monday March 9th Third Darwin Lecture at the Wolf Performance Hall

Monday March 16th Fourth Darwin Lecture at the Wolf Performance Hall

Further details on the Darwin lectures will be forthcoming.

Volunteers Our organization is indebted to the following volunteers.

| | | | |
|-------------------------|----------------|----------|------------------|
| Refreshments | Jackie Emerson | Music | Camile Van Daele |
| Humanist Library | Derek Kaill | Research | Richard Gibbens |
| Web site, Enlightenment | Don Hatch | | |

We appreciate and thank them all for the services they provide.