



The Enlightenment



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Michel de Montaigne – Philosopher and Essayist (1533-1592)

Michel de Montaigne was born in 1533 into a wealthy family on the family estate Chateau de Montaigne, not far from Bordeaux in southwestern France. As a youth he was tutored privately in order that his first language be Latin. He was one of the most influential writers of the French Renaissance, known for popularizing the essay as a literary genre. His massive volume *Essais* contains to this day, some of the most widely influential essays ever written. He had a direct influence on writers the world over, including Descartes, Pascal, Rousseau, Emerson, Nietzsche, and Asimov. And he was Jean Meslier's favourite mentor.



Michel De Montaigne

But Montaigne was much more than an academic essayist. He traveled widely in Europe and was twice elected mayor of Bordeaux. In this position he sometimes found himself mediating between Catholics and Protestants. He was nominally a practicing Catholic all his life, but was really a forerunner of skeptical deism or atheistic naturalism. (It was not prudent to be seen as an apostate in France in the 1500s).

The Essays of Montaigne are an eclectic mix of a multitude of subjects. It requires 1269 pages in M.A. Screech's English translation to include all 107 essays. Many are less than two pages in length, while the longest, the Apology for Raymond Sebond, stretches to 105 pages. A sampling of topics reveals the following: On Idleness, On Liars, To philosophize is to learn how to die, On educating children, On affectionate relationships, Reflections on Cicero, On the vanity of words, On drunkenness, On books, On virtue, On repenting, and On vanity.

Montaigne left us many quotes with the most famous probably being "Que sais-je?" (What do I know). Others include:

- Man cannot make a mite, yet he will make gods by the dozen.
- Our religion is made to eradicate vices; instead it encourages them, covers them and nurtures them.
- Not being able to govern events, I govern myself.
- On the highest throne in the world, we still sit on our bottom.
- No man is a hero to his own valet.

Remarkably modern even to readers today, Montaigne's attempt to examine the world through the lens of the only thing he can rely on – his own judgment – makes him more accessible to modern readers than any other writer of the Renaissance. Much of modern literary non-fiction has found inspiration in Montaigne, and writers of all kinds continue to read him for his masterful balance of intellectual knowledge and personal storytelling. (Some of the foregoing was obtained from Wikipedia).

President's Remarks

I'm writing this on the day of the Winter Solstice, when the nights are long, the days are short, the trees are bare, and the earth is shrouded in ice and snow. We look forward to the return of longer days and the sunshine, warmth, and renewal of springtime. Since time immemorial, this has been a period of festivities marking the ending of the old year and the beginning of the new. Long before Christianity came along and co-opted this ancient festival for its own purposes, humans had been developing traditions to mark this time of year. Indeed, most of the traditions associated with Christmas – decorating evergreen trees, decking the halls with boughs of holly, hanging mistletoe, burning yule logs and candles, giving gifts – predated Christianity. Last week the members of HALA celebrated together at our annual solstice party, sharing a potluck supper, singing secular carols, and enjoying a time of fun and fellowship. Some photos of this event may be found in these pages. We look back over the past year with feelings of joy mixed with sadness. We greatly miss four of our longtime HALA members who passed away during the year: Ed Ashman, Ivan Sexsmith, Elvins Spencer, and Claire Van Daele-Boseret. On the bright side, we achieved a record level of membership, and had a full year of interesting and informative meetings. We look forward to the coming year with anticipation. Our first meeting in the new year will take the form of a debate on government funding of Catholic schools at the university campus, co-sponsored with the student atheist and agnostic society. I look forward to seeing you all there. In the meantime, I wish all our members and friends a very warm, joyful, and relaxing holiday season with family and loved ones.
~ Rod Martin.

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The Humanist Association of London and Area meets at the Cross Cultural Learner Centre, 505 Dundas Street in London, on the second Wednesday of the months September to July inclusive at 7:30 p.m. Please use the rear door off the parking lot. *The Enlightenment*, edited by Don Hatch, is published quarterly in January, April, July and October. Please note: We reserve the right to edit and publish articles at our discretion.

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

New members are welcome. Contact Membership Secretary, Walter Heywood (519) 434-9237 e-mail wjheywood@yahoo.ca Membership fees are listed below.

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

Nature and Ethical Responsibility

By Goldwin Emerson

As humans, we are inescapably products of nature, from the time of conception until our deaths, and ultimately, our return to nature. The recognition of this fact is a first step in understanding ourselves. An important second step is to become more accepting of living within the limits of nature. Third, nature sustains us. We cannot live without it, but nature can exist without us, as it has for millions of years prior to the dawn of human life. During eons of pre-human existence, our planet was forming deposits of coal, natural gas, oil, gold, diamonds and other valuable minerals. Nature formed rich topsoil which sustains flora and fauna. Ocean life developed early in the earth's pre-historic times, and from this sprang the resources that presently enable many life forms to survive.

With modern technology, it is now possible that we can threaten and damage the earth. The harm or the good that we do to nature determines how nature shapes our lives and provides for our needs. Humans have been slow in recognizing that the resources of nature are vast, but not inexhaustible.

For generations, people believed that erratic weather, periods of drought and floods, depletion of fish stocks, and increasing desert areas were simply unfortunate events that happened to us as though they were truly "acts of God." However, with developments in science, we now know that each of these events is a natural response exacerbated by human actions or inactions.

We need to look at global problems in a broader sense. Consider, for example, the present problems of war, over-population, poverty, starvation, disease, shortages of natural resources, and global warming. According to many scientists these problems are caused by humans and will, in the end, have to be solved by human solutions. As we come to understand nature, we find that things that occur in nature are more predictable than we had previously thought.

Nature contains vast resources that we require in order to survive. Fresh water, clean air, minerals, food, and energy resources such as coal, natural gas and oil are important parts of nature's global storehouse. As our world population increases, we threaten nature's resources through contamination and depletion. Human needs for energy resources continually increase. Combined efforts are required to preserve nature, and the more young people are educated about the limitations of nature, the more responsible they will become as future keepers of natural resources. While most formal education occurs in schools, much is also handed down through parents, community values, public media, and responsible business practices.

With input from scientists, businesses can promote ecologically sound methods of conserving what we already have while searching for new sources of clean energy consistent with a healthy environment. Energy efficient automobiles, better disposal of wastes, scientific advancements in health care, combined with the best scientific knowledge, can preserve and protect our natural resources. Politicians have an important role to play in overseeing nature's wealth and the state of its health. It is important to select politicians who are truly leaders, people who will think globally and who will serve as gate-keepers for the conservation of our natural resources.

The air we breathe and the water we drink are so much a part of nature that it is easy to take these aspects of nature for granted. Without clean air and water, or without healthy food, our lives will be considerably debased and shortened.

We can't all be scientists, but ordinary citizens can make huge contributions in arriving at solutions to environmental problems. In a very real sense, we are all in this together. No one industry, country, or leader alone can provide all the solutions needed to keep nature healthy. We are as much a part of nature as are the rocks, trees, and animals that share this planet. Sharing is a key concept in this matter. We have the responsibility of keeping nature as healthy as possible. We inhabit this planet with our children and future generations. We share an ethical responsibility to leave this earth as healthy as we found it when we were children ourselves.

The Evolution of Islam

Of the three monotheistic Abrahamic religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – Islam is the most recent, dating from 622 CE. But the connection of Islam to Abraham goes back much further - in fact all the way back to the Book of Genesis. Abraham's wife Sarah, being barren, offers Hagar her handmaiden to Abraham, and a son named Ishmael is born. Later, Sarah finds herself with child, and a son Isaac, fathered by Abraham, is born. Under these conditions, Hagar and Ishmael are sent away and according to legend, Ishmael became the father of the Arabian nation, while Isaac's descendents begat the nation of Israel. Arabs are sometimes referred to as Ishmaelites and of course the descendents of Isaac, through his son Jacob and Jacob's twelve sons, are referred to as Israelites.

Fast forward to the early seventh century CE and we encounter another legend. According to this legend, the founding and propagation of Islam occurred in the following manner. Muhammad was an Arabian merchant of the Quraysh tribe of Mecca. He rejected the polytheism of his tribe and was given to frequent prayer in the hills and caves outside Mecca. In the year 610, when he was forty, he was praying in a cave on mount Hira, when he was suddenly confronted by the angel Gabriel, who commanded him to recite. For the next twenty-three years until his death in 632, Muhammad did just that. He recited the messages he received from Gabriel, presenting them to his followers as the pure and unadulterated word of the supreme and only God, Allah. Arabia at the time of Muhammad was an oral culture that respected poetic achievement, and thus the prodigious feats of memory required to memorize the lengthy suras were not so unusual. After Muhammad's death, the revelations he had received were collected together into the Qur'an, or "Recitation," from the accounts of those who had memorized them or written them down.

Muhammad began his career simply as a preacher of religious ideas. But his uncompromising monotheism cut directly against the entrenched polytheism of the Quraysh – and against their lucrative business in the Ka'ba, the shrine that attracted pilgrims from all over Arabia. The Quraysh scoffed at the preacher, his words of Allah and his prophetic pretensions. Tensions steadily increased until finally Muhammad fled from Mecca after learning of a plot to assassinate him. In 622 he and the Muslims left Mecca and settled in what became known as Medina. This was the *hira*, or flight, that marks the beginning of the Islamic calendar. Once in Medina, Muhammad began to call believers to take up arms in defense of the new community and ultimately to fight offensive wars against all nonbelievers. Muhammad himself led the Muslims into battle against the Quraysh and other pagan Arab tribes. This series of battles forms the backbone of Islamic salvation history, illustrating the core point that obedience to Allah brings success in this world as well as the next, and that the converse is also true: disobedience will bring earthly disaster as well as hellfire.

After Muhammad died, his teachings lived on. Muslim warriors, energized by his exhortations to jihad and his example in unifying Arabia, embarked on a series of conquests unprecedented in their breadth and swiftness: Syria and the Holy Land by 637, Armenia and Egypt in 639, Cyprus in 654, and North Africa by the 660s. By 674 the Muslims were besieging Constantinople. But why were these conquests so successful? Most probably because by the seventh century, the Byzantines were so exhausted from their protracted wars with Persia, they left a vacuum that the Arabs easily filled. In any case, the end result is that now fourteen hundred years after its birth, Islam influences, in varying degrees, numerous countries that stretch from Northwest Africa to the Philippines. And now, Muslims around the globe, numbering more than one billion people, readily accept the broad contours of the foregoing narrative that has been told and retold for centuries. But how much of it is factual? Certainly the Arab conquests themselves did actually occur without any doubt, but virtually none of the remainder of the account could have happened as Muslims now claim.

To begin with, a strong case can be made that angels do not, nor ever did, exist. Furthermore, a strong case can be made that a supernatural deity, whether he or she is called Yahweh, God or Allah, also does not, nor ever did, exist. Therefore Muhammad's revelations did not come from on high, but if in fact they did occur, they must have originated in his own mind. This naturally leads to the question: did

Muhammad ever actually live? In his recent book, *Did Muhammad Exist?* (2012), author Robert Spencer attempts to answer this question. In a Chapter entitled “Making Sense of it All,” he cites thirteen points that confirm there is little historical evidence that Muhammad ever lived. He also notes that much of the Qur’an itself shows signs of having been borrowed from the Jewish and Christian traditions, suggesting that the founders of Islam fashioned its Scripture from existing material rather than from divine revelation. Spencer concludes: “as a prophet of the Arabs who taught a vaguely defined monotheism, Muhammad may have existed. But beyond that, his life story is lost in the mists of legend, like those of Robin Hood and Macbeth. As a prophet of Islam, who received (or even claimed to receive) the perfect eternal book from the supreme God, Muhammad almost certainly did not exist.” And now that questions are being raised about the realities of the beginnings of Islam, Spencer goes on to conclude that, “more than ever before, historical investigators have the opportunity – in fact the responsibility – to usher Islam’s origins out of the shadows and into the light. Were they not to discharge that responsibility fully or properly, we would all be the poorer.” Thus a challenge facing the Western world is to attempt to confirm, beyond reasonable doubt, that the conventional wisdom concerning the origin and teachings of Islam are highly suspect, and then make it widely known that a reform of Islam would be beneficial for all Muslims, especially Muslim women, and for the whole world. Admittedly, this is not an easy task in view of the multitude of problems existing within Islam today.

These problems include suicide bombings, jihads, honour killings, Sharia law, female circumcision, banning girls from attending schools, and male superiority among others. Another problem is the Qur’an itself. Allah says in the Qur’an: “As for those disbelieving infidels, I will punish them with a terrible agony in this world and the next. They have no help to save them.” (Sura 3:6). Allah also exhorts Muslims to wage war against apostates and polytheists. He even commands the Islamic faithful to expand the domains of the believers by waging war against and subjugating those outside the fold (9:29), including those among the “People of the Book” who disbelieve (98:6). In other words, those monotheists who dare to reject the claims of the Qur’an. These are just a few examples of the misguided teaching being injected into the impressionable minds of Muslim youth in Madrassas. No wonder many of them are turning out to be suicide bombers. Obviously the Qur’an cannot be the voice of a non-existent Allah, and also there is evidence that it has undergone extensive revision consistent with the likelihood that it was developed over time by a series of people. In the end, the final version is a complicated and difficult to interpret document in which the philologist Gerd-R. Puin notes, “every fifth sentence or so simply doesn’t make sense.” Over time various Islamic scholars have attempted to clarify the contents of the Qur’an in a multitude of Hadiths, but the Hadiths themselves are often confusing and in some cases contradictory.

Another major concern is that, by its nature, Islam is unapologetically a political faith, discouraging separation of religion from the state. A prime example is Iran, where Ayatollahs have inordinate power. Currently this nation is threatening to develop atomic weapons, thus jeopardizing the stability of the whole Middle East. Also threatening stability is the conflict between Suni and Shia Muslims, such as is occurring in Iraq and Syria.

So with the multiplicity of problems cited above, are there any actions the West might take to minimize the ongoing threats? In the long run, surely the solution is to convince the Muslims of the future that many of their long-held beliefs are misguided and that secular democracies are superior to religious states. If this seems impossible, we must remember that it took Christianity fifteen hundred or more years before the dictatorial Roman Catholic Church ceased burning supposed heretics at the stake. Aiding in the abandonment of these barbaric practices was the Protestantism of Martin Luther and John Calvin. So what Islam needs is a Martin Luther type individual who can bring Islam into the twenty-first century. To be sure, fervent believers in Islam have resisted and continue to resist any investigation into the premise of their belief system, and any who have pursued this line of inquiry often labour under the threat of death. But now more than ever before, historical investigators have the opportunity – in fact the responsibility – to usher Islam’s origin out of the shadows and into the light. It remains to be seen whether a Muslim leader of the caliber of Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, or Nelson Mandela will come forward and

attempt to instigate reform, but in the meantime there may be some hope with the Muslim youth who have rebelled in some Arab countries, aided to some extent by the social media and the Internet. The road ahead will be difficult for moderate Muslim youth, because the fundamentalists will try to form theocracies as has happened in Iran, but at least there is a ray of sunshine from this bottom-up approach.

There is also a ray of hope emanating from the literary and public speaking efforts of two brave women. One is the Canadian Irshad Manji, author of *The Trouble with Islam Today: Faith Without Fear* (2004) and *Allah Liberty and Love* (2011). The other woman is the Somali native Ayaan Hirsi Ali, author of *The Caged Virgin: Emancipation Proclamation for Women and Islam* (2002-2004), *Infidel* (2006-2007), and *Nomad: From Islam to America: A Personal Journey Through a Clash of Civilizations* (2010). Both of these women have courageously laid bare many of the nonsensical and even sometimes barbaric practices and features of Islam even though they have received death threats and require bodyguards. For anyone wishing to learn more of what goes on inside Islam, these books are highly recommended.

Before the Renaissance, the Arabs were ahead of the West in areas of science and particularly mathematics. They provided the West with Arabic numbers, algebra, the inclusion of zero in the number system and decimals. (Some of this may have come from India). And fortunately they managed to preserve the writings of the Greek philosophers and other authors until they were rediscovered in the West at the time of the Renaissance. But as the West pulled ahead, Islam stagnated and has failed to move into modern ways of thinking. Hopefully before the time Islam is fifteen hundred years old, the current threats of fundamentalist Islamists will have ceased. And as mentioned above, the Muslim people and the world deserve no less. Yes, surely it is now time for reform. (DAH)

Barry Goldwater Quote

Mark my word, if and when these preachers get control of the [Republican] party, and they're sure trying to do so, it's going to be a terrible damn problem. Frankly, these people frighten me. Politics and governing demand compromise. But these Christians believe they are acting in the name of God, so they can't and won't compromise. I know, I've tried to deal with them.

Solstice Photos



Paul at the Keyboard



Helpers Noelle and Brett

More Solstice Photos



Don and Olive



Terri



Serious Looking HALA Board Members



Overall View



Jane, Andre, Marianne and Gina



Camille, Richard, Betty, David and Amelia

Special Announcement

The January Meeting of the Humanist Association of London and Area will take the form of a debate. Please note the changes from the regular meeting time and place.

Topic of debate: That Government Funding for Ontario Catholic Schools Should be Abolished.

Participants: Justin Trottier, Skeptic, Secularist and Media Personality from the Centre for Inquiry *versus* Patrick Dunne, Professor, Kings College, Past Director of Education for the London Catholic School Board.

Date and Time: Thursday January 24th, 2014, at 5:30 p.m.

Place: Room 40, Health Sciences Building – University of Western Ontario.

A poster giving directions and parking locations will be sent out prior to January 24th.

Some Truthful Humour

