



The Enlightenment



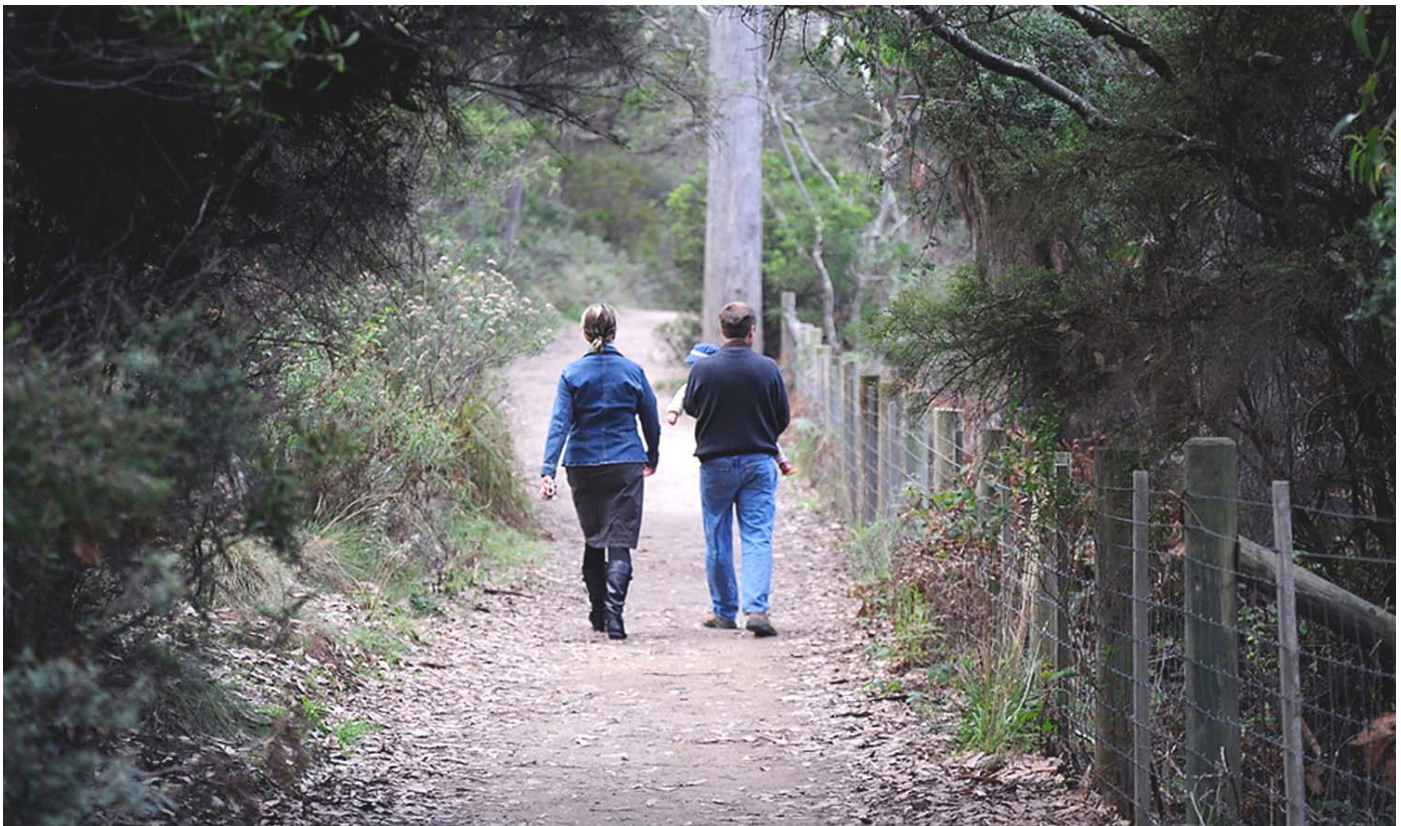
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The Journey From Belief to Non-belief



Modifying Religious Beliefs Along the Pathway of Life

Life is often described as an ongoing journey with a beginning, an extended middle and an end. It begins with the miracle of birth and ends with inevitable death, both of which are normally beyond our control. Between these milestones there are times when we have no control over ensuing events, and times when we do. How we handle situations over which we do not have control or over which we do have control, can have significant influences on the kinds of lives we will ultimately live. Take for instance, the matter of beliefs. We will have little control over the religious beliefs (or non-belief) that our parents wish us to acquire, but as we grow older we have the option of retaining these beliefs (or non-belief) or of rejecting them and progressing on to something else. Changing beliefs is the central theme of this issue of *The Enlightenment*.

President's Remarks

Due to work and family demands, Dave Mabee has unfortunately found it necessary to resign his position as HALA Board member responsible for membership. Although he is stepping down from the Board, he expects to continue attending regular monthly HALA meetings. I want to take this opportunity to thank Dave for the great job he has done in this role, bringing our membership to a record high this year. I also want to extend all our best wishes to him and his wife as they await the arrival of their first child. I'm pleased to announce that Walter Heywood, one of our current Board members, has agreed to take over the membership duties, and that Peter Evans has accepted the Board's invitation to a pro tem appointment as Board Member at Large for the remainder of the year. I want to thank both of these individuals for taking on these duties, and I look forward to working with them over the coming months.

As the warm spring weather brings renewed life, singing birds, beautiful flowers, and green leaves on the trees, we look forward to the joyful days of summer ahead. Bill and Pat Chefurka have kindly offered their charming rural location again this year for our HALA picnic, which will be held on Sunday, July 11. I hope all of you will be able to attend and enjoy a fun time of socializing. Unfortunately, I have to miss the picnic this year because I'll be teaching in Switzerland. I'll certainly be thinking of you that afternoon, and will be back for our regular meeting in July. Whatever your travel or vacation plans may be over the next few months, I want to wish all of you a very refreshing, relaxing, safe, and enjoyable summer. ~ Rod.

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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.

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Setting the Scene For Modifying Beliefs

Individuals who are raised by humanist-minded parents will not likely be exposed to, or encouraged to adopt any kind of religious beliefs, but they will instead be encouraged to adopt and practise a moral and ethical life stance. Children who are raised by secular parents who have no religious affiliation, and don't think much about matters of belief or non-belief, will likely continue to follow the secular life stance of their parents. It is those who are raised in a religious environment who will have to decide whether or not to retain their indoctrinated beliefs throughout their life's journey. The majority of believers will not desire much change, but will continue to enjoy the social aspects and the rituals of their church, while at the same time not questioning or even caring much about the theology of their denomination. It is those individuals who begin to have doubts or become skeptical about what they are expected to believe, who might request help in sorting out their thoughts. It is realized that it will be difficult for some doubters to leave their old beliefs behind without being assured that there are reasonable and logical reasons for making a change. The following discourse is an attempt to help doubting, skeptical, critical-thinking people consider the available alternatives and make a choice that they are comfortable with.

Beliefs Versus Non-Belief

Traditional Christian Beliefs

Jesus was the divine son of God, one part of the Holy Trinity, born of a virgin and bodily resurrected.

Jesus died on the cross to atone for original sin and the sins of believers.

The Bible is the divine word of God, to be taken literally, (mainly a fundamentalist belief.)

Humans possess a soul that survives death and lives on in some form of afterlife.

There is a divine, all-powerful, all-knowing, benevolent, supernatural deity somewhere in the universe, able to answer prayer and influence events on earth.

As stated above, any person contemplating abandonment of former beliefs and acceptance of alternatives will want to be presented with logical, reasonable and convincing reasons to do so. A few are listed below:

The Trinity – The enigmatic Trinity is never mentioned in the Bible. It was invented by the early church fathers at the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE at the insistence of the Emperor Constantine in order to put an end to the bickering of the various Christian sects that were arguing over the divinity of Jesus. It was purely a political move by Constantine to promote unity in the Empire.

Non-belief Alternatives

Jesus was fully human, possessing no supernatural qualities.

Non-belief in the blood atonement.

The Bible is a human construct.

Body and soul are one, and the possibility of an afterlife is extremely remote.

The possible existence of a supernatural deity is extremely remote.

This concept, that has lasted for 1700 years, is prevalent in hymns and in the names of many churches, and is repeated ad nauseam using the words "Father, Son and Holy Spirit" at endless religious occasions. The Trinity makes very little sense and its abandonment should be considered. The Unitarians sensibly did this 400 years ago.

Virgin Birth and Bodily Resurrection. – There are many myths from ancient times that talk about virgin births and resurrections three days after burial. The writers of the gospels obviously picked up on these myths, and used them as an aid to transform Jesus, a human Jewish sage, into the supernatural Jesus Christ of the gospels.

The Blood Atonement – This, one of the main tenets of devout Christians, has to be one of the most improbable of beliefs. The arguments against it are legendary. How can professing to believe in "Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" simply wash away the sins of believers and guarantee them a place in heaven, while excluding all others? What about all the good-living Jews, Buddhists and other citizens of the world? What about all those who lived before the time of Jesus? Yet every Sunday, in the order of service of many Christian churches, an "Assurance of Pardon" is recited, ending with the words "we are forgiven." Logic would suggest that this practice should be discarded.

Original Sin – The following clever poem by Unitarian Anne Schultz goes a long way to putting original sin in its proper perspective:

I've thought it all over. What could it have been?
Was it really--original sin?
Was it pride, disobedience, envy or lust?
Or gluttony, arrogance, greed, breach of trust?
Intellectual pride, ambition for glory?
None quite seems to fit the true facts of the story.
When the question was asked, "Who has disobeyed?
Did each one acknowledge the part he had played?
Adam, true gentleman right from the start,
Lost not a moment disclaiming his part.
"Twas not I," said he. "I was pleased with my diet.
That woman you gave me, she forced me to try it."
And Eve? "Twas the serpent that promised so much--
That the fruit was sweet-tasting and pleasant to touch--
Of all the fruits in the garden the most healthful kind,
Warming the heart and expanding the mind."
And the serpent? "I played on their weakness--true,
But the weaknesses there were created by you."
Original sin? Still with us worse luck.
The original sin was passing the buck

Jesus Jesus the man was a fully human Jewish prophet (probably considered a Rabbi) whose mission was to prepare the Jewish people for the Kingdom of God on earth. He most likely had no thought of preaching to the Gentiles. Then there is Jesus the Christ, the central pillar of the Christian Religion. He is considered by most devout Christians to be a unique individual, born of a virgin, resurrected and ascended into heaven. It is claimed he died on the cross to atone for the sins of believers. Jesus the Christ is the resurrected Jesus portrayed in the Gospels and the Epistles, who also later became the Christ of faith, as promoted by the early Church fathers.

One of the most miraculous marketing exercises in history has to be the promotion of the supernatural Jesus Christ as the divine son of God by the early Roman Church, aided of course by the Emperor Constantine who declared Christianity to be the official religion of the Roman Empire. Nothing else has had such a profound influence, both good and bad, on western civilization. We even use the supposed birth date of Jesus as the benchmark of our dating system. Today, fundamentalist Christians believe implicitly in the supernatural Jesus, but many liberal Christians are now questioning some of the supernatural aspects of the man. And of course, as society becomes more and more secular, humanists and many other non-believers view Jesus mainly as an historical figure of some importance.

The Bible is the Divine Word of God – Modern scholarship has determined without question that the Bible is a human construct. The books from Genesis to Kings were assembled by a group of scholars at the time of the Babylonian captivity around 550 BCE. The remainder of the books in the Old Testament were added after the return from Babylon up until about the third century BCE. The seven books of the Apocrypha were also written in that era. The authenticity of the Old Testament, written in Hebrew, was verified by the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Fragments of all the Old Testament books, except Esther, have been found in the caves and the wording is very close or identical to the wording we have today. The New Testament did not approach its present form until the fourth century CE, after several synods were held by the Roman Church fathers, who selected the canonical books from the literature then available. Although they had a variety of works to choose from, they chose only those that dovetailed with the beliefs that the early church was expounding. It is interesting to read some of the books that were rejected, for in many cases they express views that differ from the selected New Testament books. Some of these other gospels consider Jesus as fully human rather than divine.

Although there are inconsistencies and ambiguities in the Bible, it should not be thrown away. It is a great piece of literature, and the most popular book ever written. The books of Ecclesiastes and Proverbs contain much wisdom. Many scholarly treatises have been written on the book of Job, and the book of Ruth is one of the world's great love stories. The book of Esther tells of the potential power of a clever woman. The 23rd Psalm and numerous other frequently-quoted passages have given comfort to many over the centuries, and it would be wrong to take that away from them as they near the end of their journey. Read the Bible if you wish, but keep it in perspective and be mindful of the myths and metaphors.

The Afterlife – The concept of an afterlife and a heaven goes back a long way in history. It was prevalent among the Egyptians, who built mammoth pyramids to help speed their pharaohs on their way to the next life. One theory of the origin of a life beyond death concerns dreams. Everyone has dreams about relatives or friends who have passed on, so it seems logical that primitive people naturally assumed that these deceased people are alive in some form, living somewhere else, i.e., heaven. This is a simple theory, but who is to say it is not true? In any case the humanist message today is to live life to the fullest, because this is all there is.

God – Abandoning belief in a supernatural God is a tough process for many, but the arguments for the non-existence of God are legendary and quite convincing. Why would a benevolent, all-powerful God allow so much human suffering in the world in the form of natural disasters and debilitating illnesses? Surely an all-knowing, all-powerful God would know when natural disasters are going to occur and would have the power to stop them. There are, however, no signs that God intervenes on this earth in any way, or that prayers are answered. Nevertheless, there are those who will want to look for a substitute for the supernatural "guy in

the sky,” and this is dealt with later in this discourse. In the meantime, the following excerpt from William Edelen’s book *Earthrise*, presents excellent reasons for wishing to be “Free of the Biblical God.”

Blessed are the Atheists, Agnostics, Deists, Mystics, Humanists, Free Thinkers, Taoists, Buddhists, and all others who do not have an archaic, anthropomorphic, supernatural God in their mind/brains.

Blessed are they for they do not participate in holy wars, Jihads or Crusades.

Blessed are they for they do not believe that God is on their side.

Blessed are they for they would never be martyrs for the “Glory of God.”

Blessed are they for they do not condemn others as heretics or infidels.

Blessed are they for they do not participate in sectarian violence, nor molest little Catholic girls (or boys) in religious schools.

Blessed are they for they do not conduct inquisitions nor slaughter millions of women as witches.

Blessed are they who do not twist biblical words to condemn homosexuality as a sin, nor condemn a woman’s right to choose.

Blessed are they who would never say that a terrorist act is a punishment against those who do not believe or think as they do.

Blessed are they who know that the only hell that exists is right here on earth created by man. And that it is in the hands of humans alone to create a heaven on earth through intelligence, empathy and love. An added bonus --- those who do not believe in hell do not possess the insidious fear that they might end up in the torturous underworld through the committing of sins.

From the foregoing evidence, surely we can conclude that humans created God (and gods) in their image, rather than the other way around. But the non-existence of a supernatural God, does not prevent us from looking for alternatives that provide non-believers with the same comforts believers say they receive from believing in God.

It is now well-documented, using brain-imaging techniques, that religious experiences can induce very satisfying feelings of spirituality or awe and wonder into the minds of believers. Surely non-believers should also be able to, and be entitled to, experience these same wonderful feelings, and indeed they can. William Edelen asks the question, “What is there in a life without belief in an anthropomorphic, supernatural God? What remains of our spiritual quest?” His answer is: “EVERYTHING. Sacred reality remains. It would be a way of life founded on the sacredness of our very existence. A life lived in the pursuit of truth, excellence, wisdom and love.” Yes indeed, feelings of awe and wonder can come from meditation, from the beauty of nature absorbed during a walk in the woods or standing on the rim of the Grand Canyon, from listening to great music, from being present at the birth of a child, from making a new discovery or from falling in love, to name just a few. And there are also the unknown mysteries of the

universe still to be discovered. As Einstein remarked, “The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the course of all true art and science.”

Einstein also said...“the teachers of religion must have the stature to give up the superstitious image of a personal god.” He goes on to say, “I believe in Spinoza’s God who reveals himself in the beauty and harmony of all that exists, but not in a God who concerns himself with the fate and doings of mankind. Spinoza was the first philosopher to deal with the body and soul as one and not two separate things. I do not believe in immortality, one life is enough for me.”

Lao-Tsu, the grand old master of Taoism equates the Tao (the way, or God) with the rhythm of the universe. The Taoists say...“in order to see God, watch a cucumber cucumbering, look into a wood fire and see the suns energy dancing as captured by photosynthesis, watch a hawk riding the wind, or watch salmon swimming upstream to spawn, or just look in the mirror.” In a similar vein, the Gnostic teacher Monoimus expressed his concept of God in the following manner: “Look for God by taking yourself as the starting point. Learn who is within you, who makes everything his own and says, my God, my mind, my soul my body. Learn the sources of sorrow, joy, love and hate. If you examine these matters you will find them in yourself.”

Finally, some people who abandon belief in the traditional supernatural monotheistic God simply stop there and do not bother looking for any alternative nor show much concern for the ascetics of life. But others want more than just rejecting belief in the traditional God. They want to live to the fullest on this journey of life, and enjoy the maximum life has to offer here and now on our miraculous planet earth. It is hoped that the last few paragraphs give some suggestions of how that can come about, and that the earlier paragraphs present a convincing case, as Sigmund Freud said, for leaving the old ideas of God and religion behind. Those who were brought up as believers and become non-believers, who abide by humanist principles, and who adopt a moral and ethical life stance, will indeed become true humanists. (DAH).

Happiness and Giving

Recently there have been articles in the news media about happiness. Where do the happiest people live and just what is it that makes people happy? Research carried out at the University of Leicester in England in 2006 revealed that the happiest people reside in Denmark, followed by Switzerland, Austria and Iceland. Canada placed 10th out of 178 countries. For what makes people happy, read on.

As would be expected, there are various causes of happiness. For people living in slums, the amount of money they possess will have a profound effect on their happiness, but for people whose basic needs of financial security, health care and education are satisfied, more money does not necessarily bring more happiness. Indeed it is often remarked that people who never seem to be satisfied, and continually strive to acquire more material possessions, are really not all that happy. Instead, research results show that two things that do generate a lot of happiness are giving and participating in worthwhile causes to help people in need. Another important factor is the nature of a person’s employment. People who love their work are, as would be expected, significantly happier than those who are not satisfied with their career.

Some surveys reveal that religious people are healthier and happier than the non-religious. This may be true, but secular Denmark, as stated above, is the happiest country in the world. Other surveys reveal that religious people give more money to charitable causes than do the non-religious. A recent Maclean’s article entitled, “Do Atheists Care Less?” reveals that a churchgoer will donate an average of \$1038 per year compared to \$295 by non-churchgoers. But I suspect that if humanists were singled out, their givings would approach that of churchgoers, and that they also experience feelings of happiness from helping others. Two of the world’s greatest philanthropists are Warren Buffet and Bill Gates, who

are not religious people, but consider themselves to be agnostics. I think it can be agreed that all humanists, atheists and agnostics alike, welcome an obligation to help make the world a better place and earn the right to be called Happy Humanists, as the HC logo suggests. (DAH).

Brainwashing

Brainwashing occurs in various forms. Perhaps the most severe form is that inflicted on political prisoners whose captors wish to bend their minds in order to shift their views to that of the captors or to force false confessions. Then there is the propaganda genre that Hitler used in order to convince a significant number of Germans that they constituted a superior race and that it was legitimate to use force to recover the German territories that had been taken from them after the first World War. And there is also the insidious brainwashing used by religious cult leaders like Jim Jones, who convinced his followers to commit suicide.

A more subtle form of brainwashing is that used by the Catholic Church to indoctrinate the minds of their young people with Catholic doctrines and beliefs. These include the premise that, if a person observes all the prescribed sacraments, he or she is guaranteed a place in heaven; that a priest is required to act as an intermediary between a person and God; and that the pope is infallible. At an older age, Catholics are discouraged from using artificial birth control and encouraged to produce children. All of this may seem innocent enough, but many of these beliefs are highly questionable. Discouraging birth control increases the risk of world overpopulation and the spreading of AIDs, particularly in developing countries. Fortunately, many thoughtful Catholics in the western world are aware of at least some of the brainwashing and do not adhere to all of the teachings of their church.

Of more concern is the brainwashing inflicted on the minds of religious-right fundamentalist Christians, particularly in the United States. They are urged to believe in all the supernatural Christian phenomena, as well as creationism, and to actively proselytize their beliefs. Concern centers on the reality that some of the fundamentalists strongly believe that it is their solemn duty to influence governments and eventually establish a theocratic state. Some of these groups are well organized and have considerable financial backing. It is incumbent on humanists and other like-minded people, where possible, to help prevent these avid fundamentalists from becoming more powerful in governmental affairs.

In addition to religious brainwashing, there is also political brainwashing. The current health-care debate in the U.S. is a prime example of this practice. The health insurance companies, the drug companies and others are spending millions, often covertly, on lobbying to convince Americans that Obama's health care plan is infringing on their right to choose. Those easily influenced believe that it is socialistic which, in their opinion, is equivalent to communism. Conservative talk-radio hosts are aiding and abetting in these attacks on Obama and the democrats. To those people living in democratic countries with universal health care, these tactics are abominable. They can hardly believe that Americans would not welcome health care for everyone. The use of well-funded, powerful lobbyists to brainwash a sometimes-gullible public, is a major flaw in the U.S. democratic system. It is in serious need of reformation, but don't expect reform any time soon.

Why is it, that here in the 21st century, the religious and political brainwashing outlined above is so prevalent, and why are so many people believing it? In the United States, one reason has to be their inferior education system. It is well recognized by President Obama, and others, that vast improvements are needed if the U.S. is to compete economically with the rest of the world. In the process, it is to be hoped that students will be encouraged to think critically and not accept everything they hear at face value without asking questions. Then, perhaps a time will come when almost half the American population will not believe that humans and dinosaurs roamed the earth together about 6000 years ago.