



The Enlightenment

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The 2014 HALA Wolf Performance Hall Event

Losing Faith in Faith

With Dan Barker

Please mark your calendar for **Wednesday June 11th**, and attend Dan Barker's presentation of **Losing Faith in Faith** at 7:00 p.m. at the Wolf Performance Hall at the London Central Library. Admission is free.

Dan Barker is a prominent American atheist activist who served as a Christian preacher and musician for 19 years, but left the Christian Church in 1984. He, along with his wife Annie Laurie Gainer, is co-president of the Freedom From Religion Foundation, based in Madison Wisconsin. Dan has written several books including *Losing Faith in Faith: From Preacher to Atheist* and *Godless: How an Evangelical Preacher Became One of Americas Leading Atheists*.

The Freedom From Religion Foundation, (FFRF) founded in 1978, is the largest national organization promoting separation of Church and State and is supported by over 20,000 members from all 50 states. FFRF publishes a newspaper *Freethought Today* and produces the *Freethought Radio* show.

Please plan to attend and bring one or more friends. We want to fill the Hall.

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 11
7-8 PM

FROM PREACHER TO ATHEIST



**LOSING
FAITH IN FAITH**

CENTRAL LIBRARY
251 Dundas Street - Wolf Performance Hall

Free
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in Citi Plaza during library hours

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Losing Faith in Faith

By Goldwin Emerson

Each year a number of conscientious believers are prepared and instructed for the Protestant Christian ministry. They are usually thoughtful, caring, intelligent young students who have special training in theology, counselling, and group leadership. It may be, that the same kind of candidates are also trained as Roman Catholic priests, but I do not have current knowledge of how Catholic priests are educated so I will address my comments mainly to the development of Protestant clergy.

Frequently, they are filled with enthusiasm, and love of God, and are motivated towards the betterment of human kind. But it is a sad fact that some, after a few years, begin to doubt whether or not they have chosen the correct career path. They will doubt their own ability to bring about positive changes in church membership, or in the growth of Christian devotion, and in the strong beliefs they originally possessed earlier in their training and careers. Those clergy who are reflective and are self-analytical may begin to wonder about their own effectiveness in bringing the Christian gospel to their congregants with sufficient clarity and enthusiasm. Others, perhaps not so self-critical, may begin to question the effectiveness of the Christian message in changing the minds and actions of their parishioners. They may not feel that what they are preaching has made a sufficient difference in the everyday lives of those to whom they preach. Still others, may begin to have doubts about theological concepts that they felt enthusiastic and clear about in their earlier years of training.

In my own religious journey of over 50 years of association with Protestant faith, I have come to believe that doubt is not such a bad approach in clarifying Christian thought. At least, when compared to blind faith or thoughtless acceptance of whatever one is told to believe without serious questioning, having some doubts may be a significant improvement.

Many Christians who we have come to respect highly were filled with doubts from time to time. Even in the life of Jesus, his words taken from the scriptures express his inner doubts at the time of the crucifixion. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Mother Teresa, in her book of letters, expressed serious doubts, at times even wondering whether or not God exists. Saint Thomas, the Apostle, and John the Baptist, similarly wrestled with doubts. These are not signs of weakness, but signs of using their reflective and rational mental faculties. They were intelligent people trying to comprehend reality.

In the smaller Protestant religious sects, statistics on clergy leaving their professions, both in United States and Canada, are surprising. Approximately 1500 to 1700 clergy leave the ministry each month. Although there are 4000 new churches built each year, there are approximately 7000 churches that close. Most conscientious clergy work from 55 to 75 hours per week and many are discouraged by persistent disagreements among their parishioners. Many who remain within their ministry do so because they openly recognize that it would be difficult to turn to new occupations.

I personally know three former Protestant ministers whom I count as my friends, who have left the ministry. Each of them is intelligent, caring and thoughtful. They are all excellent communicators and ethical people who care about making the world a better place for everyone. After leaving the ministry, each has been successful in the work he has taken on and each is a pleasure to have as an acquaintance.

Since one of these former ministers will be coming to visit London on June 11th, 2014, I will mention his name here. He is Dan Barker and he will be speaking at Wolf Performance Hall on the evening of June 11th about why and how he left his work as a clergyman. Everyone, both of religious persuasions, or non-religious persuasions, is invited to hear his interesting story. This is a free event sponsored jointly by the London Public Library and the Humanist Association of London and Area. You will not be asked to change any of your beliefs, but those who attend will leave better informed. See page one for more details..

Book Review

The Age of Atheists – By Peter Watson

How We Have Sought to Live Since the Death of God

In the Introduction to *The Age of Atheists*, Peter Watson states: “how to live without God, and how to find meaning in a secular world, is a grand theme that has been touched on by a number of the more daring modernist writers, artists and scientists, but has never before been gathered together, as far as I know, into a master narrative.” Gathering together is what he has done, outlining the thoughts and conclusions of about one hundred non-believers who have lived since Nietzsche proclaimed that “God is Dead” in 1882. These individuals include philosophers, poets, novelists, painters, psychologists, psychiatrists, scientists, educators and others. Of the total, only about a third would be known to most readers.

The fundamental question raised in the discourse is this; now that Christianity is gradually fading away in most of the Western world, what kind of life-style can successfully replace it in the ensuing secular environment? As would be expected, the individuals cited in the book do not provide one simple universal formula for moving from a religious society toward a secular one. For example, some will say there is no such thing as secular spirituality or secular transcendence; others will say there definitely is. Some may say religions have nothing to offer secularists, while others will say that secularists should cherry pick the good things about churches, such as their sense of community. Many humanists will adamantly state that in no way is humanism a religion! Nonetheless, there are a few who will posit that humanism can be considered as a religion if it is void of the supernatural. Others may say that science is science and the arts are the arts, and never the twain shall meet. But others will say that the two are compatible, in that understanding the scientific details of an aesthetic phenomenon actually enhances it. Think of a rainbow. Understanding how the rainbow is formed by light refracting through raindrops adds to its beauty, rather than detracting from the enjoyment of the phenomenon.

Obviously, there is no unity amongst secularists on many issues, but there is one aspect that all the non-believers mentioned in the book agree on, and that is this. Christianity should be encouraged to fade away, because it is based on false supernatural premises and on questionable human creations. They will argue that surely in our Darwinian world, it is time to forego belief in a supernatural God and a supernatural son of this God, as well as realize that the enigmatic creeds and the Trinity did not originate on high, but were invented by humans. Also it should be stressed that the Bible is a human construct, not the divine word of God. While it will be difficult to convince devout believers of the shortcomings of their religion, more and more young people are realizing the falseness of Christian claims and this will aid in speeding up the secularization of societies. In the end, the challenge is to determine just what actions will best result in a more peaceful, more prosperous free society? Does Watson offer practical suggestions? Read on.

To begin with, Watson has certainly succeeded in gathering together the thoughts and opinions of a multitude of daring modernist non-believers into one 600 page compendium. There are philosophers including Bertrand Russell, John Dewey, George Santayana, Karl Marx, Martin Heidegger, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Richard Rorty, Jurgen Habermas, Jean Paul Sartre, Simon de Beauvoir, Emile Durkheim, Albert Camus, Steven Pinker and Ronald Dworkin. There are authors, playwrights, poets and painters including Henrik Ibsen, George Bernard Shaw, W. B. Yeats, James Joyce, Henry James, Aldous Huxley, W.H. Auden, Virginia Woolf, T. S. Eliot, Samuel Beckett, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Benjamin Spock, Claude Monet and Paul Cezanne. There are the psychoanalysts Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung and scientists Niels

Bohr, Albert Einstein, E. O. Wilson and Jonas Salk. And of course, there are comments from the so-called “New Atheists,” Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris and Daniel Dennett.

There are chapters devoted to the two World Wars, mentioning that Nietzsche is sometimes blamed for both. The connection between religion and Nazism is explored. There is a chapter on the Holocaust posing the theodicy question – how could an omnipotent, benevolent God allow such a calamity to happen? Orthodox Jews offer excuses for God, while Reformed Jews really have no easy answers. There is a chapter on the “anything goes” sixties, and a section entitled “Better Living Through Chemistry,” documenting the attempts to achieve transcendence with psychedelic drugs such as magic mushrooms and LSD. Timothy Leary was one of the main exponents of this phenomenon.

There is a great chapter entitled “Our Spiritual Goal is the Enrichment of the Evolutionary Epic,” with thoughtful comments by Daniel Dennett, Richard Dawkins, E.O. Wilson, Steven Pinker and Theodore Roszak among others. In the penultimate chapter, “The Good Life is the Life Spent Seeking the Good Life,” Watson sketches the thoughts of a number of philosophers in how to live meaningfully in a secular society.

In the final chapter, Watson reminds us that the exercise of searching for meaning in a life without God is an activity engaged in by a privileged few. He notes that a significant majority of individuals are not “metaphysical types” and seek no deep meaning in existence. They just get on with their lives, making ends meet, living from day to day, enjoying themselves untroubled by matters that so perplex academics. They are the most secular people of all, and perhaps the most content. And it must also unfortunately, be recognized that there are countless others who live in circumstances so meager and fraught with material difficulties, that there is no time for reflection on much else. These are the people who are often attracted to the fundamentalist components of religions.

So the reality is I think, that *The Age of Atheists* will not likely attract a wide readership outside of academia, even though it is an easy, most informative and interesting read. In my view there could have been more discussion on the practical realities of secularism, now that it is evident that the fast track to secular, societies with less religiosity is through economic prosperity, with academic discussion being less of a factor. Nevertheless, I learned a lot from the book and thoroughly enjoyed reading it. I highly recommend it to those interested in learning the views of a wide variety of twentieth century non-believers.

Finally, I want to point out an error concerning Nietzsche, who is referred to throughout the book. Nietzsche was not mad in 1882 when he stated, “God is dead,” in *The Gay Science*. He did not go mad until 1889. As Watson notes, it is often difficult to translate Nietzsche’s thoughts from German to English, and as a result he is often misunderstood. The following article attempts to unravel some of the misconceptions about Nietzsche and I think readers may find it helpful. (DAH).

Thus Spake Friedrich Nietzsche

After reading a book or treatise written by a philosopher, I usually sit back and try to grasp and summarize the message and thoughts of the author. Sometimes this is easy, sometimes it requires considerable cogitation, and sometimes it can be very difficult, particularly after reading some of Nietzsche’s books.

Nietzsche is one of the most profound, enigmatic and ultimately one of the most controversial philosophers in the whole Western canon. He has been variously appropriated, venerated, vilified, or simply misunderstood. Many books have been written by various authors attempting to get inside the mind of this

great genius and clarify his ideas. Some of these books are helpful while other analyses, such as the following excerpt taken from *Basic Teachings of the Great Philosophers* by S.E Frost Jr., are not so helpful.

“Nietzsche had no use for equality or anything that suggested democracy. The will to power is his dominant idea. The most powerful have the right to win. If others are weaker and are unable to survive, that is good. The weak should be destroyed to make way for the strong. Slavery seems perfectly natural to him; and he feels that women, being weaker than men, cannot be expected to have the same rights as men. Since inequality is characteristic of nature, and the natural state of man, it is unnatural to replace it with a forced equality.”

It is most unfortunate that the above summary of Nietzsche’s philosophy is prevalent in some circles. It was probably this mode of thinking that Hitler used in his attempt to justify the superiority of the Aryan race. Also, this concept of a master/slave relationship is definitely a misrepresentation of Nietzsche’s overman or *Übermensch*, as is pointed out later in this discourse.

One of the best interpretations of Nietzsche’s ideas that I have discovered is a three-page article by Jeanette Lowen in the August/September 2007 issue of *Free Inquiry* magazine. The article must be read in its entirety to get the full meaning, but I will attempt to summarize her analysis.

Nietzsche said: “The story I have to tell is the history of the next two centuries, a tribute to the philosophy of the future. Man’s task is simple. He should cease letting his existence be a thoughtless accident. All our concepts (aim, unity, purpose, truth, justice) are in need of a comprehensive examination. If ‘God is dead,’ how is it possible for us now to interpret the world and give meaning to our lives? How can we endure such an experience and overcome it?” Even in his day, many Europeans were beginning to think that the Christian Church had become too ritualized, and too detached from the cultural and moral problems that had arisen as a side effect of an overly mechanical and deterministic world. He judged that belief in a supernatural, all-knowing, all-powerful, all-good God was unhealthy, because it distracted people from the world in the here and now. He recognized that if Christianity became redundant in people’s lives, it must be replaced with something else, such as existentialism or humanism, hopefully without a period of chaos, which would afford an opportunity to rethink the aims and goals of human life. Destruction can bring reconstruction. From this springs his demand for a revaluation of all values. How can nihilism be overcome and life affirmed without illusion? This problem remained at the center of his life which was devoted to discovering a new source of cultural and moral strength.

Nietzsche considered himself a psychologist as well as a philosopher. His major psychological theory is that all human behavior, all human life, is basically motivated by the “will to power.” He did not mean that people wanted to overpower each other physically, but that they wanted to gain power and control over their own passions, or in other words, to organize chaos and create joy. He found more power in self-control, art and philosophy than in the subjugation of others. A person of strong will to power is in a liberating position to reverse his or her fundamental life project completely, and thereby become a person who is, in a sense, “reborn.”

He saw that the possibility of achieving healthy, creative individual lives (and a healthy culture) depended upon surpassing the nihilism and despair of the modern era. To this end he introduced the aforementioned concept of the overman. Despite the enduring confusion of this term, the overman is not a superman; rather the overman embodies the approach to life whereby the fully human being has organized the chaos of his passions; given style to his character, and become creative. Aware of life’s terrors he affirms life without resentment. The overman represents a this-world antithesis to God – one who has taken on the task of

surpassing himself and society, who, instead of conceiving perfection as a given, has taken on the quest of “becoming” something more than was ever before. Nietzsche’s philosophy is the overture to a new kind of human being.

Nietzsche makes a distinction between happiness and joy. He says, “The goal of human life is not happiness but joy.” His feeling of joy is his formula for the greatness of a human being. “The person who experiences this joy is the powerful person,” one who gives meaning to his or her life, “continuing to grow and exalting in every moment.”

For more than a hundred years Nietzsche has been a key figure on the intellectual and cultural landscape. Whether you are for him or against him, he must be reckoned with. One contemporary scholar considers Nietzsche’s work as “nothing less than the challenge of thought, and a challenge to think.” Nietzsche argued that philosophers have a responsibility, not only to interpret the world, but to change it for the better. What he sought was to make us ready for “change,” to recharge our awareness that humanity has a history that has been “de-formed,” and that the end of the religious-moral interpretation of the world offers the possibility of another beginning.

It would appear that Nietzsche accurately predicted the existentialism that arose in the 20th century as well as the decline of religion that has occurred in Europe. He reasoned that during the 20th and 21st centuries, these trends would continue, hopefully without excessive chaos, and by the year 2100 some of his concepts for improving the lot of humanity would begin to be utilized. He did not, of course, predict the regrettable present rise of monotheistic radical fundamentalism and Islamic terrorism that is causing so much havoc in our world today, and is seriously delaying any progress toward the sort of society that Nietzsche envisioned.

Someone has pointed out that it took 1500 years for dogmatic Christians to stop killing infidels through crusades, inquisitions, and the burning of witches, so it may well take 1500 years since the founding of Islam, for Islamic terrorists to stop killing those they believe to be infidels. This reasoning suggests that it will take about 100 more years before Islamic children are not brought up in Madrassa schools to hate Jews and Christians, and Muslims move into the modern world. This does not bode well for the 21st century where we must deal with other serious problems as well; problems such as global warming, energy shortages, overpopulation, globalization, and environmental degradation. Humans have a lot of work to do in order to leave our descendants a world that has any chance of allowing them a peaceful prosperous existence along the lines that Nietzsche proposes, a humanist-like environment free of dogmatic religions. Let’s hope reason and common sense will prevail in the long run, but this is by no means a certainty. (DAH).

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