



# The Enlightenment



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

Volume 5

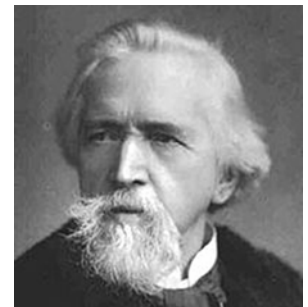
Number 4

Special Edition

## Secularism

Secularism seeks the development of the physical, moral, and intellectual nature of humans to the highest possible point as the immediate duty of life. It inculcates the practical sufficiency of natural morality apart from Theism or the Bible and selects as its methods of procedure the promotion of human improvement by material means. Secularism proposes these positive qualities as the common bond of union to all who would regulate life by reason and ennoble it by service. Implicit in secularism is the assertion that governmental practices or institutions in a secular society should exist separately from religion and/or religious beliefs.

Secularism draws its intellectual roots from Greek and Roman philosophers such as Epicurus and Marcus Aurelius and from Enlightenment thinkers like Denis Diderot, Voltaire and Thomas Paine, as well as from modern freethinkers such as Robert Ingersoll, Albert Einstein, and Richard Dawkins. The term “secularism” was first used by British writer George Holyoake in 1846. Holyoake had been imprisoned earlier for being an atheist. He was one of the fathers of the cooperative movement, and fought for issues such as education, freedom of the press, political reform and the enfranchisement of women. He edited a publication called *The Reasoner* and founded The Secular Society that later became the National Secular Society (NSS) with Charles Bradlaugh as its first president. This organization published a journal called *The Freethinker* that along with the NSS still exists today. Bradlaugh also edited a secularist newspaper called the *National Reformer* and was prosecuted by the British Government for blasphemy and sedition, but he was eventually acquitted. In 1880 he was elected Member of Parliament for Northampton, but refused to take the oath on the Bible and was not able to take his seat. He appealed and eventually he was allowed to sit in parliament. Supporting him were William Gladstone, George Bernard Shaw and John Stuart Mill.



George Holyoake



Charles Bradlaugh

Since the time of Holyoake and Bradlaugh, England has truly become a secular society where only about six or seven percent of the population attend church on a regular basis. The same applies in Western Europe, especially in Scandinavia, where religiosity is also very low. The question then naturally arises; why is religion so much more prevalent in the United States than in Europe? This special edition of *The Enlightenment* attempts to answer this question.

## President's Remarks

The Darwin lectures organized by the Humanist Association of London and Area and cosponsored by The University of Western Ontario and the London Public Library, were an unqualified success. The four presenters were:

Dr. André Lachance spoke on the importance of biology in the process of evolution.  
Donald Santor, a specialist in world religions, dealt with the educational aspects of evolution.  
Dr. Brian Alters compared "Intelligent Design" with the theory of evolution.  
Dr. Jerry Lieberman looked ahead in his presentation on the "Future of Evolution."

At the regular HALA meeting on April 9<sup>th</sup>, lawyer and London Councilor David Winninger gave an excellent presentation entitled "The Republic Revisited." And we also have interesting topics and speakers arranged for May and June. On May 14<sup>th</sup> Dr. William Harper will speak on "The Scientific Method of Sir Isaac Newton" and on June 11<sup>th</sup> Dr. James Rinehart's topic will be "Building the Creative Economy." Notices with more details will be sent out before each meeting.

The theme of this special edition of *The Enlightenment* is secularization, the secular society and the decline of religions. Contained herein are three articles that deal with various aspects of these phenomena.

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

President – Don Hatch – 472-6167 – e-mail – [dahatch@rogers.com](mailto:dahatch@rogers.com)

Vice President – Dr. Rod Martin - 673-6635 – e-mail – [ramartin@uwo.ca](mailto:ramartin@uwo.ca)

Secretary - Kate Balogh – 432-6122 – e-mail - [olgab36@hotmail.com](mailto:olgab36@hotmail.com)

Treasurer – Claire Van Daele-Boseret – 451-5962 - e-mail, [c.v.d.b@rogers.com](mailto:c.v.d.b@rogers.com)

Member at Large – Ed Ashman – 457- 9982 – e-mail, [edward017@sympatico.ca](mailto:edward017@sympatico.ca) - Promotions

Member at Large –Dave Mabee – 697-6010 – e-mail – [davemabee@rogers.com](mailto:davemabee@rogers.com) - Membership

Member at Large – Dr. André Lachance – e-mail – [lachance@uwo.ca](mailto:lachance@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 month from 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](http://www.humanists-london.org)

**New members are welcome.** Contact Membership Secretary Dave Mabee at (519) 697-6010, e-mail [davemabee@rogers.com](mailto:davemabee@rogers.com) Membership fees are listed below.

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

## Why the Difference? – Why is Europe More Secular Than America?

In his book *A Secular Age*, Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor documents the gradual secularization of Europe over a five hundred-year period, using the term “exclusive humanism” to describe the prevalent secularism that now prevails throughout much of the continent. In Chapter 14, Taylor poses these questions: Why has European society become far more secular than is the case in the United States where church attendance has not declined nearly as much? Why does close to half the population in the U.S. believe humans and dinosaurs walked the earth at the same time? Why do a few members of Congress sincerely believe there is no need to worry about global warming because the current unrest in Israel is fulfilling prophecies in the Book of Revelation, signifying that the end of the world is near at hand? Why this incredible ignorance exists in the U.S. is a bit of a mystery to Taylor. He admits he does not have satisfactory answers. He says he would be groping in the dark if he tried to fathom the reasons.

Perhaps Taylor was very wise in not attempting to answer these questions because arriving at plausible answers would necessarily require considerable research and analysis, which would probably be outside Taylor’s areas of expertise. Independent scholar Gregory Paul has done just that. His analysis and conclusions are presented in an article of considerable length in the December 2008/January 2009 issue of the *Free Inquiry* magazine entitled, “The Big Religion Question Finally Solved.” Quoting *Free Inquiry* Editor Tom Flynn, “Paul has digested vast quantities of survey data compiled on national and global scales, based on which he argues that religion is *not* a universal feature of human societies and that the much maligned secularization hypothesis is very much alive. In his new model, popular piety has less to do with metaphysics and more to do with the level of economic and social security middle-class majorities perceive themselves to enjoy. If this hypothesis is true, then if we bring more members of the human community to the social standards enjoyed by western Europeans, we might expect religions to wither away” (p23).

Paul’s article displays several graphs that conclusively demonstrate the difference in the level of secularization in first-world democracies compared with the United States. Individual letters, designating seventeen different countries, are positioned on the graphs indicating the degree of secularization or religiosity of each country. All of the countries except the U.S. are clustered together in the most secular quadrant, while the U.S. is positioned far away in the most religious quadrant. The data on one of the graphs shows conclusively that income inequality is a major factor in separating the secular countries from religious America. The rough order of the degree of secularization in the cluster, starting with the most secular, is Japan, Sweden, Denmark, France, England, Germany, Norway, New Zealand, Holland, Canada, Spain Switzerland, Australia, Austria, Italy and Ireland. The United States always stands alone, far removed from the cluster as being the most religious.

Paul points out that in most first-world democracies, secularization has occurred casually and voluntarily. There has been no visible organized atheistic movement and almost no atheistic proselytism. Hundreds of millions almost spontaneously lost interest in religion. He claims this historic occurrence dispels the notion that humans possess a compulsive desire for God. He posits that once humans are freed from the anxiety of poverty caused by income disparity, and no longer fear going bankrupt from crippling medical bills, the need for religion greatly decreases. He believes that in most modern democracies, religious faith has been, and is being reduced by three specific factors.

The first is *modern science, evolution and education*. In most progressive countries the teaching of evolution, rather than creationism and intelligent design in science classes, along with all the latest scientific findings, discourages belief in religious articles of faith. Education is a potent secularizer: every additional year of higher education tends to undermine and lessen religiosity.

The second factor, and by far the most significant in Paul's opinion, is *economic and societal security*. Poverty engenders discomfort, and want for basic needs raises stress and anxiety prompting humans to embrace religion as a source of comfort. Income inequality, along with the absence of universal health care, is a major factor in making the U.S. the most dysfunctional nation in the first world, with a declining middle class slowing down any significant move toward secularism. Middle class Americans feel anxious and fearful enough to seek the assistance of a friendly creator. In contrast, in most first-world democracies, it is more difficult to lose middle class status and very few go bankrupt due to overwhelming medical bills, a circumstance that causes a lack of interest in religion. Simply put, insecurity breeds religion, security promotes non-theism.

The third factor is *the corporate-consumer popular culture*. It is the aim of corporations to promote materialistic consumption in order to increase profits. Big business knows that when piety and pop culture square off, pop culture wins hands down. Excessive advertising promotes the habit of acquiring a wealth of materialistic possessions and encourages "keeping up with the Joneses," often by over borrowing. In particular, young people are yearning to acquire all the latest electronic gadgets as well as other things, and this segment of the population shows little interested in belonging to a church. Paul postulates that materialism is a deeper part of the human psyche and a more stable feature of human societies than religion, and that under stress-free economic conditions the theist's perpetual hope that a profound need for spirituality must eventually compel a revival of faith is mere speculation.

But the situation in the United States is somewhat different where the corporations have been running the country for the last eight years. The drug industry, the health care industry, the industrial-military complex, big oil, the gun lobby and others have made huge financial contributions to Republicans in particular and encouraged politicians to reduce taxes for the wealthy, cut social programs and thwart all attempts to establish universal health care. The mantra of the corporations and many Republicans is that the kinds of socialism prevalent in most other democracies are not wanted in the U.S. and are a threat to the freedoms Americans are entitled to enjoy. Consequently America really has no universal social safety nets to provide its citizens with a guaranteed sense of security. These are the very conditions that foster religiosity, allowing the religious right fundamentalists and evangelicals to become powerful enough to influence governments, and in fact, George W. Bush would not have been elected twice without their support. But many U.S. corporations are now in trouble, as witnessed by the auto industry and the huge lay-offs that are occurring. Their shortsighted thinking is causing the middle class to shrink even further, thus preventing many citizens from having the income needed to purchase the products produced by the corporations, who are then forced to lay off more employees, making things worse.

It is encouraging to observe that Barack Obama will be attempting to take back America for the people by standing up to the corporations and proposing to introduce universal health care, easier access to a college education, and other needed social programs. The task will not be without difficulty because the corporate powers will fight tooth and nail to prevent the changes

that Obama wants to introduce. If he is successful, the level of religiosity should decrease in the U.S., but unfortunately ominous signs are on the horizon.

When Obama commenced his campaign to become president, he knew he would face monumental challenges. These challenges included bringing an end to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and dealing with the social inequities mentioned above, as well as unprecedented annual deficits and a huge national debt. Also there are the threats of Islamic terrorism and the potential proliferation of nuclear weapons. Dependence on foreign oil and global warming are among other pressing concerns. As if these initial problems were not daunting enough, he now has to contend with the financial and economic meltdown occurring throughout the world as a result of corporate and Wall Street greed and shortsightedness, and even corruption. These worsening conditions are so severe that they will not be short-lived, and the trend toward secularization will no doubt regrettably slow down as struggling individuals look to religion for some solace and comfort. In time, the global economy should recover, and if reason and common sense prevail in the U.S. Congress, the stage may be set for the religious people in America to mature and approach the other first-world democracies in terms of a lower level of religiosity. The introduction of universal health care would most likely do more to promote secularization in America than any other single factor.

So what can be learned from Paul's research? Three things can be concluded:

1. Few individuals base their decisions to become unbelievers on rational analysis of philosophical and scientific arguments. Most non-religious first-world citizens raised in religious surroundings simply lose interest in the supernatural when their lives become sufficiently pleasant and assured, drifting away from church with relatively little thought about the matter. And their children usually have very little interest in religion.
2. Higher income inequality tends to foster religiosity, while higher education levels tend to weaken religiosity.
3. The ideological struggle is largely limited to partisan activists and the intellectual élite. No broad grass roots organized atheist movement has ever successfully emerged. Proselytizing atheism is basically ineffective in decreasing religiosity, and does little to promote or cause increased secularization.

Reality supports these conclusions. Secularization of first-world democracies happened basically because social safety nets allowed people to become more comfortable and they did not see religion as being important in their lives. As an exception, the United States, with fewer social safety nets and one of the highest levels of income inequality, is one of the most religious of the first world democracies.

Any beneficial effects as a result of activities by organized humanist groups are not readily apparent. None are mentioned in Paul's article and the word humanism does not appear anywhere. Karen Armstrong in her book *The Battle For God* describes the American Humanist Association as "an organization of little influence." In *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor does not mention one humanist organization in all 776 pages, this in a book on secularism. Humanist associations are just not on the public's, or apparently on many academics, radar screen.

Further support for Paul's hypothesis is presented in a paper by researcher Priyanka Palani in the Spring 2008 edition of the *Journal of Politics and International Affairs*. The paper is entitled

“The Effect of Religiosity on Income Inequality.” Analyzing answers from surveys in over eighty countries questioning the role of religion in people’s lives, Palani found a direct positive correlation between income inequality and religiosity. The higher the level of income inequality, the more religious was the country. He also found an inverse correlation between education levels and religiosity. The higher the level of education the less likely a person was to be religious.

And more support for Paul’s contentions comes from a book by University of Oregon professor Philip Zuckerman, entitled *Society Without God*. Zuckerman spent fourteen months living in Denmark in 2005 and 2006 researching secularism in Denmark and Sweden. After interviewing one hundred and fifty Danes and Swedes, he concluded that that society without God is not only possible, but can be quite civil and pleasant. And contrary to the claims of certain outspoken conservative Christians who argue that society without God would be hell on earth, rampant with immorality, full of evil and teeming with depravity, the reality is that Denmark and Sweden are remarkably strong, safe, healthy, moral and prosperous societies. Zuckerman’s conclusion is that traditional religion fades in a society not because of aggressive atheist activity, but due to a society achieving a high level of personal security.

It would certainly appear that Gregory Paul, Priyanka Palani and Philip Zuckerman have indeed solved one of the “Big Religious Questions” and determined why the United States is so much more religious than most other democracies, but some questions still remain. For instance, they do not explain why a lot of rich people attend churches in the United States. Perhaps the following points should not be overlooked.

- religion offers solace in the face of death and suffering.
- religion offers the adherents a vision of what life should be like and offers hope for some form of existence beyond the grave. (Humanists of course do not believe in an afterlife).
- religion provides moral and ethical guidelines for many.
- religion offers a sense of community to the adherents.

These are powerful attractions for certain individuals, especially those who obtain spiritual fulfillment from religious rites and rituals. This is sometimes described as spirituality of place. The ambiance of a sanctuary filled with glorious music provides an atmosphere of awe and wonder that some people just do not wish to give up. Certainly one of the greatest contributions of Christianity is the wealth of sacred music composed over the centuries. The words will grate on the ears of humanists, but if the words are ignored, the magnificence of the music can be experienced. Somehow this music must be preserved and it will be, because secular choirs and orchestras will continue to perform these great works. And even though improved education, more critical thinking and hopefully better economic conditions in the future, will cause religions in the west to continue to decline, there will always be those who wish to support the church of their choice. This is not a bad thing as long as the separation of church and state is maintained. What is needed is not necessarily a complete elimination of liberal religions, but the eventual elimination of radical fundamentalist proselytizing religions.

It is encouraging to observe that the number of people professing “no religion” is growing even in the U.S., and most certainly in Canada where the figure is now twenty percent of the general population and thirty-two percent of teenagers. As Freud said about a hundred years ago:

“Religion belongs to the infancy of the human race; it has been a necessary stage

in the transition from childhood to maturity. It has promoted ethical values that were essential to society. Now that the humanity has come of age, however, it should be left behind.”

By Freud’s standard, humanity has not yet come of age because religions are still very much with us. Others have also been overly optimistic. In the 1950s, Sir Julian Huxley predicted that some form of religion based on humanist principles would have made the Christian theistic religions almost obsolete by the year 2000, but as we now know this has not come to pass. Former evangelist and Canadian author Charles Templeton stated in *Farewell to God* that it will take several generations for Christianity to wind down and this is probably about as realistic as we can expect. In the meantime the huge challenge ahead is to somehow solve the mammoth economic problems the world is facing in order to bring about prosperity and peace of mind to individuals that will allow religions to decline further and not be a threat to the separation of church and state.

### **What Can Humanists Conclude and Learn From Gregory Paul’s Research?**

Ever since I became involved with humanist organizations, I have wondered why there are so few card-carrying humanists when the humanist principles appear to be such a logical guideline for ethical and moral living. I have now concluded that humanists have failed to capture the interest of the general public, partly because many humanists (but certainly not all) take a negative approach and dwell mostly on the rejection of the supernatural and are critical of religions, instead of promoting the many positive aspects of humanism. If the secularization of society is one of the aims of humanists, perhaps they should realize that it will only happen, as it has in Western Europe, under conditions of a prosperous economy, universal social safety nets and a large contented middle class. Experience seems to indicate that proselytizing atheism is not very effective. Under thriving economic conditions people eventually cease seeing much positive value in religions. Those people who think critically realize the spuriousness of the Apostle’s Creed and other articles of faith and no longer attend church. Therefore it would appear that there is little to be gained from criticizing religions; they will eventually become much less important as society gradually outgrows them. Islam is the most serious religious threat at the present time, but the threat can only be eliminated by bringing Islam into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and this unfortunately will take a generation or more.

So where can organized humanist associations fit into the global picture? Individuals belonging to these groups are for the most part partisan activists as well as the well-educated intellectual élite who meet regularly to discuss issues of common interest. They periodically hold well-planned interesting conferences, often with guest speakers of international renown. These activities are most enjoyable to the participants and should continue. But what about other activities? Assuming that the conclusions of Gregory Paul outlined in the article above are correct, the aim of humanist organizations should be to further secularization by working along with other like-minded organizations on promoting issues that will improve the prosperity of society, reduce income inequality and perpetuate a large middle class. Of course issues pertaining to human rights should be dealt with as well. These are huge challenges that often will involve political lobbying.

I suggest that national humanist associations should consist of two categories of members. There will be those who wish to engage in activist and advocacy activities and those who wish

to engage in ideological and philosophical discussions and perhaps publish essays and papers on these topics. The former group will tend to be comprised of younger people with lots of energy and the latter group will usually be older people who have retired from their careers, many from academia. In the past the philosophical groups have been very successful at what they do. Many great conferences have been held, and many great books and articles have been published. These activities, however, are little known by the general public. This lack of public recognition, however, is really not a problem because only a small number of people are interested in academic philosophical subjects. It is the activist segment that should be of interest to the masses. In Canada, humanists have been supporters of a woman's right to choose, gay and lesbian marriage, the right to die with dignity and other human rights issues, but these facts are not widely known. It is toward these social/economic areas and human rights issues that humanist activists should direct their efforts, and the spin-off will be a more secular society with less belief in the supernatural and hopefully better economic conditions.

An independent observer of the current situation might wonder why there are numerous humanist, atheist, freethinker and freedom from religion organizations, all supposedly working to bring about a more secular, less religious society. Why are they all not united into a single organization with a critical mass large enough to raise sufficient funds to make a significant impression on the general public? I suspect it is for the same reason that there are many religious denominations. They just can't agree on how best to go about their mission and the disagreements cause off-shoots. It was ever thus.

In the United States the Freedom From Religious Foundation, (FFRF) based in Madison Wisconsin, has 13,000 members and is large enough and wealthy enough to continually fight for the separation of church and state in court. In particular they have uncovered situations where George Bush's financing of faith based charitable organizations has been misused. They are a perfect example of an organization that is large enough to put up and finance a good fight for preserving the intent of the U.S. Constitution. They have won some cases and lost others. Their proselytizing seems to be limited to debates between religious leaders and FFRF co-president Dan Barker on the existence of God. So far, however, there seems to be little evidence of this organization working alongside other humanist groups in the U.S.

From all the above commentary it would seem that if the humanists and freethinkers in Canada want to do something worthwhile and constructive, all the disparate groups should unite and create a critical mass large enough help improve the lives of Canadians by working on social, educational and political issues, and working with people belonging to the liberal religions to help solve social/economic problems. Most humanists will be non-believers, but they do not have to wear it on their sleeves. As conditions for the masses improve, more and more Canadians will mark "no religion" on their census forms. Unfortunately under the current stressful economic conditions, progress will be slow. Also the chances of getting all the humanist/freethinking groups in Canada to agree and unite may be very slim.

### **Have Religions Become Dysfunctional? – Yes, Says Alexander Saxton**

Some people may want to question Gregory Paul's contention that materialism makes up a deeper part of the human psyche than the propensity for religion, and that religion is not necessarily a human universal. Historian Alexander Saxton is one of these people. In the same *Free Inquiry* issue as Paul's article, Saxton has authored an article entitled, "The Great God



Debate and the Future of Faith,” wherein he postulates that the tendency toward religious belief must have conferred adaptive benefits to early humans through evolution, even though these benefits may not be visible today. While believing that religions definitely benefited humans in the past he suggests that quite recently they ceased to be of the same value. For him, the defining crises of the twenty-first century will be ecological degradation and weapons proliferation, and religions will be of little benefit in ameliorating these exigencies. In the article Saxton describes recent religious developments in the U.S. by dividing them into four stages.

**Stage 1: Fundamental Hubris** - After going through World War I, the Great Depression and World War II, the country had to choose between two possible directions:

1. To blame industrial capitalism for the mishaps and move in a socialist direction; or,
2. Attribute the ills of the modern world to secularism and disbelief and move in a “spiritual” direction.

Obviously, religious institutions and clerical hierarchies (to say nothing of the capitalist ruling class) favoured the second alternative. The fundamentalist invasion of the media not only converted penniless preachers into millionaires, it generated turnouts of conservative voters and big bucks for willing candidates. Out of it came the alliance of Christian fundamentalism with the Republicans. In the same period science was advancing by leaps and bounds with the discovery of the transistor and the unraveling of the DNA molecule among other things such as the development of the PC computer. The fundamentalists became concerned that scientific advances would reinforce the theory of evolution and undermine their beliefs in creationism. To counterattack they devised the ploy of Intelligent Design to hopefully slow down beliefs in evolution. They have had some success as witness the fact that over fifty percent of the people in the U.S. are still creationists.

**Stage 2: When the Atheists Come Marching In** - Half way through the first decade of the twenty-first century, four atheist authors published bestselling books that were excessively critical of religions.

1. Richard Dawkins – *The God Delusion*.
2. Sam Harris – *The End of Faith* and *Letters to a Christian Nation*.
3. Daniel C. Dennett – *Breaking the Spell*.
4. Christopher Hitchens – *God Is Not Great, Religion Poisons Everything*.

Just how effective these books have been in terms of converting believers to non-believers is not yet known. They will never be a factor in converting the stubborn fundamentalist, but they should logically encourage those believers who are questioning their faith to perhaps investigate humanism to see what it is all about. In any case these books have precipitated dialogue and generated interest in the God debate.

**Stage 3: Strategic Withdrawals** – While most scientists are non-believers, there are a few including Francis Collins, Freeman Dyson and Charles Townes who are practising Christians and favor or support Deism. In the past they have been relatively silent, but now are confirming that they believe in evolution and are speaking out against Intelligent Design. They are, however, concerned that radical Darwinists like Dawkins and Dennett are actually giving aid and comfort to their own worst enemies. They prefer a more moderate approach, reaching out to liberal Christians such as themselves. Philosopher of science Michael Ruse concurs. He told Dennett, “I think you and Dawkins are absolute disasters in the fight against Intelligent Design – we are losing the battle...What we need is not some knee-jerk atheism but grappling with the issues...we are in a fight, we need to make allies...not simply alienate everyone of good will.”

Evolutionary biologist E.O. Wilson and Harvard humanist chaplain Greg Epstein, also support reaching out to the moderates.

**Stage 4: An Atheist For All Seasons** - In a recent speech Barack Obama named non-believers along with a list of world faiths including Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and Sikhism. This is a most encouraging sign. Dare we hope this may indicate that American fundamentalism has played out its John-the-Baptist role? Let's hope so; it is time for a change. Although religion may have played a beneficial role in the evolution of humans, they have also generated much havoc over the centuries and are still doing so today, as the present religious wars and Islamic terrorism attest. Religions are now clearly more a part of the problem, rather than part of the solution.

Saxton claims that the real turning point, in terms of religions being beneficial, came after the Second World War when the destruction of Hiroshima/Nagasaki made it crystal clear that nuclear weapons of mass destruction became capable of destroying life on earth. Then in the late 1950s pioneering ecologists including Rachael Carson and others demonstrated that industrial technology, which had seemed so useful and desirable, was in fact rapidly exhausting our planet's ecosystem. The bottom line is that religions were able to remain adaptive, or beneficial, only as long as wars between nations could be fought without destroying the entire human species, and only as long as industrial technology could be pushed forward without contaminating the natural world in which all biological life is based. When these changes occurred, religions became dysfunctional and ceased being adaptive to human survival.

Neither of the problems Saxton mentions above is close to being solved. There is the continuing threat that terrorists could get their hands on nuclear weapons, pollution of the environment is still rampant and there is lack of agreement on how to deal with global warming. And there are many other serious concerns. The list includes the population explosion, the energy crisis, AIDS, Islamic terrorism, and now the unforeseen world economic meltdown that may turn people toward religion rather than away from it.

The fact that religions are responsible for some of today's serious problems should be plainly evident to any clear thinking person. The Jews are fighting the Palestinian Muslims in the near east with no end of the conflict in sight. Taliban and al Qaida Islamic terrorists are threatening to establish theocratic Islamic rule wherever they can. Again there is no immediate solution on the horizon. In the long run secular authorities must attempt to reform education so that the young are no longer taught in religious schools to hate those of other races or religions nor to encourage students to become suicide bombers.

Saxton points out that there will be global events that continue to disrupt the social order and if humanity is to survive, help must come not only from outside, but also from inside religions, because at least for the near future believers will outnumber non-believers. There are critics and reformers inside religions and those outside need to work with these progressive people to solve common problems. This is humanity's only hope. Eventually the non-believers will outnumber believers if the non-believers can present a plausible practical alternative. For instance, in the U.S. both sides can work together to establish universal health care and, if Gregory Paul is right, religiosity will decrease and the number of non-believers will increase automatically. Perhaps in the end, through some sort of subliminal awareness, every human really knows that believing in belief is nothing but make believe. The challenge for humanists is to nourish this seed and through social actions, nurture non-believers for all seasons.