



# The Enlightenment



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## Confucius – Chinese Sage and Humanist

The Chinese thinker and social philosopher Confucius was born in 551 BCE in the Lu state. His philosophy emphasized personal and government morality, correctness of social relationships, justice and sincerity. He is often credited as being the originator of the Golden Rule, and along with the Buddha, being one of the world's first humanists. His teachings may be found in the *Analects of Confucius*, a collection of aphoristic fragments, which was compiled many years after his death.

After becoming a government official with a retinue of followers, he had a successful ministerial career. Following a breach with the ruler, he spent several years as an itinerant sage, and then spent his later years teaching and writing. He basically replaced religious teachings with ethical and moral values. He championed strong familial loyalty, respect for elders by their children and the family as a basis for an ideal government. His political thought is based on ethical thought. He argued that the best government is one that rules through people's natural morality rather than by using bribery and coercion. Truth and honesty are of primary importance. Confucius died in 479 BCE.

There are many aphorisms containing wisdom and foresight attributed to Confucius. A few are quoted below:

- Knowledge is recognizing what you know and what you do not know.
- To know your faults and be able to change is the greatest virtue.
- What you do not wish for yourself, do not do to others.
- The superior man is modest in speech, but exceeds in his actions.

While Confucius was alive in China, Buddhism was developing in India, and Greek philosophy, a perspective that led to the humanism of Epicurus, was beginning to be formulated in ancient Greece. What a pity that these seeds of democracy and non-religious ethical and moral living were not able to grow and blossom. In the west, they were snuffed out by the Roman Church during the dark ages.



## President's Remarks

Several of the articles in this issue of the Enlightenment touch on the thorny question of the relationship between Humanism and religion. Some Humanists take a decidedly anti-religious stance, arguing that humanity would be better off if religions could be eliminated altogether. It is certainly easy to see many deplorable effects of religion in the world around us, including wars, terrorism, intolerance, and abuse. However, the book "God's Brain," reviewed by Don Hatch in this issue, suggests that it may be close to impossible to eliminate the need for religion. The authors of this book contend that religions, which are found in all human cultures, serve an important "brain-soothing" function, increasing the levels of mood-enhancing serotonin and helping individuals manage stress and anxiety. This would suggest that religion fulfills some very profound human needs, rooted in evolution and the biochemistry of the brain, and it is very unlikely that large numbers of people will give it up easily. If Humanism is ever going to appeal to greater numbers of people, rather than attacking religion, perhaps we need to search for ways that our non-theistic life-stance can more effectively take the place of religion in people's lives. Should Humanism seek to provide a caring and nurturing community, comforting rituals, and an emotionally as well as intellectually satisfying belief system, fulfilling those profound human needs, and supplying the "brain-soothing" that religion currently does so well? I think these are important questions for us to ponder. ~ 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.

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## **Book Review**

### **Humanist Anthology**

*By Margaret Knight*

In an informative article entitled *Humanism: A Long Past and a Short History*, published in the March 2010 *Enlightenment*, our President Rod Martin documented the evolution of humanism from the era of ancient Greece up to the present day. In this same vein, in 1961, British psychologist Margaret Knight published a relatively short book containing excerpts from the writings of sixty humanist-minded scholars ranging from Confucius to Bertrand Russell. It is entitled *Humanist Anthology*. Margaret Knight died in 1983, but the book remained in print until the early 1990s. In 1995 Jim Herrick revised the anthology, adding excerpts of eighteen more humanist-minded writers to the volume. An unchanged edition was published in 2005.

Many of the excerpts in the *Anthology* are from the works of famous philosophers and academics, while others are taken from the writings of lesser-known scholars, but they all have something important to say about humanist thinking. A few of the famous are Confucius, Epicurus, Marcus Aurelius, Benedict Spinoza, Voltaire, David Hume, Baron D'Holbach, Thomas Paine, Arthur Schopenhauer, Thomas and Sir Julian Huxley, Friedrich Nietzsche, Mark Twain, Bertrand Russell, Albert Einstein, Jean Paul Sartre, Paul Kurtz and Richard Dawkins. Most of the excerpts are fairly short, which makes for easy reading, but they all contain a wealth of explicit humanist ideals and reasoning. It would be difficult to find a more useful and satisfying account of humanist history in concise form. There are, as would be expected, numerous recurring humanist concepts sprinkled throughout the excerpts. I want to mention one: ethics and morality do not come from on high; they are a purely human construct. For the others, you will have to read the book. It is highly recommended. (DAH).

*Margaret Knight worked in the Psychology Department of Aberdeen University from 1937 to 1970. She achieved fame in 1955 when she gave a series of BBC radio talks on non-religious morality and education.*

## **Definitions**

*Humanist Anthology* contains a few definitions of atheism and humanism. Some comments on these subjects are offered below.

### **Definitions of Atheism**

From the true meaning of the word, an atheist is an a-theist who simply reasons that a supernatural deity does not exist anywhere in the universe. This is in direct contrast to a theist who possesses the faith necessary to believe that a supernatural deity, who created the universe and is able to influence life on earth, really does exist.

An atheist is more than a person who does not believe in God. He or she could be a tyrant or a greedy selfish person without any concern for the welfare of others. (Note: a vindictive religious person could also fit this description.) On the other hand, I would venture to say that almost all individuals who call themselves atheist are upstanding citizens concerned with freedom and justice for all, and believe that society should be free of all religious dictates and influences. Some atheists believe, with some justification, that on balance religions cause more harm than

good. They can become quite vitriolic in their criticisms, particularly when it comes to fundamentalists, both Christian and Muslim. Catholics get their share of criticisms too. Much of this criticism is perhaps justified. The concern is with the liberal Christians. They are the people who are potential candidates for humanism, if humanists are willing to converse with them.

In the *Humanist Anthology*, the founder of the Indian Atheist Centre, who went by the name of Gora, had some very complementary things to say about atheism. He said, “the essence of atheism is the freedom of the individual that releases the immense potentialities of human imagination, initiative and effort that lay suppressed under theistic faith. It is not fanciful salvation after death, but happiness here and now. Honesty and equality are primary atheist virtues. Poverty, violence and discrimination have no place among atheists.”

Favourable comments like those of Gora should go a long way to create positive impressions of atheists among the general public, but for some reason atheists have not been very good at public relations. Recent surveys in the United States have revealed that atheists are the most despised minority in the country, even more hated than gays or lesbians. Apparently the religious right community has been successful in creating a negative stereotype, calling atheists (as well as secular humanists) “agents of the devil.” Atheists have a gargantuan challenge ahead to get the truth “out there.” Instead of derogatory remarks, atheists deserve respect and admiration, a benefit that will only come through effective education of the general public about the good works of atheists. Perhaps the best way for atheists to do this is through humanism.

### **Definitions of Humanism**

Most humanist organizations have a very good descriptive definition of humanism. Two are printed below.

#### **The International Humanist Ethical Union’s definition:**

“Humanism is a democratic and ethical life stance, which affirms that human beings have the right and responsibility to give meaning and shape to their own lives. It stands for the building of a more humane society through an ethic based on human and other natural values in the spirit of reason and free inquiry through human capacities. It is not theistic, and it does not accept supernatural views of reality.”

#### **Humanist Canada’s definition:**

“Humanism is a dynamic and religion free-way of life that affirms our ability and responsibility to lead ethical and meaningful lives, aspiring to the greater good of humanity. Humanists are guided by reason and scientific inquiry, inspired by music and art, and motivated by ethics, compassion and fairness. Humanists support secular and scientific approaches to addressing the wide range of issues important to us all. This is why Humanists advocate keeping government and religion separate. Secular laws are the fairest and most realistic way that people of all faiths and philosophies can be considered as truly equal under the law.”

Humanist Canada has also formulated the following Vision:

“A world where reason and compassion guide public policy, and beliefs are respected, provided that they are compatible with the rights of others.”

This is a laudable “Vision” and it ties in with the views of the American philosopher Sydney Hook. The *Humanist Anthology* contains a two-and-one-half-page excerpt on Hook’s definition of humanism. He ends by saying, “An ethical humanist today is one who relies on the arts of intelligence to defend, enlarge and enhance the areas of human freedom in the world.” Notice that he is talking about action rather than belief. Although he is a non-believer, he says, “I regard the concerns about the existence or non-existence of God as a *private* matter.” He is saying that humanism is about much more than non-belief in the supernatural. It should not be the central thrust of humanism. It is just one of the facets, and the public needs to be made aware of this.

### **Some Thoughts on Humanism**

I believe a principal purpose or aim of humanists should be to continue to work for the establishment and maintenance of a prosperous, secular, democratic society with optimum freedom and opportunities for all; a society that fosters critical thinking, reason, and compassion, through high-quality secular education and community support. Humanists should aim at developing a society that promotes the separation of religion from all levels of government, a society where all businesses assume responsibility for protecting the environment and show concern about maintaining the prosperity of the communities in which they have the privilege of operating. Communities need businesses that are concerned about protecting the jobs and welfare of their employees, and plan to be around for the long term, not just for short-term profits.

I raise this point about profitable businesses because it is of the utmost importance. It now seems certain that secular societies evolve when citizens are provided with social safety nets such as government-operated health care. Under these favourable conditions, people tend to drift away from religions on their own. In order to finance social safety nets, profitable businesses and their employees must pay adequate taxes. Governments have to run on balanced budgets because they cannot run deficits for long periods and still provide safety nets. (It now appears some secular European countries have serious debt problems that are threatening their ability to continue providing all the social security that people have come to expect.) Humanists and humanist organizations should support government policies and programs that help ensure the continuation and growth of a prosperous middle class, not policies that cause the rich to get richer and the poor to get poorer.

Although humanist organizations with charitable status are forbidden to offer financial support to political parties or individual politicians, they are permitted to lobby for, and support, causes that fall within the boundaries of humanist concerns. Two examples might be the public funding of religious schools and legalizing euthanasia, thus enabling people to die with dignity. There is lots of work to be done on both these issues, and there are other organizations that have similar concerns; humanists could work cooperatively with these groups.

A misconception held by religious people about humanists involves so-called spirituality. They may believe and say that humanism is a “cold” life stance. But in reality most humanists are as “spiritual” as anyone, although they tend to shy away from, and avoid using, the word spirituality because it has religious connotations. Instead, they may prefer the expression “awe and wonder.” In any case, transcendent feelings are not the sole prerogative of religious folk. Humanists experience their transcendent moments through being awed by the wonders of nature, hearing their favourite music, experiencing the birth of their children, and enjoying the

miracle of being privileged to savor pleasures life offers on our wondrous planet earth. Whenever these “secular” transcendent feelings occur, they add immeasurable pleasure to human living.

In any discussion about humanism, the subject of non-belief in a supernatural deity (atheism) must be considered. How should it fit into the humanist philosophy? How much should it be promoted, or should it be promoted at all?

It is pretty much a given that most humanists are non-believers and call themselves atheists or agnostics. (I say most because there is a small minority who consider themselves to be religious humanists.) Sometimes atheists accuse agnostics of being fence sitters. I think most agnostics would agree that the probability of the existence of a supernatural deity is very slim, but they are not ready to make the jump to atheism, partly because of the negative impressions about atheists held by much of the general public. Here the ball seems to be in the court of the atheists to improve their image. How can they do this? I don't think they would accomplish much by criticizing liberal religions, but on the other hand, it is hard to avoid criticizing the fundamentalist religions, and at times Catholicism. It is suggested atheists might consider using the vehicle of humanism to help establish a more positive public image, and many atheists are already doing this.

In any case, the challenge for humanists is to decide what place atheism should occupy in the total scheme of things. I think the evidence is pretty convincing that proselytizing atheism would not accomplish much, so in my view humanists should put atheism on the back burner and consider belief or non-belief to be largely a personal matter. The emphasis should be on moral and ethical living in a society with complete and total separation of church and state where all people have the freedom to believe or not to believe whatever they feel is right for them. No one do not, however, has the right to try to thrust their beliefs onto others, whether they are religious or atheistic beliefs. It should be noted that of the world's religions, only monotheistic Christians and Muslims proselytize. Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, and Taoists, to name a few, do not openly evangelize. Finally, atheist humanists should be tolerant of agnostic humanists and vice versa. The debate may never be settled. Comments back and forth should be respectful and thoughtful, or at least of a light or jesting nature. (DAH)

## **Another Book Review**

### **God's Brain**

*By Lionel Tiger and Michael McGuire*

Close to the beginning of *God's Brain*, the authors note that about 80% of the world's adult population live their lives within the embrace of a known religion, leaving only 20% who could be classified as secular non-believers. In their book they attempt to answer the why, the how and the when. Why is it that religions are so prevalent and how did this come about? They also mention that, unlike the works of Dawkins, Harris and Hitchens, this book is not about the criticism of religions, it is about an un-biased analysis of religions.

To look for answers they centred on the human brain, rather than some external deity. They used results from MRI scans, analyses of certain chemicals in the brain, and studies on the social habits of chimpanzees to help arrive at conclusions. In doing their research the authors strived to be as neutral and unbiased as possible. They do not suggest that one religion is

superior to another, or that being a believer is better than being a non-believer. They offer no conclusive proof of the existence or non-existence of God or an afterlife. They are confident, however, that religions and religious beliefs originated in the human brain rather than from on high, and that the probability of an after life is extremely remote. Like belief, ethics and morality did not originate on high; they originated in the human brain.

Throughout the book the coined word, *brainsoothing*, is used to describe the beneficial feelings religious people experience from time to time by virtue of belonging to, and observing, religious practices. Research has revealed that the brain is *soothed* when the level of serotonin – which fights depression and anxiety and makes people feel good about themselves and others – is increased as a result of good feelings generated by religious events. In fact churches are described as serotonin foundries that have the capacity to relieve, or at least lessen, stress.

The authors characterize religion as a non-holy trinity consisting of socialization, ritual and belief. Any of the three can trigger brainsoothing. For many the acceptance into the social constituency of a congregation generates brainsoothing. For some the rituals do the same thing, and the certainty of an afterlife can be exceedingly comforting as well. As has been reported many times, MRIs have shown increased firing of neurons, and presumably brainsoothing in certain areas of the brain during deep prayer and meditation. One surprising finding was that the firing is more intense when monks meditate than when non-believers meditate. Go figure.

An interesting observation in the book deals with the differences between Catholics and Protestants in how they handle guilt. For Catholics the confessional is a wonderful mechanism. Guilt can be assuaged simply by stepping into the confessional booth. But the confessional booth disappeared with the Protestant Reformation, and the authors suggest that this makes Protestants more inclined to do the right thing rather than let the guilt build up into a heavy load. It is also suggested (and this may be a stretch) that this concern encouraged Protestants to develop self-interest, leading to the spirit of capitalism that emerged after the Reformation.

Getting back to brainsoothing, it is the author's contention that it is the brainsoothing effects of the three aspects of religion mentioned above, that has caused the proliferation and staying power of the world's 4200 religions. This answers the how, but not necessarily the why of why the human brain invented religion in the evolutionary scheme of things in the first place. For this, more research and study may be required. Significantly, the last chapter of the book is titled, "Rather a Beginning, Not a Conclusion." (DAH)

*Anthropologist Lionel Tiger is Charles Darwin Professor of Anthropology at Rutgers University. Psychiatrist Michael McGuire is the President of the Biomedical Research Foundation.*

### **What Can Humanists Learn From God's Brain?**

What is the reason for the 80/20 ratio of religious versus secular mentioned in God's Brain? Why do believers outnumber the non-believers by such a large margin? Does the 80/20 split apply everywhere?

The authors do state that of the 80% who say they adhere to some form of religion, there are many who are not actively involved and may only belong to avail themselves of the rights of passage, such as baptism, marriage and funerals. This is particularly true of Catholics and

liberal Protestants in Western Europe and in places like Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Tiger and McGuire noted this reality and agree there are countries where the ratio is not so one-sided. They did not, however, make the connection that the provision of social safety nets in these areas causes less exposure to personal stress, with the result that there is less need for the brain soothing of religions. This is the reality that humanists should take advantage of. By striving for a prosperous secular society where stress is lessened by the provision of social safety nets, the influences of religions will diminish. People then can perhaps experience brain-soothing through the mechanism of Awisim as described in the March 2010 *Enlightenment*.

## **Who Is “Playing God” in the Euthanasia Debate?**

*By Goldwin Emerson*

Since the death of Sue Rodriguez over sixteen years ago, conversations about euthanasia have been more frequent. According to polls done at the time of her death, in February 1994, over seventy per cent of Canadians indicated they favoured euthanasia under carefully controlled conditions.

Conversations I have had about euthanasia often follow a pattern beginning with guarded dialogue meant to convey the idea that both participants are broad-minded and open in their stance. As the discussion proceeds, each participant gently urges the other to commit to a definitive position so that both can know how the other thinks.

The next stage often involves some impatience on my part as I plunge wholeheartedly into the issue and state my pro-euthanasia stance. My counterpart now responds with a polite, but more adversarial tone, and reveals the position she/he held all along but has waited until now to state.

Then there is a flurry of excited exchanges from both sides in a desperate attempt to win the other person over. After these heightened discussions comes a moment of quiet reflection when both sides politely convey the impression that we are giving full consideration to the other's arguments.

Then from my adversary comes a final compelling point designed to clinch the argument and put the whole matter to rest. My opponent looks at me and sternly says, “We must not play God in these matters. God gives life and it's up to God to decide when life is to end.” I am taken a little off guard by my adversary's confidence in this final thrust and I wonder how my opponent knows what God thinks on these matters. How does my counterpart determine the point at which a patient should die or continue life on a medical support system? If my adversary is a religious fundamentalist, he or she may support death by capital punishment or by holy war, but not by the withdrawal of heroic medical intervention, such as in the case of the comatose, Terri Schiavo in the United States. Terri was finally taken off life support in March 2005 after fourteen appeals and five Supreme Court decisions that backed up the original decision given in 1998 that found that she was in a persistent vegetative state. I have even encountered the argument that it is a benefit to suffer pain during a prolonged terminal illness since this is one of God's ways of strengthening character and of preparing oneself for a blissful eternity. In the above arguments, it seems to me that it is my anti-euthanasia adversary who claims expertise on how God thinks. In short, it is my opponent more than I, who has assumed the role of “playing God.”

Of course, there are important reasons for proceeding with caution on the issue of euthanasia. I too want to be assured that candidates for euthanasia are terminally ill and without hope according to the best and most current medical knowledge. I want to know that the patient who is capable is freely choosing death rather than prolonged and painful illness. I recognize that built-in safe guards are required in order to assure that euthanasia is what the patient really desires over an extended period of time. But in these difficult decisions, it is the patient and her or his doctor who can best decide, and not relatives or others who might stand to gain financially. In the end, it is of little value for organized religion, my anti-euthanasia opponent, or myself, to “play God” in these serious decisions.