



# The Enlightenment



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## The New Pope – Questioning Christian Tenets – Living Well

### The New Pope

In St. Peter's Square in Rome on March 13<sup>th</sup> 2013 at 7:06 p.m. Vatican time, the assembled throng cheered as white smoke billowed from the simple copper chimney on the Sistine Chapel. The 1.2 billion Catholics had a new pope, Jorge Mario Bergoglio, a Cardinal from Argentina now Pope Francis I, the 266<sup>th</sup> successor to St. Peter. He appears to be an intelligent and compassionate 76 year-old man who holds a master's degree in chemistry, taught literature and psychology in Santa Fe and Buenos Aires, and speaks fluent Spanish, Italian and German. He is known for being humble and living within simple means. He traveled by public transport, cooked his own meals and lived in a small apartment outside Buenos Aires. He is known as a defender of the poor. The name Francis was inspired by Francis of Assisi, the 13<sup>th</sup> century saint, a lover of animals who rejected worldly wealth in the service of his faith and the poor.



Pope Francis believes the church should have a missionary role and he supports the use of contraception to prevent the spread of disease. He teaches that homosexuals must be treated with respect and compassion. He believes extreme poverty is a violation of human rights and social debt is "immoral, unjust and illegitimate." But, along with these liberal attributes, he opposes abortion and euthanasia, opposes homosexual marriage, and opposes adoption by gays and lesbians. Although it remains to be seen, he is not apt to engage in discussions regarding married or women priests, and in the end, the papacy will likely remain conservative.



The new pope inherits numerous problems. The behavior and integrity of clergy has fallen in public estimation as sexual disgraces have rocked churches in Italy, *(Continued on Page 3)*

## President's Remarks

Over the past decade, a number of best-selling books by writers like Dawkins, Hitchens, Harris, and Dennett have increased public awareness of the scientific evidence and rational arguments in favour of atheism. Science and reason are increasingly becoming recognized as more reliable than religious dogma and superstition as a foundation for our understanding of the universe and our place in it. However, atheism is only half the story. To say that I am an atheist only tells you what I am *not*, what I *don't* believe in. It doesn't tell you what I *am*, what kind of values I espouse, or what sort of life I live. We need to move from negative to positive, going beyond the rejection of supernatural beliefs to focus on what it means to live a meaningful, ethical, compassionate, and joyful life without faith in gods or the supernatural. Recently, a movement called "Atheism-Plus" has taken a similar view, seeking to promote social justice and counter "misogyny, racism, homo/bi/transphobia, ableism and other such bigotry inside and outside the atheist community" (<http://atheismplus.com/>). This outlook is also reflected in *The God Argument*, the latest book by British humanist philosopher A. C. Grayling. The first half of the book presents a well-reasoned argument against religion, and the second half goes on to a refreshing and enlightening exploration of humanism as a meaningful, satisfying alternative to religion. This is also the perspective I'm pleased to see represented in HALA, whose members seek to go beyond the negative and work together to build a positive, caring community that strives to promote ethics, tolerance, acceptance, responsibility, awe, and celebration of life. ~ Rod Martin

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(The New Pope Continued) Ireland, Scotland, the U.S., Canada, Australia and other places. The church is losing members in Europe and North America, and gains in Africa are not making up for these losses. And there are reports of financial irregularities and infighting within the Vatican as well as allegations of blackmail regarding a circle of gay priests in Rome. Nevertheless, the selection of a South American pope is a wise move for the Church because 42% of the world's Catholics reside in Latin America. This may help reduce the inroads of Protestant Christian evangelists and even secularists, who are gaining ground in that area.

But what about the future of the Catholic and other Christian Churches and their relevance and legitimacy in our modern world? Certainly early indications are that Pope Francis is a sincere humble man who will be very popular amongst traditional Catholics, and this may slow down the exodus from the pews in the short run. But in the long term the hierarchy is not likely to reform itself or its ideology and liberal Catholics could well become skeptical about the 2000 year-old concepts on which their church is based and vote with their feet. Perhaps this ongoing gradual trend from religiosity to secularity can be accelerated if the foundations of the Christian Church can be shown to be questionable and shaky. The next section of this special issue of *The Enlightenment* will attempt to suggest alternatives to the traditional basic tenets of Christianity.

## **Questioning Traditional Christian Beliefs**

The tenets of the Christian faith, as stated in the various creeds, are based on two supernatural phenomena. First, there is belief in a supreme all-powerful, all-knowing and benevolent God, residing in a heaven of unknown location, and who is supposedly capable of answering prayer and influencing events on earth, Secondly, there is belief in the only son of this God, who is reputed to be born of a virgin and rose from the grave after his crucifixion.

If, as most secularists, freethinkers and humanists believe, this supernatural God does not in fact exist, then Jesus of Nazareth, who most probably did actually live on earth in the first century CE, could not possibly have been the son of a non-existent God. He had to be fully human, not born of a virgin and not resurrected from the grave. Conclusion: the supernatural Jesus Christ portrayed in the gospels, possessing great wisdom and considered to be a paragon of virtue, could not possibly have existed. No human being can measure up to this perfection, yet the Christian religion is, to a large extent, based on this supernatural Jesus-the-Christ who has to be nothing other than an invention. But who was the inventor? After much investigation and consideration, it is the writer's contention that the inventor was Jesus of Nazareth himself. This may at first appear preposterous, but is it really any more preposterous than the existence of the supernatural Jesus portrayed in the gospels? The argument goes like this.

Christians believe that the first century Jews were mistaken when they did not believe Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah foretold in the Old Testament. The Jews of the day considered Jesus to be an upstart preacher as well as a threat, and called for his execution. Now what if the Jews were right and the early Christians were wrong? This puts an entirely different slant on the situation. To begin with, writings exist that suggest Jesus' mother Mary was not the immaculate virgin of the gospels, but instead had a liaison with a Roman soldier named Panthera, resulting in an illegitimate son named Jesus. And in his recent book, *In the Shadow of the Sword*, British author Tom Holland relates that Jewish Rabbis were teaching in rabbinical schools that, in adulthood, Jesus enrolled in one of these schools, but was either expelled or left on his own. He then went on to recruit twelve disciples and formed a cult claiming he was the promised Messiah, possessing the God-given power to forgive the sins of all who believed in him. The Jews were

sure (then and to this day) that Jesus was not the promised Messiah, and considered his claim of having atonement powers to be nonsense. And, as already mentioned, they had him crucified. These alternative proposals are certainly a far cry from the conventional wisdom prevailing in Christian circles. Although it may be challenging to prove the authenticity of these stories, the Jewish viewpoint has a greater chance of being authentic than the existence of a supernatural deity, or the existence of the supernatural Jesus Christ of the gospels. And the suggestion that a clever, ingenious Jesus of Nazareth surreptitiously invented Jesus-the-Christ ties in remarkably well with Jean Meslier's contention that Jesus was an imposter. (See the October 2011 *Enlightenment*). In view of the foregoing, it is not too big a stretch to conclude that Christianity is based on a shaky foundation indeed.

Since the scenario delineated in the previous paragraph is far removed from accounts in the gospels, these alternative proposals demand further investigation. Is it possible that the father of Jesus was a Roman soldier? Yes, it is possible and maybe even probable. Tiberius Julius Abdes Panthera, was born in Sidon in Phoenicia in 22 BCE. He was an archer in the Roman army and was serving in Judea about the time of Jesus' conception. In 9 CE he was transferred to Germany and remained there in the army until his death in 40 CE. All of this information is taken from his tombstone that was discovered during railway construction in Bingerbrück Germany in 1859.

According to the prevailing Jewish gossip of the day, Jesus' mother Mary was seduced by Panthera, either by rape or consent, while she was betrothed to marry Joseph. In order to avoid embarrassment, or even stoning to death, Joseph had compassion and took her away to a distant location to give birth to her illegitimate son Jesus. This account ties in with the birth stories in Matthew and Luke, but the gospel writers had to utilize the immaculate conception in order to cover up the embarrassment. After returning to Nazareth, Jesus is reported in Jewish references to having been called Yeshu'a bin Panthera (Jesus son of Panthera) further substantiating the claim that Panthera was the father of Jesus.

Other than in Tom Holland's book *In The Shadow of the Sword*, I have been unable to find any references to Jesus attending a rabbinical school. Nevertheless, it is a distinct possibility. In the gospels, Jesus refers to the Hebrew Scriptures many times and what better way to acquire this knowledge than to attend a religious school, perhaps one run by the Essenes. After leaving for whatever reason, he then recruited twelve disciples and cleverly established a cult claiming he was the promised Messiah possessing unique God-given power to atone for the sins of those who believed him to be the authentic Messiah. He must have been one cunningly shrewd promoter in order to pull this off. The Jews of course were astute enough to recognize this upstart as an imposter and called for his crucifixion. This should have been the end of the Jesus cult, because in the end, this small band of Jesus' followers was unable to convince enough Jews to join the movement.

A few years after the death of Jesus, something extraordinary happened. The man who became known as the apostle Paul supposedly had a vision on the road to Damascus in which Jesus instructed him to proclaim the gospel story to the gentiles. In this endeavour, he and his cohorts were amazingly successful as they established a number of Christian churches in the eastern Mediterranean area. Paul's message of redemption through faith in the lord Jesus Christ, the Messiah, appealed to a segment of the gentile population and despite persecutions, the movement grew. Then with the emperor Constantine's dictum in the early fourth century that Christianity was to be proclaimed the sole religion of the Empire, Roman Catholicism expanded

and the rest, as they say, is history. Now if, as has been suggested above, Christianity is based on an imposter, it is truly remarkable that so many have been deceived for so long.

This is not to say, however, that Christianity has been all bad. Although there are negatives, including, the Crusades, Inquisitions, burnings at the stake, religious wars and antiquated attitudes toward artificial birth control and contraception, there have been some positives. After the decline and fall of the Roman Empire, the Catholic Church was a major form of stability in Europe until nations began to form in the second millennium. Later, the Protestant Reformation provided an environment for science and democracy to evolve and grow. In fact it is difficult for democracies to become established without the Christian values of equality and freedom of the individual. And the effects of the Protestant work ethic are also not to be underestimated as outlined in the *Enlightenment* of July 2012. Another attribute of churches is that they provide a social environment and a sense of community for their members and adherents and offer consolation in times of grief. And of course devout Christians get comfort from the established rites of passage as well as believing that there is some form of life after death.

But as more and more people, particularly the young, reject belief in the supernatural, church attendance will continue to decline in the West. The rate of decline will depend on how quickly prosperous economic conditions develop after the 2008 financial debacle. Religiosity declines as prosperity increases. So if people leave churches and adopt a more secular life stance, where do they look to replace the benefits and support they enjoyed in their church? What will replace the assurance of an afterlife if in fact there is no immortality of the soul? Jean Meslier suggests they should look to Ecclesiastes, one of the wisdom books of the Bible. Verses 5-9 in Chapter 9 state:

*The living know at least that they will die, but the dead know nothing and they wait for no reward; no feelings of hatred or love or any desire at all affect them and they take part no longer in all that is done in the world. Go, then, in peace and joy to enjoy the goods that you have! Drink and eat the fruits of your labor in peace and rejoice with your friends and loved ones; for that is all the good you can hope for in life.*

I believe this simply means, enjoy life every day to the fullest, because this life is all there is. It can also be helpful to look to philosophy for guidance. A few quotes from French author Luc Ferry's book, *A Brief History of Thought: A Philosophical Guide to Living*, explains why.

“Unable to bring himself to believe in a God who offers salvation, the philosopher is above all one who believes that by understanding the world, by understanding ourselves and others as far as our intelligence permits, we shall succeed in overcoming fear, through clear sightedness rather than blind faith. In other words, if religions can be defined as ‘doctrines of salvation’, the great philosophies can also be defined as doctrines of salvation (but without the help of God). Epicurus, for example, defined philosophy as ‘medicine for the soul’, whose ultimate aim is to make us understand that ‘death is not to be feared’. He proposes four principles to remedy all those ills related to the fact that we are mortal: The gods are not to be feared; death cannot be felt; the good can be won; what we dread can be conquered.” Epicurus’ interpreter, the Roman poet Lucretius, puts it this way in his poem *On the Nature of Things*.

*The fear of hell must first and foremost be dismantled; this fear muddies the life of man to its deepest depths, stains everything with the blackness of death, leaves no pleasure pure and clear.*

The same theme is encountered in Montaigne's famous adage – 'to philosophize is to learn how to die.' Thus to live is to learn how to die. In other words, in order to live well, one must first realize and admit that death is inevitable (there is no afterlife) and since the time of death is usually unknown, until it arrives, live life to the fullest.

### **Living Life to the Fullest**

People who are born into a secular home are most fortunate. They do not have to get rid of the baggage of religion. But for those who have been brainwashed with religious doctrines, the first step is to realize the spuriousness of it all and let it go. Then they can embark on a life of secular spirituality that is far superior to the religious kind - a spirituality that some secularists like to describe as awe and wonder. They marvel at the awe and wonders of nature, the vastness and complexity of the universe; the miracle and preciousness of life itself; the accomplishments of human kind in the areas of art, music, poetry and architecture; at the emotion of falling in love and the joy experienced at the birth of a child. Rather than worshipping a supernatural deity, secularists celebrate the joy of living a moral, ethical and compassionate life. They look on all these things as being sacred, not in a religious sense, but as a new kind of sacredness, the sacredness of life itself and the sacredness of the natural world that we are privileged to inhabit.

And of course adults cannot live well without a source of income that can provide a feeling of security. This makes it imperative for parents to instill a sense of responsibility into their children and ensure that they become educated in preparation for a career of their choice. This may not be easy in today's environment, but still it must be attempted.

A major factor in the enjoyment of a long satisfying life is good health. Life is not enjoyable when we are sick. Although some forms of sickness may be inherited, other sicknesses can be avoided by good health habits, hygiene and prevention. For example, at the HALA meeting of March 13<sup>th</sup> 2013, UWO professor Dr. David Spence explained how strokes may be prevented by not smoking and by proper diet.

Recent research has revealed that people who are part of a circle of like-minded friends tend to live longer than people who are loners. Churches may provide this for religious folk, but secularists need to be part of social groups in which they have an interest.

It is also recognized that it is beneficial for retired people to have a hobby or other interests that will keep them active both physically and mentally. Things that will help keep the old brain and body functioning because as the aphorism goes, "use it or lose it."

And perhaps most important of all, humans who have partners, married or otherwise, need to share their life with a compatible person, have respect for the views of the other person, and work together to cope with adversities that occur along the pathway of life.

The above are just a few of the things that may help insure a productive and satisfying life. An essential requisite is to "seize the day" and make the most of it.

*The preceding comments and opinions are those of Enlightenment editor and publisher Donald Hatch. Comments and or rebuttals are welcome.*