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The Bonobo And The Atheist

In Search of Humanism Among the Primates

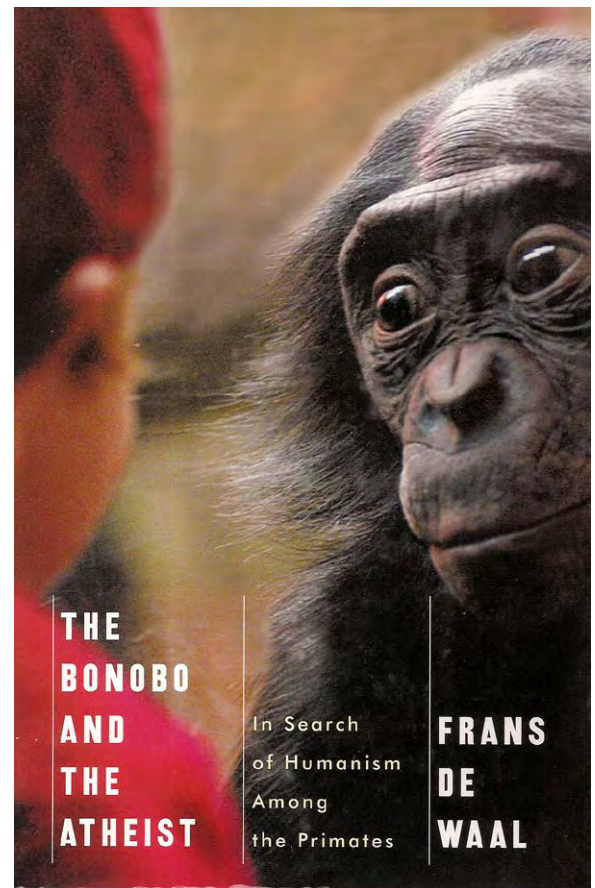
By Frans de Waal

Prior to presenting the actual review of de Waal's book, a few facts from Wikipedia about bonobos should be of interest. The bonobo, *Pan Paniscus*, is a great ape, one of two species making up the genus *Pan*; the other is the common chimpanzee, *Pan troglodytes*. The bonobos live in a half million sq. km. area of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. They are omnivorous and inhabit primary and secondary forests, including seasonally inundated swamp forests.

The bonobo is popularly known for its high levels of sexual behavior. Sex functions in conflict appeasement, social status and stress reduction. It occurs in virtually all partner combinations and in a variety of positions. This is a factor in the lower levels of aggression seen in the bonobo when compared to the common chimpanzee and other apes. Bonobos are perceived to be matriarchal and a male's rank in the social hierarchy is often determined by the mother's rank.

Along with the common chimpanzee, the bonobo is the closest relative to humans. Because the two species are not proficient swimmers, the formation of the Congo river 1.5-2 million years ago possibly led to the speciation of the bonobo. Bonobos live south of the river, and thereby were separated from the ancestors of the common chimpanzees, which live north of the river. There are no concrete data on population numbers, but the estimate is between 30 and 50 thousand individuals. The species is listed as Endangered on the IUCN Red List and is threatened by habitat destruction and human population growth and movement, though commercial poaching is the most prominent threat. They typically live 40 years in captivity, though their lifespan in the wild is unknown.

In *The Bonobo and the Atheist*, biologist Frans de Waal argues that human morality is not imposed from above, but instead comes from within. Moral behaviour does not begin and end with religion, but is in fact a product of evolution. A review of de Waal's book begins on page 2. This is followed by a review of the bestseller, *I Am Malala* by Malala Yousafzai, and then an article on humanist officiants by Adriaan Mak.



Book Review One

The Bonobo and the Atheist – By Frans De Waal

In Search of Humanism among the Primates

Frans de Waal was born in Den Bosch, an ancient Netherlands city. The artist Hieronymus Bosch, best known for his triptych, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, took the name of the town in which he was born. This work is thought to have been painted around 1504 CE, before the Protestant Reformation. It is now in the Museo del Prado in Madrid, Spain. De Waal devotes a lot of space describing the painting in his book, offering his interpretation of small sections of the three panels, but he never shows the complete work. To overcome this omission, the whole triptych is shown below:



The Garden of Earthly Delights – by Hieronymus Bosch – Circa 1504 CE

The left panel depicts God presenting Eve to Adam. The central panel is a broad panorama of socially engaged nude figures, fantastic animals, oversized fruit and hybrid stone formations. The right panel is a hellscape and portrays the torments of damnation. Art historians are divided as to whether the central panel is a moral warning or a panorama of paradise lost. One critic has described it as “an erotic derangement that turns us all into voyeurs, a place filled with the intoxicating air of perfect liberty.”

Why does de Waal begin his book describing parts of Bosch’s triptych? Perhaps it is because having grown up with Bosch’s statue in the market square, he became fascinated by the surreal imagery and symbolism of Bosch’s paintings, and contemplated how it relates to humanity’s place in the universe under a waning influence of God. Bosch was no fan of the Church and its avarice, and perhaps in the painting he is questioning religion’s place in society, and suggesting in the centre panel that a world without God would be a good world. De Waal also questions the relevance of religion and God in society

and devotes two chapters in the book to the God question. Chapter 4 is titled “Is God Dead or Just in a Coma,” wherein de Waal, among other things, comments critically on the “neo-atheists” Dawkins, Hitchens and Harris who merely shout from the roof tops that there is no God and bash religions. What is the point of getting all worked up about the absence of something as esoteric as God? And rather than just bash religions, realize that they will be around for some time, while advocating the building of better humanistic secular societies based on natural human abilities. Chapter 7’s title is “The God Gap.” The gist of this chapter is that the gap between belief in God and non-belief is getting wider as societies become more secular.

Concerning the subject of morality, in *The Bonobo and the Atheist*, de Waal argues that morality is not imposed from on high, but instead comes from within. Moral behaviour does not begin and end with religion, but is in fact a product of evolution and existed among primates (and a few other animals) before humans came on the scene. And indeed morality certainly existed among humans before the major religions originated. Whatever role religious moral imperatives have played in society, de Waal sees this as a “Johnny-come-lately” role that emerged only as an addition to our natural instincts for cooperation and empathy.

Now on to the bonobos. While there is a wealth of information concerning the behaviour of chimpanzees, both in the wild and in captivity, bonobos have not received the same amount of attention, partly because they are very reclusive in the wild and also because fewer studies have been conducted about them in captivity. Nevertheless, enough work has been done to know that there are striking differences between the two species. To begin with, chimp societies are patriarchal with dominate alpha males in charge, whereas bonobo societies are matriarchal with the females in charge. Chimps are more aggressive, as killings can take place during territorial disputes, while in contrast, bonobos will engage in sex with neighbouring tribes. They mix freely, turning potential enemies into friends. This is not to say that bonobos never have conflicts. But when they do, they usually make up afterwards and engage in sex. So de Waal proffers that the bonobos, living by and large with compassion and empathy toward each other, present firm evidence that morality was not invented by religions, but is instead a product of evolution. Furthermore he maintains that if bonobos could talk, they would have a message for all people, and in particular the so called “neo-atheists.”

The bonobo would urge the atheist to take a long-term perspective, realizing that the surest way to cause a lessening of belief in God, and a decline in organized religion, is to work toward the establishment of prosperous secular societies. As de Waal points out, this is happening in the West, particularly in northern Europe. The bonobo would further suggest that the atheist become an advocator rather than a protestor, and move forward beyond religion and top-down morality. People need to be made to realize that religions were not the wellspring of morality; instead, religions were invented by humans to bolster it. Morality had much more humble beginnings, which are recognizable in the behaviour of other animals.

In conclusion, if I were asked to suggest in a few words, what advice bonobos would want to impart to humans, I think they would say, “make love not war.” (DAH)

Mark Your Calendars

Wednesday June 11th is the date of the next HALA Wolf Performance Hall event. The speaker will be Dan Barker, co-president of the Freedom From Religion Foundation in Madison Wisconsin. His topic will be “Losing Faith in Faith.” More information will follow as we get closer to June 11th. Please plan on attending and bring your friends. We want to fill the Hall.

Book Review Two

I Am Malala – By Malala Yousafzai – With Christina Lamb

The Girl Who Stood Up For Education and Was Shot by the Taliban

This book contains two interwoven stories: the story of the life experiences of Malala Yousafzai, and the story of the infiltration of the Taliban into the Swat valley in northern Pakistan.

Malala Yousafzai, a Pashtun, was born on July 12th, 1997, at her parent's home in the town of Mingora in the mountainous Swat valley, part of the Pakistan province of Kyber Pakhtunkhwa. In her book, Malala describes her valley as “the most beautiful place in the world, a heavenly kingdom of mountains, gushing waterfalls and crystal clear lakes. We have fields of wildflowers, orchards of delicious fruit, emerald mines, and rivers full of trout.” While most Pashtun families are disappointed if the first child is not a boy, Malala's father Ziauddin, looked into her eyes when she was born and fell in love. Not too long after, two sons, Khushal and Atal joined the family.

In ancient times Swat was a Buddhist kingdom, but Islam came into the valley in the eleventh century when Afghan invaders arrived. Malala was raised to be a devout Muslim, firmly believing the Prophet Muhammad intended Islam to be a religion of peace with equal opportunities for men and women. She states that nowhere in the Qur'an did the prophet proclaim that women should be subservient to men, nor should Muslims be disrespectful to Jews, Christians, Hindus or Buddhists. Her father, who held a Masters degree in English, was the founder and director of several private schools in the valley where lessons were taught in Urdu and English, although the language used in most homes was Pashto. Both boys and girls attended these schools, often in co-ed classes. Malala was an exceptionally keen student and was disappointed if she did not always come first on her exams. Her oratorical skills were particularly promising, as she would compete in public speaking contests advocating equality in opportunities for both men and women and especially for the right of girls to attend schools. Her ultimate goal was to become a politician, hopefully in a democratic Pakistan. Her heroine was, of course, Benazir Bhutto and she was heartbroken when Benazir was assassinated.

Malala's father was not only busy with his schools, he was heavily involved in community activities such as literary societies and groups organized to protect the environment in the valley, and organizations formed to promote a return to democracy in Pakistan, thus hopefully bringing an end to corruption and rule by military generals like Pervez Musharraf.

After shaky beginnings, Ziauddin's private schools eventually became sustainable and all was going well until a local Mufti (Islamic scholar) began to campaign for the end of the education for girls in the valley. Ziauddin first ignored the threat and girls continued to attend schools, but in 2007 the Taliban came to the valley and attempted to implement Sharia law. They established a radio station to promote their propaganda and eventually forced the education of girls to cease. Even though she was only eleven, Malala often spoke on national TV advocating freedom for girls' education. Subsequently, she was asked to write and air a diary under the name of Gul Makai, documenting what living under the Taliban was like. Eventually the Pakistan government decided to act and they asked all residents to leave the valley while the army attempted to drive out the Taliban. Malala and her family left to stay with relatives in Abbottabad. Three months later the government declared victory over the Taliban and the evacuated families returned. Girls went back to school, but in time it was evident the Taliban were still in the valley operating in a clandestine manner. Malala's father began to receive threats that if he did not stop educating girls there would be consequences. He believed it was he who was in danger, not his daughter,

even though by now she had a national profile. Then on the 9th of October 2012, a gunman entered a school bus asking, “Who is Malala?” The gunman fired three shots. One bullet entered Malala’s left brow and ended up in her left shoulder blade. The other two bullets injured two of her classmates, but they both fully recovered. After receiving preliminary treatment in the Mingora hospital, Malala was transferred by army helicopter to a hospital in Peshawar. Fortuitously, two British doctors from Birmingham happened to be in Rawalpindi and they were brought to Peshawar to offer their advice. They were Dr. Fiona Reynolds and Dr. Javid Kayani, and they strongly advised flying Malala to Birmingham immediately in order that she could get the care she urgently required. The United Arab Emirates offered their private jet that had a hospital on board. After a successful operation, Malala woke up on October 16th a week after the shooting. Soon she was joined by her family and they moved into a residence in Birmingham. With therapy, Malala slowly recovered and on July 12th, 2012, her 16th birthday, she addressed the United Nations eloquently calling for free education for all children, both boys and girls.

On completing the reading of this well-written book, I could not get over the enigma it presents. How can you square the Islam of the Taliban with the Islam of Malala? The Taliban advocates strict Sharia Law, where women are not to be educated, but remain subservient to men in the home and preferably wear the burka. They train boys in Madrassas to become suicide bombers, not hesitating to kill non-Muslims. Some aim for a world Islamic Caliphate. And if this was not bad enough, there is a constant animosity between the Shia and the Sunnis, as well as threats from al Qaeda in various parts of the world. Yes, the actions of these Islamic fundamentalist militants are one of the greatest threats facing humanity in the 21st century, and no one seems able to offer practical effective solutions to these problems. The long drawn out war in Syria is a perfect illustration of a problem without a foreseeable resolution.

Now in contrast, take a look at how Malala ends her book:

I love my God. I thank my Allah. I talk to him all day. He is the greatest. By giving me this height to reach people, he has also given me great responsibilities. Peace in every home, every street, every village, every country – this is my dream. Education for every boy and girl in the world. To sit down in a chair and read my books with all my friends at school is my right. To see each and every human being with a smile is my wish. I am Malala. My world has changed, but I have not.

How is it that this intelligent girl does not see the theodicy here? Why does she not question why her all-loving, all-knowing, all-powerful God, the same God the Taliban worship, allows the atrocities that Islamist terrorists commit? The answer surely must be early education. Young impressionable minds absorb what they are told without questioning. The Islam taught to Malala was vastly different from that taught in Taliban homes or Madrassas and must be the reason for the dichotomy.

So as I have said many times. One of the most effective ways of working toward a better world is to stop teaching children religious untruths. Instead teach them about the miracle of life and the need to appreciate the many wonders of our universe. As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel describes this approach, “Our goal should be to live in radical amazement...get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. Everything is phenomenal... To be spiritual is to be amazed.”

Over 2300 years ago Plato devoted the third chapter of *The Republic* to education. Regarding the young he said, “the minds of the young and tender are easily molded, and any impression we make leaves a permanent mark. It is of the utmost importance that the first stories heard by the young shall aim at encouraging the highest excellence of character.” Why has humanity not yet learned this lesson? (DAH).

Humanist Officiants

By Adriaan Mak

Humanist officiants are in increasing demand as religious affiliation continues to drop in Canada. While in 2011, 24% of the population claimed not to be affiliated to a religious institution, that number is expected to rise not in a linear, but an exponential curve. Real non-affiliation may well be over 30% today. Many children are no longer baptized, yet most weddings may still take place in churches, although the couples may never have and never will be in regular attendance there. Those coming to Canada from Moslem, Sikh, Hindu and Buddhist communities may not have been religiously active in their countries of origin, but still find a need to meet people who speak their native tongues in mosques, shrines or temples. Their offspring however may decide to marry outside their parents' faiths. Such has been the experience of many immigrant families in the past.

As Humanists we may therefore wish to stress the importance of the work performed by our own officiant Dr. André Lachance. Long ago I was a Unitarian chaplain and my job sometimes involved being an officiant at naming or coming-of-age ceremonies. One of my granddaughters recently attended a *bat-mitzvah* for a Jewish friend and was so impressed, that she wanted to know when she would become "of age." Her father is from Spain where non-religious *Quinceañeras* for girls still take place. This September I hope to be present at my granddaughter's ceremony and an officiant will be there! For most officiants, memorial services, and of course weddings, are what they are mainly involved in. Indeed, the word officiant is becoming more and more acceptable, replacing the word chaplain, perhaps because the former most often do not officiate in "chapels."

The notion of specially designated wedding-chapels may have started in Las Vegas, but they have become more and more common in other U.S. and Canadian centres, London being no exception. A group of "ordained" ministers" will be at your service, so their advertisements state.

Many of the people who request the services of a Humanist officiant are not affiliated with any church. Many others are in "mixed" relationships such as where one partner was raised Jewish and the other Anglican. One rabbi I know stated that he felt like a Dutch boy standing with his finger in the dike stemming the tide of assimilation. All the more reason that the "folks out there" become aware of the availability, and surprising flexibility of a Humanist officiant's services. They will find out what is involved, how their wish can be accommodated, and perhaps more importantly, what is *not* required. Since many people may attend such ceremonies, this openness can only raise the profile of our Humanist communities.

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