



# The Enlightenment



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

Volume 5

Number 7

Special Edition

## Why is God Still Here?



The Hand of God Imparting Life to Adam – Michelangelo's Painting in the Sistine Chapel

Prognosticators have been predicting the death of God and the demise of religions for centuries. In the early 1700s the English Deist Thomas Woolston predicted that Christianity would be expunged by 1900. Voltaire informed Fredrick the Great that Woolston was too pessimistic and predicted that religions would come to an end in the early 1800s. And it was in 1882 that Nietzsche declared, "God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him." In the mid-twentieth century, feminist Gloria Steinem stated, "by the year 2000, we will I hope, raise our children to believe in human potential, not God." Other predictors were more reluctant to suggest precise dates. Viscount Amberly, Bertrand Russell's father, announced that religion was going to disappear "shortly." C. Wright Mills chose the words "in due course." Thomas Jefferson predicted that the future lay with liberal Unitarianism. He once wrote, "I trust that there is not a man alive in the United States that will not die a Unitarian." He scorned evangelical Christians and he would have been most disappointed to learn, were he alive, that by 1870 80% of American church-goers were evangelicals. Why were the predictions of these intelligent people so wrong? In this special edition of *The Enlightenment*, we will attempt to search for answers.

## Books on God and Other Musings

Over the years there have been many books published about God. One that immediately comes to mind is Karen Armstrong's *A History of God*. This thoroughly researched book documents the many concepts of God that have existed throughout history in the Jewish, Christian and Islamic faiths. The last chapter is entitled, "Does God Have a Future?" In the last paragraph of the book she cautions:

"Human beings cannot endure emptiness and desolation; they will fill the vacuum by creating a new focus of meaning. The idols of fundamentalism are not good substitutes for God; if we are to create a vibrant new faith for the twenty-first century, we should, perhaps, ponder the history of God for some lessons and warnings."

This book was written in 1993 and her warning, in view of the religious conflict now occurring, is even more urgent today. How do we confront the serious threats of religious fundamentalism and how could we fill the vacuum, if God should someday hopefully disappear from our society? These are the challenges we face.

Quite recently a number of new "God" books have appeared. They include *The Evolution of God* by Robert Wright and *God is Back* by John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge. Another is *God Is* by David Adams Richards; his "Search for Faith in a Secular World." He was raised a Catholic, fell away, and has found his way back to the faith. This is not the kind of book a humanist is likely to read, but the other two books are worth reading. Each examines God from a cultural angle, differing from the God books written by neurologists and medical experts trying to determine whether or not humans are "hard-wired" for religions. *Why God Won't Go Away* by Andrew Newberg and Eugene Aquili is just such a book. Using high-tech imaging techniques, these researchers have examined the brains of meditating Buddhists and praying nuns and concluded that religious impulse is in fact rooted in the biology of the brain and that humans could well be hard-wired for religion. More recent brain imaging research has revealed that the brains of secular non-believers, who engage in deep meditation, also light up in the same areas as religious supplicants. This discovery suggests that our brains are not programmed for religion per se, but for the seeking out of some kind of hard-to-define pleasure from the awe and wonder of existence.

Brain imaging research leads to the study of nurture versus nature, which in itself is a contentious issue. Have believers been influenced more by factors in their genes or by the environment in which they were raised? Certainly in today's environment, nurture would seem to be the most powerful religious influence. In modern monotheistic cultures, children are indoctrinated with the beliefs (or occasionally non-beliefs) of their parents. Unless believers later engage in critical thinking and question their learned beliefs, they will likely remain believers for life. But what about primitive humans? There was no one around to teach them about the spirits and gods that they came to believe really existed. It would seem that humans are indeed hard-wired to search for some kind of non-tangible entity that will bring meaning into their lives. In the western world this non-tangible entity has evolved over millennia into a monotheistic God. Today, belief in this "God" is causing no end of problems on our planet. How did this come about and what might we do to hasten the establishment of a practical, exciting, moral, compassionate and peace-loving secular democratic society?

## The Evolution of Religions

Apparently most, if not all, early humans practised a form of religion referred to as animism, defined as a belief in spiritual beings. These early people saw spirits in plants animals and features of the landscape. From such elemental notions all religions evolved as humans sought explanations for the origin of the universe and for the creation of humankind. It would appear, as mentioned earlier, that humans are programmed to search beyond the physical and reach out for supernatural explanations of their reason for being. This quest for explanations brought about the creation of various myths and the invention of a god or gods supposedly capable of influencing events on earth while at the same time demanding adoration, obedience, and respect, as well as sacrifices for appeasement. As early as 3000 BCE the Sumerians had established a priesthood for the purpose of offering appeasements while also supervising agricultural practices. At about the same time, the Egyptians were creating many religious myths that contained ideas common to later religions including the concept of an afterlife. Perhaps gods were created because people could not find any other way to console themselves in times of tragedy, which brings to mind Voltaire's quote, "If God did not exist he would have to be invented." Thus it can be argued that gods were indeed a necessary human invention, implying *that God was created in the image of humans rather than the other way around*. This claim also implies, of course, that religions were not divine creations imposed from on high, but that both polytheism and monotheism are human creations. As time passed, a number of outstanding individuals, including Abraham and Moses (probably not real characters), Buddha, Zoroaster, Lao Tzu, Confucius, Jesus, Mohammed, and others, came forward and brought about, or influenced, the founding of the world's great religions. In time, the pantheon of gods of the great civilizations of Egypt, Greece and Rome slowly faded away and were replaced in the western world by monotheism which, according to Genesis, originated by divine revelation in the religion of the Israelites about three and a half to four millennia ago, when the patriarch Abraham and his family began to worship principally one God. During the following centuries Abraham's descendants are reputed to have created the three monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, calling their supreme being Yahweh, God, and Allah respectively. Many of the devoted followers of each of these religions believe that they are a "chosen people." This concept is difficult to comprehend; why would a loving, benevolent, supreme being, who supposedly influenced the formation of each of the three religions, favour one over the other? Moreover, the belief that they are an especially chosen people tends to make the supposedly chosen regard the un-chosen as strangers or aliens or even enemies. This is hardly a formula for world peace, as is evident today with the threats of Islamic Jihad and the Israeli/Palestinian conflict.

From their beginnings world religions have expanded throughout the globe. The make-up today is roughly as follows:

Christianity	1,900,000,000
Islam	1,300,000,000
Hinduism	735,000,000
Buddhism	325,000,000
Judaism	18,000,000
Other	<u>1,722,000,000</u>
Total	6,000,000,000

It will be noted that the religions of Christianity, Islam and Judaism, the subjects of this discourse, make up over half the world's population, and that there are only 18 million Jews in the world.

## Judaism

The Judaism of the Old Testament came to an end in 70 CE with the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple by the Romans. Rabbinic Judaism took the place of the former temple worship and the Jews eventually dispersed throughout the Diaspora. They were often wrongly accused of being Christ killers and were heavily persecuted through the centuries, culminating in the holocaust. Since 1948, millions of Jews have returned to their supposed God-given homeland, a move that has caused much conflict that continues today. Relative to their small numbers, Jews have had a disproportionate influence in the world, some good and some bad. They are highly influential in financial and political circles, particularly in the U.S., and many prominent scientists and medical researchers have been Jewish. Unlike Christians and Muslims, Jews do not proselytise and are more concerned with life here and now, rather than with any semblance of an afterlife. The main concerns about the Jews today are their seemingly stubborn reluctance to establish a peaceful settlement with the Palestinians and the unrest that this creates in the Islamic world. Israel possesses nuclear weapons and if backed into a corner might use them.

Of particular interest in the Judaic sections of *The Evolution of God* by Robert Wright, is the refutation of some of the conventional wisdom about the history of the early Israelites. For instance, recent decades of archaeological research have failed to turn up any evidence of the Exodus or of the ousting of the Canaanites by violent conquest. It now seems fairly certain that the Israelites came from within Canaanite society and gradually took over a section of the area adjacent to the Dead Sea. Another misconception is that the Israelites were always monotheistic. According to Wright, there was polytheism in Israel until the Jews returned to Palestine from Babylonia in the sixth century BCE, at which time Yahweh became the sole God of the Jewish people. The reason for mentioning these discrepancies is to point out that there is much fiction in the Bible, as well as some truths, and the Bible is certainly not the result of divine revelation.

## Christianity

Everyone reading this discourse will be familiar with the traditional Christian story which includes a virgin birth, the teachings of Jesus, miracles, the crucifixion, the resurrection, the forgiveness of sins and some sort of life after death in an idyllic heaven. All of these claims, except the teachings of Jesus and his death, consist of supernatural phenomena; how is it, therefore, that a religion based on these questionable concepts could have had such a major influence on western civilization?

To begin with, the apostle Paul, not Jesus, was the founder of what became the Christian faith. After the writing of the Epistles by Paul and others, the gospel writers picked up on the supernatural aspects, embellished them and added to the sayings of Jesus. Biblical scholar Robert Funk believes that no more than 20% of the words in the gospels attributed to Jesus are authentic. Paul's religion, which was struggling, received an enormous boost in the fourth century CE when the Emperor Constantine declared Christianity to be the official religion of the Roman Empire. He instigated the Council of Nicea in 325 CE and instructed the early church fathers to formulate one system of beliefs that would provide consistency and unity throughout the empire. The eventual result was the invention of the Trinity and the Nicene Creed as well as the compilation of the canon that became the New Testament. This was tacked onto the Old Testament in order to encompass, into one religion, the monotheistic Jewish God, along with

Jesus as the son of this deity. This was the beginning of the Roman Catholic Church, the doctrines of which were later solidified by St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas.

It must have been the exclusivity and certainty of the Catholic faith that appealed to the masses in the dark and middle ages. Only devout practising Catholics who observed the sacraments were guaranteed entry into heaven. The alternative presented was to roast in hell. It was during these times that the great cathedrals of Europe were constructed. By the 16<sup>th</sup> century, corruption had crept into the Catholic Church. The priest Martin Luther broke away and instigated the Protestant Reformation that paved the way for the sciences and democracy to prosper and develop during the period of the Enlightenment and beyond. Much of northern Europe eventually became Protestant. In more recent times church attendance, both Protestant and Catholic, has drastically declined with the result that today most Western European countries are largely secular, partly because of the social safety nets that are provided, lessening the need for support from churches.

In the United States, however, things have turned out quite differently. The founding fathers, many of whom were Deists or Unitarians (or both), were determined not to have a state religion and established a firm wall between church and state. This was to ensure that government would not be influenced by religions, but at the same time it allowed freedom for religions. The end result is that many different religions have been formed in the United States, and some of these enthusiastic evangelical, fundamentalist and Pentecostal people are threatening the separation of church and state. A large percentage of U.S. people are scientifically ignorant, with close to half of the population believing in creationism and that humans and dinosaurs existed together 6000 years ago. No wonder there are millions of Americans gullible enough to believe the doctrines of the Christian right and believe they are certain to end up in heaven. The infusion of radical Christian fundamentalism into U.S. politics is a dangerous situation and begs the question: will the developing world adopt the European or the American model? More on this later.

## **Islam**

Islam is the most recent of the major monotheistic religions. It was founded by the prophet Mohammed in the 7<sup>th</sup> century in what is now Saudi Arabia. It later spread rapidly throughout northern Africa, parts of southern Europe and western Asia, often by the sword. During the early years of the second millennium the Muslim nations were more advanced in science and mathematics, than the Christian nations. After the Renaissance and Enlightenment periods, however, Islamic countries failed to advance in the same manner as Christian countries. They have not had an equivalent to a Martin Luther to organize a movement that could bring them into the modern world.

Islam is based on the Koran which like the Bible contains many ambiguities. It is difficult for westerners to get a clear picture of the teachings of Mohammed, but the Five Pillars of Islam are quite clear. They are, confession that Mohammed is the true prophet, prayer five times a day, alms giving, fasting during Ramadan, and pilgrimage to Mecca once in one's lifetime. Some Islamists insist that Islam is a religion of peace, but today's violence and jihads seem to belie this claim. Punishments for crimes listed in the Koran are severe and include lashings, amputations, and stoning to death. The Koran apparently advocates equality for men and women, but this does not seem to be the case in practice. The main focus of Islam appears to be centred on life after death. Muslims must obey the teachings of the Koran and organize their

lives so that they will be guaranteed a place in heaven. If they do not comply, they will be guaranteed an eternity in a horrific hell. Some Muslim youth in Madrassa schools are taught that it is an honour to become a suicide bomber in the cause of Islam and that Allah will reward them generously in heaven if they kill the “infidels.”

Mecca is in Saudi Arabia which is home to the powerful Wahhabi sect that has an alliance with the Saudi Royal family to maintain strict Islamic law in the Kingdom. Oil has made the Wahhabis wealthy, and their money is financing the construction of mosques all over the world, furthering the expansion of the Muslim religion; they are probably funding terrorism as well. There appears to be no shortage of money to fund terrorist activities and the war in Afghanistan. It is the threat of increasing radical Islamic terrorism that is of extreme danger to westerners and is cause for great concern. This anxiety is giving peaceful and moderate Muslims a bad name.

## Conclusions

What can be concluded from the above short account of the evolution of the monotheistic religions? One thing seems perfectly clear. Although these religions may have done some good in the past, today they are the cause of much conflict, pain, and suffering. The disappointing reality is that there are no apparent solutions in sight. The Afghan war is probably not winnable; there is no likelihood that the conflict between Sunnis and Shiites in Iraq will end any time soon and the Israelis are unlikely to give up any of the illegally occupied Palestinian land. All these conflicts are costing enormous amounts of money and the loss of far too many lives. This is money that should be spent on more worthwhile endeavours. Logic would suggest that religions should exert far less influence in the future, but will they?

## Will Religions and Belief in God Increase or Decrease?

According to John Micklethwait and Adrian Woolridge, authors of the recent book *God is Back*, both are on the increase. This book begins by describing a Christian discussion group held by a group of young, well-off, educated, Chinese men and women meeting in one of their homes. They say the reason for their interest in Christianity is that America grew strong because it was Christian, and if China wants to be a truly prosperous country, the **Word** must be spread to non-believers. If you are a patriotic Chinese, you must be a Christian -- this is in a country that not too long ago was officially atheist. This developing interest in Christianity in China is surely a surprise to many secularists. Is it a passing fad or will it take root and expand?

Unlike during the atheist regime of Mao Zedong, there are now five official religions in China; Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Protestantism and Catholicism. The Chinese government prefers its religious citizens to adhere to Taoism, Confucianism or Buddhism, but Islam is growing in western China and Christianity is growing in the populated areas. One forecast predicts that by 2050 China could be the world's largest Muslim nation as well as its biggest Christian one. Russia, under Stalin, was also officially atheist, but a survey in 2006 revealed that 84% of Russians believe in God while only 16% considered themselves atheist. In recent years the Russian Orthodox Church has made a huge comeback. These realities make one wonder why atheism did not prevail in the long run in China and Russia. What was missing? What gap does religion fill?

Now back to the growth of religions. The oriental religions do not proselytise so they will not likely undergo any significant change. Islam will certainly grow because the birth rate among

Muslims is higher than average and because Wahhabi money is available for recruitment. The chances of a Muslim reformer emerging to modernize Islam are extremely remote. Catholicism will expand where it is present in Africa because the Catholic Church discourages birth control. American evangelical Christians will attempt to send missionaries wherever it is feasible. They seem to be able to find the necessary funds and of course they sincerely feel they are doing God's work. The authors of *God is Back* claim that growth of Christianity in the future is not a bad thing. They say religion and government can exist comfortably side-by-side as long as there is always a wall between church and state. They caution strongly that what must be guarded against is the union of religion and power. Chris Hedges, in his recent best seller *Empire of Illusion*, issues the same caution. He is very leery of the aims of the right wing Christian evangelicals in the United States and stresses that they must be watched very closely.

The last section of *God is Back* acknowledges that secularists may be depressed that God is back, but suggests they need to recognize that the enemy that "poisons everything" is not religion, but the union of power and religion. As would be expected, there are secularists who disagree that Christianity is on the ascendance. They point to Europe as proof that the trend is away from religion. In the August/September issue of *Free Inquiry* magazine Matt Marshall gives a scathing review of *God is Back* saying the authors have added nothing new to the religious-secular dialogue and that their arguments are simplistic and unrealistic. Nevertheless, whatever a persons viewpoint may be, surely now is the time for secularists to objectively examine the reality of the current situation and attempt to arrive at a plan, free of the supernatural, that will aid in improving the lot of humanity in the years ahead.

### **Strategies and Actions for the Future**

One of the disturbing concerns in *God is Back* is the prediction that the developing world will adopt the American model and increase their religiosity rather than increase their secularity as has happened in Western Europe. Surely the last thing any country should do is copy America. The U.S. business leaders, bankers and conservative politicians have put the country and the world into the worst mess since the great depression, and the country has amassed a humongous debt. One of the claims of religions is that they impart morality to their adherents, but where is the morality in greedy business managers and bankers becoming extremely wealthy while ignoring the welfare of the remainder of the population? Religions have failed miserably in this regard. They need to speak out more about social injustices and be less concerned about saving souls and lobbying for their own selfish spurious aims. It would be a very backward step in many respects for developing countries to follow the American example.

We need to realize that the main reason Western Europe became secular is because the people had social safety nets and therefore less need for the comfort and support they may have formerly received from churches. Also, the education systems in many European countries are superior to the inadequate and failing American systems. Studies have shown that the better people are educated, the less likely they are to have a need for religion. America is more religious partly because of a lack of social safety nets, a condition that makes it necessary for people with problems to look to churches for comfort and charity. Another factor is the proliferation of proselytising evangelical churches that know how to convince gullible people to join their ranks and part with their money. Since many developing countries cannot afford social safety nets, and because in many cases the people in these countries are poorly educated, the predictions of Micklethwait and Wooldridge could unfortunately come true. Can the secularists offer better alternatives, and if so, what should be their plan of attack?

There seems to be little evidence that proselytising atheism is effective in furthering secularisation. Other approaches must therefore be considered. It seems to me there are two possibilities staring us in the face: One is the provision of social safety nets and the other is education. Since some developing countries tend to look to America as a model to emulate, perhaps the logical strategy is to work toward making the U.S. more secular and less religious. President Obama's plans to regulate financiers, turn the economy around, provide universal health care, and reform education could help do this. Therefore, would it not be logical for secular organizations to get more political and more involved in trying to influence the important decision makers? Business leaders and bankers have spent millions lobbying politicians to get governments to bend to their interests. Secularist groups need to unite, raise money and make their voices known as organizations striving for social justice. As Paul Kurtz has said, this will take time, but now is the time to start. For example, the Center for Free Inquiry, the American Humanist Association, the Freedom From Religion Foundation, and others, could unite to form a strong national voice to support President Obama in his quest for needed reforms.

A very important part of these reforms is education. It is often said that there is room for better instruction in science and math. In this regard, teaching the rudiments of science to the young provides a real opportunity to promote secularism. Instead of exposing young children to Bible stories, they should be made aware of the wonders of the universe. Since the basic elements of the sciences are not difficult to comprehend, children should be taught at an early age about the fascinating features of the universe, evolution, and the miracle of life. They should also be encouraged to develop reverence for the privilege of being alive. Feelings of awe and wonder for nature and the arts, instilled at a young age, can perhaps act as a substitute for God and religion. Instructions on ethics, morality, compassion, and empathy should also be included.

Now to get back to the question posed at the top of the cover page: Why is God still here? Why do so many people still feel a need to believe in the supernatural? And why are evangelical mega-churches growing, when mainline churches in North America are losing members and closing, partly because they do not seem able to attract the young? I say North America because right here in London there are at least five "big box" churches that are thriving while United and Catholic churches are closing. In an effort to find the reasons, I visited four of these big boxes. Right away it became evident that they are family oriented. Children are everywhere and family activities are going on every day of the week. The music is almost inane and very repetitive; the people are swaying to the music, raising their hand and praising the Lord; the power point sermons are upbeat, and the preaching is dynamic. This phenomenon is happening all over Canada and the United States, and is a major reason why God is still here in spades. And we must not forget that some of these thriving churches house the very people who threaten the separation of church and state. (Note: Prime Minister Harper is a fundamentalist).

In this *Enlightenment* I have identified some reasons why there is such a difference between the level of religiosity of Western Europe and the United States. I think all humanists would agree that the European situation is the more desirable, and I have suggested that secular organizations should get more active, work together, and concentrate on supporting the establishment of social safety nets as well as improving education. Fortunately in Canada, unlike the U.S., we have social safety nets in place (although not without problems) and we have abortion available to women in need. We also have established gay and lesbian rights, including the right to marry. We still need to work toward the elimination of public funding for religious schools and toward the right to die with dignity. Humanists in Canada cannot do this alone. They must work in cooperation with other like-minded organizations that now exist. (DAH)