



The Enlightenment

A Mini-Journal of the
Humanist Association of London and Area

Visit Our Web Site at www.humanists-london.org

Volume 9

Number 8

October 2013

Spirituality – The Secular Kind

Not long ago in an airing of TVO's Agenda with Steve Paikin, the guest was the noted physicist Lawrence Krauss, author of the relatively recent book *A Universe From Nothing*. The title of the episode was "Atheism and Science." Krauss kept making the point over and over that the discoveries of science are so wonderful and awe inspiring (i.e. spiritual) that whether or not God exists is irrelevant. He said if certain people wish to adhere to the beliefs and pronouncements of an iron-age religion that originated in an era of belief that the sun revolved around the earth, and also believed that the earth is six thousand years old, that is their prerogative. For him there is no need for a God, who some claim is needed to fill the gaps that science cannot fill, but science has gradually been filling most of the gap and very few gaps are left. He cited viewing the Hubble telescope images of distant galaxies as a genuine spiritual experience that for some of us, far exceeds any spirituality based on religious rites, tenets or dogmas. He also cited Carl Sagan's quote on secular spirituality to help get his point across.

"Science is not only compatible with spirituality; it is a profound source of spirituality. When we recognize our place in an immensity of light years and in the passage of ages, when we grasp the intricacy, beauty, and subtlety of life, then that soaring feeling, that sense of elation and humility combined, is surely spiritual. So are our emotions in the presence of great art or music or literature, or acts of exemplary selfless courage such as those of Mohandas Gandhi or Martin Luther King, Jr. The notion that science and spirituality are somehow mutually exclusive does a disservice to both." No one could have said it better.

Unfortunately, spirituality is a word that some humanists do not like to use because of its association with religion. But surely it is wrong to cede this wonderfully descriptive word exclusively to the religious, especially in the light of Carl Sagan's beautiful description of, shall we say, "Secular Spirituality."

I will never forget the feelings of awe I experienced, as a teenager interested in science, when I discovered the symmetry and beauty of the periodic table and the electromagnetic spectrum. Later in life I became in awe of the best music of Bach, Mozart and Beethoven. And I have always been in awe of the wonders of nature. One of my greatest spiritual feelings was standing on the rim of the Grand Canyon. I was just overwhelmed by this vast magnificence, while staring at the phenomenon of evolution present in the geological strata. None of this has any connection to God or religion. It is indeed secular spirituality. Let us humanists get over our reluctance to admit we are spiritual. The feelings are too good to pass up. (DAH).

President's Remarks

Don Hatch's thoughts about a secular form of spirituality really resonate with me. I have long felt that we Humanists tend to put a little too much emphasis on the intellectual, cerebral side of life, and not enough on the life of emotion, relationships, and engagement. As Paul Kurtz said, to be a Humanist means living a life of "joyful and creative exuberance." It involves the overwhelming feelings of awe and wonder we experience when contemplating the beauty and mystery of the universe, the pleasure of forming deep personal relationships with others, the quiet sense of satisfaction after accomplishing a difficult task or solving a perplexing problem. Humanism is a full life of engagement, struggling to make the world a better place, combatting various types of prejudice and discrimination against the weaker members of society, struggling against all forms of injustice, ignorance, and superstition. Humanism involves seeking to live a life of meaning, integrity, wisdom, ethical practice, empathy, and compassion. It means caring deeply for oneself, for others, and for the natural world around us. As I write this, we are moving into autumn, with its splendid colours, crisp cool days, and even colder nights. I look forward to seeing all our members at the meetings we have planned over the coming months, listening to interesting speakers and engaging in stimulating conversation. I also look forward to our annual winter solstice party in December, where we enjoy one another's company and celebrate the changing of the seasons. May the coming months be a time for all of us to learn something new, build deeper relationships, engage more fully in the challenges of life, and enjoy the peak experiences of Humanist spirituality. ~ 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 June 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. Special issues are published from time to time. Please note: We reserve the right to edit and publish articles at our discretion.

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New members are welcome. Contact Membership Secretary, Walter Heywood (519) 434-9237, email wjheywood@yahoo.ca Membership fees are listed below.

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Sharia Law and Religious Accommodation in Ontario Schools

By Goldwin Emerson

In the early days of the seventh century, laws and punishments were much harsher than they are today. Crucifixion, burning at the stake, flogging, dismemberment, and other forms of torture were accepted practice in many parts of the world. Sometimes, these punishments were ordered by kings' courts, by slave owners, by religious courts, and by groups or individuals who had sufficient power over those upon whom they could exercise their control.

It was in this period of history that the prophet Mohammed was establishing the beginnings of the Muslim religion. In order to guide adherents in the correct path, *sharia* law was established and came into use in Muslim religion. For Muslims, correct morality is based upon the commandments of Allah. Today, Muslims still look to *sharia* law as the correct path to follow. Some Muslims adhere more closely to the harsher version, or the Hanbali interpretation of the original codes. The Hanafi version of *sharia* law is more liberal and incorporates, or at least allows, more gentle interpretations consistent with morality practiced in modern developed countries.

In its harshest form, *sharia* law applies to many aspects of one's personal life and can include punishments such as stoning to death for adultery, or for de-conversion from the Muslim faith. The death penalty is also dispensed for holding to non-traditional interpretations of the Qur'an. Other severe punishments consist of amputation of hands or feet, imprisonment or flogging. While these punishments seem horrible to many of us today, they were consistent with the punishments for both Muslims and non-Muslims of the early 7th century.

In present times, it is generally the case that the strictest forms of *sharia* law apply in countries where Muslim populations are predominant. These include Afghanistan, Pakistan, and to a lesser extent, Saudi Arabia, although there are exceptions to this general rule. Strict dress codes for women often apply in Muslim countries, although sometimes these dress codes are a matter of cultural expectations rather than requirements set out in *sharia* law.

In Canada we sometimes speak in glowing terms about our multicultural society while in the United States the tone is different. Citizens of the United States talk about their cultural society as a "melting pot" where immigrants blend into the cultural milieu of overall American society. In Canada, we pride ourselves in being tolerant and accepting of a cultural mosaic that welcomes many religious traditions and ethnic backgrounds.

Part of the philosophy of Canada's favorable acceptance of multiculturalism grows out of a postmodernist view that all cultures, religions, ethnic groups, and concepts of truth and values, are equally relevant and of equal worth. When this misguided postmodernist view is carried to its logical conclusion, it is bound to burden governments. They will be called upon to accommodate a great variety of special treatment for individual interest groups.

In Ontario, school boards are directed by the provincial Ministry of Education to accommodate Muslim students with suitable space and supervisory personnel for prayer rooms. When students are studying curricula that may be deemed by their parents to be objectionable on religious grounds, teachers are normally expected to make accommodation for such objections. Accommodations are expected to be

made in physical education classes for modest gymnasium apparel. Ideally, cafeteria staff are expected to be mindful of dietary requirements of various religions. Teachers are cautioned to be aware of teaching curricula and school assignments that may be offensive to the cultural, ethnic, or religious sensitivities of students or their parents. Our law courts are similarly required to provide accommodation regarding women's clothing. This includes acceptance of facial covering except when a presiding judge determines that, in special cases, it is necessary to remove facial covering for clearer identification.

The main purpose of schools and teachers should be to provide education. There are limits to how much even the most willing teachers and administrators can do to provide accommodation. Allocation of time, space, and personnel required to accommodate the various religious preferences of students or their parents can over-burden school resources. In Ontario, let us not tip the balance of reasonable accommodation to the point that expectations of various cultural, religious, and ethnic demands exceed our schools' ability to satisfy all cults, all religions preferences, and all minority groups. Above all, let us keep in mind that the main function of public education is to educate students in the broadest sense for the public good. If there is extra teacher time and classroom space for special interests, let it be used to help students in their study of mathematics, science, Canadian history, individual learning difficulties, and in the pursuit of physical fitness. Let us also make room for special needs and abilities in the pursuit of literature, music, and the arts. Above all, let us direct our extra time and expertise towards public education that serves the public good.

Two Book Reviews

- 1. The Great Agnostic by Susan Jacoby**
- 2. Age of Greed by Jeff Madrick**

The Great Agnostic: Robert Ingersoll and American Free Thought

By Susan Jacoby

Robert Green Ingersoll was born in 1833 in the small town of Dresden in upstate New York. His father was the Reverend John Ingersoll, a Presbyterian minister. His mother, Mary Livingston Ingersoll died when Robert was only two years old. He had two older sisters and two older brothers. He was closest to his brother Ebon, who eventually became a congressman from Illinois. John Ingersoll was not a particularly popular minister and consequently the family moved quite often, causing Robert's education to be sporadic. But despite this less than ideal situation, both he and his brother Ebon were admitted to the bar in 1854. Robert became a prodigious reader of books with Shakespeare being one of his favourite authors. He admired other poets including Burns, Byron, Keats, Shelly and Walt Whitman. (Ingersoll's thoughtful eulogy delivered at Whitman's burial is included in the book). Robert was also a lover of classical music.

Robert Ingersoll went on to become an expert attorney whose skills were in great demand as he became involved in numerous famous cases. He also became the greatest orator of the nineteenth century. People were willing to pay to hear his lectures and the lecture halls were always full. Early on in his life he left the Christian religious beliefs of his father behind and he became know as "The Great Agnostic." When asked if the term agnostic was more satisfactory than the term atheist, he succinctly replied, "The Agnostic is an Atheist. The Atheist is an Agnostic. The Agnostic says: 'I do not know; but I know I do not believe there is any god.' The Atheist says the same. The orthodox Christian says he knows there is a God: but we know he does not know. The Atheist too cannot know that God does not exist." On this

Agnostic/Atheist debate, Jacoby comments that the word Atheist has a much harsher sound than the word Agnostic and the reason for the invention of the more bland word Agnostic by Thomas Huxley in the nineteenth century, was that the words atheism and atheist had long been considered pejoratives. Ingersoll did not dwell unduly on the distinction between the two words. Like James Madison, he did not waste time on the trivial. There were bigger fish to fry.

In his lectures Ingersoll was critical of religious doctrines saying, “the doctrine of original sin has no foundation in fact and the blood atonement is an absurdity.” Nevertheless, religious believers would pay to attend his lectures just to hear this brilliant orator speak. He was a great champion of science and said, “scientists and inventors had done much more for the welfare of human beings than preachers of any creed,” and, “the moment it is admitted that all phenomena are within the domain of the natural, the necessity for a priest has disappeared.” Ingersoll was a humanistic free thinker who championed the secular way of life that teaches us to strive to be happy in the here and now. He advocated equality for women and believed that education was the best investment government could make at any level. “It is far cheaper to build schoolhouses than prisons and it is much better to have scholars than convicts.” He rejected the dictum that religion is the foundation of morality and believed that discoverers, inventors, teachers and scientists would eventually take the place of clerics.

Ingersoll was a great admirer of Thomas Paine (1737-1809) whose writings favourably influenced the outcome of the American Revolution. Paine is famous for the line, “these are the times that try men’s souls,” penned during the darkest hour of George Washington’s army. But after writing *The Age of Reason* (1794) that put forth the heretical idea that sacred books of all religions were written by human beings, and not by any deity, Paine became obscure in the annals of American history and died a pauper. Ingersoll did not die a pauper, but like Paine there is no statue honouring his memory. Both men have been downgraded or eliminated from history books because of their outspoken opposition to organized religion and any entanglement between religion and government. In *The Great Agnostic*, Susan Jacoby, one of America’s best known female freethinkers, has admirably documented the many achievements of Robert Ingersoll, and regrets that Ingersoll’s secular influence did not carry over into the 1900s. (DAH).

Age of Greed: The Triumph of Finance and the Decline of America

By Jeff Madrick

A short while ago a book entitled *Assholes: A Theory*, by Aaron James appeared on bestseller lists for a number of weeks. In this book the author provides us with a delightful romp through the world of assholes, analyzing various types such as smug assholes, royal assholes, corporate assholes, reckless assholes and numerous others. One type of asshole that particularly caught my attention was the delusional banker asshole, represented by the individuals who precipitated the financial crisis of 2008. Through mathematically sophisticated “innovation,” investment firms and traders were allowed to take on too much risk with the result that society assumed the risk, while investment bankers reaped huge financial rewards. Some of these assholes, with no concern for the welfare of those they adversely affected, felt they were entitled to these unconscionably large payouts because they were smarter than the next guy. It was this appalling situation that prompted me to read *Age of Greed*, the principal focus of this review, and learn more about these greedy characters.

In the years following WWII, most Americans believed the federal government was good for them. Partly thanks to the far-reaching financial, social and economic reforms of the Depression, the country prospered after the war and living standards improved. Highways were built, men were sent into space, Social Security was expanded and progressive taxation to pay the bills was widely accepted. But things changed in the 1970s, possibly due to high inflation as much as anything, as Americans began to wonder if

governments had gone too far. The new refrain was that big government was holding Americans back and consequently regulations were weakened and social programs were curtailed. As reforms went blindly ahead, the “age of greed” began. This book is about how this shift came about, and how profound its influence has been since this “new age” came about, citing the damage that was done along the way. Part I tells the story of business pioneers who fought government regulation, or through innovation escaped government oversight, all the while diminishing the power of government and reinforcing the changing national attitudes. Part II tells the story of how government was no longer a counterweight as financiers led the way. Wall Street changed radically. Debt more than innovation and technical progress became the economy’s driving force. Financial businesses doubled in size compared to the economy and their profits grew still faster. Hundreds of billions of precious American savings were wasted.

The book describes in considerable detail the activities of over twenty individuals who actively participated in the events that took place in this era. The list includes names such as Walter Wriston, Milton Friedman, Richard Nixon, Ivan Boesky, Ronald Reagan, Ted Turner, Sam Walton, Jimmy Carter, Paul Volker, Michel Milken, Alan Greenspan, Tom Peters, Jack Welch, and George Soros. Not all these individuals were blatant practitioners of greed. Some were not in the game to get rich and some who made fortunes gave much of their fortunes away. Most were not wholly destructive, but nevertheless they participated in taking the economy along an unfortunate tragic path for their own purpose, from which it may not be possible to turn back.

In the Epilogue, the author details how so much capital has been wasted in the “Age of Greed.” As Wall Street investors got fabulously rich, hundreds of billions of dollars were channeled into wasteful investments that could have been spent on energy, infrastructure, transportation, communication, health care, medical research, education, technical and business R&D, and new truly innovative consumer products and business equipment. And the money spent bailing out financial institutions could also have been put to much better use, although some of this has been paid back.

At one time business managers were not subject to the whims of investors who now force managers to meet financial forecasts in order that share values can be maintained and increased. This undesirable thinking has caused businesses to operate for the short term by trimming costs on such things as R&D, which is needed for long-term growth. Businesses were also adversely affected by the financial crisis of 2008 as it caused the loss of eight million jobs, resulting in a sharp fall in GDP, reducing Federal revenue and increasing the deficit.

It should now be clear to all that tighter government regulations are urgently required to bring Wall Street under some semblance of control, in order to prevent a repeat of the recent disasters. Controls that will force the financial institutions do what they are supposed to do. That is, eschew excessive greed and channel savings to productive use. But Wall Street continues to complain about how new regulations would undermine its profitability and has threatened to leave those financial capitals that impose restrictions they deem damaging. America has not yet turned the page. As long as Wall Street has Congress under its thumb, the page will be difficult to turn.

I have included a review of *Age of Greed* in this issue of *The Enlightenment* because it describes the economic conditions of the last thirty or more years that were at least partly responsible for the rise of the Religious Right and for their increasingly damaging political influence in the United States. Surely it is a no-brainer to conclude that a strong thriving economy with a large middle class is the surest way of diminishing the influence of the Religious Right, leading to a more secular society. Unfortunately, as outlined in the paragraph immediately above, the challenges that lie ahead are daunting to say the least, making the existence of a more secular and less religious society difficult to achieve in the short term, but what about the long term? The following article attempts to answer this question. (DAH).

Can the Middle Class be Revived?

In late July, 2013, U.S. President Barak Obama delivered a speech concerning the need to strengthen the middle class if America is to be as prosperous in the twenty-first century as it was in the twentieth. “The postwar era,” he said, “had offered the middle class a basic bargain. Whether you owned a company, swept the floors, or worked anywhere in between, the United States was a place where your hard work would be rewarded with fair wages and benefits, the chance to buy a home, to save for retirement and above all, to hand down a better life for your kids.” The same opportunities were available in the entire Western industrialized world, where the postwar era was a time of strong, and widely shared, growth. In recent decades, however, as Mr. Obama put it, “that bargain began to fray.” He said, “the link between higher productivity and people’s wages and salaries was severed as the income of the top one percent nearly quadrupled from 1979 to 2007, while the typical family’s income barely budged.” Mr. Obama pointed to some of the familiar political drivers of the shift such as weaker unions and tax cuts for the top earners. He also noted structural factors – in particular, technological change and globalization – that have helped hollow out the middle class. These two factors are the heart of the problem, because they are at the same time both largely positive and difficult to change. We can’t stop them, but we sure want to reverse the devastating consequences for the middle class. But how? That is the formidable challenge America now faces, and solutions are not easy to come by, because the favourable conditions that existed after World War II are not likely to recur. Too many things have changed!

These changes have been so great that one can argue the United States is no longer Abraham Lincoln’s democracy of “government of the people, by the people, and for the people.” It would seem that members of both recent and today’s Congresses have failed to heed Lincoln’s perceptive warning that, “America will never be destroyed from the outside. If we falter and loose our freedom, it will be because we have destroyed ourselves.” Lincoln was referring to the possibility of the country breaking in two by disagreements over slavery, but is it too big a stretch to suggest that America is today in the process of destroying itself because Congress is no longer responding to the needs of the middle class, but to the needs of Wall Street and the wealthy one percent? In 1974, three percent of retiring members of Congress became lobbyists. Now, fifty percent of Senators and forty-two percent of the members of the House of Representatives become highly paid lobbyists after retirement. It is estimated that in 2009, the special interest groups earned \$3.47 billion by lobbying the federal government. One is left thinking that if retiring members of Congress simply went home rather than remaining in Washington to lobby for special interests, the country would be better off. Maybe then the partisan gridlock that now exists in the U.S. Congress could come to an end, and members could devote their efforts toward the interests of the middle class rather than the wealthy, and deal with current problems on a non-partisan basis. This is what President Obama is advocating if America is to survive and return to its former glory. But realistically it is a utopian hope in the short term because big money is so successfully entrenched into governments that the wealthy are able to call the shots in their own interest, rather than in the interest of the country as a whole.

In the long run, however, an effective practical solution is required if America’s decline is to be reversed. Somehow, fair wages must be earned by a large middle class in order that they can buy the products and services provided by the companies owned by wealthy shareholders. These shareholders, who are often short-term thinkers, must begin to realize that their shares will start to reduce in value as the prosperity of the businesses they own declines due to a shrinking middle class that does not have the money to buy their products and services. Investment bankers and hedge fund managers need to stop using their money to make more money through derivatives and other financial instruments and instead invest their profits in viable new age businesses that employ middle class workers and pay them a decent salary. This is how the system used to work and must be revived because the present situation is precarious and unsustainable in

the long run. Without more regulation of Wall Street speculation, there will be another financial collapse akin to 2008 involving businesses rather than housing.

Another part of the solution involves education. President Obama touched on this when he mentioned technical change as a current reality that has to be considered and dealt with. How do we adapt to changes that are as different from the industrial era as those of the industrial era were different from the previous agricultural and cottage industry era? How do we educate our children in order that they possess the knowledge and skills required for this technical age? In a new paper retired MIT professor Frank Levy, and Richard Murnane, a professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, consider this question. One of their strongest conclusions centres on the importance of preschool education. The jobs of the future that pay well will require problem-solving skills utilizing new information. It turns out that this ability to solve new problems by getting new information is closely correlated with having a strong vocabulary as early as in kindergarten. It is claimed that teaching three and four-year olds to read and to talk is a lot less challenging than teaching sixteen-year-olds calculus and computer programming. And I would add that instead of teaching pre-school children untrue supernatural religious beliefs in Sunday schools, teach them about the wonders of nature and instill in them a sense of curiosity that will inspire them to keep learning so they can enjoy a secular and fulfilling life style as they mature and grow older.

Obviously future schools at all levels face the challenge of providing the kinds of training needed to equip students with the knowledge and skills required to obtain employment in this new age. Already many graduating university students are finding it difficult to find gainful employment in the field in which they specialized. Despite what is stated in the U.S. Declaration of Independence, all humans are not created equal. Humans differ in their aptitudes and their ability to learn. How to provide an adequate education and gainful employment for this wide variety of citizens' abilities in our new economy is a demanding hurdle facing our politicians, business leaders and educators.

In a recent book entitled *The Great Degeneration: How Institutions Decay and Economies Die*, historian and author Niall Ferguson notes how after the fall of Communism in Russia in 1989, we anticipated a Great Regeneration in the West, but instead we have experienced a Great Degeneration, manifested in high income inequality, excessive debt that is mortgaging the future of our descendents, the rule of law supplemented by the rule of lawyers, and institutions that have run amok or are stagnated and are unable to effectively solve the problems at hand, let alone the future. He claims the needed reform will not come from the workings of present institutions, but "must come from outside the realm of public institutions. It must come from the associations of civil society. It must come, in short, from us citizens." Or in other words, from the bottom up. Does this mean a revolution? Not necessarily, according to the cliometrician, Peter Turchin.

Peter Turchin has conducted extensive research on the cycles of income inequality using data from historical societies and suggests that the results obtained can provide answers to questions about our own society. He says, "Our society, like all previous societies, is on a roller coaster. Impersonal social forces bring us to the top; then comes the inevitable plunge. But the descent is not inevitable. Ours is the first society that can perceive how these forces operate, even if dimly. This means that we can avoid the worst – perhaps by switching to a less harrowing track, perhaps by redesigning the roller coaster altogether. This is imperative because several leading indicators of political instability look set to peak around 2020. In other words, we are approaching a historical cusp, at which the U.S. will be particularly vulnerable to violent upheaval. But this is not a preordained prophesy no matter what we do. On the contrary, if we understand the causes we have a chance of preventing it from happening. But the first thing we will have to do is reverse the trend of ever-growing income inequality." This is indeed a tall challenging order, but solutions must be found if the middle class is to be revived in order that our society can return to prosperity for all, or at least nearly all. (DAH).