



# The Enlightenment



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

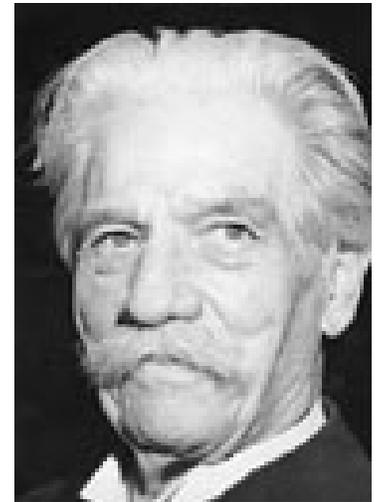
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Special Issue

## Albert Schweitzer – Organist, Theologian, Philosopher and Physician

Albert Schweitzer, the son of a Lutheran-Evangelical pastor, was born in Alsace-Lorraine in 1875. He graduated from high school in 1893 and while at high school he began studying organ. He was greatly inspired by the music of Bach and Wagner and in 1893 began studying under the great organist and composer Charles-Marie Vidor. He became close friends with Vidor and later worked with him to improve the design of pipe organs. In 1899 he obtained his Ph.D. in theology, his dissertation being *The Religious Philosophy of Kant*.



**Albert Schweitzer**

Schweitzer was thrust into notoriety in 1906 by the publication of his book *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*. This book was the result of his studying the work of the German philosopher Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1649-1768). Reimarus postulated that Jesus the Christ, as portrayed in the Christianity of his day, did not represent the real human Jesus of Nazareth, but rather grew out of circumstances and events that occurred after Jesus' death. Being a recent graduate in theology, Schweitzer set out to disprove Reimarus' conclusions, but after studying the works of various nineteenth century German philosophers, particularly those of David Friedrich Strauss (1808-1874) he concluded that Reimarus was right. He stated, "The Jesus of Nazareth who came forward publicly as the Messiah, who preached the ethic of the kingdom of God, who founded the kingdom of heaven upon earth, and died to give his work final consecration, never existed." Schweitzer maintained that it is essential that there be an understanding of life in first century Palestine, in order to grasp the true teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, which are at odds with the beliefs proclaimed by the early Christian church. (These differences are discussed in the following pages.)

Schweitzer is probably best known for his work over many years as a medical missionary at his hospital in Lambaréné in what is now Gabon, but he wished to be remembered as well for his advocacy of a reverence for life. The last of his many books was *The Teaching of Reverence for Life*. He deplored the suffering of animals and was himself a vegetarian. He was most concerned about the proliferation and use of atomic weapons and worked with Albert Einstein and Bertrand Russell, urging governments to curtail their development and deployment. He was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1952. It was his humanitarian ideal of reverence for life, and the inspiring example that he set by a long life lived in loving devotion to that principle, that is a tribute to this great man of many talents. He died in Lambaréné in 1965 at the age of 90.

## Introduction

This Special Issue of *The Enlightenment* is a follow-up to the 2010 Special Issue Volume 6, Number 8, entitled *Two Contrasting Legacies of the Axial Age*. The first legacy was the democracy and humanism of Ancient Greece that was unfortunately superseded by Christianity - the second legacy. In the 2010 issue, an attempt was made to demonstrate that Christianity was a human invention, rather than the divine creation of a supernatural Jesus the Christ. In this issue, an attempt is made to establish a clear demarcation between the human Jewish Jesus of Nazareth and the invented supernatural Jesus the Christ. Making this somewhat new approach known, might be an aid in convincing doubting believers to become humanists, or at least adopt a humanist frame of mind.

In the April 2008 and the April 2011 issues of *The Enlightenment*, mention is made of Baron D'Holbach's 1761 book entitled *Christianity Unveiled*, and in the April 2011 issue, the Philosophes, who were the clandestine atheists of the eighteenth century, were featured as well. This current issue moves on to the German scholars of eighteenth and nineteenth century that were documented by Albert Schweitzer in his book, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*, making it appropriate to feature him on the cover of this *Enlightenment*. After Schweitzer's book, there was little interest in searching for the historical Jesus until the 1980s and 1990s when a spate of action occurred, and as we shall see, it is still going on.

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## **Making a Case for Humanism by Attempting to Solve the Jesus Puzzle**

*By Donald Hatch*

If a religious friend asked you to explain why he or she should give up their long-held cherished religious beliefs and become a humanist, how would you go about it? Would you begin by trying to make a case that there is no God? Would you use the well-worn cliché that if there is a benevolent, all-knowing, all-powerful deity somewhere in the universe that answers prayer and is able to influence events on earth, why then, does this God allow so much suffering and violence in our world? Would this do the trick? Perhaps, but maybe not because you cannot prove there is no God any more than anyone else can prove there is. Both are poking at a phantom, so why not try another approach? Why not centre on something that is very real, instead of something imaginary like God? The “something” that is real is the Christian religion itself, which has existed and influenced western civilization for better or worse for two millennia. Why not demonstrate just how questionable the Christian religion actually is, being based on an invented supernatural Jesus the Christ?

About two and a half centuries ago the German religious scholar Reimarus concluded that Christianity is a *fraud* based on a supernatural Jesus the Christ, and since that time there has been enough serious scholarly research to confirm this conclusion. Therefore, perhaps pointing out the fallacies of Christianity to prospective humanists, might be more effective than trying to convince them that there is no God. To this end the following discourse is an attempt to briefly document the scholarship that has occurred over the last two and a half centuries as a means of making a case that the Christian religion, despite its popularity, is based on a very weak foundation indeed. As stated in the Introduction, this discourse will provide further support for the polemics put forward in the 2010 Special Issue of *The Enlightenment* entitled, *Two Legacies of the Axial Age*, in which it is asserted that Christianity is a human, not a divine invention.

In the mid eighteenth century, Deist German philosopher Hermann Samuel Reimarus who is already mentioned, authored *The Aims of Jesus and His Disciples*, fragments of which were anonymously published only after his death. Reimarus was attempting to discover the historic Jesus and in doing so may well have been the first scholar to proclaim that the Gospel of John was incompatible with the synoptic gospels. Consequently he virtually ignored the fourth gospel in his writings. He firmly believed that Jesus had no intention of doing away with the Jewish religion and putting another religion in its place. He characterizes Jesus as a preacher, not a founder of a new religion. He believed it was necessary to leave miracles behind as well as the metaphysical concept of portraying Jesus as the divine son of God, the Trinity, and other dogmatic tenets. He may have been the first to emphasize that it is necessary to get back to the world of first century Jewish life in order to discover the real Jesus of Nazareth. As stated above, he even went so far as to suggest that Christianity rests upon a *fraud*. Like d’Holbach’s *Christianity Unveiled*, Reimarus’ works remained rather obscure for an extended period because they were so revolutionary. Both authors wrote before their time and their books did not do much to diminish religiosity in the Western world.

But fortunately, Reimarus was rediscovered by Schweitzer when he started to investigate the writings of German philosophers in his search for the historical Jesus. In total, he examined the works of more than fifty authors and scholars. The results of his investigation are documented in *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*. Schweitzer cites many authors in this book including David Friedrich Strauss (1808-1874), whose work *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* was published in two volumes in 1835-36. These were translated into English by Marian Evans (George Eliot)

in 1846. The English volumes constitute close to seven hundred pages. These books caused a sensation, but were negatively received by many religious scholars and Strauss lost his teaching position at the University of Zurich as a result. In *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, Strauss examines many of the usual New Testament enigmas including miracles, the virgin birth, (there is no reason to believe that Joseph was not the father of Jesus) and the meaning of the term "Son of Man." (In Aramaic the phrase simply means a human man). He rules out the Gospel of John as not being credible, and also rules out the possibility of an afterlife. It has been said that Strauss was no mere destroyer of untenable solutions, but was also a prophet of coming advances in biblical and religious knowledge.

From the works of the German scholars explored by Schweitzer, the following can be deduced:

1. It is necessary to have an understanding of conditions and beliefs in Jewish first century Palestine, in order to uncover a clear picture of Jesus of Nazareth.
2. This Jesus was a human Jew who had no intention of founding what became Christianity.
3. The Gospel of John should be seriously questioned. The difference from the Synoptic Gospels is so great that it is impossible to intelligently consider it as being credible. As the Bible itself states, you cannot logically serve two masters. (It is worth pointing out that the Gospel of John is where the fundamentalist/evangelicals get most of their misguided ammunition and it is also where calling the Jews "Christ killers," probably originated. More on this later).
4. Immortality is not even a remote possibility.
5. The supernatural Jesus the Christ never lived. He was an invention based on the real Jesus of Nazareth and morphed into Jesus the Christ by the apostle Paul, the New Testament writers, and the early Catholic Church fathers.

The next few paragraphs of this discourse will rely mainly on material taken from a just released book entitled *Jesus of Nazareth*, by Maurice Casey, Emeritus Professor of New Testament Language and Literature at the University of Nottingham, U.K. He is fluent in Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic (the language of Jesus). Casey agrees with the researchers mentioned above, that it is absolutely essential to differentiate between Jesus of Nazareth and Jesus the Christ, and this can only be done by having an understanding of the history and beliefs existing in Jewish Palestine and the surrounding area before and after the birth of Jesus in 4 BCE. This task has been aided by translations of the Dead Sea Scrolls including those written in Aramaic.

After briefly noting the contributions of Schweitzer and the German biblical scholars mentioned above, Casey moves on to the latter years of the twentieth century citing the works of Geza Vermes and E.P. Sanders. Vermes, himself a Jew, points out that Jesus the Jew is not consistent with the deified second person of the Christian Trinity. Sanders suggested that it is helpful to direct attention away from the sayings of Jesus, and instead place prime importance on the facts about the real Jesus of Nazareth that can be established beyond reasonable doubt. In his book *The Historical Figure of Jesus*, he lists the following facts as being authentic:

- Jesus was born circa 4 BCE, near the time of the death of Herod the Great.
- He spent his childhood and early adult years in Nazareth, a Galilean village.
- He was baptized by John the Baptist.
- He called twelve disciples.
- He taught in towns, villages, and countryside of Galilee (apparently not in cities).
- He preached the kingdom of God.

- He left Galilee and went to Jerusalem for Passover.
- He created a disturbance in the Temple area.
- He was arrested and interrogated by Jewish authorities, specifically the high priests.
- He was executed on the orders of the Roman Procurator, Pontius Pilate.

At this point the reader might well ask; is there any independent historical evidence that Jesus of Nazareth actually lived? The answer is a qualified yes. There is a reference in some (but not all versions) of the writings of the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, where he reports the martyrdom of James in 62 CE, who Josephus refers to as the brother of Jesus. There is no reason to suspect that Josephus was not a reliable historian. For example, there is an account of the activities and death of John the Baptist by Josephus that coincides with the gospel stories, so it would appear that his mentioning Jesus as the brother of James is an authentic statement. Also there are historical accounts confirming that Pontius Pilate was the Roman Procurator at the time Jesus died, and the Roman historian Tacitus mentions that Pilate was the one who sentenced Jesus to death.

Because it is so well known, any discussion of the search for the historical Jesus must include the research of the Jesus Seminar, a group of biblical scholars based in California who have attempted to determine which of the words attributed to Jesus in the four gospels, plus the relatively recently discovered gospel of Thomas, were actually spoken by him. To achieve this aim they devised a questionable system of using beads of four colours, red, pink, gray and black to determine the probabilities of the words being actually used by Jesus. They engaged in this exercise because they believed that many of the words attributed to Jesus in the gospels were not actually spoken by him, but were put into his mouth by the gospel writers; not an unreasonable assumption. Their results have been published in a book entitled *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*, which I have attempted to read, but could not finish because I found it to be so convoluted. I am forced to agree with serious scholars of the caliber of Donald Akenson of Queen's University and Maurice Casey, that the Jesus Seminar methods and some of their conclusions are seriously flawed. Nevertheless, the Jesus Seminar has performed a useful function in that for the first time, the general public became aware of the fact that traditional Christian beliefs were being challenged. It was through reading about the Jesus Seminar in Time Magazine, that I started to read much more on these matters and eventually became a humanist.

Casey lists many other attempts by various parties to establish the truth about the historical Jesus, most of which he regards as inferior and not up to the standard of serious scholarship.

Casey's book, *Jesus of Nazareth*, is 508 pages long plus an Appendix. His conclusions are listed in the short final chapter. He believed that the life of Jesus of Nazareth unfolded as described by Sanders, and that he was a fully human Jewish teacher and prophet whose mission was to reform the Judaism of his day. Casey believes Jesus and his brother James were fully conversant with the Hebrew Scriptures. Jesus believed in God and expected the establishment of God's kingdom on earth in the relatively near future. He was a compassionate person and a distinguished ethicist. He urged his fellow Jews to repent by returning to the prescribed ways of the Torah. He believed his death would encourage his fellow Jews to do this. He had no intention of founding a new religion.

From all the above, I submit we can conclude the following:

- Jesus of Nazareth was a fully human Jewish teacher (with good qualities and faults just like all humans) whose mission was to reform the Judaism of his day, which he maintained had deviated from God's intentions.
- St. Paul transformed Jesus of Nazareth into Jesus the Christ, the Messiah, a man without blemishes, who was later embellished by the gospel writers with supernatural qualities taken from myths circulating at the time. These myths included a virgin birth and a physical resurrection from the grave.
- The Christian religion, called Christianity, is a human invention based on the supernatural Jesus the Christ, the supposed son of God. It was invented over a period of several centuries by a combination of circumstances. (See the 2010 Special *Enlightenment* for details of how this unfolded).
- The Gospel of John should be seriously questioned. It does not fit in with the synoptic gospels and provides the fundamentalists and evangelicals with ammunition for their misguided causes. It is also responsible for much anti-Semitism.

The above assertions merit further amplification in two respects. Firstly there is the two-Jesus concept and the need to identify the characteristics that carried over from Jesus of Nazareth to Jesus the Christ. Secondly, the reasons for questioning the Gospel of John require explanation. These are both discussed below:

The first obvious carry over from Jesus the Nazarene to Jesus the Christ is monotheism. Jesus of Nazareth refers to God a lot, often using the term Father as in the Lord's Prayer. Also carried over is the concept of heaven and hell and the coming of God's Kingdom in the near future. Then there is the idea of redemption that Jesus thought of as a return to righteous living according to the Torah. Perhaps most important is the teaching of morality and ethics, of compassion, concern for the poor, the fair treatment of women and children and of course the Golden Rule. The rites of baptism, and marriage were also carried over.

Characteristics that were added to Jesus of Nazareth to bring Jesus the Christ into being include the virgin birth and the physical resurrection, both most likely based on ancient myths, the atonement for the forgiveness of sins of believers, the concept of grace, the considering of Jesus as the son of God, and the invention of the enigmatic Trinity. And then there is the ludicrous exclusivity that makes no sense at all. Why should believing Christians be the only humans allowed to enter heaven, if indeed there is one? Finally there is the claim that Jesus was the Messiah, fulfilling prophecies in the Old Testament. (This claim was of course, rejected by the Jews). I believe it can be safely stated that nothing mentioned in this paragraph stands the scrutiny of logic or believability or common sense, and scholars such as Reimarus are justified in terming Christianity as a *fraud*. This may seem extreme, and may well upset believing Christians, but the facts cannot be avoided.

Now, why should we question the validity of the Gospel of John? For starters, the fourth gospel is remarkably different from the synoptic gospels. Right off the bat, the chronology is different. Jesus' ministry lasts three years instead of one as in the synoptics, and the Passover occurs after Jesus' trial rather than before. More importantly John is the major source of ammunition for the Christian evangelists. They zero in on John 3:3 – "Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." And John 3:16 – "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." Here is where much of Christian exclusivity originates. The evangelists fervently believe it is their duty and their calling

to save humanity and Christianize the whole world. In doing so they have caused much harm. The debacle of the Canadian Indian residential schools is a prime example of the harm that can occur. Missionary work should be confined to helping the underprivileged live better lives, not proclaiming a dubious Christian message. Then there is the problem of the fundamentalist/evangelical Christians that are attempting to infiltrate governments and form theocracies. They also are heavily influenced by the contents of the Gospel of John.

Although there are anti-Semitic inferences in Matthew 27:25 and 1 Thessalonians 2:14-16, the Gospel of John has to be held responsible to no small extent for much of the anti-Semitism that has occurred over the centuries in Christendom. In the extreme, the Jews are referred to as "Christ killers." That much of this hatred originates in John is not hard to substantiate. In the synoptic gospels it is the chief priests, the elders, and the scribes, that seek to condemn Jesus and have him crucified. In John it is usually the Jews that are mentioned. The word "Jews" appears over and over again in John in the narrative about Jesus' trial and conviction. And there is the damning phrase in John 8:44, referring to the Jews, "Ye are of your father, the devil." The misguided persecution of Jews by pogroms, by expulsions, by setting up ghettos and by execution throughout the last thousand years is well documented and this has to be one of humanity's greatest tragedies, because the Jewish people have made a disproportionate contribution to the betterment of humanity in relation to their small numbers. (There are only about fifteen million Jews in the world). They have received 10 Nobel Prizes in literature, 8 for peace, 53 three in physics, 13 in economics, and 44 in medicine, for a total of 128. Who knows how many Albert Einsteins, Neils Bohrs, or Eli Wiesels were senselessly slaughtered? What a horrendous black mark on Christianity!

From the foregoing, I think it is evident that those scholars who claim that the fourth gospel should be ignored when attempting to discover the true historic Jesus of Nazareth, have got it right. Not only that, surely humanity would be better off if this book had not appeared in the New Testament canon. It has and is still causing unnecessary problems even today

So have we solved the Jesus puzzle by postulating that there were two Jesus'? One the real human Jesus of Nazareth and the other, the fictitious and invented Jesus called the Christ. The implication is that it is impossible to solve the Jesus puzzle unless Jesus is split in two, so to speak. But can it really be that simple? It is up to the reader to decide. Is the foregoing presentation credible enough to convince a believing, but perhaps doubting Christian, that he or she has been asked to believe in questionable Christian ideology, partly based on myths? Maybe, maybe not, but here is some further substantiating food for thought.

In the eleventh century, Pope Leo X is reputed to have said, "It has served us well, this myth of Christ." Catholics of course deny that he ever said this, but whether he did or not, it is a factual statement. There would likely be no Christianity or Catholic Church today, if Emperor Constantine had not sanctioned Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire, and if the Catholic Church had not taken advantage of this political connection to promote their brand of Christianity to their own advantage. They were able to convince the uneducated masses to follow their dictates that revolved around a mythical Christ, and coerce and persuade them to donate money, thus making the Church rich and powerful in the process. They cleverly promoted the exclusiveness of Christianity by claiming that only faithful Catholics were allowed to enter heaven, and using the tactic of fear, they claimed that all unfaithful non-believers would roast in hell. Yes, two millennia of Christianity have certainly demonstrated the power of supernatural myths and indeed these myths have served the Church hierarchy very well. But it is time to move on. As Sigmund Freud has stated, religion has outlived its usefulness and

should be replaced with something better. Can the something better be a democratic secular society with citizens living according to humanist principles? Most humanists would say yes, but can they convince potential converts? Let's attempt to answer that question.

After being exposed to all the preceding arguments for casting doubt on the validity of Christian beliefs and the Christian religion itself, a potential convert to humanism may well ask; can humanism provide a satisfying and sustaining life stance in place of my religion? After all, I get a lot of satisfaction from my affiliation with my church. My church provides moral and ethical guidance, an opportunity to socialize with friendly people, and I receive solace from the music and the rituals. Most humanists will of course believe they have convincing answers to these questions. They will point out that humanists practise a secular lifestyle according to a set of logical ethical and moral secular principles; they are in awe of the wonders of nature and have a genuine concern for the health of our environment and the future of humankind. Humanists may also mention that surveys show that the happiest people in the world live in Denmark, probably the most secular, safest and least religious country in the world. All good stuff.

But it must be admitted that humanism may have difficulty providing the social attributes of meeting regularly with like-minded people in a designated facility on a regular basis as churches do. And humanists do not generally get involved with outreach work to help the underprivileged. Interestingly enough, the well-known humanist philosopher Dr. Daniel Dennett dealt with this question in a talk at the 2010 Humanist Canada conference in Montreal titled, *"What Should Replace Religions?"* Dennett suggested humanist should examine the tool shed of religions and make use of the good tools such as hope, love, beauty, joy, art, music, justice, truth and freedom. And he also emphasized a most important feature, namely a place to meet regularly for enjoying lectures and discussions while socializing with friends. He suggested that there are many abandoned churches that humanists could purchase at bargain prices, but cautioned that these facilities require substantial amounts of money to maintain. This in turn requires a significant numbers of members willing to donate, and most humanist groups do not have a large membership or a lot of money. If humanist organizations wish to increase their numbers, how do they convince other secularists and doubting liberal Christian to join a humanist organization? For doubting Christians, humanists must obviously provide a worthwhile alternative to what these people already receive from their church. Are the humanists capable of meeting this challenge? I am not sure they have yet found a winning strategy for providing skeptical churchgoers with a secular alternative to religion, and I don't think Dennett is sure either.

But maybe we don't have to. The Western European experience seems to indicate that successful secular societies happen naturally on their own as prosperity increases and interest in religion wanes. Mainline religions are in decline in Canada and the younger generation is showing less and less interest in religion. Maybe what humanists need to do is politely point out (without excessive bashing) the fallacies of religions to those who may be interested, as has been attempted in this discourse. Then just let secularism take its natural course, hoping that in the future the majority of young people will reject the religious-right propaganda, thus causing religious fundamentalism to decline along with the mainline denominations.

In his book *Good Without God*, Greg Epstein mentions that non-believers outnumber the members of any organized religion in the world. And it seems that most people who participate in a secular life stance have no interest in belonging to official humanist organizations. Dr. Dennett also mentioned the very large number of non-believers in the world in his Montreal talk. He went on to observe that the number of people belonging to official humanist organizations is

not very large, and those humanists that do belong are principally known for writing intellectual articles and meeting annually to preach to the converted in hotel ball rooms. There is some validity to this observation, but maybe that is not such a bad thing. Since secularization is proceeding at a significant pace anyway in the developed world, perhaps the job for card-carrying humanists is to speak up for causes of particular concern such as euthanasia and opposing the public funding of religious schools. If they do this well, then they are justified in meeting in hotel ballrooms and holding local meetings to elucidate intelligently on the shortfalls of religions and discuss other matters of mutual interest and concern.

## **Summary**

Humanism is concerned with many things affecting human beings and the way humans live. Things like personal dignity, mutual respect, personal freedom, democracy, responsibility, justice, compassion, rationality, separation of church and state, critical thinking, concern for the environment, human rights and more. All of these attributes are included in the Declaration of Humanist Principles issued some years ago by the Humanist Association of Canada. Also included in the principles, is the rejection of belief in supernatural phenomena in the absence of verifiable evidence. It is submitted that in our modern world, a secular society with a low level of supernatural religiosity is superior to a society with a high degree of supernatural religiosity. Therefore, perhaps pointing out the two-Jesus concept to doubting believers and others can help them reduce their dependence on religion for peace of mind, and make them realize that adhering to the humanist values listed above can be a satisfying alternative to religion. Add to this, Schweitzer's celebration of a reverence for life and the picture is complete. This is the message this special issue of *The Enlightenment* is attempting to convey.

## **The Jefferson Bible – A Very Interesting Document**

Thomas Jefferson (1743 -1826) is best known as one of the founding fathers of the United States, as well as an author of the Declaration of Independence and a contributor to the U.S. Constitution. It is also well known that he was a Deist and a firm advocator of the separation of church and state, and that he predicted that within a couple of generations, at least two thirds of Americans would be Unitarians. (We now know how that did not work out). What is not so well known is that he put together a book entitled *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*, but it was not published until 1895 under the title of *The Jefferson Bible*. Sitting down with a straight razor, he cut out the sentences in the synoptic gospels that he thought were realistically authentic, (there is very little from the gospel of John) and pasted them in chronological order removing all references to supernatural events, while still retaining the beauty and wisdom of the philosophy of Jesus of Nazareth. It contains narrative about some of Jesus' activities plus a number of his sayings, the beatitudes, the Lord's Prayer and many of the parables. There is no virgin birth. There is a crucifixion but no resurrection. Although Jefferson was not a biblical scholar as such, he was an exceptionally intelligent individual who like most Deists, realized the shortcomings of traditional Christianity, and in his "Bible" he logically separated the plausible from the implausible. In a relatively short time he achieved what the Jesus Seminar, took several years to accomplish with their questionable methodology. I hope the reader will appreciate this bit of historic information because, as an ardent admirer of Jefferson, I enjoyed reading *The Jefferson Bible* and found it to be of considerable interest. In any case it is related to the subject at hand in this *Enlightenment*. (DAH)

## A Most Interesting Question

It has been stated many times that Christianity, which has had undue influence on Western civilization, would never have gotten off the ground were it not for the Herculean efforts of the apostle Paul. Whether this is entirely true or not, there is no doubt that he was a major factor in establishing the Gentile churches throughout the Eastern Mediterranean region. Several decades later these churches were invigorated by the four gospels and later became the foundation for the founding of the Roman Catholic Church. So just what was it that motivated Paul to proselytize Christianity, despite being subjected to much torture and suffering? It is an important question to ask, even though it may be impossible to answer with any assurance. It is, however, possible to speculate. One such speculation is offered below.

What is not speculation, however, is the fact that the Epistles of Paul are the only writings in the Bible for which we know the author for certain. But what motivated Paul to write them and endure suffering from floggings and imprisonment while promoting the teachings of Jesus and establishing Gentile churches? What happened during his conversion on the Damascus road (probably an epileptic seizure) that started him, a Jewish Pharisee who was originally critical of those Jews who were followers of Jesus, on his quest? Something caused him to snap and do an about turn. Somehow he became aware of the newer concepts that were circulating among the various minor Jewish sects at the time, including the ideas of a devil and the possibility of an afterlife. He became acquainted with James the brother of Jesus and the major disciples including Peter, John and Andrew. He seemed to become enthralled with the idea that through the grace of Jesus, his death now made it unnecessary to follow Jewish law to the letter. This seemed to be one of the main messages he wanted to get across to the Gentiles. Why?

One speculation is that it was because Paul was a homosexual. This is not to say that he condoned homosexual behaviour. On the contrary, he abhorred homosexuality and apparently remained celibate all of his life. The reasoning behind the assertion that Paul was gay is that he was a Pharisee who religiously tried to follow the dictates of the Jewish laws as outlined in the Old Testament. It is postulated that because of his homosexuality, his mind was troubled by the verses in Leviticus that specify death as the punishment for engaging in homosexual activities. In other word this was his "thorn in the flesh," that he spoke about. It is further postulated that after his conversion on the Damascus road, Paul's mind was put at ease by believing that Jesus died for the sins of humankind, and through his grace, the Jewish laws were superseded and no longer had to be followed to the letter. Having received his salvation, Paul supposedly became so thankful that he felt obligated to travel throughout the eastern Mediterranean region evangelizing and proclaiming the gospel, often under conditions of considerable hardship. Although it is impossible to prove, the above explanation could account for Paul's zealous attempts to convert as many people as possible to Christianity in its fledgling years, prior to his martyrdom in Rome around 68 CE. The fact that Paul never married lends further credence to the possibility of him being a homosexual. Readers might be surprised to learn that none other than Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong believes there is a good possibility that Paul was gay. In his book, *Rescuing the Bible From the Fundamentalists*, he devotes five pages to the possibility that Paul was a homosexual. Spong states that in his view, although it is strictly speculation, of all the possible reasons for Paul's avid promotion of Christianity, the homosexual explanation is the most plausible. There is nothing basically wrong with being gay or lesbian. They have made great contributions to society particularly in the area of the arts. Perhaps if it were widely known that there is, I think, better than a 50-50 possibility that Paul was gay, there would be less animosity toward gays and lesbians in our society. Just a thought! (DAH)