



The Enlightenment



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How I Became a Humanist

At the June 12th meeting of the Humanist Association of London and Area, three members described how they became a humanist. It has been suggested that *Enlightenment* readers who were not at the meeting, would be interested in reading these presentations. They are printed in the following pages. The bios of the three speakers, Arsenio Girón, Donald Hatch and Amelia Wehlau are listed below.

Arsenio Girón spent the first 9 years of life in Spain (where he was born) and in France. In 1942 he came to America on a boatload of refugee children, was placed in an orphanage and later in foster care. After graduating from high school he continued his music studies at the Eastman School of Music, Oberlin Conservatory of Music, received a masters degree from Tulane University and pursued doctoral studies at Washington University (St. Louis). In 1968 he was invited to join the Faculty of Music at the University of Western Ontario where he taught theory and composition until retiring. Though he continues to live in London with his wife of 57 years, he spends the summer months in a cabin located on 35 acres of woods near the east coast. Of his several hobbies, he enjoys best reading, sailing and woodworking (and learning to play the dulcimers which he makes).

Donald Hatch was born and raised in Guelph, Ontario, where he graduated as a chemist from the Ontario Agricultural College in 1953. He spent his whole career working in the Canadian chemical industry as a technical service representative, a marketer and latterly in management. After retirement in 1990, he obtained his private pilot's licence and also became interested in philosophy and middle-eastern history. He has written numerous articles for *The Enlightenment* and a few for *Humanist Perspectives* magazine.

Amelia Wehlau was born in the United States and raised in California and then Kansas City. She holds an undergraduate degree and PhD in Astronomy from the University of California in Berkeley where she also met her husband. In 1955 the two of them emigrated to London, Ontario. After the last of her four children was born she worked on pulsating variable stars with Helen Hogg of the University of Toronto and then accepted a half time position with the University of Western Ontario where for more than 25 years she taught a Introductory Astronomy class. After her husband died and she reached retirement age she maintained an office in the Department and continued to do research. She is interested in art and music and attends many plays and concerts.

How I Became a Humanist

By Arsenio Girón

When asked to speak about how I became a Humanist, I hesitated, even thought of declining. The reason being, I don't recall a time in life from my mid teens, when I did not try, to the best of my ability, living by humanist principles, (humanist with a small "h").

Sometime in mid- life when I learned about Humanism (with a capital "H") I realized I had always been a Humanist, even while I believed in God. The Humanist "manifesto", if I can call it that, is not in conflict with the manner in which rational thinking people, theists or atheists, conduct their lives. Though theists and atheists are in agreement with principles of good behaviour, disagreements quickly arise when abstract ideas are put into practice. Where the theist may rely on the facile doctrines of his religion to determine good behaviour, the atheist must call on his intellect, reason, and anticipate the consequences of his actions. It is fiction believing that secularism and religion can approach a problem with equal purpose.

All I can reveal to you is first, why I rejected established religion and second, why later I transitioned into atheism. And this I'll try to do in about 10 minutes - not an easy task. It's very difficult compressing 80 years into such a short time.

I did not reject belief in God until my twenties or later, but because of my experiences in Spain during the civil war and in southern France under the Vichy Government, I developed a strong dislike for religion. (You may be familiar with the role of the Catholic Church in Europe during the second world war and understand why I rejected religion). It may have been pointed out - I don't recall clearly how I was told - that believing in God and rejecting religion were incompatible, contradictory, two ideas that cancelled out each other. Likewise it may also have been pointed out that religion and God-belief are like the woof and warp - the threads - in a fabric. Analogies (comparisons) I found useful but they proved nothing to a young man who kept a copy of Hesper's Philosophical Analysis at his elbow.

As is the case I believe with most people, I am a product of all my life's experiences - I was molded by what I observed in society, by my interaction with people, ie. friends, colleagues, family, by what I studied, by how I was trained in my field, by the conclusions drawn from subjecting dictums, doctrines, pronouncements to logical examination over many years, my logical examination and the examination of others much wiser than I am. All this and more made me who I am; how I confront life's challenges (not always successfully), why I can laugh at the ridiculous, why I love my family, and yes, why I can lose my patience with the gullible and sometimes find it difficult to remain on the right side of civility.

The majority who end up being religious start their path to belief early in life as children, and belief is re-enforced by how they interpret and how they read into their life's experiences. In my case, I began as a child disbelieving in religion and as I passed through the various stages of growing up - childhood, adolescence, and adulthood - I could not avoid observing the glaring disconnect between professed beliefs and behaviour among those who were part of my life. They included faithful churchgoers, scout leaders, coaches, teachers. The list could go on.

As a young man living in the U.S., I was subjected to the draft. To this day I am convinced the Gods conspired to punish an atheist. I ended up in the chaplain's section. And there for 2 years among these men of God, I continued to observe the gulf between belief and behaviour.

My life in foster care was not unpleasant though it could have been better. To keep peace in the family I reluctantly attended a Northern Baptist Church of which the foster parents were members. The time in church was my daydreaming time except during baptizing Sundays. It was very difficult for a teen boy to stifle a giggle seeing mature men and women wearing white smocks down to their bare feet being dunked bodily in a large tub of water located behind the altar. I don't know if I am blessed or cursed seeing humour in solemn situations. (Keeping a straight face recently watching an army of fat men wearing red robes parading in St. Peter Square, was beyond my control).

There was always some tension in the foster home. The well-meaning parents felt that if one did not believe in God he was morally wanting. This was painful to a teenager. Life in foster care was not in many ways different from that of any other child growing up in a religious household. What made my experience different was the conflict between my disbelief and the parent's belief. As an adolescent I had to conform to the rules of the house which were not oppressive, but which I often found offensive, irrational and sometimes comical. And though I found myself surrounded in a theistic ocean not to my liking, I did benefit from many acts of kindness. I was saddened leaving the foster parents and later learning of their deaths. During the years of living in the same house, we did develop an emotional attachment that over-rode religious conflicts.

So as belief is strengthened in the believer by his experiences, disbelief was strengthened by my experiences. Though we traveled in different directions, the manners by which we arrived at our core beliefs were not much different. I repeat, I lost my belief in religion very early but not my belief in God until later. At this age it is very difficult drawing aside all that stands between today, the present, and the times in my life 60 or more years ago. I do know that my journey to atheism was at a glacial pace.

If any of you surf the Secular, Atheist and Humanist sites, you will hear or read reasons why people and especially ministers, no longer believe in God. Most reasons for disbelief are based on problems with the bible, where there are too many contradictions; events unsupported by historical or geological records miracles requiring suspension of the laws of nature; outrages doctrines that must be read as metaphors.

The list of these reasons could fill an encyclopedia. Others find belief based on faith alone totally outside the realm of logic. (And of course one can always count on a learned individual proving the non-existence of God with convoluted sophistry that can make your eyes roll back in your head.) I feel that an excessive amount of space is devoted to disproving the existence of God in too many books on Humanism.

God for me was something ethereal, a life force, something I felt without anthropomorphic attributes such as love, kindness. It could not have been painted by Michelangelo, Giotto, or Leonardo but perhaps by a modern expressionist - De Kooning, Kandiski. I could have accepted their wild canvases as reasonable representations of my God. As I matured, my life filled with so many wonderful things: reuniting with my biological parents, falling in love, discovering the music beyond or pre-dating the standard repertory that we hear all the time, reading a wide variety of literature, studying religions other than Christianity, being drawn by well executed sculpture, architecture, painting, God became marginalized. I could not thank it for my good fortune nor blame it for my bad. I could not ask it to make my fingers go where the score called for.

Over many years of scrutinizing my vague concept of God as I had often scrutinized other concepts, I realized that my notion of God made no more sense than anyone else's. No amount of philosophical rumination starting from faith, hope, an assumption, lead to a God-existence conclusion. The idea of anything non-demonstrable evaporated, took flight from my mind.

My life did not suddenly become empty, did not unstitch, become unraveled, without joy, lacking direction, devoid of all that I cherished and which gave meaning to living. Reducing God to irrelevance did not dampen my efforts to lead a productive life, a life appreciative of nature's gifts and man's creations nor did it discourage me from pursuing dreams as far as my limited intelligence and talents could take me. I could still enjoy the humour seen daily. I could laugh at myself, my silly foibles. So here I stand, a Humanist (with a capital "H") without a god, without religion. Over the many years since arriving at reasons for God disbelief, I have come to recognize that I may suffer from a condition not unlike that of the colourblind person who can't distinguish certain colours or someone tone deaf who can't match pitches. It is and has always been impossible for me to accept the idea of a supreme being who controls our destiny, the course of the universe etc.. Recent research is studying the idea that God belief, though having no survival value, is a bi-product of brain functions that do. It may be that my brain failed to spawn the God belief bi-product.

I do not have the luxury of thinking about religion in the abstract, as something that has or has had, no impact for the good on my life. Too many of my friends and members of my family are theists; good people who attempt as we all do, to lead responsible ethical lives. The church that I reluctantly attended, collected shoes, clothing and other items- food for distribution to the needy, was supportive of and sponsored many worthy causes.

It was not the atheists, humanists, or other ethical groups (nor the main line churches), but the black churches that to a large extent spearheaded the civil rights movements in the US. (I'm sure there were atheists in the ranks of those marches). It was not the atheists or other secular associations but mostly Jewish organizations that rescued European children during the Second World War. (English and US governments can also be credited for rescuing children). I am here today because I was, along with 40 other Spanish boys and girls, rescued primarily by the efforts of the Society of Friends - better known as the Quakers.

How I Became a Humanist

By Donald Hatch

I had the misfortune of being raised in the Baptist Church where there was a lot of talk about sin. Over and over I heard that I was a sinner and had to be saved or born again. And there were many sins. Dancing, going to Hollywood movies and drinking alcoholic beverages were all sins. It seemed that Baptists were just not supposed to have any fun. Nevertheless, I went along with all this to please my mother, became baptized and joined the Church. But all along I sensed that there was something not quite right about all I was being asked to believe, and I continued to have nagging doubts. After leaving university and my hometown of Guelph in 1953, I took a job as a chemist at a small company in Norwich Ontario. My future wife, a professional musician and high school teacher, was the organist at the Norwich United Church and I became a member of this church. No more talk of sin and the need to be born again. This was a relief. Nevertheless, I could not stop feeling that something about Christianity just did not add up, but could not put my finger on it. In 1956, the company I worked for was purchased by CIL, at that time Canada's largest chemical company. In 1961 I was transferred to head office in Montreal

and moved there with my wife and two children. We joined the local United Church where I became an elder. In 1964 I was transferred to England for two years. While there, the only churches we darkened were famous cathedrals including York, Durham, Winchester, Salisbury, Coventry, St. Paul's and of course Westminster Abbey. We returned to Montreal for a few years and then in succession moved to London Ontario, Vancouver BC, and back to London in 1979. In each location my wife played the organ in a United or Presbyterian Church where I sporadically attended, still harbouring doubts. In 1990 I retired and at about that time I met Dr. Murray Hoover at a meeting of the London Vintage Radio Club. Many of you in this room will remember Murray. He was indeed, to say the least, a most unique individual.

I visited Murray from time to time in his rather unusual house to talk about radios and noticed that he was reading books on philosophy and religion. In fact his house was so full of books you could hardly move. He gave me various books to read and in an attempt to ease my doubts, I began to study Middle-east history and the origins of Christianity. Surprisingly a breakthrough came for me in the waiting room of my dentist's office where I picked up a copy of *Time* magazine that had a picture of Jesus on the cover. Inside was an article on the Jesus Seminar, a group of liberal clergy and biblical scholars, based in California, who were attempting to determine which words in the gospels were authentic and actually spoken by Jesus, as opposed to those that were put into his mouth by the gospel writers. For me, the startling revelation in the article was the suggestion that Jesus was not supernatural, not born of a virgin and not resurrected. He was fully human. Wow! All of a sudden I realized that my doubts were valid. What a relief. But what was Jesus really like? I spent almost twenty years researching this question without much success until I read about Jean Meslier's assertion that Jesus was an imposter and Christianity was a hoax or even a fraud. Wow again! My final conclusions about the human Jesus of Nazareth are contained in the May 2013 special issue of *The Enlightenment*. I have been advised to wear a flack jacket if devout Christians ever read this. But I believe my suggested scenario of the life of Jesus is closer to reality than the story in the gospels. Finally for me at least, clarity had arrived. If you have not already read this *Enlightenment*, you may wish to do so.

Now onto humanism! In the early 2000s, Murray Hoover invited me to a meeting of humanists at the Unitarian Fellowship of London. Goldie Emerson was the speaker. I was impressed by this small group and continued to attend meetings. In 2004 the group formally became the Humanist Association of London and Area (HALA) and the meeting location changed to the Cross Cultural Learner Centre. Derek Kaill was the first President. I started publishing *The Enlightenment* in 2005 and became president in 2006, serving until Rod Martin became President in 2010. I gradually became aware of other humanist groups and their activities, but I was not particularly impressed. Admittedly, these groups were very good at arranging interesting conferences and publishing academic articles, but their reason for existence seemed largely to consist of trying to convince people of the world that there was no God, and that religions should disappear. Surely there should be more to humanism than this. This is not to say that there have not been noteworthy individual humanists. Dr. Henry Morgentaller immediately comes to mind and there have been many others. But as far as I can tell, humanist organizations per se have not done very much that is truly noteworthy except perhaps in Norway, where the official humanist association receives part of the church tax. They have about 90,000 members. Humanist Canada has no more than 500 members and seems inactive at the present time. But there is a breath of fresh air in the American Humanist Association. Their new president, David Niose, is a young attorney who represents secularist in court. In his recent book *Nonbeliever Nation*, he outlines what he believes humanists must do to combat the current wave of fundamentalism in the United States, partly by installing secularists in political offices.

Yes I believe this political approach is definitely necessary. I have discovered that the countries with low religiosity and those where people have very little concern about beliefs, but where churches still exist, are the prosperous Scandinavian countries that have developed a workable system of social democracy, where citizens are provided with social safety nets that engender a satisfying sense of security. Now, is it not logical for humanists pick up on this and attempt to make one of their objectives the establishment of, and continuation of, sufficient prosperity to finance adequate social safety nets for all citizens? This will do more to decrease religiosity than all the preaching about there being no God. How to go about this is a daunting challenge and it certainly means getting politically involved at election time. Are humanist organizations up to this challenge? They seem to be in Scandinavia, but what about the other democratic countries? I wonder!

Finally, summarizing my journey from Baptist to humanist, the first step was to realize that what I was being asked to believe in the Baptist Church did not seem to ring true, and I realized I needed to search for something better. The next step was to join the United Church where thankfully there was no more talk of the need to be born again. This was a relief, but nagging doubts about the Christian belief in the supernatural still persisted. Then after retirement, I discovered that the supernatural tenets of Christianity were being seriously questioned and consequently rejected by many. This resulted in an epiphany similar to one experienced by the eminent Canadian scholar Northrop Frye. He put it this way; "that whole shitty and smelly garment of fundamentalist teaching I'd had all my life dropped into the sewers and stayed there." My epiphany felt the same way. I considered that my decision to reject the supernatural turned me into a humanist, but at the same time I thought there must be something more to humanism than just rejecting belief in the supernatural. There must be some sort of secular spirituality that is equivalent to, or better than religious spirituality. And indeed there is. There is a spirituality that some secularists like to describe as awe and wonder. They marvel at the awe and wonders of nature, the vastness and complexity of the universe; the miracle and preciousness of life itself; the accomplishments of human kind in the areas of art, music, poetry and architecture; at the emotion of falling in love and the joy experienced at the birth of a child. Rather than worshipping a supernatural deity, secularists celebrate the joy of living a moral, ethical and compassionate life. They look on all these things as being sacred, not in a religious sense, but as a new kind of sacredness, the sacredness of life itself and the sacredness of the natural world that we are privileged to inhabit. I believe that the foregoing comments on spirituality describe a great deal of what living as a humanist is all about. Does this complete my journey? Perhaps, but on the other hand, I cannot help but feel there are still other avenues to explore, perhaps in future *Enlightenments*.

How I Became a Humanist

By Amelia Wehlau

My parents were both non-observant Jews, although at one point my father had considered becoming a Rabbi. He was friends with Stephen Wise who married my parents and whose father had founded liberal Reform Judaism in the US. When I was about 10 I was sent to a Jewish religious education class that met once a week. I had such good attendance that year that I won a children's book of bible stories. But I don't remember continuing to attend for another year and we certainly didn't go to any services at the temple.

However I knew we were certainly not Christian even though we celebrated the non-religious rites of Christmas and Easter such as a Christmas tree and presents and colouring eggs. I do

love to sing Christmas carols. But we also lit candles for Hanukah and I still do. And sometimes we went to Passover dinners.

I went to camp every summer and had a friend there who was a fundamentalist Christian. She used to pray out loud for my conversion in our tent. She eventually went to Bob Jones College that is very fundamentalist. But now I have lost touch with her. I had no intention of converting and when a high school date suggested we go to some Unitarian event I vetoed it because it was "Christian".

When I was 9 I decided I wanted to be an Astronomer. I was very good at Math and that was required. My father encouraged me although my mother felt I should aim at being a high school teacher. We lived in Kansas City, Missouri and I had two teachers (sisters) who were sisters-in-law of Harlow Shapley, director of the Harvard Observatory. They taught me German in High School and Junior College but also brought me copies of the magazine "Sky and Telescope" which I still subscribe to.

In any case, I was admitted to the Univ. of California at Berkeley (in the town where I was born) where I received a degree in Astronomy and continued on for a Ph.D. I met my husband there. He was brought up as a Catholic, but he became very anti-Catholic. He had spent 2-3 years in the US army fighting in the Pacific and then occupying Japan. We felt we should join some religious group and some good friends on the faculty were active Unitarians. We tried it out and became members of the Berkeley church and were married there.

When we received our degrees my husband took a position in Cleveland and then a post-doc in London. In those days when you met people it was common to be asked what church you attended. In the parts of the U.S. where I'd lived such a question was considered very impolite. So there was pressure to belong to some group. And in some schools children were given stars if they had attended Sunday School. As result the Unitarians set up a Sunday school of their own and many people joined because of that.

The London group was very small but there I met people who thought as I did and I made life-long friends. We brought our four children up as Unitarians and my three daughters have continued to be. My son married an Anglican girl but I don't believe they have ever set foot in that church since. I think my son is more interested in the Montreal Canadiens.

Meanwhile my father and some others felt the local Reform Temple was too conservative and they founded a new Jewish Reform group in Kansas City. It was much more liberal and even had a female Rabbi at one point.

My oldest daughter is active in the Kingston Unitarian Fellowship (KUF) but she also belongs to a Jewish book group. Her husband is an interesting religious case. He was born a Catholic but was an active Anglican when she met him. But one day he quit because he felt the Kingston group was too anti-Semitic. Instead he began to support the local Reform Jewish congregation. He was a professor of ancient middle-eastern studies and he understood Hebrew (and Arabic). They sent their children to the KUF.

I began coming to HALA with some of my friends and enjoyed listening to the talks. But I have never broken off my membership in the London Unitarian congregation. I believe liberal religion needs support in London.

But, in some ways, I believe my real faith is Astronomy. I have never lost my interest in it after almost 75 years! Working as a scientist at the University I have found few people in the Faculty of Science with any belief in Christianity. They would find that unusual. In fact, as more people have lost their belief, things are changing. When I came here from the U.S. I was shocked to find an Anglican minister teaching religion in our school. I wrote a letter of protest. However now my oldest daughter teaches Medieval English at Queen's and it turned out she valued hearing those Bible stories and finds them useful in her field of study. When we visited Europe with her she always knew which saints were which on the stained glass windows.

But that doesn't mean she believes any of it literally. A good deal of our culture is based on Judaism and Christianity so it is useful to know. However most of the younger generation knows nothing about it. Once, when we were visiting some old church in Russia we met a couple working on conservation of the building and they told us they had been taught nothing about what they were conserving and now wanted to know what the carvings and paintings were about.

One of the things I value in Unitarianism is social action. They have a long tradition of that. Humanists should consider how they could put more stress on that. Another thing I enjoy is music and singing in our small choir.

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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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