

Letters to the
Editor

by a
Modern
Humanist



THEO MEIJER

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For my splendid and loving wife Marjam, children Paul (Gina Sturgeon) and Yolanda and grandchildren Miranda, Andrew, and Oliver.

Our beliefs must be governed by a respect for facts, not by what someone tells us we ought to believe, nor by what we personally would prefer to believe.

It is better to navigate the seas of uncertainty than to be mired in the concrete of dogma.

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Foreword

When someone goes through the considerable amount of effort to put any kind of book together, it raises the obvious question why he or she would do so.

There are probably a number of reasons. One has no doubt to do with the ego. It is a satisfying feeling to see and to hold a completed product of one's imagination. It is also something for posterity, however modest it may be.

Another reason may be a desire to communicate. That brings to mind Descartes pronouncement: "I think, therefore I am."

Although a concluding rather than an originating statement, he did have a point in suggesting that as a thinking thing he had to exist.

I have always enjoyed the world of ideas more so than that of activism. It is stimulating to read about and discuss current concerns and formulate opinions.

However, if they remain unwritten and therefore inaccessible to others, one might as well not have formed any opinions at all.

Perhaps, therefore, it is a matter of "I write, therefore I exist!"

Finally one would hope that these opinions will contribute to further discussions and that they will stimulate debates.

That would particularly be the case with this modest collection of letters and articles because they have been written from a modern Humanist perspective as the subtitle indicates.

Modern Humanism is committed to the concept of evolutionary naturalism or the idea that we are all part of a natural environment within which all living matter has evolved over a long period of time, it is free from a belief in the supernatural or a commitment to dated dogma.

Few opinions are entirely original of course, More likely they are the result of extensive reading and engaging in discussions over time

In that regard have been fortunate that have been a long time member of both the B.C. Humanist Association and the Victoria Secular Humanist Association.

Both groups consist of fiercely independent-thinking individuals who are not reluctant to express their strong opinions.

Over the years many of these discussions have helped me to focus on a variety of issues and to clarify my own positions on them.

Obviously there are far too many people involved in this to express my appreciation to them individually, so I thank them as a group.

One exception is my very good friend of more than two decades, Conrad Hadland, who has never failed to challenge my opinions on a diverse number of issues and to help articulate them in my own mind.

Finally, I should mention that, while two thirds of the letters and articles have been published in various newspapers and magazines, I have added some unpublished ones.

They made a particular point well or provided a good summary of arguments. The main reason that they remained unpublished is likely that other writers had already made the same points.

Once again, I do hope that these letters and articles will contribute to reasoned debate at least somewhere some of the time.

Theo Meijer

North Saanich, British Columbia, Canada

May, 2009

Democracy and Education

Access to Education and Democracy

The main theme of this issue of the magazine reflects the importance that modern Humanism places on a reasonably universal access to quality education at all levels.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, proclaimed by the UN in December 1948, declares that everyone has the right to basic education and that professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.

It is reasonable to suggest that this Declaration is essentially a modern Humanist manifesto. Without invoking a supreme being, it calls for the right of all people to enjoy freedom of thought conscience and religion, including freedom to change religion or belief. In contrast, the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, formulated more than three decades later, does not mention education, but in its preamble refers to an acknowledgement of the supremacy of God.

Humanism believes that education is essential to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. A broad liberal education aids in the understanding, tolerance, and friendship among all nations, ethnic or religious groups.

The Humanist Manifesto 2000, published in the fall of 1999 by Free Inquiry magazine, calls for the opportunity for education and cultural enrichment to be universal. Such opportunity should be made available to all age groups, including continuing education for adults. Every person should attain minimum standards in the basic skills of reading writing and mathematics. Higher levels of attainment should relate to talent and capacity. Admission to schools of higher education should be based on merit, while scholarships should be granted so that no qualified student must forsake educational opportunity because of financial constraints.

The Curriculum should promote an understanding of the scientific process and critical thinking without any limits on free inquiry. Education should include an appreciation of the natural, biological, and social sciences as well as the theory of evolution and the standards of ecology.

Apart from the opportunity for full personal development, education also plays a vital role in any democratic society. A reasonably well-educated and informed population is a necessary condition for the type of fully functioning democracy to which modern Humanism is committed. Citizens in a democracy are sovereign and the state is the instrument they use to govern themselves. Rights and freedoms flow from this sovereign status and from the fact that citizens are subject to the laws they enact to regulate their own behavior.

Over the last three decades or so there have been significant shifts at the university levels of education in Canada and elsewhere in regard to courses of study, focus, funding, and accessibility.

Initially, the goal at liberal arts colleges was to expose students to a wide range of subject matter in a way that made higher education relevant to the problems faced by society. Universities could play a key role in democracies in transforming public attitudes and developing critical thinking and in attempting to apply the methods of science to ethical values.

Increasing privatization is changing universities into business schools, geared towards training people for the corporate economy rather than on cultivating a liberal academic agenda focused on a fully functioning democracy.

At one time there was serious concern about ever-closer financial connections between the corporate sector and the universities. More recently such justifiable misgivings seem to have abated.

At the same time, and for at least equal importance, access has become far less universal. For example, a very recent statistics Canada study shows that, as tuition fees for professional programs in Ontario sky-rocketed during the late 1990s, the demographic profile of students enrolled in these programs changed substantially. Enrolment dropped for students whose parents had post-secondary education, but no graduate degrees. The study's authors suggested that "... it is possible that some students in this group either could not afford or chose not to pay the higher fees, and did not qualify for as much student aid as students from less educated families...".

Canadian Federation of Students' Ontario spokesperson Jesse Greener stated: "... We need to talk about the broad swath of students from middle-income backgrounds that represent 80 per cent of students...". According to the study, between 1995/96 and 2001/02, tuition fees in Canada rose 80% in Law and 160 per cent in Medicine with increases of about 50 per cent in all undergraduate disciplines.

Particularly in North America, all this seems to be heading back to the politically conservative and social Darwinist worldview of an era when a university education was a privilege, reserved for the wealthy. At the same time, limiting access was a way of retaining social-economic advantage within the narrow confines of a nation's elite.

This type of regressive move has been mitigated in most continental European countries, arguably because of social democratic parties in government coalitions or as strong oppositions.

The British on-line newspaper 'Guardian Unlimited' recently reported about the U.S. that post-secondary participation rates are lower because poverty has increased, as has the gap between rich and poor, and the effects have been seen in falling graduation rates at high school, and hence the ability to go on to university. At the same time states have been making drastic cuts in their university budgets, pushing more of the costs on to students in fees. The situation in Canada does not seem to be much better with significant cuts in federal transfer payments to the provinces in regard to education.

According to the 'laissez-faire' promoting magazine *The Economist*, privatization is necessary in order to maintain a level of quality that it claims has declined in publicly funded Universities such as in France and Germany. Nevertheless, the magazine concedes that Finland and The Netherlands, for example, have largely managed to keep quality up and bureaucracy down.

Although much debate surrounds attempts to define education quality at all levels, solid common ground exists. A recent EFA (Education For All) Global Monitoring Report argues that quality must be seen in light of how societies define the purpose of education. Generally, two principal objectives are at stake: the first is to ensure the cognitive development of the learners and the second emphasizes the role of engendering values and attitudes for responsible citizenship. Finally, regarding access, an education system characterized by discrimination against any particular group is not fulfilling its mission.

Some argue that Canada cannot afford any increased spending on education regardless of how important quality and access may be.

However, our nation's ability for adequate funding cannot be a real issue. While there are differing approaches between the individual provinces, spending on education in Canada reaches just above 6% of GDP, leaving ample room for increases when and where needed. At the same time, the universities themselves could likely do more to mitigate the funding deficits by reducing spending on research projects of limited value and instead spend the money in their classrooms.

Some Canadians reject all the arguments in favour of the right of personal development and the ability to contribute to democracy and are instead concerned merely with economic efficiency and competitiveness.

Ironically, even for them there is a sound reason to support higher education. The corporate globalization promoting World Economic Forum, in its latest report, notes that Switzerland topped the competitiveness league while Finland, Sweden, and Denmark are in positions two, three, and four. The WEF suggests that their growing competitiveness points to the growing importance being placed in these countries on higher education and training in maintaining a fertile environment for attracting businesses.

A recent UNESCO report observes that higher education is currently confronted with formidable challenges and must proceed to the most radical change and renewal it has ever been required to undertake. Our society, which is currently undergoing a profound crisis of values, should transcend mere economic considerations and incorporate deeper dimensions of morality. It is doubtful that the universities are capable or even willing to meet such challenges.

Nevertheless, concerned citizens, in favour of retaining at least some measure of the original mission of our universities to provide a level of basic liberal education for personal development and active citizenship to all their students, must continue to strongly resist the ongoing commercialization of post-secondary education.

In addition, and regardless of the measure of success in this effort, access to post-secondary education by deserving students must never be impeded by financial constraints, if only as a simple matter of social justice.

-Humanist Perspectives, *Issue #159, Winter 06/07*

Missing the Point

John Redekop of Trinity Western University (Letters, March 01) confuses his sense of delight to be among like-minded colleagues with genuine intellectual openness and tolerance.

After all, in his 26 years at UBC he did not have to sign any formal declaration confirming his commitment to a specific set of religious beliefs or worldview. Nor did his evangelical belief prevent him from being a full-fledged faculty member.

In contrast, any Humanist, agnostic, atheist, or liberal Christian for that matter, who would be unwilling to sign any such declaration, would not be welcome at the TWU faculty.

It is not so much the differences in religious beliefs and worldviews among the student body as it is the diversity of opinion among the faculty members that determines the intellectual and political openness that Redekop claims to cherish.

Many letter writers have missed that point.

A bible college by any name is just that!

- The Vancouver Sun, *Published 13-04-1997*

Democracy and Critical Thinking

In a free and democratic Society it would be reasonable to expect that the activities in public education would encourage the development of critically and independently thinking adults over time. As students they would be exposed to the full range of social and economic ideas as well as the basic skills needed to function as literate, informed and responsible citizens.

Regrettably that does not generally seem to be the case. There is a degree of indoctrination and omission generated by fear of offending one group of people or another. Important and interesting topics such as religion and politics are not part of any formal curriculum at the high school level any more than the development of skills in critical thinking and logic, using natural language.

Proponents of such desirable development often blame classroom teachers for failing to develop their students along this way. However, teachers at the classroom level have little input into the curriculum and its implementation, which are decided upon by the department of education and the school boards. Since local parents elect school boards, their decisions tend to reflect the parental opinions and expectations of those who vote. Unfortunately voter turnout at the local level is dismally low, allowing well-organized minority pressure groups to exercise undue influence.

In his book *The Demon-Haunted World*, Carl Sagan wonders about the lack of interest in science among senior students. Talking about children in the first grade he finds them: "... curious, intellectually vigorous. Provocative and insightful questions bubble out of them. They exhibit enormous enthusiasm..."

Talking to high school students he finds something different "They've lost much of the wonder and gained very little skepticism... they're willing to accept inadequate answers they don't pose follow-up questions . . ."

Sagan speculates that part of what happened between these grades is puberty and peer group pressure not to excel except in sports, part is that so little is expected of them and that there are few role models, setting examples of learning for its own sake. More importantly he finds that: "...many adults are put off when young children pose scientific questions...Children soon recognize that this sort of question annoys grown-ups..."

It seems reasonable to conclude that the problem goes well beyond Sagan's concern about science. More often than not, parents demand what they perceive as a good education for their children while they are generally not willing to face any challenge to their own social, economic, or religious beliefs or to the extent of their parental authority.

Nevertheless, there are some places where there is a light at the end of the tunnel that is not from a train. About a dozen public schools in B.C., and many more across the nation, offer a Theory of Knowledge course as an integral part of the International Baccalaureate program for capable and committed students at the senior secondary level. This course encourages critical analysis of the subjects in the I.B. program.

It examines the ambiguities of language, prevalent fallacies, and stresses the importance of clarity. In history there is an analysis of different interpretations of past events, the significance of new discoveries and the realization that history is written in the present. The tautology of mathematics and the importance of foundational axioms in geometry are discussed. The fact that scientific assertions are always tentative and the meaning of scientific theories are examined. Ethical issues are explored using practical case studies.

Unfortunately, the Theory of Knowledge course reaches only a limited number of students. However, there is scope to pursue the same desirable goal in many other courses, particularly at the secondary level.

There can and should be an infusion of critical thinking in language, mathematics, and the sciences. In history, law, and economics, the case study method can serve this purpose well. Even in the arts and in music there is scope for critical analysis.

The bad news is that there is no coherent and organized effort to ensure that critical thinking is an integral part of the public school curriculum at all levels and appropriate subjects.

The good news is that committed teachers will find their own ways of pursuing the lofty goal of encouraging their students to develop into independently and critically thinking citizens.

-Unpublished

Democracy and Elections

Experiment in Democracy

On December 10, 2004 a remarkable and unprecedented report was presented to the citizens of British Columbia. In this report the Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform declared: "We are here to invent a new way to engage citizens in the practice of democracy" as it recommended the adoption of a new voting system called B.C.-STV.

In the year before, on April 30, 2003 the BC Legislative Assembly had unanimously approved a motion, put forward by the Gordon Campbell Liberal government, to create a citizens assembly composed of randomly selected citizens, representing all the regions as well as different age groups of the Province.

One woman and one man were selected from each of the 79 ridings and two members of the aboriginal community were added.

A special legislative committee reviewed the appointment of a Chair and arranged for senior staff and researchers to guide the proceedings and assist the members.

Once the Assembly was duly constituted, its 160 members began the first part of their activities in January 2004. This was the learning phase, exposing the members to the wide variety of voting systems used by the world's democracies. The next period consisted of numerous presentations by B.C. citizens all over the province. During this same time the Assembly received over 1600 electronic submissions.

After a summer break the Assembly started its deliberation phase in September. Its mandate was to either recommend retention of the current First Past The Post (FPTP) system or propose only one alternative

The mandate did not allow any seats to be added to the current 79.

A vigorous debate resulted in a final choice between a Multiple Member Proportional Representation (MMP) system and a Single Transferable Vote (STV) system, both modified to meet B.C.'s particular needs. MMP gives every voter two choices on the ballot. One vote is for a party to determine the distribution of seats in the legislature. If party X receives 30% of these votes it gets 24 of the 79 seats. It is a proportional system whereby the distribution of seats among the parties in the Legislature mirrors the popular vote, which is after all the clear expression of the political will of the voters. The other vote is for a local candidate who can be of any party or an independent.

In the proposed B.C. version, the province will be divided into 48 single member ridings in which local candidates will be elected by an alternative vote. This means that voters will have the option to rank order the candidates so that the ultimate winner will have a majority rather than a plurality of the local votes.

After the locally elected 48 members of the Legislative Assembly are determined the remaining 31 seats will be used to ensure that the final number of seats for each party equals the popular vote. For example, if 40% of the locally elected candidates belong to party X, they will occupy 19 of the 48 local seats for party X. But the party is entitled to 30% of the total number of seats or 24 out of 79 because they received 30% of the total popular votes. An additional 5 seats are now taken from the list of Party X candidates, earlier selected by party members, to reach the party's proportional entitlement.

This would have been an improved version of the system used in Germany, New Zealand, and another half dozen or so countries.

Assembly members voiced two main objections to MMP:

It would leave too much power with the parties and their leadership and some of the single member ridings would be too large, particularly in the northern parts of the province.

Consequently, on October 23, 2004 the Assembly voted 123 to 31 in favor of an STV system over the MMP one.

The next day the Assembly voted 142 to 11 against the retention of the current FPTP system and recommended instead the adoption of the B.C.-STV system with a vote of 146 to 7.

For those of us who are occasionally disappointed in the democratic political process, the engagement of the Assembly members in education, civilized debate and serious deliberation and their ability to come to a clear consensus was a remarkable and encouraging example of participatory democracy in action.

With B.C.-STV the province will be divided into somewhere between 18 and 21 ridings to be determined by the B.C. Boundaries Commission. All of these will be ridings with no fewer than 2 and no more than 7 seats per riding. The former will likely be in the the northern parts of the province while the latter will likely be in the more densely populated urban areas.

Voters will get a ballot with all candidates listed by party or separately as independents.

The position of the names on the ballots will have been randomly changed on different ballots, avoiding any undue advantage of being listed on top.

Voters will then have the option of voting for just one candidate by placing an x or a 1 beside one name or then can numerically rank order as many candidates as they wish. By indicating 2nd 3rd or further choices, voters can affect the election of not only their first choice candidate but also of their second and further preferred candidates. Even if their first choice candidate is not elected, their ballot may contribute to the election of any of their subsequent choices. So the voting part is as simple as 1-2-3.

A simplified example of a riding with 1,000 valid votes, 3 seats and 8 candidates will further illustrate the basic principle of the STV process. In this example the first three candidates reaching 333 votes each would clearly be elected. However, to speed up the process without affecting the result, there is no need to go that far. As soon as 3 candidates reach 251 votes each, they will together have 753 votes out of the 1000 total, leaving only a possible 247 votes for the next highest candidate, which is not enough. Therefore, in this example, the number of votes needed to be elected is 251 rather than 333.

This minimum required number of votes (or quota) is determined in all cases by a simple arithmetic process, referred to as the Droop formula.

Any candidate who has reached the quota is declared elected.

Assume that a very popular candidate A actually garnered 502 votes out of 1000 at the first round of counting or twice as many as needed for election. In other words, A has a surplus of 251 votes, which constitutes half of his total vote.

Although all of A's ballots will now be re-examined to determine the second choices of all voters who picked A as their first choice, only half of those second choices will be transferred and added to the totals of the appropriate other candidates prior to the second round of counting.

If or when there are no candidates reaching or exceeding the quota while there are still available seats, the candidate with the lowest number of votes at that stage is eliminated. All this candidate's ballots will now be re-examined and the 2nd choices determined. If those second choices happen to be for candidates already elected then the 3rd choices will be noted. Once again all those further choices will be transferred and added to the totals of the appropriate other candidates still remaining.

This process continues until all seats are filled.

This final tabulation of votes under any STV system is therefore somewhat more complicated and time consuming than other systems.

However, such complication is alleviated by the use of electronic devices.

The Assembly has insisted that any computing devices used must be open to public verification, subject to audits and always have a concurrent paper trail.

The Assembly stated the following reasons for proposing its version of the Single Transferable Vote:

It is easy to use.

It provides fair results because, although the system is not proportional as such, it is the most proportional of any system based only on ridings.

It gives voters greater choice and more influence because of the multiple seats and through the transfer of their second and further choices.

Of course, various vested interest groups reacted to the Assembly's recommendations with disagreement. One prominent political pundit heaped scorn on the members of the Assembly and dismissed its recommendations out of hand. The reaction of the population in general was far more positive.

Citizens who took the trouble to acquaint themselves with the basic workings of the STV system favoured it 2 to 1.

Now it was up to the eligible voters of B.C. to decide the issue.

Concurrently with the May 2005 general election the following clear question was asked on a separate ballot: "Should British Columbians change to the BC-STV electoral system as recommended by the Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform? YES/NO."

Almost 58% of the total votes cast replied YES, while a solid majority of votes replied YES in 77 out of the 79 provincial ridings.

However, the government had earlier stipulated that it would be bound by the result of the vote only if there would be a simple majority in 48 out of the 79 ridings and an overall majority of 60%.

The result was just short of this requirement. Nevertheless it was quite remarkable given the fact that there had been little time and no funding to inform the voters about the actual workings of the proposed new election system. The Assembly had been disbanded and a number of former members took it upon themselves to travel the province and attend information meetings at their own expense.

Once again, opposing columnists concluded that this had to be the end of the matter. However, while the government would have been compelled to adopt the new system, had there been a 60% majority overall, it would still have the option to adopt the new system anyway, even with the lesser but significant majority.

A group of STV supporters, consisting of former Assembly members and other interested citizens, formed a Victoria chapter of the national Fair Vote Canada organization that has been advocating for electoral change at the federal level for years. This Victoria group wrote strongly worded letters to re-elected Liberal Premier Gordon Campbell and NDP Opposition Leader Carole James, urging them to take the solid support for the STV into account and adopt it in time for the 2009 elections.

Most recently the B.C. Legislature decided to be a bit more cautious and proposed a second referendum, coinciding with the November 2008 municipal elections, to let B.C. voters make a final decision with the same terms as before.

In the meantime the B.C. Boundaries Commission has been asked to draw updated boundaries both for the current FPTP system but also for a possible B.C.-STV system.

Funds will be made available to inform citizens of the positive and negative aspects of both our current system and the STV alternative.

Should the voters elect the STV system in November 2008, it will be in effect for the May 2009 elections.

As it is always unsettling for most people to change to something fundamentally new and different, the proponents of STV have their work cut out for them when trying to persuade B.C. voters to adopt the new electoral system, this time with the required majorities.

STV has been used effectively in Ireland for eighty years and is also used in Malta and for the election of the Australian Senate as well as in smaller jurisdictions there.

Although there are well-meaning defenders of the current FPTP system, it is clearly dysfunctional and really a system of a different time and place.

A century ago in the United Kingdom it may have worked when there were only two parties and very homogeneous ridings. Once additional parties emerged and demographics changed dramatically, the system increasingly failed to represent the political will of the electorate.

Most recent examples in B.C. were the election of an NDP government in 1996 even though they lost the popular vote. Then in 2001 the Liberal party received fewer than 58% of the popular vote but got over 97% of the seats or 77 out of 79. Together with their rather mean spirited refusal to extend official opposition status to the two NDP members, the Legislature lacked an effective opposition during the ensuing four years.

B.C. voters will now have one more opportunity to abandon this dated and dysfunctional FPTP system and show the courage to try a new an improved way of electing members of their Legislative Assembly.

No doubt the entire country will be watching!

UPDATE

On May 12, 2009 a referendum was held concurrently with the provincial election. B.C. voters had a choice between retaining the FPTP system or switching to B.C.-STV. The B.C.-STV option was overwhelmingly defeated. 39% voted in favour but the threshold was 60% of the total vote. At the district level 7 out of the 85 ridings voted in favour with a margin of at least 50%+1 while the threshold was 51 out of 85. Some of the objections were the perceived complexity of the vote tabulation, the unease about coalition government and the fear that a small party in a coalition would have undue influence.

-Humanist Perspectives, *Published Issue # 155, Winter 05/06*

Proportional Representation Has Many Merits

It is not often that the editorial writers agree with Dave Barrett. How ironic that you now do soon electoral reform. That you are both wrong deserves further comment. (Bid for reform a flawed idea, 5/26, p. A 14). It is incontestable that proportional representation (PR) produces a more democratic government because the party standings in parliament equal the popular vote, as an expression of the electorate's political will.

Consequently voter turnout is consistently higher in countries with PR compared to our own declining public participation in elections.

Notwithstanding that parties in power may have little interest in reform, most parties in B.C. are now in favour of at least a referendum on this issue.

Arguments against PR often result from a lack of familiarity or understanding. The vast majority of democracies in the world use some form of PR and stable governments in virtually all belie Barrett's assertion that it is a recipe for chaos, particularly in the dozens or so of Western European nations.

Some want to cling to the Westminster type system that they believe has served Canada well since Confederation because of tradition. But not all traditions are worth keeping. We have done well without slavery and the view of women as chattels among others.

Some bemoan the lack of local representation, however, under PR, it is in the interest of parties to appeal to all regions in order to maximize their opportunity to participate in government. Therefore, with an open list exemplified by PR voters can in fact cast a ballot for a preferred local candidate. In any case, most appropriate for B.C. would be a Multiple Member PR system under which electors cast two votes. One for a party of choice determining the ultimate distribution of seats and one for a local candidate who may be of the same or any other party.

Another concern is the possible proliferation of parties. However, in recent elections in Sweden there were seven parties under PR, yet many more with our current system in B.C. In virtually all cases only a limited number of parties are large enough to form a governing coalition. In addition many countries require a minimum percentage of votes for a party (usually 4 or 5%) to qualify for seats. While slightly distorting the outcome, it does address this concern.

Finally is a worry about the lack of strong government that may result. This is arguably the only objection that has some merit. Nevertheless, one has to wonder whether an unrepresentative government should have the legal power to act as a dictatorship and implement legislation which often ignores opposition by a majority of citizens. This applies to governments of the left or the right. Surely it is better to have parties agree to some positive compromise and avoid extreme policy changes. PR does require the forging of coalitions in most cases. However, rather than creating a problem, this makes it ideally suited for the Canadian character. Indeed, the very existence of this great country is the result of continuing compromise.

I agree with the TC that people should indeed think twice before signing on to the PR initiative because I have no doubt that if and when they do, they would actually be in strong support of it!

--- Times Colonist, *Unpublished 05-27 2009*

A Few Things To Learn

Apparently Norman Spector, right wing columnist and former advisor to Brian Mulroney, hankers for us to try to become more like Americans. According to pollster Michael Adams most Canadians do not share his desire.

(“Canadians could learn from the American elections,” TC, Nov. 12, A12).

Spector asserts that we can learn a few things from the American democratic process. In fact, their 2000 election was fraught with fraud in Florida and resulted in a final selection of the president by the Supreme Court. Prominent lawyers have described this decision as a “Supreme Injustice” and “The Betrayal of America.”

The election this month showed a remarkable difference between the generally accurate exit polls and the eventual result. The U.S. is likely the only democratic country in the world without a non-partisan and independent Election Commission to oversee the voting process.

Some voting machines are manufactured by staunch supporters of the Republican Party, have no paper trail and cannot be audited because of patent protection. The possibility of manipulating computers has been amply demonstrated.

Spector is delighted that 85% of our exports are now going south and feels that criticizing such a trading partner is unbecoming.

More prudent people might be troubled by such great dependence on a declining empire and economy, burdened with unprecedented debt. They would favour an improved domestic economy and a search for alternative trading partners.

Spector praises the U.S. presidential debates. Actually they were highly controlled and staged events that had little to do with genuine debate, not in the least because of the exclusion of Ralph Nader, who was the only presidential candidate with some truly different and challenging ideas.

Finally, what Spector calls being honest about the importance of their religion in their public lives, others might dismiss as outright pandering and hypocritical posturing.

When it comes to democratic values, electoral processes and the separation of church and state, it is the U.S. that could learn a few things from us!

---Times Colonist, *Published 15-11-04*

Democracy and the Media

Media Responsibility in a Democracy

One of the core values of modern Humanism is a commitment to the democratic process. While opinions may differ in regard to the type of electoral process that would be most appropriate in various circumstances the commitment to democracy itself is firm.

Why then are modern Humanists concerned about the mainstream media? More than half a century ago it would have seemed reasonable suggest that many owners of newspapers and other media had a sense that their efforts should not be aimed exclusively at securing profit but also be part of a public responsibility to provide a balanced of socio-economic issues and policies. This was part and parcel of unique status of the mainstream media as the major providers of political information to the citizens of a fully functioning democracy that requires a well-informed electorate.

With the advent on the Canadian scene of the likes of Conrad Black and the Asper family, any such sentiment has evaporated. These media moguls view media ownership not only as a revenue stream but also as a platform to promote their political opinions, which are understandably well on the right of the spectrum.

In their 1997 book "The Big Black Book: "The Essential Views of Conrad and Barbara Amiel Black," authors Maude Barlow and James Winter report that "... Black has been quite open about using his newspapers for political influence... "[he] is not above using the services of his journalists for partisan purposes ... [and] he use[s] his newspapers to promote his political views."

Addressing shareholders last year, CanWest Global CEO Leonard Asper spoke eloquently about emerging market opportunities, lever aging assets and increasing shareholder value. Not a word about any commitment to provide balanced reporting or about journalistic responsibility and integrity.

In a 2002 speech to the Canadian Club of Ottawa, Mr. Asper complained bitterly that his many critics did not understand that the mainstream media are just a business like any other. But the whole point is precisely that they are not. Like the legislated privilege of the chartered banks to hold and expand the money supply, the media are in their own field and in a unique position as providers of information essential to the proper functioning of a democracy.

During a recent media conference in Moncton, New Brunswick, American media expert Robert Picard stated: “Media concentration is worse in Canada than in other industrialized countries.”

Linguist and social critic Noam Chomsky has suggested that in a democracy propaganda takes the place of what repression achieves in a totalitarian state. Although this statement may be somewhat of an over-statement it has a ring of truth to it.

In order to retain its privileged status, the ruling socio-economic class promotes government policies and practices favourable to itself.

In order to get these enacted it needs to manufacture consent among the electorate to convince them that their interests are served equally well, even though this may not be the case at all.

Obviously the mainstream media play an essential role here and they have not served the majority of Canadians well in this regard. Robert M. Seiler, at the University of Calgary, observes that: “The media giants are by definition businesses which concentrate on making a profit, attracting advertisers and so on. They are controlled by wealthy people who are constrained by market/profit forces first and foremost. I would say that corporate ownership has a negative impact on content, in terms of news choices, advertising and so on.”

Like all democracies, Canada is considered to have a government of the people, by the peoples and for the people. In fact, the overall direction of government policies, strongly supported by the mainstream media, seems more a matter of a government of the Canadian Council of Chief Executives, by the CCCE and for the benefit of the corporate sector in Canada.

The last few decades have seen the implementation of its political agenda of privatization and deregulation with diminished oversight as well as of significant corporate tax cuts. Also included have been various trade agreements that ignored social and environmental interests, occupational health and safety standards and other employment issues.

The mainstream media provide us with a plethora of right wing columnists and commentators, supporting laissez-faire capitalism and unfettered free markets with little or no analysis or needed critical response.

Why should all this matter?

The Freedom House, a non-partisan American Institute, monitors the level of freedom and political participation in the world's nations. Among others they consider the level of public access of major political parties to the electorate through the media and whether diverse sources of information about politics exist and are protected by law. The Freedom House concludes that those countries with the greatest diversity of mainstream media also enjoy the greatest political freedom. In its 2006 Democracy Index, listing 28 democratic countries on the basis of their political freedom, Sweden was ranked number 1, well ahead of Canada as number 9 and the U.S. as number 17.

Apologists for the Canadian media claim that the geography and demographics of our country prohibit the financial viability of a greater media diversification. However, Sweden and other Nordic countries solve this same problem by providing subsidies to the media when and where necessary, in order to maintain ready public access to the full range of political opinions. Oslo, with a population of half a million, has nine daily newspapers and Norway as a whole has consistently led the world in per capita newspaper reading.

In addition to greater political freedom there is a likely relationship between the broad ranged diversity of media coverage of social, economic and political issues, and the social health of societies as measured by statistics such as on serious crime rates, infant mortality, teenage pregnancies and levels of education.

The free market economies of the Nordic countries operate within a framework of rules that allow economic benefits to be reasonably shared by all citizens, secured by governments largely independent of the corporate sector.

At least this would be an example worth considering for Canada. Instead it is generally dismissed out of hand and the mainstream media focus is firmly on the U.S. Regrettably, Prime Minister Harper is among the greatest cheerleaders of this mindset. In a public speech in Montreal in June 1997, he stated that Canada is a Northern European welfare state in the worst sense of the word, the devil is responsible for the NDP and the U.S. conservative socio-economic model is a light and an inspiration to us all.

Surely, Canadians committed to genuine democracy, regardless of their political points of view, are entitled to at least have their mainstream media look seriously at the government policies and practices of the Nordic countries as possible alternatives to the U.S. model.

Most recently it has been argued that the expanding Internet provides the balance of political views that is lacking in the mainstream media. However, there are significant limitations to the internet as a source of news and to its independence. Most Canadians do not surf the web for their daily news and instead continue to get it from the mainstream media, particularly television. These media themselves have an increasingly significant presence on the Internet. At the same time advertising is threatening to cause the same financial dependency that plagues the mainstream media. Internet advertising revenue passed one billion dollars for the first time in 2006 and is rapidly expanding.

In his 1996 book "Democracy's Oxygen, How Corporations Control the News", Canadian academic James Winter writes: "We endure a daily barrage of one-dimensional views on issues whose narrow presentation stands in direct contrast to their importance in our lives." Some of the issues he mentioned are free trade, globalization, privatization, deregulation, social democracy, public debt, and wealth disparity. He concludes: "The Media Think version of these issues bears little or no resemblance to reality."

Participatory democracy in Canada is already hampered by an anachronistic and undemocratic election system. If, in addition to this, politically diversified and investigative mainstream media are indeed democracy's oxygen and a necessary condition for its proper functioning, genuine democracy in Canada is on life support and the prognosis is not very good.

--- Humanist Perspectives, *Issue #161, Summer 2007*

Wrong Question

A survey of 1000 people, conducted for Canwest News Service and Global National in April 2009 found that overall the nationwide proportion of people who believe in God has dropped from 84 per cent in 2000 to 71 per cent in 2009.

However, because people have widely varying interpretations of the word God, a better question would have been: “Do you believe in a supernatural being involved in our daily lives?” There is little doubt about the veracity of the mystical experiences people described, but modern brain research provides natural explanations for such emotional sensations.

An accompanying photo shows Pope Benedict reflecting on the suffering of humanity. He might also reflect on the responsibility of the Catholic Church itself for much of this suffering. Millions of innocent women, children, and men were tortured and murdered at the behest of the church as they were arbitrarily convicted of witchcraft or dared disagree with the dogma of the day. More recently the church unconsciously covered up cases of pedophilia.

Furthermore, Benedict “heaped scorn” on recent claims that Jesus may have instructed Judas to betray him. However, because Christianity is based on the martyrdom of Jesus to atone for the sins of humanity, this new suggestion seems no less plausible than any other.

Like his predecessor, this Pope seems to ignore the more humane and enlightened leaders of his own church. His staunch rejection of free thought and free inquiry and of those with a different life style causes much distress to critical theologians and religious homosexuals.

In addition, the repressive attitudes of the fundamentalist forces in all Christian churches toward female equality and human sexuality, including their arguably immoral opposition to contraception, causes much misery to millions of religious women.

We can only hope to improve the human condition by transcending dated dogma, centuries of sectarian conflict and religious mythology and through the realization that morality has evolved with us and must remain grounded in the human experience. We must take full responsibility for our own actions here and now.

--- Times Colonist, *Not submitted*

ISSUES OF CHURCH AND STATE

Through the Looking Glass

The tragic events of September have made an unforgettable impression on us all. To most of us it is incomprehensible that a group of intelligent and well-educated people would hijack four planes filled with ordinary people, murder members of their crews and knowingly and deliberately crash them into buildings occupied with thousands of innocent civilians. How could they have stood in line checking in and mingled with fellow passengers, while looking for their seats on the plane, knowing they were about to murder them all in cold blood? And doing so not in a fit of provoked rage but with the cold and calculated calm of a deliberate and perverse plot.

There are undoubtedly secular aspects to the wrath of some supporting the terrorists that have to do with American foreign policy, particularly during the last half century. The United States itself came into being as the result of a revolution against the then legitimate authority of the British King, standing in the way of independence. How remarkable therefore that those U.S. governments in turn have often supported oppressive regimes all over the world. The United States claims to stand for progress, freedom and tolerance of diversity and dissent. Too often it has helped to suppress people striving for these very values elsewhere. Many Americans would likely have opposed activities, carried out in their names, had they been more aware of them. Perhaps this recent tragedy will lead to some soul searching regarding the nature and extent of what the United States claims as its manifest destiny in the world.

However, there is no indication of any kind that social injustices or economic inequities motivated the perpetrators of the recent crimes. Instead, they seemed to have been driven by religious fervour and by blind obedience to their selective view of Islamic fundamentalism.

The positive potential of organized religion is evident through the many interfaith vigils being held for peace and understanding. At the same time a number of responses to the religious aspects of this unprecedented tragedy are disquieting. Some prominent Christian religious leaders assert that their loving and benevolent God took the life of thousands of innocent and unsuspecting creatures to teach the rest of us a lesson about our lack of humility. Others condemn the secularization of America --- even though some 90% of its citizens claim a belief in God and more than half believe in angels --- and they call for the establishment of a Christian theocracy. President Bush spoke of a new Crusade.

Sadly they fail to even consider that this very type of religious righteousness might have been a major factor in motivating the terrorists. Such calls for a Christian theocracy may be different in degree, but not in kind, from the Muslim theocracy of the Taliban in Afghanistan. It calls for the very type of closed minded community that breeds the fanaticism and the mindless obedience to selectively interpreted religious dogma that incites such sinister deeds of terror.

These comments further reveal the extent of the problem now faced by more perceptive, thoughtful and reasonable people whether they are religious or not.

Mainstream Muslims were quick to assert that the terrorists had perverted the true teachings of Islam which are about peace and brotherhood. That clearly was not the terrorists' view when they sacrificed their own lives and those of thousands of citizens in blind obedience to religious dogma. In fact, all religions have sacred texts that can be interpreted to legitimize violence and senseless sacrifice. It is difficult to determine which spokespersons --- if any --- for the 20,000 or so religions and cults in the world reflect the real meaning of the religious truths they claim to represent.

Only centuries of secular influences throughout the Renaissance and the Enlightenment have blunted the vain urge for absolute knowledge and indubitable certainty in the West. H.L. Mencken suggested: "Men become civilized, not in proportion to their willingness to believe, but in proportion to their readiness to doubt." Indeed, the Arab Muslim civilization reached its zenith in the Middle Ages when it was open to many different ideas and became a vibrant venue for the arts and the advanced math and sciences of the time.

In a speech in April 1999 Nobel Laureate Stephen Weinberg suggested that: "...With or without religion, good people can behave well and bad people can do evil; but for good people to do evil --- that takes religion..."

One positive thing that could emerge from the recent tragedy would be the beginning of a reasoned dialogue about the dangers of rigid religious dogma, indiscriminate indoctrination and the search for supernatural sources to solve human problems here and now. More than ever there is an urgent need to transcend sectarian strife and to affirm our common humanity and the human decencies all of us share.

Let us heed the words of Bertrand Russell from his 1954 talk for the BBC about the threat of nuclear armament: “Remember your humanity and forget the rest.”

--- Times Colonist, *Opinion Piece, Unpublished 01-11-01*

Holly-Jolly Intolerance

I share concerns about the frenzied shopping spree and garb and glitter overwhelming us at this time of the year.

(“Whose birthday is it?” Letters, Dec 07).

I disagree with writer Bill Giuriato’s view of what constitutes the true essence of all this social merriment.

The long existing winter solstice celebrations, welcoming the renewed lengthening of the days, were arbitrarily appropriated by the early Christian church to commemorate the birth of Jesus. In fact, the Christian story itself is a restatement of earlier stories in Egyptian mythology.

The use of the fir tree as a prominent symbol of the season has an equally pagan precedent, as does the lighting of candles and other such customs.

When Giuriato suggests that the freedom we enjoy in our pluralistic society “flourished under Christian doctrine” he overlooks the millions of innocent people who perished over time because they were arbitrarily accused of being witches or black magicians or because they disagreed with the dogma of the day.

Tolerance for other faiths has hardly been a hallmark of the Christian church!

Oh well, Merry Christmas --- no, happy winter solstice and peace to all persons of good will! This year let us continue to express love and generosity. We could do worse!

--- Vancouver Sun, *Published 12-10-1996*

A Transcendant Morality

For the majority of us who are not Roman Catholics “A tale of two dioceses” (*Saturday Review* 08-02) provided interesting insights into the workings of “the only true Church” and into the minds of those in charge of it. Regrettably Archbishop Exner was unwilling to contribute to this article. Bishop de Roo is quite correct when stating: “You need not always agree with someone to respect someone.” However, the real question for Catholics such as de Roo is to what extent can one disagree with clearly stipulated basic positions of the church and still remain a prominent advocate for it. He states that “... The church is a mysterious body moving through history...” Later on it is mentioned more accurately that it is like “... a powerful multi-faceted organization ...”

Many of us committed to democracy, reason, and free inquiry, commiserate with progressive intellectuals such as de Roo, who attempt to remain at home within an institution that maintains “... a chill on free expression...” and decries any attempt to democratize. Indeed, “... More than 10 usually talkative Catholics ... declined to ... say anything ...” Perhaps it is too difficult to transcend the powerful emotional effect of early childhood indoctrination. De Roo hedges when asked about issues like contraception, sex outside marriage and masturbation.

Surely one either condones or condemns such activities. Attempts to do both renders the position rather meaningless. Another problem is that the enlightened bishops and priests validate the more reactionary and intransigent position of the senior leadership of the Catholic Church in the world at large and its considerable political influence.

Madeline Weld of Global Population Concerns mentioned in a letter to the *Ottawa Citizen* of June 11 that “... in large areas of the world health care is provided by the Roman Catholic Church and its powerful position prevents the effective access to reliable contraception...” She also states: “... Ironically, the Catholics in western countries avail themselves of birth control and abortion as much as any other segment of the population and would be outraged to be denied these services...”

At the conclusion of the article it is suggested that both de Roo and Exner would agree "... that love, in the end, is ultimate." However, it would seem to others that the ultimate and unique message of Christianity is instead the need for redemption from original sin through Christ. On the other hand, versions of the "Golden Rule" long precede most traditional religion.

The turmoil within the B.C. church as well as between the major religions and numerous cults should encourage us to recognize the basic moral decencies we all share. We must transcend narrow parochial doctrines and establish a morality based on human need and experience, guided by knowledge and reason. That is the message of modern Humanism. Perhaps its time has come.

--- Times Colonist, *Published 08-09-02*

Evolution and Education

In 1999 the State School Board of Kansas approved a new curriculum, eliminating the teaching of evolution. The decision was seen as a victory for the supporters of creationism who believe that the world came into being more or less as described in the Bible.

However, it was reversed two years later by a less conservative Board. Then again in 2004 conservatives recaptured the board's majority and proposed to change the definition of science as the process of explaining natural events through natural causes.

This frustrated many scientists, worried that students could be discussing supernatural explanations for natural phenomena in their science classes. These goings-on regarding the teaching of evolution in public school science classes are certainly not limited to Kansas but prevail in many other states.

Furthermore, a CBS poll conducted last fall indicated that 37 per cent of Americans want to totally replace the teaching of evolution with creationism.

Yet there is no question that the theory of evolution is strongly supported by findings from anthropology, paleontology, and biology focusing on the fossil record. More recently, intriguing genetic and biochemical evidence for evolution have augmented the fossil record. Instead of looking at anatomy, the new evolutionists look at molecular structures and the use of proteins among various organisms.

The result of this work provides an entirely new reason to believe that evolution has shaped life since the beginning.

Therefore, stating that evolution is merely a theory is like stating that the earth revolving around the sun is merely a theory or that matter consisting of atoms is merely a theory. Evolution is a scientific fact even though evolutionary change generally happens much too slowly for humans to perceive.

In some cases, natural selection happens quickly enough for us to perceive. For example, new strains of antidote-resistant viruses are always emerging through mutation and natural selection. Through observing bacteria, evolution can even be observed in a matter of hours. Adding a certain antibiotic kills the vast majority of bacteria, but some of them are immune and go on to mass-reproduce.

New Yorker Thomas Frank was born and raised in Kansas and wondered why the evolution versus creation issue, as well as other cultural value concerns had gained so much prominence in his state of birth and why these concerns prevailed over the best economic and political interests of the vast majority of its citizens.

So he went back for a visit, did research and conducted many interviews. The result was an insightful study of contemporary middle and working class America, titled "What's the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America." He points out that in the 1890s the largely farming population was aggrieved by low crop prices and exorbitant costs imposed by furnishing agents and railroads. They found business interests to be their primary oppressors and called for governmental intervention in the economy. It was a decidedly leftist movement of "producers versus parasites."

Yet, when Heartland America was subjected to de-industrialization, off-shoring and stagnating wages in the 1990s, while elites prospered, there were no withering economic critiques and market forces were held to be blameless.

Instead working people began to feel strongly that cultural issues such as abortion, gay liberation and the teaching of evolution were to blame for disturbances in their lives and in society at large.

In fact, however, huge corporations largely dictate culture in the US and cultural directions, set by media and entertainment concerns, are determined by what sells. Universities and government mostly reinforce business interests.

Yet, those feeling socially besieged are generally not concerned about these structural connections. These new populists are most concerned with the imagined lifestyles of the so-called liberal elites.

Conservative political forces must vigorously resist the influence of snobbish liberal elites, who of course are staunch Democrats.

The alliance of business elites, from whom the leaders of the GOP are frequently drawn, with a conservative base of working people is one of convenience if not outright cynicism.

Business leaders sometimes join in conservative rants against liberal culture thereby gaining the voting support to carry out a pro-business political program. The deregulation, privatization, and union-busting agenda of corporate America has been greatly harmful to their base of supporters. It is clearly a matter of the working class feeding the hand that bites them.

The fanning of the flames of cultural discontent makes good business sense while the political process actually seldom delivers on conservative promises to roll back moral practices. Therefore ordinary families lose on both counts.

Of course Canada is not immune to this very same focus on values issues at the expense of genuine political and economic interests.

Fortunately Canadians are more resistant to the extremes with which these battles take place in the U.S., although such resistance seems to be weakening.

Even here the evolution versus creation issue has cropped up from time to time. In the early 1990s the Abbotsford School District in British Columbia encouraged creationists to visit science classes at the senior secondary level and present slide shows promoting their view.

Eventually, the B.C. Civil Liberties Association became involved and dispatched one of their board members to address the School Board at a public hearing and point out the errors of their ways.

However, it took the direct intervention of the Minister of Education to force the Board to stop this nefarious practice.

What makes all this somewhat more difficult is that apparently up to 30% of science teachers in B.C. are actually sympathetic to creationism. Membership in the Professional Specialist Association for science teachers does not require a commitment to evolution.

To be clear, few people object to the idea of creation stories being mentioned in social studies classes, when discussing comparative religious mythologies.

To introduce such views in the science classes perverts the very essence of the scientific process and nature of inquiry. The scientific approach of asking questions and providing tentative answers is fundamentally at odds with the religious approach of claiming to know the answer and fitting in any questions accordingly. While science provides us with evidence without certainty, religion gives us certainty without evidence.

It is particularly pertinent to ensure the integrity of teaching science in the public schools and resist any attempted intrusion by creationists, whether under the name of intelligent design or whatever other nomenclature they may attempt.

Modern Humanists play an important role in this regard.

--- Humanist Perspectives, *Published Issue # 154, Autumn 05*

God as Metaphor

It is hardly surprising that a few people in Rev. Laing's Capilano United Church are somewhat befuddled by her concoction of mystical practices, Jungian psychology and Eastern religions. ("Looking for the center of God" Saturday Review 05-17).

Mysticism by its very nature tends to be ambiguous, indeterminate and paradoxical in its search for the divine source of the world's being and humanity's salvation.

As a Humanist I believe that mystical experiences can be explained in naturalistic terms and that meditation can be useful in order "... to cleanse your mind of distractions (and) quiet your emotions ..." without the need to "... pass through ... to the center of God."

I share Laing's concern that prayer ought not to become "... a selfish attempt to curry favor from a magician-like Supreme being ..." particularly because the *Newsweek* poll quoted indicates that most prayers by Americans are exactly that.

Of particular interest in the article are the observations by various prominent theologians and others as quoted by Douglas Todd.

Gordon Kaufman thinks of God "... as creativity rather than as creator." Harold Kushner likes to believe that he is "... the wave and God is the ocean..." Dan Seals emphasizes that "... people shouldn't always expect to get what they pray for..."

It appears that they are using the word 'God' as a metaphor. They seem to believe that humans are a part of nature just as our natural environment and they seem to recognize our kinship with fellow humans and all living things everywhere.

This is what modern Humanism has claimed all along.

--- Vancouver Sun, *Published 05-24-97*

A Guarded Welcome

The visit of Pope John Paul II has unleashed a veritable avalanche of euphoric stories and comments in the mainstream media.

No doubt his visit is of paramount importance to many Roman Catholic Canadians and is therefore deserving of media attention. However, that should not result in an absence of balanced reporting and critical analysis.

John Paul II heads a patriarchal and authoritarian organization and he is no friend of free thought, free expression and free inquiry. He shows little regard for the more humane and enlightened leaders and lay people within his own church.

He encourages his church to continue its relentless attempts to impose its dated dogma regarding human sexuality, contraception, abortion, and homosexuality on all of us, while it arrogantly claims to represent the only true Christian religion and deems all others defective.

His hostility to any manifestations of women's concerns, responsible sex, free thought, and free inquiry and to those with a different life style has caused much misery to millions of mothers in the third world, to honest and conscientious theologians, guilt-ridden Catholic homosexuals and to others.

By all means let us extend our customary Canadian courtesy to the visiting Pontiff. However, let us not pretend that this prominent pilgrim travels on a morally higher road than many of the rest of us.

--- Times Colonist *Published 06-24-02*

Pope Has Much to Answer for

Some statements in Andrew Nagorski's review of the biography of John Paul II by George Weigel deserve further comment.

("The good pilgrim," G.W., Nov. 11-17, p.34).

Weigel complains that the view of John Paul as an authoritarian, often retrograde leader of his church is plain wrong. However, that view would likely be shared by the hundreds of academics who have been muzzled by this pope.

John Paul is no friend of free thought and free inquiry. He shows little regard for the more humane and enlightened leaders of his own church.

Weigel asserts that the pope has always believed the truth to be clearly identifiable. If that were the case John Paul would have recognized that divine birth and bodily resurrection are figments of the mythological imaginations, recurring through the ages. He would have concurred with modern liberal Christian theologians asserting that the story of Christ is to be taken as metaphor.

If Christ's truth is to be liberating and the key to individual freedom, it has certainly not been such for the many who perished for centuries under the rule of the church because of allegations of witchcraft or mere disagreement with the dogma of the day.

Still today, relentless attempts by the church to impose its dogma regarding abortion, contraception and homosexuality on all of us contradict the pope's alleged commitment to individual and religious freedom.

Weigel claims that the pope interprets utilitarianism as encouraging doing "what is useful to me." Most people consider this philosophical position to propose, quite to the contrary, that we should consider the greatest good to the greatest number.

Weigel is undoubtedly correct when he claims,, "it is a very obscure corner of this planet that has not been in some way touched by the life of this pope..."

But he misses the point. The question is whether the prominent presence of the good pilgrim has contributed positively to human freedom and well-being.

His hostility to any manifestation of feminism, sex, free thought and those with a different life style has caused much misery to millions of mothers in the third world, guilt-ridden Catholic homosexuals, honest and conscientious theologians, and for Catholic women.

Notwithstanding Weigel's hagiography, many would answer the question in the negative.

--- The Guardian Weekly, *Published Vol 161 / No 22 p.15*

The Need for Non-Belief

One of the most offensive assertions made about modern Humanists by believers in the supernatural is that Humanists cannot be moral without sharing the absolute convictions of these believers.

One could argue that the opposite is actually true. At the end of a talk to the American Association for the Advancement of Science in Washington D.C. in April 1999, Nobel laureate Steven Weinberg suggested: "... with or without religion, good people can behave well and bad people can do evil; but for good people to do evil --- that takes religion..." He might have extended that to all people with a blindly obedient and unquestioned commitment to any cause.

Thomas H. Huxley reminds us that skepticism is the highest duty and blind faith the one unpardonable sin.

If you think about the people who tortured and burned alive their fellow human beings just over two centuries ago, you can only hope that they must have had some doubts, some pangs of conscience! Whatever such hesitations may have been, they were crushed by their mindlessly religious fervor to save the souls of their victims.

Regrettably, such arrogant and absolutist religious views still abound in the major media and in the public mind, more so in North America than in Western Europe.

And yet, there is no logical reason whatsoever to grant immunity from criticism or fair comment to any kind of organized religion. The Catholic Church in particular basks in a media-supported aura of moral superiority when in fact many of its religious positions could be deemed highly immoral. The previous Pope found it apparently appropriate after the defeat of communism, for which he took undue credit, to assert that the next greatest scourge to be defeated was atheism.

On the other hand any questioning of the policies and practices of the Church is dismissed as mere "Catholic bashing" if not hate speech!

The main argument of the super-naturalists is the necessity of a transcendent or supernatural arbiter of human moral decision-making, in order to render an ultimate judgement of the appropriateness of our merely mortal and fallible decisions and actions.

It is remarkable that this view completely overlooks the fact that any and all of these allegedly supernatural edicts inevitably come to us through very human and fallible intermediaries.

There is nothing but their claim to have communicated with a supernatural entity, however strongly they may have believed it themselves. Not Yahweh himself but Moses came down Mount Sinai with the two stone tablets engraved with the Decalogue, which bears a remarkable resemblance to earlier Egyptian religious edicts. Not God himself but Jesus revealed his redemptive mission to a lost world that became recorded in the New Testament. Not Allah himself but Mohammed, as his messenger, came out of his cave proclaiming what became recorded as the Koran.

Modern Humanists are arguably more honest when they question alleged supernatural authority and declare that moral behavior must be grounded in the human experience to be valid and that it reflects the societal norms and needs in any historical period.

In a recent interview with Bill Moyers on the new PBS program “Faith and Reason,” Salmon Rushdie quite correctly observed: “... it is, in a way, one of the weaknesses of religious arguments, that they argue that you cannot have a moral life unless you accept the moral code, which is defended by an ultimate arbiter. You know, of whatever god it might be... My view has been, quite simply, that religion has been one of the ways in which human beings, throughout history, have tried to codify and organize their moral sense of the world. But that’s to say, I would argue, that our sense of good and evil, our sense of right and wrong, our moral sense precedes religion. It’s not created by it... it’s perfectly possible for me to say that we can as civilized people create moral codes to live by. We do not need that ultimate arbiter. And one answer to the question is democracy. And it seems to me that what happens in a democracy is that we don’t have an absolute view of what is right and wrong. We have an argument about it...”

In “Why I am not a Christian”, Bertrand Russell suggests: “... A good world needs kindness and courage; it does not need ... a fettering of the free intelligence by the words uttered long ago by ignorant men ...”

As an example of the difference between dated doctrine and a more reasonable, contemporary approach, one could compare and contrast the attitude of the Catholic Church and modern Humanism in regard to human sexuality.

The view of the Church flows logically from its fundamental insistence that sexual intercourse is only moral if it can lead to pregnancy. The previous Pontiff even declared that it would be all right for women to enjoy the sexual experience, provided there was such chance of impregnation, which is often a clear contradiction in terms.

In any case, this basic premise, however misguided it may be, leads inevitably to the vigorous opposition of the Church to various aspects of sexual activities, such as masturbation, oral sex, contraception, abortion and homosexuality.

In the real world, a Catholic young man who masturbates, to avoid intercourse and possible pregnancy of his girlfriend, commits a venial sin and is burdened with guilt for a perfectly normal and natural act, committed by all men and most women at some time or other. If he and his girlfriend subsequently use contraception they are even bigger sinners in the eyes of the Church.

If morality refers to the principles of what is right or wrong and if these relate to the enhancement of human happiness and the reduction in human misery, then these young people have clearly acted in a responsible and reasonable manner and a moral one all along.

Ethicist Margaret Somerville, recent recipient of a controversial honorary degree at Ryerson University, strongly opposes artificial insemination involving donors, on the grounds that children have the right to be brought up by their biological parents. She may or may not have a point, but surely it is a far more important right of children that they be wanted, welcomed and loved as they start their life's journey.

And that is only possible when women maintain full control over their bodies, including the use of contraception and the option of choice in the case of an already difficult decision regarding abortion.

Of course the exercise of that free intelligence in the pursuit of arguments in a democracy about what is right and wrong is more challenging than the unquestioned adherence to a rigid set of rules, interpreted by others.

But it is ultimately far more satisfying and relevant and it makes a profound difference in people's lives. What may go into the mix of moral decision making for modern Humanists would be concepts such as the Golden Rule (do as you would be done by), Utilitarianism (the greatest good to the greatest number) and the considerations of consequences. All this would be filtered through reason to lead to a tentative decision.

That moral guidelines are in fact tentative and change over time is apparent from our modern views that slavery is unacceptable, women should have equal rights, homosexuality is an integral part of the human experience and that basic human rights must be universally recognized.

Western civilization would not have moved forward to the extent has without the challenges of the Renaissance and particularly the Enlightenment to the overwhelming authority of organized religion.

These challenges have led to at least a legal, if not always a factual, separation of church and state as a necessary condition of maintaining civic harmony in modern pluralist democracies.

The persistence of the skeptical non-believers in challenging established supernatural beliefs has long made a vital contribution to this condition and must continue to do so.

--- Humanist Perspectives, *Issue # 158, Autumn 2006.*

Religion's Friends and Foes

In his rebuke of an earlier criticism of organized religion, letter writer Rob Gerein makes a number of points that merit a response.

(Religion has its uses, Letters, Aug. 15).

Mr. Gerein states that the United Way was "started by Christians, Protestants and Jews." Protestants no doubt consider themselves Christians and the historic treatment of Jews under Christianity has been rather grim right into this century.

He justly praises St. Paul's Hospital for apparently having the only specialized AIDS treatment centre in B.C. However, he omits to mention that all medical personnel are absolutely prohibited from encouraging the preventive use of condoms. Archbishop Adam Exner specifically reiterated this position recently, notwithstanding the public funding of the hospital.

Countless churches do indeed feed the hungry and house the homeless and they are to be commended for it. Arguably the historic preoccupation of these churches with the afterlife rather than with the here now has contributed to the need for such aid in the first place!

Mr. Gerein concludes that in the real world religion has much to offer to many. That may be the case. Nevertheless, the histories of many religions are replete with intolerance, repression and persecution.

The insidious Christian concept of original sin may have caused great psychological distress.

Only recently have there been ecumenical efforts and a focus on social and economic issues.

Under the influence of scientific discoveries and secular pressures, mainstream leaders and members of many churches are attempting to reinterpret religious tenets to make them more meaningful to contemporary needs.

Perhaps those "liberal thinkers, unbelievers, scientists and other courageous activists" deserve some credit after all!

--- Vancouver Sun, *Published 08-18-97*

**MODERN
HUMANISM
DEFINED**

What's in a Word

"When I use a word, " Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean --- neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master --- that's all."

There has been a fair amount of peering through the looking glass on the HAC Internet list recently regarding the recurring soul searching , (or should that be cognitive cogitation) about the use of the word 'Humanism' to duly represent our evolutionary naturalistic worldview.

There seems concern that the word just isn't catching on in North America. Alternatives have been suggested. Prominent American Humanist Paul Kurtz, for example, has tried to coin the new word eupraxsophy. One would think that if people have trouble understanding you when you introduce yourself as a Humanist, they surely must be puzzled when you turn out to be a eupraxsophist!

Others have suggested Secularist, Naturalist, Freethinker or Skep-tic. There is also a persistent attempt, even by the Humanist Association of Canada, to equate Humanism with Atheism. However, although many Humanists are probably atheists, most atheists are regrettably not Humanists! Prominent scientist, popular author and former President of the American Humanist Association, Isaac Asimov (1920-1992), noted that: "... I've thought of myself as an 'atheist,' but that simply described what I *didn't* believe in, not what I did. Gradually, though, I became aware there was a movement called 'Humanism' which used that name because . . . Humanists believe that human beings produced the progressive advance of human society and also the ills that plague it. If the ills are to be alleviated, it is humanity that will have to do the job."

Humanism is clearly concerned with the here and now. Nevertheless the term can also relate to the study of the humanities in the academic world and the renewed focus on human achievement during the early Renaissance, within the context of the Roman Catholic religion. Referring to our life stance as 'modern' Humanism can eliminate such confusion. Some prefer to add the adjective 'secular', which is a bit of a tautology because it also means 'of this age' referring to the here and now.

To muddy the waters further some modern Humanists think of themselves as 'religious' and refer back to the original meaning of religion as 'binding together.' Even prominent scientist, author and Humanist, Carl Sagan (1934-1996) in his "The Demon Haunted World" equates religion with spirituality and suggest that science is the most spiritual activity because the original meaning refers to breathing, obviously a vital natural activity. At least he acknowledges that this interpretation is contrary to current common understanding.

The most recent entry into the "What-shall-we-call-Humanism-except-Humanism" contest is to call all non-believers "Brights.'

Philosopher Daniel Dennett apparently, coined the word recently, one would imagine with tongue in cheek! You can join on the new website for Brights and raise your self-esteem at the same time! I very much doubt this term would endear us any more to the opponents of evolutionary naturalism or persuade anyone to adopt our views any more than any of the other terms.

Why not give the term 'modern Humanism' a bit more time? After all, it is widely understood and indeed accepted in Europe and we will no doubt catch up here eventually.

----Humanist Perspectives, *Published Issue # 147 Winter 04*

Modern Humanism: A Basic Approach

No doubt some intelligent people with inquiring minds would like to be better informed about modern Humanism.

One source for this would be the writings of academic philosophers, most of whom are likely to be practicing modern Humanists.

Regrettably, only few have taken the trouble to explore the philosophical foundations of this worldview. Those who have done so tend to obscure their thoughts with arcane terms like ontological precepts, epistemological hypotheses and eschatological contemplations.

The purpose of this short article is to offer some insights that are unburdened with undue professional jargon.

Some basic concepts, forming the foundation of modern Humanism, will be applied to a realistic attitude for daily living.

It seems reasonable to suggest that for the last few thousand years people in the West have taken two basic approaches to explain our universe, the Earth and everything in it and on it. The prevailing proposition was and is that all of nature is so complex that there must have been an external, extra-terrestrial or supernatural entity that created it all for some reason or other at a given time rather than sooner or later. Let us call this entity God.

This so-called 'dualist' concept that there must be something outside natural processes seems deeply engrained in the human psyche. Even people who are not particularly religious sometimes express dualistic feelings. Most major religions promote this dualist perspective.

Of course it raises the question that if God created all, then who or what created God? The answer is generally that God is eternal and always was and will be. Another reasonable question would be why bad things happen to good people. The answer to that generally refers to God's plan although no one has any idea what such plan might be and why it would have to involve undeserved suffering. Many don't find either of these answers very plausible.

Consequently, concurrently with the dualist vision, the proposition persisted that nature and natural events always were and will be; hence there is no need for a supernatural intermediary. This so-called 'monist' position has been on the margins, but it has persisted all along and is now held by modern Humanists, freethinkers, agnostics, atheists and the like.

Inherent in this monist approach is the scientific hypothesis of evolution as the driving force of all living things. Through random mutations and natural selection all life, including human life, has evolved to its contemporary form over a very long period of time without apparent purposeful design. This is in contrast to the proposition that all life resulted from an ad hoc creation by an intelligent designer.

This idea of evolutionary naturalism is one of the foundations of modern Humanism. One cannot be a modern Humanist and subscribe to the idea of creationism in any form, including its recent guise of intelligent design.

Another basic element is the recognition of our unique position as human beings on this Earth. Humanists are sometimes accused of being so pre-occupied with this idea that they neglect other life forms and the environment. To the contrary, it is precisely because of our concern about humans that we realize how much we are a part of the web of life and how much we depend on our interaction with other life forms. Nevertheless it would seem that only OUR brains have to allow for introspection and the awareness of our own mortality.

This self-awareness manifests itself in a number of ways.

Driven by our natural curiosity we developed the scientific process to gain better insights into our environment and ourselves. Unlike knowledge through revelation and the like, the scientific process is self-correcting. However limited science may be, and notwithstanding that some scientists may falsify data or distort results, the process as a whole will ultimately correct its own deficiencies and provide us with our best tentative understanding.

We are also capable of creating things of lasting beauty. It is obvious that our aggressive energy has led to massive destruction, murder and mayhem in our history to date. But that same innate energy has also been channeled into the architecture of memorable buildings, the writing of great literature, the moulding of shapely sculptures, the painting of beautiful paintings and the composition of stirring music.

Another aspect of our unique stature as humans is the inclination to judge our own human behavior. In other words we have gained a sense of morality and have indeed articulated codes of conduct to determine which actions are perceived to advance human interests and which behaviours are thought to undermine them.

There are a number of ways in which the concept of evolutionary naturalism, the recognition of our uniqueness as human beings and our sense of morality affect our daily lives as modern Humanists.

One is a matter of focus. There are many people who believe that they have lived before. Under hypnosis some seem capable of remembering aspects of such previous existence. Even more people believe that our life on this earth is merely a transient experience on the way to a more exalted place after we die. Apparently such conviction gives believers hope of an eternal existence and in this regard modern Humanism would admittedly be hope-less. However strongly people may believe any of this, it must nevertheless be conceded that there is no credible evidence for it and it therefore remains mere speculation. As modern Humanists we may find such speculation interesting, but we prefer deal with what we reasonably do know, which is that we live here and now.

Total skeptics may want to engage in a debate as to whether we can actually know anything at all, but that seems of little practical value and most of us are prepared to accept that we do indeed live in the present. Rather than spend a great deal time and effort on idle speculation, we therefore prefer to act in a way that enhances human well-being and diminishes human suffering here and now!

Another issue is that of meaning. For a religious person the meaning of life presumably comes from serving God and carrying out His perceived purpose on Earth. For a modern Humanist the universe and life on this Earth do not have any meaning in and of themselves. Instead, meaning derives from how we live, what we do with our lives, and how we interact with others. First with our immediate family and then our friends, neighbours, community and so on in ever widening circles.

When we enjoy a piece of literature or music or admire a beautiful painting created many centuries ago, we can certainly acknowledge that the lives of the originators were profoundly meaningful to us. Although most of us are not so fortunate to have the exceptional talents that would allow us to leave such lasting legacies, we can all act within the scope of our given situation and make positive contributions that will infuse our lives with meaning.

A further concern is morality. One of the most offensive comments, made by religious people from time to time, is that one cannot behave morally without belief in a supernatural being. Not only is that clearly not the case but also it could be argued that the opposite may be true. While there have always been bad people doing bad things and good people doing good things, it may take a strong religious belief to persuade a good person to do bad things. One cannot help but wonder whether the people who tortured the victims of the Inquisition or the witch hunts would not have felt some serious misgivings about the infliction of such cruelty on their fellow humans. If they did, it must have been their religious conviction of saving souls that helped them overcome any conscientious objections.

For religious people moral behaviour may be relatively straightforward as a matter of following rigid and distinct imperatives, articulated in holy books such as the Bible or the Koran. Unfortunately such directives as the Ten Commandments originated thousands of years ago among nomads roaming the desert under circumstances that have no relation to modern life. As a result they are arguably of little real help in determining proper moral behaviour now.

Furthermore, organized religion has merely appropriated the reciprocity and recognition of mutual dependency common to all people everywhere and arbitrarily declared them to be religious values.

Modern Humanists reject any such rules, arbitrarily derived from supernatural sources, and instead firmly believe that morality must be grounded in the human experience to be valid. To arrive at a credible position in regard to any moral action, modern Humanists take a number of matters into account. First would likely be the Golden Rule, concisely articulated by David Hume as "doing as you would be done by."

However that would not be sufficient, so another consideration would be John Stuart Mill's idea of utilitarianism, often defined as "the greatest good to the greatest number." A further necessary aspect would be the careful consideration of the consequences of any action and how it may affect others. All these aspects must then be filtered through reason, leading to the question of whether or not the contemplated action makes any sense. Surely a much more complicated procedure than mindlessly following a set of dated dogma!

Nevertheless, or more precisely because of this, the result of our modern Humanist considerations will lead to a more satisfying and more reasonably defensible moral action that would enhance human well-being or diminish human suffering.

--- Humanist Perspectives, *Published Issue #157, Summer 06*

The Straight Route to Understanding Ourselves

Religion columnist Douglas Todd shared with us his delight in wearing a mystical Mayan calendar when he was a hippie teen-ager. ("The circular route to self-discovery," *The Sun*, Sat. Review 05-16, 16). More recently he used high-school geometry sets to draw circles in a psycho-spiritual search of the dark side of his personality that apparently looked a bit like a disturbed hamburger.

High school is precisely the educational level to which such soul searches belong. As people grow up they should come to realize that one searches in vain for a better understanding of the self and of others in the rose-shaped centers of elaborate labyrinths or magical mandalas or anywhere else in mystical mist.

Advances in neuro-science and the application of the scientific method in social sciences such as psychology and sociology will provide us with increasingly better and more reliable insights into basic human needs and behaviours.

A measure of reasonable reflection rather than divine doodling could have given Todd his insight into the importance of play and intimacy in his life.

There is no discernable intrinsic meaning to the natural universe or the life that has evolved within it. For each us the meaning of our life becomes whatever we put into it within the limits of the circumstances we find ourselves in. First regarding the extent to which we develop our own personality and abilities. Then the manner in which we interact with those closest and dearest to us and finally the extent of our contributions to our community and the larger society.

This is the essential message of modern Humanism; a life stance and worldview studiously avoided by Todd in his articles while busily bestowing meaning on roaming around in circles.

--- The Vancouver Sun, .05-93, *Unpublished*

What Modern Humanists Have to Offer

Modern Humanists have a great deal to offer in regard to the current clashing of religions and conflict of politics. In the most general way, we support the moral decencies that we all share and that transcend religious differences and dogmas. A necessary but not sufficient part of that is our commitment to the separation of church and state, at the very least in practice.

In regard to religion as well as politics we are reminded of T.H. Huxley's admonition that skepticism is the highest of duties, and blind belief the one unpardonable 'sin.' And we concur that all alike agree to think but not all agree to think alike!

On a more mundane level it appears that most people actually live their daily lives very much according to Humanist or at least non- (traditionally) religious principles. No doubt passengers in an airplane, for example, have some confidence in the skills of the pilot and the aerodynamic design of the plane in their expectation that they will reach their destination. Few would expect mere prayer to provide lift off. The only exception may be the Natural Law party members, who would propose a simultaneous levitation of all on board to achieve that same goal. Most citizens would also agree that a significant degree of tolerance to other ideas and beliefs, whether religious or political, is necessary to maintain a semblance of civil order in a pluralistic society.

Canadians mostly ignore the dogmatic dictates of their various religions and support the use of contraception, access to abortions, activities on Sundays and they appreciate the products of applied science. In other words, they live mostly like modern Humanists; We just do not get the credit --- yet.

In regard to the topic of clashing religions and conflicting politics, modern Humanism can specifically contribute in three areas:

--- 1. Emphasizing the importance of avoiding war, other than as the very last resort in the resolution of conflicts. The horrors of war and the modern infliction of lasting physical and/or emotional impact on participants and civilians are too often underrated and understated. It is ironic that many of the most vociferous hawks in the current U.S. administration have never personally experienced war and have often actively sought to avoid doing so.

A decision as important as an invasion of Iraq deserves vigorous debate. In this regard, Senator Robert Byrd expressed his concern in a speech to the Senate last February. Here are just a few brief quotes: “ ... as this nation stands at the brink of battle, every American on some level must be contemplating the horrors of war. Yet, this Chamber is, for the most part, silent... There is no debate, no discussion, no attempt to lay out for the nation the pros and cons of this particular war. There is nothing ...”

“ ... The doctrine of pre-emption --- the idea that the United States or any other nation can legitimately attack a nation that is not imminently threatening ... appears to be in contravention of international law and the UN Charter ...”

“This administration has turned the patient art of diplomacy into threats, labelling, and name calling of the sort that reflects poorly on the intelligence and sensitivity of our leaders, and which will have consequences for years to come ...”

“ ... Yet this chamber is hauntingly silent ... On the eve of what could possibly be a vicious terrorist attack in retaliation for our attack on Iraq, it is business as usual in the United States Senate.”

As Humanists we may differ in regard to the need or desirability of invading Iraq under any circumstances, but we surely agree on the need for a reasoned decision and a vigorous debate to precede with such a drastic measure. We must support all with whom we share this common cause in any way we can.

--- 2. Understanding human nature. The better we understand what leads ordinary citizens to support such violent actions, the more we will be able to channel all such negative energy into more positive, productive directions. Recently Bill Moyers addressed this issue in an interview with Chris Hedges on his excellent program “NOW” on PBS. Hedges is an experienced war correspondent and just published his book: “War is a Force that gives us Meaning,” from which he quoted: “ ... The communal march against an enemy generates a warm, unfamiliar bond with our neighbours, our community, our nation, wiping out unsettling undercurrents of alienation and dislocation... To many people, war provides a purpose for living; it seems to allow the individual to rise above regular life and perhaps participate in a noble cause...” Hedges discusses outbreaks of nationalism, the wartime silencing of intellectuals and artists, the ways in which even a supposedly skeptical press glorifies the battle field... He is no pacifist but thoughtfully cautions us against accepting the accompanying myths of war.

He is not a Humanist either, but we can certainly concur with the ideas he mentioned here. We must stress the importance of an increasing understanding of the genetic as well as cultural influences on our thinking and our behaviour.

--- 3. Separating church from state. Once again we share a common cause with many who are not Humanists. There can be little doubt about the religious connotations regarding the attack of September 2001 and the consequent current commitment to invade Iraq as part of a war on terrorism. The Islamic fanatics were punishing the infidels when destroying the twin symbols of American commercialism.

--- 4. Christian hegemony. President Bush called for a crusade against evildoers, while the reverend Falwell decried Mohammed as a terrorist and Franklin Graham disparaged Islam.

Once again we are reminded of the necessity to transcend sectarian strife and remember our common humanity. Recently religious zeal has carried over into a pervasive patriotism and flag waving. In some personal comments Bill Moyers bemoans the fact that: ". . . the flag has been hijacked and turned into a logo—the trademark of a monopoly on patriotism." He concludes that: ". . . not every patriot thinks we should do to the people of Baghdad what Bin Laden did to us . . . it is not un-American to think that war except in self-defense is a failure of moral imagination, political nerve, and diplomacy. Come to think of it, standing up to your government can mean standing up for your country." I doubt that Moyers is a Humanist but once again, he expresses sentiments and opinions that we can wholeheartedly agree with and continue to bring to the fore.

—Commentary, *Un-submitted*

Morality

The Abortion Controversy

The abortion controversy will no doubt remain a difficult and emotionally charged issue ("Abortion foes allege bias"/Vancouver Sun 04/04). Pro-choice and anti-abortion positions are generally presented as two equally valid sides in this difficult debate.

However, the pro-choice position does not impose anything on its opponents. No one is compelled to have an abortion against her will. In contrast the anti-abortion position imposes one particular view and deprives everyone else of a choice.

The fact that the anti-abortion faction claims to speak for the developing fetus does not change this reality. Opposition to abortion under any circumstance is clearly a minority view in this country and in this province. Therefore, the imposition of this view would seem to be the more undemocratic.

In addition it is regrettable that many abortion opponents are equally inimical to contraception. Apart from abstention, contraception is clearly the most effective way of preventing unwanted pregnancies and reducing the demand for abortions.

The anti-abortion position would be more credible if its adherents would apply some of their considerable efforts and energy toward the support of a more responsible use of contraceptives.

--- Vancouver Sun, *Published 04-07-1997*

Freedom to Doubt

(Re: “No Religion Can Flourish by Repression” by Thomas F. Farr, May 9)

Of course, religious freedom and freedom of speech and assembly are essential to a pluralistic democracy. However, when Farr suggests that religious organizations reduce “the potential for corruption and the abuse of power” of governments, he ignores that history is replete with examples of these very problems within organized religion. The pedophilia scandal and its cover up in the Catholic Church is only one recent example.

When Sheik Tantawi asserts that you must have freedom to come to the truth, he leaves no doubt that to him such truth means an absolute commitment to Islam. Mohammed Fadel concludes that religious freedom is critical to a virtuous Muslim regime because then “the message of Mohammed ... can be effectively communicated.” He would clearly be less impressed if such freedom would lead to the effective communication of the message of Christ!

After all, John Paul II has restated that the Roman Catholic Church is the only true Christian religion and all other beliefs, including other Christian ones, are ‘defective’

Farr concludes that the definitive lesson we must draw from history is that freedom and dignity are given by God to be used to honour Him and His creation. He does not allow for the realistic possibility that humanity created the idea of a supernatural personal God and its attendant mythology, rather than the other way around.

He does not acknowledge the merits of doubt. Furthermore, history teaches us that proselytizing has been inherent in the major religions, currently resulting in renewed and worrisome clashes.

To maintain a pluralistic civilized society, we must transcend sectarian hatred and dated dogma and strengthen our commitment to tolerance for its own sake.

Half a century ago, English philosopher Bertrand Russell spoke against nuclear proliferation on BBC radio and ended his talk with: “Remember your humanity and forget the rest.” His words ring as true today as ever.

--- Times Colonist, *Unpublished*

Morality Grounded in Human Experience

Colin Tudge asserts that: "... the absolute and immediate importance of religion lies in its contribution to morality ..." ("Microscopes Have No Morals." Sept. 18).

Historical evidence would seem to contradict such a questionable claim. A flourishing and pluralistic Arab culture, while initially inspired by religion, would not have been stifled by the later regression to an intolerant and narrow-minded interpretation of Islam. There was nothing moral about that. Indeed, Baghdad, now declared the center of international terrorism by President Bush, was at one the cultural center of the world.

Progress in the West would not have been delayed for centuries by the book burning and superstitions of the Dark Ages. There was nothing moral about the witch-hunts and persecution of those who dared disagree with the dogma of the day.

In our own time examples abound where the blind adherence to dated dogma undermines morality. Just one example would be the pro-natal doctrine imposed by the Catholic Church in regard to human sexuality. If a young man masturbates or uses contraception when having intercourse with his girlfriend, rather than cause an unwanted pregnancy, the Church accuses him of moral weakness and venial sin. Surely his actions would be the more moral?

When considering the common moral decencies of virtually all societies, whether primitive or advanced, it is clear that a functional morality must be grounded in the human experience, guided by reason. A good start would be the "Golden Rule", defined as "Do as you would be done by." Most traditional religions merely appropriated this long-standing principle. Also relevant would be the utilitarian concept of the most good to the most people.

Half a century ago, English philosopher Bertrand Russell, a staunch and eloquent critic of religion, spoke against nuclear proliferation on BBC radio and ended his talk with: “Remember your humanity and forget the rest.” His words ring as true today as ever.

--- Guardian Weekly, *Unpublished*

An Ounce of Prevention

In his article about the abortion debate Douglas Todd suggests it is fundamentally a philosophical battle.

(“War of Words...,” *Saturday Review*, 11-07, 14).

The issue of foetal personhood is more likely a theological one.

Todd extensively quotes Vancouver theologian Terry Anderson who likes to use what he believes are more honest terms than are often employed in this volatile debate. This commendable attitude is some-what marred when he defines the termination of an early pregnancy as “justifiable homicide.” The Criminal Code defines homicide as causing the death of a human being.” A human being is generally defined as a living person rather than a fertilized ovum.

Anderson sidesteps the crucial issues of the difference between potential and its realization and when a developing embryo becomes a person.

To some extent the issue of abortion can be viewed as a red herring obscuring underlying more basic beliefs about human sexuality.

If abortion opponents were truly interested in significantly reducing the incidence of abortions they would consider the fact that the lowest abortion rate in the world is in The Netherlands as reported recently in *The Sun*. I do not believe that the Dutch are any less sexually active at any age than citizens anywhere else. The difference is that contraception is so widely accepted and available that the Dutch equivalent of Planned Parenthood has long dissolved itself as redundant.

Unfortunately many anti-choice activists are equally vocal in their opposition to vigorous educational efforts to encourage the use of contraceptives in preventing unwanted pregnancies.

That is certainly the case in regard to the official position of the Roman Catholic Church that was unequivocally reiterated by the current Pontiff, although this may be quietly ignored by many Roman Catholic Canadians in practice.

Todd fears that the potential for real dialogue about abortion seems hopeless. Maybe there is hope for a dialogue about the less emotional issue of preventing the incidence of unwanted pregnancies through abstention and contraception.

--- The Vancouver Sun, *Unpublished*

Unbelievable Reason

Letter writer R.H. Thompson is quite correct when suggesting that we are capable of finding the answer to many problems plaguing humanity. ("Praying for Reason", TC, Dec. 30, 1999, p A15) During this century in particular, the rapid development of the scientific method has enabled us to eradicate many erstwhile fatal diseases.

He is not correct when suggesting that our ability to reason is a miracle in the sense that it resulted from supernatural intervention.

Our capacity for introspection and the application of reason are the result of a lengthy evolutionary process within nature.

It cannot possibly be reasonable to suggest that an all-loving, all-powerful and all-knowing God would allow innocent children to suffer from disease or starvation as Thompson suggests.

It is one thing to admit that we do not understand God's plan as some clergy claim. It is quite another to propose that God would permit untold numbers of children to die or be crippled for life, merely as an experiment to find out how long humanity would take to find a cure and the will to apply it, as Thompson would have us believe.

Such belief could readily lead us to wonder whether we have achieved any ability to reason at all.

---- Times Colonist, *Published 01-02-01*

POLITICS

The Corporation

In his review of the film *The Corporation* (“Ideological Indecision,” May/June) Joseph Heath commits the fallacy of false alternatives, which is surprising for a philosopher.

The alternative to a private-sector economy is not necessarily a publicly owned one. Nor is it the case that private ownership cannot be the problem if public ownership is not the solution. Consequently, there is no reason for Heath to expect the film to come to such a definite conclusion.

The pursuit of private profit may provide innovation and efficiency. It may not be the root of all evil, however, in order to prevent it from becoming so, the economic libertarianism of Milton Friedman et al must be restrained by enforceable regulations rather than by expropriation or nationalization.

That would seem a reasonable interpretation of the film’s message and it leaves the filmmakers neither “grasping at straws” nor “engaging in wishful thinking.”

--- Briarpatch, *Published*

Historical Revisionism

Franco Zeffirelli is a splendid Italian filmmaker and his recent foray into historical revisionism suggests the he should stick to his forte.

He berates continental Europe for not supporting the recent bombing raids against Iraq by the British and Americans.

(“Inaction on Iraq: Shame on Europe,” *The Sun* 12-23, A15).

Most people would agree that Saddam Hussein is a ruthless dictator and despicable character the world would do well without. However, it should not be overlooked that the Americans put him in power when it suited their purposes and the British initiated Iraq’s chemical capabilities.

Many political analysts suggest that economic sanctions and bombing raids are devastating to the Iraqi people without dislodging their loathsome leader. Lifting sanctions and opening up economic relations with Iraq is more likely to achieve the removal of Hussein in due course.

Zeffirelli draws comparisons to the Nazi era fifty years ago and suggests: “it was due only to Britain and America that the world has been saved.” Few would deny the courage of the British pilots and others during the battle of Britain. However, the fact that two-thirds of the German armies were tied up by the Russians on the eastern front contributed greatly to the favourable outcome of the war.

The suggestion that: “... the Anglo-Saxons had throughout history received nothing from Europe but problems, threats and mortal danger ...” could be countered by the view that British imperial policy was replete with duplicity and this it was Britain throughout history fomenting discord in continental Europe and supporting one country against another in order to divide and rule.

Zeffirelli even states that he is “sincerely ashamed to be a European.” He may have some cause for this if he contemplates strictly the support by his homeland of Nazi Germany until the war was lost and Italy changed sides.

He mentions France, Germany, Italy and Russia. However, continental Europe contains many more albeit less powerful countries.

The Scandinavian and Benelux countries are exemplars of socio-economic progress and Zeffirelli need not feel ashamed to come from the same continent.

--- The Vancouver Sun, *Published 12-29-98 A15*

Strong Leadership

Recently there has been a great deal of reference in the media and elsewhere about the merit of strong leadership. But that raises the question about what such strong leadership would attempt to achieve.

The media seem to attribute the quality of strong leadership in particular to the Conservative Party minority government leader Mr. Harper.

Canadians should remember some of Mr. Harper's comments in a speech he gave to a group of far right wing Americans in 1977 in Montreal when he was still outside of politics and could speak more freely.

He told them: "... your conservative movement is a light and an inspiration to people in this country and across the world ...". About the NDP he suggested that its very presence: "... proved that the devil exists ...".

We also know that Mr. Harper recently gave a speech that was in part identical to one given by Mr. John Howard, the former right wing Prime Minister of Australia who suffered a resounding defeat a year ago.

In the U.S. we now see the devastating results of the unfettered free market ideology promoted by Mr. Bush and favoured by Mr. Harper as an economist.

Ironically, where Mr. Harper's party favours strong government interference is in people's private lives with such issues as a woman's right of choice regarding abortion, the use of contraception and people's sexual orientation.

Surely, it would be preferable to have less forceful, or even shared leadership, implementing a more moderate party platform that more closely resembles the socio-economic and political aspirations of a significant majority of Canadians.

--- Times Colonist, *Unpublished*

More Left Than Us

Shawn McGuire complains that he rarely sees the progressive attitude in the Netherlands reflected in *This Magazine*, ("Star Performance," Letters July-Aug. 99).

The following may interest your readers:

The current and very popular Prime Minister, Wim Kok, re-elected last year was president of the Dutch Federation of Labour.

That would be the Canadian equivalent of a Bob White or Ken Gerogetti as Canadian Prime Minister, an unlikely possibility to say the least.

At that election the Labour Party emerged as the single largest party with 30% of the popular vote and the Green-Left party doubled its share of the vote to 6%.

With other progressive parties they could have formed a left-of-center majority government.

Since the Netherlands has a system of pure proportional representation the seat distribution in Parliament closely reflects the popular vote.

Although the country has half the population of Canada there is a large variety of daily and weekly newspapers and magazines, reflecting viewpoints across the entire political spectrum including those represented by *This Magazine*.

--- This Magazine, *Published Sept-Oct-99*

The Scientific Process

Diverging Directions

The scientific consensus seems to be that early humans evolved in Africa and lived there for as long as 2 to 3 million years ago, before some may have entered Asia prior to 1.7 million years ago, while the first major habitation of central and western Europe may have occurred between 1 million and 500,000 years ago and the earliest modern traits emerged some 200,000 years ago.

Therefore it would seem reasonable to consider that every person on this planet has ancestry ultimately leading back to Africa. Some suggest that such understanding of our shared origin and ourselves ought to instill in us a degree of humility and sustain a pursuit of freedom and equality for all.

During these dispersions from Africa, early humans took diverging directions. Those differing paths have led to equally differing developments. However, there is no reason to presume that these developments are necessarily of equal merit in the sense of having contributed equally to human well-being and the improvement of the human condition.

This human journey is somewhat like that of a family of which several siblings share a similar genetic predisposition and early upbringing and then take different paths and reach entirely different levels of accomplishments for a variety of reasons and as time goes by.

The initial dispersals from Africa and the subsequent settlements elsewhere took place so long ago and over such an extended time that these time frames are practically impossible for our minds to grasp in any realistic sense.

A retrospective of recent times will be more illustrative.

Looking back to the immediately preceding 3,000 years we see the emergence of what could now loosely be called Western civilization, initiated in early Greece after the defeat of the Persians in 480 BCE at Salamis.

The values and ideas that we now consider an integral part of the Western worldview were re-initiated during the Renaissance period of the 14th and 15th centuries, articulated further and expanded during the Enlightenment years of the 19th century.

Critics of Western civilization are quick to point to the darker side of its history and development and lecture on a litany of deplorable deeds. Indeed, there have been colonisations, exploitations, repressions, genocide, and two world wars to name just some of those ills.

But such darker sides seem to be inherent in the establishment of any large empire anywhere at any time. For example, the Huns under Atilla in the 5th century left a legacy of death and destruction wherever they ventured. Even more so did the Mongols under Genghis Kahn in the 13th century as they swept across Asia and parts of Europe with unprecedented cruelty.

What makes Western civilization compare favourably to all others nevertheless, is its positive influence and the unprecedented enactment of its progressive values within its boundaries and to some extent beyond.

One example is the issue of slavery. Europeans did not invent slavery, as it long existed as an integral part of tribal warfare in Africa, even before its notorious excesses during the slave trade, aided by the North African Arabs. But it was only during the recent Western civilized era that slavery was formally abolished for the first time in recorded history.

Another example is the emancipation of women, who have taken an increasingly important part in politics, the professions, business and other areas of modern life. This is particularly the case in the Scandinavian countries more so than in North America. No doubt this emancipation is far from complete but it is nevertheless unparalleled by any previous developments anywhere in the world.

A third example is the evolution of the concept and the actual codification of civil rights and individual human rights in various formal and widely recognized national and international documents.

In addition, the idea of democracy as a form of government, once initiated in ancient Greece, evolved over the last two millennia and is now firmly established in all developed and some developing countries affected by Western civilization.

An integral part of a contemporary functional democracy is freedom of speech and expression. The flurry of commentary following the publication of the controversial cartoons in Denmark is a positive and encouraging sign that the issue of freedom of expression gets the serious attention it deserves. Unwarranted attempts to stifle it by

Muslim leaders, agitating to impose their oppressive and totalitarian mindset on non-Muslim cartoonists in a non-Muslim country, must be resisted.

Another positive value that emerged in the West, is the idea of a reasonable equality of opportunity to access basic human needs such as food, clothing, housing, education and essential medical aid.

While, once again, more advanced in the Scandinavian and other West European countries, it is irrevocably established at least to some degree in Canada and to a lesser extent in the U.S.

What does all of this mean? While recognizing our common human heritage, going back over millions of years, we can appreciate that Western civilization has brought to the world positive values to a larger degree than any of the preceding cultures and civilizations in recorded history.

At the same time it is essential to realize that this achievement is the result of complex factors relating to geography, demography, and ecological happenstance. Greater advances do not necessarily occur because of biological differences among peoples themselves but likely because of differences among peoples' environments and other chance occurrences.

It is now up to all of us, who are privileged to share the achievements of Western civilization, to ensure that its positive values will prevail against increasingly threatening odds in today's turbulent world.

--- Humanist Perspectives, *Published Issue # 156, Spring 06*

The Art and Science of Medicine

In the nineties Dean Ornish, MD, president of the Preventive Medicine Research Institute of California, conducted a series of studies to see if a comprehensive program of intensive lifestyle changes can have a positive impact on the progression of coronary heart disease.

He was concerned that the arsenal of conventional medicine, consisting of bypass surgery, angioplasty and the like, was merely treating symptoms without any effort to go deeper and to determine possible underlying causes of arterial blockages.

A group of 28 patients following his treatment program for one year showed a measurable reversal of coronary blockages. A control group of 20 patients followed a more conventional diet and did not receive exercise programs, group support, counselling or instruction in stress reduction.

The study found that Ornish's 28 patients suffered half the rate of heart attacks without drugs or surgery. On the average, the patients in the control group got worse instead of better. Conditions of the arteries were measured independently with angiography.

The Ornish program consists of exercise, yoga, meditation, stress reduction, and lifestyle changes. Patients are encouraged to confront emotional aspects of their healing as well as physical concerns like diet and high cholesterol. The diet of the reversal program is more rigid than that of the prevention program. There are a number of reasons why these remarkable results are not widely known.

For one, the American Heart Association remained skeptical of Ornish's approach, questioning whether most Americans could actually maintain the drastic dietary and lifestyle changes necessary for his program.

Another reason is mentioned in his 1990 book "Reversing Heart Disease." Dr. Ornish comments: "If I perform bypass surgery on a patient, the insurance company will pay at least \$30,000. If I perform a balloon angioplasty on a patient, the insurance company will pay at least \$7,500. If I spend the same amount of time teaching a heart patient about nutrition and stress management techniques, the insurance company will pay no more than \$150. If I spend that time teaching a well person how to *stay* healthy, the insurance company will not pay at all."

Fifteen years later these amounts have increased significantly.

The insurance system encourages the use of drugs and surgery rather than focusing on health education and disease prevention.

While skeptics often dismiss alternative medicine as merely a billion dollar industry based on greed it is not unreasonable to keep in mind that the love of money plays an important role in conventional medicine as well. In many cases patients treated without surgery seem to enjoy the same survival rates as those who undergo open-heart surgery. Physicians may be too hasty to prescribe surgery immediately upon the appearance of angina or chest pain.

Clinical studies seem to indicate that certain treatments and behaviours, generally considered among complimentary and alternative therapies, can be effective (<http://clinicaltrials.gov/ct/gui>).

Another important aspect of conventional medicine is the ever increasing emphasis on prescribed drugs. In a recent article in the *Literary Review of Canada*, Charles Godfrey points out that the most profitable business sector operating today is the pharmaceutical industry, grossing U.S.\$ 37 billion worldwide in 2001. In that year so called Big Pharma enjoyed returns of around 18.5 percent compared to a median 2.3% for the rest of industry, according to an analysis of Fortune 500 data.

In Canada this represents 16.2 of health care costs!

An increasing problem is the industry's financing of research facilities at major universities. No publication of research can be made without prior donor approval. Consequently unfavourable research results have been and will be stifled to the detriment of Canadian consumers.

To some extent the Paten Medicine Prices Review Board, with its mandate to ensure that drug prices will not be excessive, has protected consumers in Canada. Nevertheless, the odds are that we will be paying more for drugs as the result of a convoluted economic process that has little to do with sick Canadians and is heavily influenced by the U.S.

In his article elsewhere in this magazine, psychologist Alcock advances ten reasons why alternative medicine enjoys increasing popularity. One of those is that a visit to a modern physician is generally a very brief one and typically terminates with a prescription for drugs or a referral for tests. Alternative practitioners on the other hand appear to understand your problem and appear to be interested in you and your life and rarely pass you on to someone else.

Alcock also mentions that Greek physician Galen already recognized in the second century CE that it is therapeutic for a troubled person to talk to an empathic listener!

Furthermore, there seems to be merit in techniques such as reframing, which challenges us to change the way we look at things in order to feel better about them. The key is to recognize that there are many ways to interpret the same situation and to learn to get rid of negative thoughts or feelings that can result in stresses. Spend more time focusing on the positive things in our lives and less time thinking negatively.

Positive thinking also aims to avoid negative thoughts or a sense of powerlessness, dejection and failure. Instead focus on our strengths and determine whether we have control over the situation. If we do, let's go ahead and take care of it! If it is entirely beyond our control, worrying will not make any difference, so let the situation resolve itself.

As a life-long skeptic by inclination and conviction I am most certainly neither an apologist for alternative medicine nor a detractor of scientific modern medicine. However, I do suggest that skeptics too often overlook the reality that modern medicine is an art as well as a science and deserves critical scrutiny while some of the ideas underlying alternative activities may have merit, even though supported mostly by anecdotal evidence and possibly due to placebo effects.

Alcock starts his article with a quote from Shelley and repeats the end of it in his conclusion when the poet proclaims that: "Whatever strengthens and purifies the affections, enlarges the imagination, and adds spirit to the sense is useful."

In order for scientific medicine to truly benefit humanity, it must be balanced with imagination and the human touch. This is the strength of some aspects of alternative medicine and rather than dismiss it all out of hand, skeptics and practitioners of modern medicine should take heed!

--- Humanist In Canada, *Published Issue #153, Summer 05*

Science Under Siege

The internet magazine *Edge.org* recently posed the following question to scientists and other scientifically minded people: “What are you optimistic about and why?”

Science is inherently optimistic as an activity and as a state of mind. Science figures out how things work and attempts to improve them. It provides an ever-expanding knowledge of ourselves and our environment and uses ever more efficient and powerful tools and techniques to deepen our understanding of ourselves and our interdependence with the environment.

Although many of us think that matters generally seem to be getting worse in the world, the nearly 160 world-class scientists and thinkers, who responded to the above question, provided a plethora of unmitigated optimism.

One of those anticipated positive developments is that science will be winning out over magic and superstition, precipitating a drastic decline in the influence of organized religion in the next two or three decades. In part, this would result from the formulation of a complete and naturalistic explanation for the existence of the universe and everything in it and on it, including ourselves. Such developments would be most welcome to modern Humanists.

Other expectations are that higher education will play a prominent role in addressing the problems in the world through education and research on a global scale and that our species will survive the impending climate catastrophe.

Notwithstanding all this optimism for the future there would seem to be reasonable grounds for considerable concern in the present. Indeed, science seems currently besieged by well-funded hostile organizations and movements that challenge its relative objectivity, its unique ability to probe natural causes and effects and its positive contributions to human well-being.

One strong source of opposition to science is organized religion, much more so in the United States than in Western Europe. Foremost opponents of any challenge to the idea of a supernatural, personal god are Evangelical Protestants and the Catholic Church. It took 3½ centuries for the Church to acknowledge the correctness of Galileo Galilei's claim that the earth circled around the Sun and to offer an apology for its sanctions against him. Darwin had to wait a mere century after publication of "The Origin of Species" to have his theory of evolution accepted and then strictly on the biological level, while the Church continued to insist that an immaterial 'soul' intrudes into the material body at some time during foetal development.

This raises the question whether science and religion can ever be compatible at all. One answer is to suggest that it depends on how they are defined. Sometimes religionists suggest that scientific advances and understandings merely open the door to a better view of god's handiwork. From such a religious perspective, science would then be perfectly compatible with religion.

However, if one considers the approach, methodology and foundations of science compared to those of religion, one can only conclude that they are hardly compatible. Science attempts to reach the truth about natural phenomena through a process of inquiry based on empirical facts, guided by reason. It never claims absolute knowledge but only offers the most plausible natural explanations of the observed facts. Science remains modest in its tentative explanations.

In contrast, religion claims to possess the absolute truth. In other words religion starts with the answer and fits questions into it while science starts with questions and offers tentative answers. Religion offers certainty without evidence while science offers evidence without certainty. Religion demands a closed mind while science advocates an open mind. Religion is faith while science is method. Religion relies on science to improve its credibility while science has achieved enormous success and has no need for religion. Religion deals with things we have thought up while science deals with things we have found out.

An important example of the religious opposition to science is the attempt to promote the idea of Intelligent Design in biology as a scientific alternative to the theory of evolution, particularly in the public education systems in the U.S. and to some extent in Canada. In fact, ID is a re-incarnation of so-called Creation Science, which derived from Creationism and remains essentially a rendition of the second Genesis story in the bible. Since science by definition deals only with natural causes, antecedent to natural effects, any reference to the supernatural is outside the realm of science and of science education at any level.

Furthermore, the scientific mindset is one of skepticism and the following of facts in the search for truth, wherever this may lead. In contrast, the religious mindset is evident from comments made by the 16th century Ignatius of Loyola, who founded the prominent order of the Jesuits in 1534. In his “Rules for thinking with the Church,” he wrote: “... That we may be altogether of the same mind and in conformity with the Church herself, if she shall have defined anything to be black which to our eyes appears to be white we ought in like manner to pronounce it to be black ...”

Hardly an encouragement for critical thinking and free inquiry! The Jesuits are sometimes credited with the ability to apply sound logic scrupulously. The problem is that a valid conclusion, reached after sound reasoning, can still be false when the process started from an incorrect premise!

Some prominent scientists are not making matters any easier by expressing themselves publicly in seemingly religious terms. While commenting on the uncertainty principle in quantum physics, Albert Einstein remarked: “God does not play dice with the universe.” He meant this entirely metaphorically and stated on other occasions that he did not believe in a supernatural personal god. Nevertheless, this comment is quoted by religious sources as evidence that Einstein shared their religious views. In his book “The Demon-Haunted World” agnostic Humanist Carl Sagan equated religion with spirituality and then alluded to the latter’s originally Latin meaning relating to breathing. Since that is the most essential natural activity we engage in, he concluded that science is the most basic form of spirituality. At least he admitted that this was contrary to the way the general public understands the term.

Organized religion is by no means the only source of challenges to the scientific process. Postmodernist philosophy, permeating academia, particularly in sociology, claims that science is a purely subjective exercise, merely telling practitioners what they want to hear. Furthermore, observations during experiments are allegedly interpreted with the biases of any particular person or group conducting the experiments and their cultural environment affects the experimenters and determines their conclusions.

While the scientific process may indeed be affected to some extent by the prominence of some societal concerns over others, Postmodernist assertions about the sciences generally, are demonstrably false. With all its limitations and shortcomings, the self-correcting scientific process on a global level still provides the best way we know of giving us greater understanding of ourselves and our universe.

Another challenge to science comes from mysticism. To a large extent, mysticism and modern science appear antithetical. Mysticism is experiential and holistic and mystical experiences are held to be beyond expression. The sciences, on the other hand, are analytical, focused on details and reductionist to a degree while the evidence for any valid scientific hypotheses should be objectively reproducible.

Mysticism is in pursuit of ultimate reality, the divine or spiritual through direct experience, intuition or insight in the belief that such experience is an important source of knowledge, understanding and wisdom. Science obtains knowledge through observed experience and controlled experiment, interpreted by reason.

Mysticism may include a belief in the literal existence of realities beyond empirical perception or a belief that a genuine human perception of the world transcends logical, reasoning or intellectual comprehension.

In his criticism of such views, skeptic Michel de Montaigne exclaimed, as long as four and half centuries ago: "To make the handful bigger than the hand is impossible and unnatural. Nor can man raise himself above himself; for he can see only with his own eyes, and seize only with his own grasp." Montaigne was most concerned about the lack of interest in disciplined inquiry into the nature of humanity and the human condition.

How little things have changed when almost half a millennium later we still face significant and concerted resistance to that very disciplined inquiry Montaigne was hankering for!

Another manifestation of mysticism is generally referred to by the term New Age as an umbrella, covering a large number of traditions and activities such as astrology, using crystals as a healing source, Tarot Card readings, graphology, channeling and dowsing.

There is actually nothing new about any of these so-called New Age beliefs or activities and many go back for centuries.

While there is no scientific foundation for any of them, one could argue that there is little harm in people engaging in them. Many of us probably look at the message in our fortune cookies or peek at our daily horoscope! As long as we enjoy this purely as entertainment there is not much of a problem.

When taken more seriously, the mindset behind these types of activities could cause serious harm because it encourages belief in instant enlightenment and magical thinking and implies that knowledge can be gained without effort. It asserts as facts events that are unproven and encourages belief in equality of opinions, regardless of evidence.

New Age thinking promotes emotive rather than rational criteria for deciding among competing truth claims and allows such claims to be made without proof, lacking the essential self-correcting aspect of science. Such thinking assumes absolute truth as opposed to provisional acceptance of the realities in our human existence. The categorization of someone's character or personality traits based on astrology, graphology and the like can have unwarranted and profoundly adverse effects on personal relationships and employment opportunities.

In the face of these and other assaults on the scientific process, it is imperative that we defend the positive scientific advances that have been made and stand up vigorously for the scientific process.

In a speech to an audience of scientists in April 199, Nobel laureate Steven Weinberg observed: "... One of the great achievements of science has been, if not to make it impossible for intelligent people to be religious, then at least to make it possible for them not to be religious. We should not retreat from this accomplishment.

--- Humanist In Canada, *Published Issue #160, Spring 07*

The Economy

The Alternative Budget

Following the exchange about the Alternative Budget by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives between letter writer Conrad Hadland and myself in the Winter-07 issue, two readers made further observations deserving of a response.

Interestingly enough, they approach the issues from opposite ends of the political spectrum.

On the one hand Andrew Zsolt (“A Humanistic Choice?” Spring-97) dismisses the CCPA as ‘fumbling’ and “Speculating in the dark” regarding their proposals for increased revenues from taxation and suggests that “corporations and individuals ... are being lured south ... by much lower tax rates ...” He further states: “There is a tolerable limit to progressive taxation.” Quite so! However, we will never know what that limit is since we have long abandoned progressive taxation if we ever had it. Almost 100,000 Canadians with six-figure incomes do not pay any tax at all. More than 20 millionaires pay less than \$100. About 1,700 of the wealthiest families are allowed to shelter large amounts in family trusts.

The proportion of federal tax revenue collected from corporations is just over 7% and the lowest of the G-7 countries. Canada is one of the few countries without a wealth or inheritance tax or a minimum corporate tax Zsolt concedes that “... Many, for emotional reasons have not yet moved ...” He could have added that such reasons might be 20,000 annual shotgun murders, 28 million annual recorded crimes, the highest per capita rate of drug use and incarceration and 40 million people without health insurance, to name just a few.

Next Zsolt suggests that the lower rate of unemployment in the U.S. “... is directly related to tax policy ...” However, the U.K, Norway and The Netherlands, in particular, have similar low rates with higher corporate and personal taxes while maintaining far more elaborate social safety nets.

When one third of our taxes is being used to pay interest on the deficit "... something went very wrong ..." What went wrong of course was the reduction in taxation of the corporate sector and the wealthiest of Canadians and the concurrent maintenance of excessively high real interest rates by the Bank of Canada in the misguided attempt to reduce inflation to zero.

Finally I agree with Zsolt that the term "welfare state" is a misnomer. The type of society at issue is not one of people on welfare but one in which there is a reasonable equality of access to basic needs such as food, shelter, clothing, education and medical care and a high degree of social cohesion.

In contrast, G.J. Williams suggests a "... fatal flaw in our traditional thinking about the economy ..." ("Re-thinking the Economy" Spring-97). He wants to reduce economics to mathematical terms. In my experience such an approach has its limitations. I remember macro-economics 301 at UBC where the instructor filled several black-boards on two walls with mathematical formulas to make some arcane point. However, he was unable to answer the question why the share of produced wealth hovered between one quarter and one third to capital owners and the rest to labour and what to do if one desired to change that.

I agree with his suggestion of "... A total rethinking of the distribution of benefits ..."

For example, the banks could use a portion of their historically high profits, partly as a result of the switch to ATMs to provide increased employment by reducing the hours of work of their employees without loss in income. The lower rate of unemployment in The Netherlands, referred to earlier was achieved in part by legally reducing the work-week from 39 hours to 35, banning overtime and by hiring 40,000 additional public employees in extended programs for the care of children and senior citizens.

Incorporating an Equitable Economic Benefits Distribution clause in the Bill of Rights is a splendid idea! However, I am sure that Williams recognizes that the political mood in the country is presently far more leaning toward the inclusion of a property rights clause. I join him in his suggestion for further discussion of the issues in the pages of our magazine.

The absence of such serious discussion in the mainstream media would seem to be largely the consequence of an unprecedented mainstream media concentration on the political right and the lack of a significant presence of social democracy. Regardless of one's particular political preferences, a presence of the full range of political opinions and choices is vital to a functioning democracy. Humanist in Canada can at least make a modest contribution toward that goal.

--- Humanist In Canada, *Unpublished*

Balanced Reporting

In the summer 1998 issue, letter writer Andrew Zsolt suggests that the publication of articles critical of globalization and other corporate practices generally “unquestionably reduces the credibility and readership of the HIC.” I just wonder how he knows that. He further accuses you of being “a promoter of the anti-free trade...agenda” rather than merely an informant.

That is remarkable because, after all, you do publish his letters in which he capably elucidates the neo-conservative socio-economic perspective.

While McDonald's is closing restaurants in Indonesia because ordinary people cannot afford its cheap hamburgers, Zsolt suggests that their improved standard of living . . . will allow them to buy products from the ... high-wage countries." His good news to the millions of unemployed and underemployed Canadians is that they "... may get a price-break, by enjoying the interim benefits from low-wage countries ..."

Zsolt dismisses the constructive criticisms of current government policies and the moderately progressive alternatives provided by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives as "new far-left." In fact, there is hardly a "left" let alone a "far-left" in North America, if indeed, there ever was. He further writes about global re-distribution wealth. That may be true to some extent. It would still leave the question why lifting the standards of other countries should be achieved by undermining the hard-fought current standard of living of those ordinary Canadians who are still employed. However, the more significant wealth re-distribution is within the western countries themselves. All statistical evidence clearly indicates that the already wealthy have increased their wealth significantly during the past decade at the expense of everyone else, particularly in North America.

This trend has been made worse by the reduction of the progressiveness of the federal income tax from ten to three steps and the elimination of full indexing for inflation fifteen years ago. The latter has resulted in the infamous and insidious “bracket creep” resulting in middle and lower income Canadians moving into the next higher tax bracket because of inflationary rather than real increases in earnings.

In Zsolt's world, large corporations are job providers and tax revenue creators. In the real world the corporate sector has drastically downsized and diminished its workforce while equally drastically increasing profits and executive rewards. The impending bank mergers will cost at least another 9,000 jobs. And in the real world the corporate contribution to government revenues has declined from about 50% to 7% over time.

Zsolt would benefit from reading *Democracy's Oxygen* by James Winter, exploring the corporate control of the Canadian media, as well as from viewing the video *Manufacturing Consent* co-produced by the NFB, documenting the views of American linguist and social and media critic Noam Chomsky. And from looking at the Internet website of Michael Parenti and of course, from continuing to read the CCPA's informative monthly *The Monitor*.

What Zsolt apparently fails to realize is that his (new far-right?) views are abundantly available to the general reading public with all daily newspapers in several provinces and the majority of all daily newspapers in the entire country owned by one man, whose neo-conservative views are certainly no secret.

A similar situation exists in the electronic media. Clearly, the problem is not one of lack of public access to the corporate view of socio-economic issues that Zsolt implies. The problem is a total lack of ready public access to credible alternatives and a vigorous public debate on these important issues.

If alternative magazines such as HIC would use their limited space to add to the torrent of neo-conservative views already prevalent in the mainstream media, they would actually fail in their commitment to achieve balance when providing needed information to the general public!

--- Humanist In Canada, *Published Issue # 126, Autumn 1998*

Humanistic Economics?

Stanford University economist Paul Krugman recently wrote that "The mantra of global competition is a large-scale intellectual scam that has diverted governments from tackling problems in their own back yards . . . like the parable of the emperor, this economic theory has no clothes . . . global competition has been used as a cover for harsh labour market policies."

Judging by his criticism of Bruce Campbell's article about the Alternative Federal Budget (Issue # 117) letter writer Conrad Hadland has clearly been taken in by the recent cascade of right-wing rhetoric. He dismisses the benefit of a lower interest rate as wishful thinking. Recently, however, even the Royal Bank's chief economist conceded, in an unguarded moment, that the rate had been too high and that lowering it further would help the economy.

The problem now is that the economy has been so damaged by years of excessively high rates that the positive effect of a lower rate is much diminished.

Hadland does not like the subtitle: "A Humanist Choice." Campbell states, among others, that the alternative budget is grounded in a commitment to full employment, a more equitable distribution of income, the eradication of poverty, economic equality between men and women, environmental sustainability and the protection of basic social and economic rights ..."

As a Humanist I have no quarrel with such values. Hadland further suggests that we might be prepared to increase the GST to the higher level of Sweden. Canadians might indeed consider this if we had even half of the extensive social programs maintained by the Swedish social-democratic government!

Finally he calls for an article presenting the pros and cons of globalization. However, the mainstream media already provide a plethora of praise for neo-conservative policies. Papers like The Globe and Mail and the Economist do not offer an unbiased and balanced perspective on political and economic issues. I recommend James Winter's book *Democracy's Oxygen* to set the record straight. It has just been published by Black Rose Books.

Last year, six out of seven Canadians had never even heard about the alternative budget, which was totally ignored by the mainstream media. Once they had the opportunity to study it, three out of four found it compelling!

As part of the alternative press you are to be commended for giving Campbell a forum. He may not persuade Hadland for now. However, there is always hope!

--- Humanist In Canada, *Published, Issue #119, Winter 1996/7*

PBS Documentary About Milton Friedman

I found the documentary disappointing. It seemed more of a hagiography of Friedman than an objective analysis of his impact in economics and particularly on ordinary Americans and others.

For example, the Chile situation was glossed over. Allende was a social democrat and not a communist and the military coup that ousted him was certainly not a spontaneous popular uprising as was implied. All he wanted was a fairer share of Chile's natural resources for the country itself and a more reasonable distribution of wealth. It is now long enough ago for most details to have come out and there is no doubt about the decisive influence of the U.S. in instigating the miners' strike and other unrest. Pinochet was their handpicked tyrant for the next decade or more. Henry Kissinger stated that the U.S. had a right to correct the mistake of the Chilean electorate. The Pinochet regime had nothing to do with the freedom of choice that Friedman keeps talking about.

Furthermore the program continuously committed the fallacy of false alternatives by claiming that the only alternative to an unrestrained free market is a command economy. Nothing is further from the truth. The Swedish model, followed in most of Europe, provides a capitalist economy with a free market, within a framework of rules and regulations that ensures a reasonable distribution of wealth and a reasonable equality of opportunity of access to basic needs such as food, shelter, clothing, education and basic medical aid.

Economics is certainly not a science. Economists have embraced mathematics to give it the aura of science. In so doing they set up mathematical models that have increasingly become totally unrelated to the realities of daily economic life. This is where Friedman excelled.

It is ironic that a couple like the Friedmans, who enjoyed a sheltered existence, sustained by tenured positions at a University with good salaries and pensions, wax eloquently about freedom of choice for people who actually live in the real economy. If a poor soul has the option of starving to death or taking a poorly paid job under unduly dangerous conditions, the Friedmans claim that as a free choice!

It is no coincidence that this type of psychopathic economic theory emanates from the University of Chicago, a private university established by the ultimate robber baron of the 19th century, John D. Rockefeller!

The program referred to Adam Smith. Let me assure you that Smith would turn over in his grave if he knew what is proposed in his name!

Smith was first of all a moral philosopher and his economic theories of the free market and the “invisible hand” were predicated on at least three conditions:

1. Large numbers of competitors without any one being able to affect price.
2. Fully informed and aware consumers.
3. Commitment to the nation (U.K) by its economic elite.

None of these conditions remotely pertain to the current economy.

I like Krugman’s analogy to religion when he states: “... If Keynes was Luther, Friedman was Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuits. And like the Jesuits, Friedman’s followers have acted as a sort of disciplined army of the faithful ...” Well, I am sure that both Loyola and Friedman were intelligent men and that they were influential within the Church and economics respectively. But let us be sure about the mindset of Loyola evidenced by the following statement in his “RULES FOR THINKING WITHIN THE CHURCH”: “... That we may be altogether of the same mind and in conformity with the Church herself, if she shall have defined anything to be black which to our eyes appears to be white, we ought in like manner to pronounce it to be black ...”

This is hardly conducive to free inquiry and critical thinking. It is this same type of otherworldly thinking that has permeated Friedman’s theories. In contrast, it was Galbraith who was far more pragmatic and in tune with the realities of daily economic life and who disagreed totally with Friedman. I am not suggesting that Keynes’ theories have no shortcomings and that they do not require a new approach and some changes. However, I do strongly believe that the Chicago crowd (and now in Canada, the University of Calgary economics department) is wrongheaded in their promotion of an unrestrained free market and I am sorry to see their influence increasing.

Obviously I feel that the negative impact on ordinary people by the likes of Friedrich Van Hayek, Ludwig von Mises, Milton Friedman et al, far outweighs any positive contribution they may have made to economic theory.

To get a broader perspective on economics I recommend the websites: www.hetecon.com and www.comer.org and the book: *A Guide to What's Wrong with Economics*, ed. Edward Fullerbrook, Anthem Press, 2004, particularly part V about the misuse of mathematics and statistics.

--- *Unpublished Commentary*

A Worthy Example?

In a pre-summit speech in Denver, President Clinton apparently suggested that other nations would do well to emulate the U.S. economy (“US bragging at summit ...” 07-21-A10). In your editorial you rightly point out that there are some considerable quibbles such as child poverty and the gap between rich and poor.

You might have added collapsing inner cities, the highest per capita use of hard drugs, 20,000 annual shotgun murders, almost two million prisoners in jail, 28 million annual recorded crimes and 40 million people without health insurance.

I wonder whether this is the type of society worthy of universal aspiration!

You further refer to the high unemployment rates in Germany, France and Italy without mentioning rates closer to those of the U.S. in the U.K. and Norway.

The Netherlands achieved a similar low rate by hiring an additional 40,000 public employees in health care and childcare, and by reducing the standard workweek to 35 hours while banning overtime. At the same time the country maintained an extensive social safety net.

The U.S. economy may seem “the best prepared to greet the future.” The question is what sort of future that will be.

--- Vancouver Sun, *Published 07-22-94*

The Bank of Canada

Just a word to let you know that I found your 1993 book as well as your article in the most recent CCPA Monitor about the Bank of Canada most informative.

I equally appreciated the more recent book by William Hixson on the same topic.

I used to teach Economics at the senior secondary school level and I have taken a number of economics courses at UBC so I have some understanding of economic issues.

I suppose I should have taken some political science courses instead because the courses I took turned out to be largely about econometrics. The instructors would fill a couple of blackboards with mathematical formulas but could not explain to me why the distribution of wealth breaks down in a certain way between investors and workers and what could be done to change such ratio if desired.

I certainly agree with you that the manner in which our national debt was privatized and the overall leeway provided to the banks, while they enjoy the privilege of deposit creation, is unconscionable.

--- Economic Reform, *Published June 1999*

BOOK REVIEW

Retooling the Welfare State

By John Richards

C.D. Howe Institute, Dec. 1997, 304 pp

The social good is of interest to modern Humanists because we believe that human well-being is preferable over human misery here and now. The modern welfare state attempts to achieve at least some modest measure of well-being for all citizens. This book provides a wealth of studies, ideas, information and proposals helpful to the reader in deciding the nature and extent of the role for government in the socio-economic affairs of the modern nation. The name 'welfare state' is a misnomer meaning different things to different people. To some it means that government should provide only for the most needy of citizens. Richards throughout refers to it as a matter of generosity and benevolence. I regard it rather as a society in which all citizens have a reasonable equality of access to basic needs such as food, shelter, clothing, medical care and education as a matter of fundamental justice.

The book has four parts. The first page of Part I quotes the famous phrase by Adam Smith, so favoured by the 'invisible hand' devotees: "... It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest." Richards judges him partly wrongly. Actually Smith was a moral philosopher and stated earlier: ". . . it is in vain to expect it from their benevolence ONLY ..." and later: "Every man, as long as he does not violate the laws of JUSTICE, is left perfectly free to pursue his own interest . . ." (Capitals added). So it would seem that economic libertarians in partly quoting him are entirely wrong.

An overview of the limits of the welfare state follows with the observation that it has been abandoned by its original proponents: the church and the traditional left, referred to by Richards throughout the book as the "loony left."

Part II provides a positive picture of the welfare state elaborating the elements of good social policy and a number of market and government failures that impact the efficacy of sound social policy. The well-known prisoner's dilemma game is used as a metaphor for a cooperative solution to wealth and income distribution. This fails to distinguish between the case of two equal prisoners and the case of the vastly unequal rich and poor where the former may ultimately suffer minor inconvenience and the latter starvation. This part concludes with an excellent comparative case study of health care in which Richards explores market failures as well as problems with government attempts to rectify these and then concludes that government intervention does indeed improve matters. Among others he advocates a form of capitation over the current fee-for-service system to compensate physicians.

Part III enumerates what is wrong with the welfare state. It defines a number of hazardous dynamics such as reduced incentives to work, failure to reduce recession-induced deficits and the growth of interest groups. While the long parade of such groups includes public sector unions, the unemployed, seniors, and welfare recipients, it excludes the corporate sector, arguably the most influential of any.

Richards worries that political parties "organically bound to organized labor can rarely disentangle their role as advocates for public sector workers from their role as advocates for a generous, well-managed welfare state."

He seems unconcerned that political parties largely financed by the corporate sector can rarely disentangle their role as advocates for that sector from their role to reduce the generosity of the welfare state and promote privatization.

The final part presents five proposals for retooling the welfare state: clear and balanced budgets, accountability, appropriate division between federal and provincial responsibility, support of two-parent child rearing and stressing work over welfare. Richards has justified concerns about the social pathologies and loss of skills arising from long-term transfer dependence. He readily identifies union opposition to a subsidized increase in the supply of low-skill non-union workers in the job market but does not consider the possibility that employers will simply fire permanent low-skill workers and replace them with subsidized ones.

The book is written in clear language with occasional lapses into economic jargon but with occasional oversimplifications and some key omissions.

Richards castigates opponents of the FTA and NAFTA as proponents of out-and-out protectionism, rather than consider that such critics merely want fair trade agreements with reciprocal benefits such as the former Autopact, mandating the manufacture of one car in Canada for each one sold here.

More disappointing are selective comparisons with countries in Western Europe. Stating merely that Sweden reduced its deficit more rapidly and its public sector more extensively than Canada fails to mention that social programs in Sweden were significantly more extensive before this reduction and remain so after. That training programs for non-professionals should be as extensive as those in Sweden and Germany is a good idea. To state that our university students are generously subsidized because they pay only one third of the cost through tuition, omits that university students in the above countries receive full tuition and living allowances for at least four years.

Richards provides a sound argument for strong support of child rearing in the context of the traditional family. His modest proposal of positive fiscal discrimination would be enhanced by the knowledge that The Netherlands has universal family allowances, covering one third of the cost of raising a child, Sweden provides childcare spaces for all preschool children and Norway allows 42 weeks of parental leave at full income.

When reading this book we would seem to witness in a way the metamorphosis of a committed democratic socialist into a reluctant neo-liberal, writing for the C.D. Howe Institute. Mindful of that, "Retooling the Welfare State" is nevertheless informative, challenging and therefore much recommended reading.

—Humanist In Canada, *Published Issue # 128, Spring 1999. N.B.: A shorter version was published on line by Chapters.ca*

The Lexus and the Olive Tree

By Thomas Friedman

(Quotes are from the 1999 hardcover edition FSG, New York)

Thomas Friedman's flights of fantasy notwithstanding, the ownership of wealth in the U.S.A. is more unequal than at any time since the late 1920s. According to Federal Reserve data for 1998, the wealthiest 10 percent of Americans owned over 82 percent of stock and 86 percent of bonds owned by individuals (including indirect Ownership through mutual funds), as well as 91 percent of business assets. And ownership of these financial and business assets is even more disproportionately concentrated in the stratospheric regions inhabited by the wealthiest half of one percent of the population, who owned over 31 percent of stocks, almost 32 percent of bonds, and almost 55 percent of business assets.

Happy news, perhaps, for an information arbitrageur and his "best intellectual sources"; but hardly a liquidation of class-based inequalities of wealth and their attendant differentials of social power. Likewise on a global scale inequalities continue to mount as the neo-liberal project has unfolded. According to the UN Development program, in 1997 the 20 percent of the world's people living in the wealthiest countries received 74 times as much income as the 20 percent in the poorest countries; up from a ratio of 60 to 1 in 1990, and 30 to 1 in 1960.

Only in Friedman's imagination is globalizing capitalism egalitarian or democratic. At times, Friedman seems almost to glimpse the anti-democratic implications of the developments he is describing. Almost; but not quite. For example, in a world of globalizing finance and electronic transfer of funds, Friedman admits, governments are increasingly obliged to weigh carefully their social, fiscal, and monetary policies against the interests of investors who may exit en masse in response to expectations of lower relative interest rates, higher relative inflation rates or currency depreciation. In Friedman's words: "[government's] main job these days is enticing the Electronic Herd and Supermarkets to invest in their states, doing whatever it takes to keep them there

and constantly living in dread that they will leave” (LOT, p116). Attracting investors requires adoption of the neo-liberal policy package --- fiscal and monetary austerity, deregulation and privatization, openness to international trade and investment --- to which Friedman (in one of his many capitalized and cartoonish neologisms) refers as the “Golden Straightjacket.”

“Once your country puts on the Golden Straightjacket, its political choices get reduced to Pepsi or Coke --- to slight nuances of taste, slight nuances of policy, slight alterations in design to account for local traditions, some loosening here or there, but never any major deviation from the core golden rules. Governments ... which deviate too far from the core rules will see their investors stampede away, interest rates rise and stock market valuations fall” (LOT, p 87-8).

The democratization and enhancement of liberty which Friedman imputes to globalizing capitalism then appears to boil down to an enforced constriction of political horizons such that the most we could hope for would be a choice between Pepsi or Coke. Friedman, however, seems oblivious to the enormity of this irony. Furthermore, Friedman is eager to authorize the use of U.S. power --- including military force --- to support this anti-democratic world order. “The hidden hand of the market will never work without the hidden fist ... And the hidden fist that keeps the world safe for Silicon Valley’s technologies to flourish is called the U.S. Army, Air Force, Navy, and Marine Corps” (LOT, p.373).

In Friedman’s twisted world, if people are to realize their deepest aspirations --- the longing for a better life, which comes from their very souls --- They must stare down the barrel of Uncle Sam’s gun.

The one-sidedness of Friedman’s understanding of globalizing capitalism makes it difficult for him to grasp the arguments of critics and protestors who appear to him either ignorant and irrational, or duplicitous and malevolent: “this anti-globalization movement is largely the well intentioned but ill informed being led around by the ill intentioned and well informed (protectionist unions and anarchists)” (NYT, 04/24/2001).

“The economic quacks peddling conspiracy theories about globalization; the anti-free-trade extremists, such as Ralph Nader’s group, Public Citizen; the protectionist trade unions; and the anarchists. These groups deserve to be called by their real name” ‘The Coalition to Keep the World’s Poor People Poor’ (NYT, 4/14/2000). “They offer the third world no coherent plan for how to develop and preserve the environment. Their only plan is that developing countries stop developing” (NYT, 4/14/2000). Here Friedman’s assertions imply a chain of reasoning which looks something like this:

1. Neo-liberalism is the only possible form of globalization;
2. Corporate globalization promotes economic growth; and
3. Economic growth and trickle-down is the only thing which will help the world’s poor.

While beloved by the champions of neo-liberalism, Margaret Thatcher’s slogan, “There is no alternative” (TINA), is simply false, as you will see below on this page.

The claim that neo-liberal globalization promotes beneficial growth is dubious.

We have seen above how neo-liberal globalization has been accompanied by manifold increases in inequality. Further, even within the World Bank there has been controversy over whether economic growth is sufficient to reduce global poverty.

From the perspective of an information arbitrageur, however, questioning the intensification and institutionalization of neo-liberal capitalism makes you a backward-looking Bolshevik: “Too many unions and activists want the quick fix for globalization: just throw up some walls and tell everyone else how to live. There was a country that tried that. It guaranteed everyone’s job, maintained a protected market and told everyone else how to live. It was called the Soviet Union. Didn’t work out so well” (NYT 12/8/99).

“People can talk about alternatives to the free-market and global integration, they can demand alternatives, then can insist on a ‘third way,’ but for now none is apparent” (LOT, p. 85).

Friedman’s problem with cognitive dissonance is clearly apparent when he states: “I believe that you dare not be a globalizer today without being a social democrat ...” (LOT, p. 354).

His entire book contradicts this contention, even for those social democrats, who support responsible globalization, making it clear that Friedman has no idea what social democracy is actually all about.

That no alternative is apparent to Friedman and his "intellectual sources" should not be taken to mean that there are none worthy of consideration. Indeed, ongoing trans-national dialogues among activist groups, non-governmental organizations, and other elements of an emerging global civil society, have generated some remarkable proposals for a more sustainable, egalitarian and democratic world. For example, the Peoples Hemispheric Agreement of 1998 was drafted by coalitions from Canada, Chile, Mexico, and the U.S.A., and reflected previous negotiations among groups from throughout the hemisphere, eventually coming together to form the Hemispheric Social Alliance. The HSA's most recent discussion draft, entitled Alternatives for the Americas, is available from the Alliance for Responsible Trade.

On a more ambitious global scale, similar kinds of multilateral proposals have been integrated into the Global Sustainable Development Resolution, which declares as its overriding purpose that "the people of the united States and the people and governments of the other nation of the world should take actions to establish democratic control over the global economy." While the distinction appears to have eluded Friedman, it is nonetheless important to note that the political programs of trans-national solidarity and democratization, which these documents embody, are as different from Buchananite nationalism and Protectionism (premised on the scapegoating of "foreigners") as it is possible to get.

Friedman is doubly mistaken here: he is wrong when he says that there is no alternative and he is wrong when he claims that the agenda of critics and protestors is xenophobic and protectionist. There indeed meaningful alternatives to the world inhabited Thomas Friedman and his friends.

---Unpublished Book Review

Other Issues

Consciousness

The concept of human consciousness is a fascinating idea that has engaged philosophers and many among the rest of us for a long time. I had hoped to find an answer to what exactly it is when getting Daniel Dennett's "Consciousness Explained." As it turned out a better title would have been "Consciousness Explained Away!"

Steven Pinker promised to tell us how the mind works in his book with that title, only to admit halfway through that he had no idea how the mind works!

Now we have Bob McQuarrie (Letters Issue #153) telling us that it is like a warning light on a car's dashboard! McQuarrie promises to solve two and a half millennia of failure by moral philosophers because of their inability to properly understand the nature of morality.

But the proposition that one should "Do as you would be done by," as David Hume put it very concisely, has been around for millennia. And it is the very essence of enlightened self-interest. I will help others in distress because I want to live in a society where people reciprocate should the situation be reversed.

The fact that 'Free Inquiry' places 'altruism' high on the list of common human decencies is to be seen in that light. McQuarrie is correct that the Christian emphasis on other-centered conduct for its own sake is misguided and has caused confusion and unnecessary misery.

However, his explanation of consciousness and its evolutionary development is not new and has been proposed by philosophers like Gilbert Ryle, Patricia Smith Churchland, Owen Flanagan and many others. Modern Humanists have always asserted that there is no 'good or `bad' or 'purpose' in the universe as such but that nature just is.

Finally, McQuarrie suggests that benevolence is something totally different from enlightened self-interest.

That is not necessarily the case. The inclination to be kind to others may still be rooted in ultimate self-interests for reasons mentioned, even though we may not be consciously aware of it.

--- Free Inquiry, *Unpublished*

The Third Reich and Religion

While continuing to write about his views on religion, columnist Mark Milke admonishes the rest of us to not even "bother to argue that Hitler was Catholic." Well, excuse me, but a bit of history seems appropriate. Hitler was indeed brought up as a Roman Catholic and never left the church nor did it leave him although he greatly admired Luther as well.

His autobiography "Mein Kampf" is replete with references to religion as were his speeches. The German army troops had "Gott mit Uns" stamped on their belt buckles and priests and ministers were keen to bless their arms and actions.

This is not to diminish in any way the courage of religious individuals who followed their own consciences and did resist to their own detriments.

Similarly, Stalin had a Greek Orthodox family background and schooling and attended a religious seminary with the intent of becoming a priest.

No doubt such religious indoctrination must have had lasting effects on both men.

Milke correctly suggests that atheists may have committed atrocities as well. The difference is that they did not do so in the name of atheism. On the other hand, the crusades, inquisition and Witch-hunts were very much pursued in the name of the Catholic Church and under its highest authority.

Incidentally, the murderous young men causing death and destruction on September 11, 2001 were also persuaded by deeply held religious dogma.

While Milke refers to atheism rather dismissively on a number of occasions, he could have mentioned the positive values and principles of modern Humanism. While equally free from belief in the super-natural, Humanists suggest that a relevant morality should be based on human experience guided by reason and insights gained from the scientific process. Human happiness here and now is preferable over human suffering.

Tolerance and a separation of church and state are necessary to maintain civic harmony in an increasingly pluralistic society.

After thousands of years of experiments with religious dogmas of all kinds, with little progress to show for it, perhaps their approach deserves more serious consideration.

--- Times Colonist, *Unpublished*

How to Kill

An article on page five of *The Sun* suggests that compulsory military service makes a great deal more sense in peacetime than in times of war.

In my view this reflects a basic attitude that largely contributes to perpetuate the endless fighting we are so desperately trying to stop for the last couple of millennia.

Such a suggestion deceptively emphasizes the glamorous aspects of military service: the physical fitness, the discipline and the travelling.

What about the instructions to stick a bayonet into another human being most effectively or to throw a grenade so as to kill as many people as possible with a single blast?

How to kill and destroy!

Does that really rescue the young from the apathy that the writer alleges besets them?

If there is no other choice in time of war it has to be done.

To suggest that to subject impressionable young people to this in time of peace without extreme necessity is to disregard the unhealthy influence of a destructive environment.

Certainly the writer must be able to think of more positive and purposeful outlets for the urge of adventure and the boundless energy of the young!

--- The Vancouver Sun, *Published 06-16-1967*

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Theo Meijer was a life-long modern Humanist. For many years he was a senior secondary educator and coordinator as well as a free-lance court interpreter.

In his early 30s, after a number of positions in administrative management, Theo got an opportunity to start a second career in education. While teaching, he completed B.Ed. and M.Ed. degrees at UBC and a PH.D. at Pacific Western University in LA.

He was president of the B.C. Humanist Association from 1996-1999 and then became involved with the Victoria Humanists, who awarded him with an honorary life membership in April 2009.

Theo co-ordinated and participated in lecture series about modern Humanism for the Adult Education programs of Douglas College, UBC, SFU and UVic.

He wrote and edited reviews and articles for the Humanist Perspectives magazine and was on its Editorial Committee. He was a member of the Board of Canadian Humanist Publications and a director of the B.C. Skeptics and was a long-time member of the Bertrand Russell Society.

