



# The Enlightenment



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## How I Became a Humanist

Once a year, for a number of years, two or three HALA members have related their experiences on how they became a humanist at one of our regular meetings. At the February 8<sup>th</sup> 2017 meeting, three members, Carl Goldberg, Elizabeth Bright-See and George Cherian told us about their journeys. As always, those in attendance found these stories to be most interesting and a lively discussion period followed. Carl and Elizabeth's presentations are printed below. George's presentation was by power point slides and he plans to convert it to narrative form so it can be printed in a future *Enlightenment*.

## How I Became a Humanist

*By Carl Goldberg*

When I was asked to speak on the topic of *How I Became a Humanist*, it occurred to me that the question implies that I used to be something else, and then became a Humanist. We have heard others talk at HALA meetings about how they grew up indoctrinated in one religion or another. They related to us the difficult journey they took breaking away from their religion and becoming a Humanist. They spoke of the loss of family and friends and how their community turned against them in some cases. They told of the difficulty they had overcoming their particular religious education and ingrained dogma. My story is very tame in comparison. It is not so much How I Became a Humanist, but Why!

It has been said that everyone is born an atheist and comes to their religious beliefs primarily through family and community influences. If one is born in India, then you are more likely to be a Hindu. Born in Texas and you will most often be a Christian. Born in Pakistan you will likely worship Allah. I believe that the same concept can be applied to Humanism. We are "blank slates" when born and we develop our life philosophies and attitudes as we grow and experience life. Here again, family and community have the most influence. In my case, my parents were secular humanists without knowing it. In fact the term Humanism would have been unknown to them.

My mother was born in a small English village where all were members of the Church of England. I learned from her and my British aunts and uncles that the family would check off the Christian box in any census, but they only went to church on special occasions because that was what was expected in a small village. They may have responded "YES" to the question about the existence of God, but that is most likely because they really didn't give it much thought.

My father, however, was born into an orthodox Jewish family and was required to attend synagogue and Hebrew school as a child . He was taught that all other religions were incorrect and delusional but the Hebrews were the chosen people. He told me of his scepticism and disbelief in what he was being taught but to keep the peace, he promised to continue in the religion at least until he had his bar mitzvah . He had an older brother who had earlier given up on Judaism and my father was waiting for the right time to announce that he no longer believed. That opportunity came shortly after his 14<sup>th</sup> birthday. One day , he returned home early from school and saw his mother in their backyard with their rabbi. She was sitting on a chair, head bowed and covered while the rabbi swung a live chicken around and around her while chanting a Jewish prayer. The rabbi suddenly stopped, held the chicken over his head and wrung its neck.

Later when he confronted my grandmother about what had happened, she explained that her sins had been transferred to the chicken and that she was now free of sin. I have heard of scapegoating but not chickengoating! Well, that was it for my dad. He stopped going to synagogue and referred to religion as a "Bunch of Hooey" from then on. So, the home I grew up in was pretty much devoid of any religion.

I did have some exposure to various religions. I lived in very Christian Toronto at a time when teachers were required to read a Bible passage each day and begin the day with the Lord's Prayer. I even remember that Bibles were given out to students by the Gideon society. As a cub and boy scout I was required to attend some church services periodically and I attended synagogue for various family functions....weddings, funerals and cousins bar and bar mitzvahs. Friends would sometimes ask me to go to church with them and I must admit that sometimes I felt that I should be more religious. I felt out of place at times. Almost envious, I didn't know the hymns or prayers. I couldn't follow the scriptures or respond to the priests. Even today I am not sure of the correct way to make the sign of the cross. They all seemed so happy and sure about their religious beliefs, but when I thought about the stories told and the miracles they believed in, my father's words would come back to me .... What a bunch of hooey.

I basically went through my life ambivalent to any faith and in God's existence and I really never gave it much thought. If they wanted to believe ... then go ahead.

There were times when someone would ask me about my beliefs. With the last name of Goldberg they often assumed I followed the Jewish faith. I would usually try to deflect their questioning or nod silently as they tried to convince me of the truth of their faith. What really worked well for me was to simply ask them the same question. They loved talking about their religious beliefs. If I was pressed further I might simply admit that I didn't know if there was a God or not, that I was an agnostic. I wasn't quite sure what an agnostic was, but it seemed to give them hope that I was just confused and that I was just one good Bible verse away from finding god. But no matter what personal revelation they had or what miracle of god they could point out, I just couldn't see the light! But I also couldn't give good counter arguments.

It was about ten years ago that I really became interested in what people believed and why. The first religion I examined was Islam. I had the opportunity to read the Koran and found it to be full of hate and violence. The bible proved to be every bit as nasty and I could argue perhaps more so! Using the internet I was able to become acquainted with various Christian sects, evangelicals and faith healers, the historicity of the Bible and took a great interest in the Church of Scientology as I lost a good friend to Scientology back in the 70's.

Like many here the internet introduced me to Dawkins and Hitchens and Harris. I discovered Bart Erhman, a scholar of biblical studies who lost his faith after examining the historicity of the bible. I started following atheist Facebook groups and spent many hours watching debates between atheists/humanists and religious apologists.

I wanted to know if there was an atheist organization in the London area that I could join so that I could meet people face to face to talk about our common non-belief. A Google search turned up empty for an atheist group in London, but a link to HALA was found. I was not familiar with Humanism so I read and researched a bit and liked what I saw. Whereas atheism tells people what I don't believe, Humanism tells you what I do believe. Humanism describes a broader life philosophy and encompasses a personal world view that promotes critical thinking in all areas of life not just in religious belief.

So, about four years ago my wife and I went to our first HALA meeting and joined the following month. We have discovered others who have similar life stances and we have enjoyed the variety of talks and discussions presented. We look forward to future discussions and speakers and participating in community events with our fellow members.

## **How I Became a Humanist/**

*By Elizabeth Bright-See*

I was raised in small rural community in the southern US. Three missionaries, Methodist, Baptist and Presbyterian, came to the area to establish churches when it was first being settled. I always felt lucky that the Presbyterian Church was in my community, it being the most liberal of the three. Most of the ministers and members had no real knowledge of the history and theology of Presbyterianism - I just learned that when I took some European history courses. However, all three were much the same - standard Protestant. I didn't meet a Catholic until I was in University.

The Baptist church was just down the road. We went to school with the kids from there. In the summer, we went to their Vacation Bible School and they to ours. In those days, there were no classes, camps, etc. in the summer, so this was something to do and probably kept us out of trouble.

As I think about it now, I realize that religion there was more a culture than a true religion. No one really thought about it, but just assumed that everyone believed the same, even those who weren't 'church goers'. The exception was when a travelling minister came through - bent on 'saving souls' Then we had revivals - which are quite an experience. A week of brimstone and hell-fire sermons. I now classify it as verbal and emotional abuse piled on until someone broke-down and confessed that they were a sinner - the sins unspecified. This was not a Catholic confessional. Then the minister left satisfied, everyone, even the newly converted, relaxed and went back to their normal lives.

I was very involved in the church which was right across the road from my house. I taught Sunday School, starting with the nursery class when I was about 10, and was in the choir, played the piano and organ and was even the janitor for four years. I had my own key and came and went as I liked. Actually this was good therapy. My brother said that he could always tell when I was mad - you could hear the organ all over town.

Today this part of the world is covered with mega churches supported by the strong economy of the region, but I doubt that there's still any real examination of beliefs. I don't discuss religion (or politics) when I visit.

In University, I belonged to the Presbyterian student groups, but these clubs were really more social clubs than serious religious organizations. When I moved to Canada in 1967, I was too busy with studies to be connected with religion.

It was not until I moved to Toronto, that I again became associated with a church - a rather interesting one. Gateway Community Church in a large housing development in Don Mills. The church building had been donated by the developers on the condition that it be shared by two congregations. The Presbyterian and Catholic churches agreed. This made for rather interesting arrangements. The cross at the front of the sanctuary was plain on one side, but had a crucified Christ on the other, so we could just turn it around between services. We used to joke that John Knox was probably rolling over in his grave. But we got along and worked together on many projects including sponsorship of a family of refugees - coming from Vietnam in those days.

The church like the community was very multi-cultural. One day, a small congregation of Koreans joined our church - apparently Presbyterianism is big in Korea. So we got to celebrate the Korean New Year, along with the many other ethnic holidays.

When we moved to London, I again joined a Presbyterian church and was very involved in many ways, but I distinctly remember the two things that made me decide to leave the church. The first was a sermon about God asking Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. Not only had I heard this sermon a dozen times before, but I got to thinking that I really didn't like the idea of a God who was so insecure that he asked people to kill their children. The second event was when the national church was considering ordaining gay or lesbian ministers. I thought that wouldn't be an issue. The Presbyterian Church had been among the first to ordain women. However, the gay/lesbian issue led to a real backlash. That is when I decided that I just didn't want to be involved with religion.

So my journey was not traumatic - more an evolution than a revolution. The only response I got was one woman asking why I wasn't still coming to church and then telling me I should be ashamed for not doing so. But she and I are still friends. I know and work with many people in churches, who are what my friend calls 'good people with simple faith'. They spend a lot of time, energy, and their own money providing meals for people who otherwise would go hungry.

This arrangement reminds me about when a colleague, which whom I had worked many years, asked if I minded that he was black. My response was that I didn't care if someone was green with purple stripes. It was not how they looked, but how they behaved that mattered. That's how I feel about people's beliefs.

But as others have mentioned, when one leaves a religion, one loses community. I had other communities, but was looking for something more. I had been following Bob Ripley's column in the Free Press and got him to sign his book, *Life Beyond Belief*, when he was selling them at a bookstore. I ask him if he knew of any group where one might discuss philosophical and ethical issues. He told me about his Wolfe Hall lecture which HALA was sponsoring. So I attended, got the HALA information and joined.

I am now a card-carrying humanist, but I don't think an orthodox one. Actually I hope there really is no orthodox humanism. That would seem like substituting one orthodoxy for another. I am more what Don Hatch described in one of his *Enlightenment* articles - a free thinker. I don't like to have anyone or any group tell me what to think.

I think that is what we have in HALA - a place where everyone is permitted, even encouraged, to think for themselves and are respected whatever their thoughts. I hope, and I am sure, that I will continued to see this demonstrated in all future meetings and events.

## Sources of Ethics and Morality

*By Don Hatch*

Every Saturday the *London Free Press* displays a Spirituality and Ethics page. One of the regular contributors to this page is HALA member Goldie Emerson, whose articles appear from time to time. Also contributing on a fairly regular basis is Bruce Tallman, a practising Catholic who offers spiritual advice to people who feel they are in need of counseling.

On January 24<sup>th</sup>, 2015, the *London Free Press* published an article authored by Goldie entitled "*Humanism Essential to Good Religion.*" In this article Goldie listed twelve humanist principles from the 2002 Amsterdam Declaration, the most recent world consensus on the definition of humanism. The gist of this article is that these principles are compatible with the teachings of many religions. This article can be read in its entirety on the HALA web site. In rebuttal to Goldie's article, the *Free Press* published an article on February 7th, 2015, by Bruce Tallman, entitled "*All the Truths of Humanism Come From God.*" Tallman states that while most of the humanist principles are "motherhood and apple pie," and would be accepted by many religious people, principle 10 would not. This principle states: "A fundamental principle of humanism is the rejection of beliefs held in absence of verifiable evidence, such as beliefs based solely on dogma, revelation, mysticism, or appeals to the supernatural." Tallman states that principle 10 would not be accepted by religious people because it rejects the existence of God and furthermore he claims, "God is the source of **all** religious, scientific, and humanistic truth."

On February 14<sup>th</sup>, 2015, the *Free Press* published an article by Goldie entitled, "*Goldwin Emerson Responds to Bruce Tallman.*" The article can be viewed on the HALA web site. Goldie mentioned that it is sometimes more useful to discuss issues of contention on a one-on-one basis rather than back and forth in print. So he suggests: "Bruce maybe it is time we met one-on-one for coffee and conversation again." In fact, Goldie and Bruce did meet for coffee on March 17th, but no views were changed. Bruce adamantly insisted on the simplistic idea that **all** ethics and morals come from God.

In the remainder of this talk I will attempt to explain why Bruce Tallman is dead wrong when he claims **all** morality comes from God.

To begin with, it should be useful to define ethics and morality and explain how they differ. Ethics and morals relate to right and wrong conduct. While they are sometimes used interchangeably, they are actually somewhat different. Ethics refers to rules of conduct provided by an external source. Morals

refer to an individual's own principles regarding right and wrong conduct. Perhaps another way of putting it is that a person's moral compass consists of the ethics or rules he or she adheres to.

One of the earliest recorded attempts to prepare an outline for the purpose of maintaining law and order in a society was the Code of Hammurabi, established in the third century BCE. Its purpose was:

- to cause Justice to prevail in the land,
- to destroy the wicked and the evil
- that the strong might not oppose the weak
- to light up the land.

Another early source of moral and ethical principles were the teachings of Confucius (551 BCE-479 BCE) that were concerned not only with the ethical and moral living habits of individuals, but also with the moral and ethical actions of rulers of the state. There are many aphorisms containing wisdom and foresight attributed to Confucius. A few are:

- Knowledge is recognizing what you know and what you do not know
- To know your faults and be able to change is the greatest virtue.
- What you do not wish for yourself, do not do to others. (The Golden Rule).
- The superior man is modest in speech, but exceeds in his actions.

Also in roughly the same era as Confucius, philosophical rationalism was evolving in Greece. The pre-Socratic philosophers were pseudo-scientists, attempting to describe how the world works. Then along came Socrates (470-399 BCE) whose emphasis was on how to live "the good life." This theme was picked up by Plato (427-347 BCE) and Aristotle (384 322 BCE). Some scholars (but not all) consider Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* to be one of the most comprehensive books ever written on the subjects of ethics and morality. Later, the Greek Stoic, Sceptic and Epicurean philosophers continued on this theme.

The morality and philosophy of the Greeks was picked up by Roman philosophers. This is, perhaps best exemplified by the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius. In his *Meditations* he put forward a plethora of common sense aphorisms to live by. Here are a few of them:

- Contentment comes from doing a few things and doing them well.
- Life is short; then snatch your profit from the passing hour, by obedience to reason and just dealing. Unbend, but be temperate.
- Observe how transient and trivial is mortal life; yesterday a drop of semen, tomorrow a handful of ashes. Spend therefore these fleeting moments on earth as Nature would have you spend them, and then go to your rest with a good grace, as an olive falls in its season, with a blessing for the earth that bore it and a thanksgiving to the tree that gave it life.
- In this life one thing only is of precious worth: to live out one's days in truthfulness and fair dealing, and in charity even with the false and unjust.
- To a reasoned being, an act that accords with nature is an act that accords with reason.

The point I wish to make here is that all of the foregoing statements concerning ethics, morality and good living, are common sense assertions that have no connection to the Judeo-Christian God and are

wholly secular. And also note that as was the case in Greece, Roman morality was not the purview of religion or the priests, but was in the domain of the philosophers.

Unfortunately, it did not remain with the philosophers, because it was stolen from them by the early Roman Catholic Church as Christianity became, and still is, the dominant religion in the western world. Time does not permit going into the historic details of how Christianity became so dominant. (For anyone interested, these details are contained in my book, *The Road Not Travelled*.) The main point is, the message of the Christian Church was that morality did indeed come from God, because the Bible said so. According to the story in the Book of Exodus, Moses received the Ten Commandments directly from God himself on Mount Sinai. And in the New Testament, the sayings and parables of Jesus, the supposed son of God, also have a connection to God. Thus it is no wonder that devout Christians who believe the Bible is the divine word of God, also believe all morality originated from God.

But any critical thinker will reason that the Bible is a human construct, and also that you have to cherry pick the sayings and parables of Jesus to avoid those that are confusing, ambiguous, or contradictory. Thus we come to the logical conclusion that the basics of ethics and morality originated in the minds of clear-thinking, intelligent individuals who had a genuine concern for the well-being of humans, not in the mind of or from God.

But what about the claim of some religious people that without religious moral guidance, societies will degenerate into corruption, debauchery and violence. Now it must be admitted that most people raised in a religious home do acquire the guidelines necessary to live a moderate, compassionate and ethical life, and it must also be admitted that these guidelines have contributed to the stability of societies in the past and will continue to do so. There is, however, also strong evidence that societies that are largely secular can function just fine without a lot of religious instruction on morality.

Author Phil Zuckerman deals with this situation in his book *Society Without God*, describing life in secular Denmark and Sweden. In this book he says, "contrary to the claims of certain outspoken, conservative Christians who regularly argue that a society without God would be hell on earth: rampant with immorality, full of evil, and teeming with depravity, in reality Denmark and Sweden are remarkably strong, safe, healthy, moral and prosperous societies." He then adds, "It is crucial for people to know that it is actually quite possible for a society to lose its religious beliefs and still be well-functioning, successful, and fully capable of constructing and obeying sound laws and establishing and following rational systems of morality and ethics. Worship of God can wane, prayer can be given up, and the Bible can go unstudied, yet people can treat one another decently, schools and hospitals can still run smoothly, crime can remain minimal, babies and old people can receive all the care and attention they need, economies can flourish, pollution can be kept to a minimum, and children can be loved in warm homes--without God being a central component of everyday life."

Now we must answer the question. If children do not receive instructions on moral living from a religious institution, where will they get it? Of course the answer is obvious, at home and at school. But what should they be taught? What they should not be taught are religious untruths such as the threat of hell fire if they live a sinful life. These kinds of instructions are not productive and as A.C. Grayling states in his book *The God Argument*, "the major reason for the continuance of religious belief in a world which might otherwise have moved beyond it, is the indoctrination of children before they reach the age of reason." So in addition to accepted common sense instructions on how to live morally in a civilized

society, children should be taught that their life is precious and they should live every day to the fullest, knowing that there is no God watching over them and judging their actions. They should be made aware that all guidelines for moral living have been devised over centuries by intelligent caring people.

Finally, here is the kicker. If as humanists believe, there is no supernatural God, then an entity that does not exist cannot be a source of morality. Bruce Tallman, it is as simple as that.

This essay was presented at the regular HALA meeting on January 11<sup>th</sup>, 2017. A lively Q&A period followed.

## **A Few Apolitical Aphorisms**

If God wanted us to vote, he would have given us candidates. ~ Jay Leno.

We hang the petty thieves and appoint the great ones to public office. ~ Aesop.

When I was a boy I was told that anybody could become President. I'm beginning to believe it. ~ Clarence Darrow.

Politicians are people who, when they see light at the end of the tunnel, go out and buy more tunnels. ~ John Quinton.

If we got one tenth of what was promised in election speeches, there wouldn't be any inducement to go to heaven. ~ Will Rogers.

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