



The Enlightenment



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What Gives Life Meaning?

By Rosslyn Ives

To see the Milky Way stretched across a clear night sky is awe-inspiring; made even more so by knowledge of the vastness of the universe and the variety of “heavenly” bodies on show. Sadly, the Milky Way is no longer a nightly vista for most of us. Its splendour has been greatly reduced by air pollution and the lights of cities, industry and urban sprawl.

Pondering the mystery of existence under a clear night sky helped our ancestors to dream up stories that gave meaning to their lives. Although we have lost such an awe-inspiring canopy, we are still moved by other core elements of existence, namely nature and human interactions.

Those whose world view includes supernatural entities and “spirituality” — whatever that means — sometimes criticise Humanism as being a shallow life philosophy. They think that because we Humanists value reasoned thinking and science, our world view excludes any sense of mystery; but that is not so. We grasp that there are limits to human understanding, a fact that requires us to live with uncertainty. However, we Humanists can still be deeply moved by experiences, both ordinary and extraordinary, just as religious people are: a baby’s first smile, music, works of art, poetry, a full moon over water, the bush wet with rain.

The philosopher Richard Norman in his book *On Humanism* examines the inadequacy of using the word “spirituality” when we want to discuss the mystery and meaning of life. Instead he suggests five things we know from experience that give life depth and meaning. These are:

- *The satisfaction of creative achievement.* Satisfaction in the sense of “I did this” can be derived from work or leisure activities like writing, gardening, painting, or music-making.
- *The excitement of discovery.* Norman points out that we are by nature curious and seek to “know” and understand what we encounter in the natural world. Science, historical research and philosophical argument are formal examples of seeking to know.
- *Relationships with others.* As social animals, co-operation and interaction with others is both essential for our survival and rewarding in the mutual satisfaction that socialising brings.

- *The life of the emotions.* Love of parents, children, friends and lovers bring joy and delight. While more negative emotions of anger and fear add to the complexity of a meaningful life.
- *The enjoyment of beauty in art and nature.* At different times we are all moved by the beauty of nature and the many interpretations of existence that the work of creative artists put before us.

In pulling these experiences forward as central to a meaningful life, Norman is tackling the accusation that without religious spirituality a Humanist life lacks depth. We know that is not so. As our Humanist Society of Victoria web site puts it, “for the one life we have”. Humanists say yes to life’s opportunities. In the manner of the Romans, who would invoke *carpe diem* or “seize the day”, we try to lead productive, responsible yet enjoyable lives.

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CAN’T ESCAPE FROM LIFE’S “BIG QUESTIONS”?

Get temporary relief with temporary answers

By Duncan Watterworth

Due to circumstances
Beyond my control,
I am master of my fate
And captain of my soul.

I found this little poem on a postcard in a shop in England at the start of my backpacking trip around the world in 1972. I have the card still. It seemed apt for my travels, but even then I knew there was a much larger meaning: I have no choice but to face up to life’s “Big Questions”.

Is there a consciousness or power in the universe greater than me? Is there a God? Does my life have an ultimate meaning or purpose? What is my relationship with the universe as a whole? What happens after death? What is the highest use of my time?

The postcard contains a sketch of a sea captain with hands on a large steering wheel. His leg is chained to the deck. Is he pleased or terrified to be steering? Either way, he has no choice. It’s his ship, so steer he must.

We all hold a position on the Big Questions, and live our lives accordingly, even if we are not conscious of it. Many simply accept the worldview they are born into. That is a decision too, made by default.

Others wrestle with the Big Questions, and I am one of those. Even in high school I knew I didn’t have the Big Answers, and I yearned for them. Ever since, I have sought the answers with more than just a curiosity. Call it a profound hobby, or a second job. In university I studied philosophy, read Alan Watts, who popularized Buddhism in the west, and later I read books on other religions, atheism, astronomy, geology, evolution, other sciences, all kinds of stuff.

My quest is not an obsession; it has never been more than lukewarm. The urge to understand has waxed and waned with the exigencies of earning a living, having a family, and seeking a full measure of fun and adventure. But it has always been with me. And now I am retired, with time on my hands.

Some things seem clear. Many wise and diligent men and women— philosophers, scientists, theologians, artists, others – have been preoccupied with these questions. Yet opinions are wildly diverse. Even established religions are constantly morphing and internally wrangling. But after all, we are only recently-evolved animals on a tiny planet, in an immense universe we do not yet fully understand. Perhaps it is still early days. We are gathered together in The Church Of The Best Guess So Far. And the elusiveness of the Big Answers creates yet another Big Question: since life won't wait, what is the best course for us ship captains right now? How should we face these mysterious seas? For this Big Question, there may be an answer, or at least an approach: pick some temporary measures, some short-term goals. And run with those.

Here are a few that I suggest. I'm not saying that I have accomplished them myself. A preacher preaches to convince himself. But see what you think.

- Rekindle a sense of awe, of amazement, with life. Whatever the ultimate answers are, it is a tremendous miracle.
- Find the courage to be at peace with not knowing. Embrace the mystery.
- Improve your mindfulness, for a deeper understanding and appreciation.
- Resolve to keep up a sheer, wondering inquiry.
- Live well. Enjoy the voyage.

More on The Lessons of History.

The pictures we are now seeing constantly on TV of women and children undergoing unspeakable suffering in Syria are appalling! Also appalling are the barbaric beheadings and suicide bombings being carried out by radical Islamic Jihadists. And recently we witnessed the despicable use of sarin gas on innocent children and others. Why, in our supposedly enlightened 21st century, are these atrocities taking place; what are the causes? In Syria, the causes are both economic and political, but the hatred between Shia and Sunni Muslims is also a significant factor. In other situations, misguided belief in carrying out the wishes of a supernatural deity is also a major cause. ISIS believes it is following the dictates of Allah to establish and rule a Sunni Islamic Caliphate, while the Jihadists are following the Qur'an's instructions to kill the "infidels" in the West, shouting their battle cry, "Allahu akbar" (Allah is the greatest). The irony here is that Allah does not now nor has ever existed. Neither has the Jewish Yahweh nor the Christian God. So the question I ask is this: Will it do any good to somehow loudly proclaim to Islamic radicals that they are misguided in believing that Allah could have issued instructions to kill the infidels because Allah does not exist, and that the Qur'an is a human construct, not the infallible word of Allah? Would shouting this from the roof tops do any good?

Unfortunately this effort would most likely be futile because the beliefs of Islam are so ingrained into the minds of most Muslims, certainly the radical ones, that very few minds could be changed. They are probably right and I believe looking back on Christian history will confirm this view. Let's take a look.

After the Protestant Reformation, which helped to moderate Christianity, and during the Enlightenment, some scholars began to question the validity of traditional Jewish and Christian beliefs. One of the earliest was the Dutch Jewish philosopher Benedict Spinoza (1632-1677) who rejected belief in a supernatural God and thought of God as the natural laws and forces of nature. The Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711-1776) was one of the first Enlightenment philosophers to reject belief in God. In France, the philosophe Baron d'Holbach (1723-1789) published, anonymously, a very enlightening short treatise entitled *Christianity Unveiled* in 1761. In Germany, the Deist philosopher Herman Samuel Reimarus (1694-1768) authored *The Aims of Jesus and His Disciples*, in which he **called Christianity a fraud** and reasoned that the Gospel of John should not be taken seriously.

There were other eighteenth century notables who were highly critical of Christianity. King Frederick the Great of Prussia (1712-1786) aspired to be, among many other things, a Platonic philosopher king like the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius. For him, "Christianity was stuffed with miracles, contradictions and absurdities, was spawned in the fevered imaginations of the Orientals and then spread to Europe, where some fanatics espoused it, some intriguers pretended to be convinced by it, and some imbeciles actually believed it." Voltaire (1694-1778) who for a time was a close friend of Frederick, put it this way: "Our religion is without doubt the most ridiculous, most absurd and most bloody to ever infect the world." He also told Frederick he believed that the Christian religion would likely disappear before the end of the 1800s. How wrong he was!

In the nineteenth century the German theologian and author David Friedrich Strauss (1808-1874) published *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* in 1835-36, questioning many of the traditional Christian beliefs. The works of Strauss and other German scholars are well documented in Albert Schweitzer's book *The Quest for the Historical Jesus* published in 1906. Being a recent graduate in theology, Schweitzer set out to disprove Reimarus' conclusions, but after studying the works of various nineteenth century German philosophers, particularly those of David Friedrich Strauss, he concluded that Reimarus was right: "The Jesus of Nazareth who came forward publicly as the Messiah, who preached the ethic of the kingdom of God, who founded the kingdom of heaven upon earth, and died to give his work final consecration, never existed

After the publication of Schweitzer's book, there was not a lot of interest in exploring the nature of the historical Jesus until the latter part of the twentieth century. In that era, a number of books were published by various scholars and liberal theologians suggesting that it was time for a fresh evaluation of the man who has had such a profound influence on the course of Western history. Among them were Bishop John Robinson, Don Cupitt and A.C. Grayling in the U.K., Lloyd Geering in New Zealand, Bishop John Shelby Spong and Marcus Boyd in the United States, and Tom Harpur and Gretta Vosper in Canada. And there were also the Jesus Seminar people in California, including founders Robert Funk and John Dominic Crossan. In general, they all concluded that Jesus was a fully human Jewish teacher who was not born of a virgin, and not bodily resurrected. Some did not believe in God or an afterlife, while others hedged on these issues. On the other hand, they all appeared to believe that Jesus was a compassionate teacher with a credible ethical and moral message, and that he was a role model worthy of emulation. This has been the conventional wisdom, but this depiction of Jesus is being challenged, particularly now that the English-speaking world is aware of the *Testament* of Jean Meslier (1664-1729).

Meslier was a French curate who composed his *Testament* outlining his radical views on Christianity and the Catholic Church over a ten-year period ending in 1728, a year before his death. We are now most

fortunate that in 2009, Paris translator Michael Shreve published Meslier's *Testament* in English in its entirety for the first time. Meslier did not want to become a priest, but became one to please his parents. Once inside the priesthood, he saw the spuriousness of the Catholic faith and beliefs and also observed the corruption therein. Meslier says the visions and wild thoughts of the famous fanatic Don Quixote were never as crazy as those of Jesus. He calls Jesus mentally deranged because he so vainly imagined and predicted many great and beautiful things that never happened. Regarding the teaching of Jesus he explains that he feels "safe in saying that even the fables of Aesop are certainly more ingenious and instructive than all those crude and low parables that are told in the Gospels."

With the publication of Meslier's *Testament* in both French and English in the early 21st century, French atheist philosopher Michel Onfray predicted that **exposing Jesus as an imposter** would be such a bombshell that it would greatly hasten the demise of Christianity. Alas, a fast demise has not happened.

Also in the early 21st century, four books were published that some predicted would hasten a reduction in the belief in a supernatural deity. These books were *The End of Faith* by Sam Harris, *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins, *God is Not Great* by Christopher Hitchens and *Breaking the Spell* by Daniel Dennett. These books were fairly widely read, but many readers were already non-believers. And although there must have been those who were having doubts and became non-believers as a result of reading these books, on the other hand, it is not likely than many fundamentalist/evangelical Christians ever read these books and any that did would not likely change their minds.

Admittedly the foregoing accounts of various scholars and others is a lengthy diatribe, but the purpose is to emphasize that after five centuries of criticism and identifying fallacies and shortfalls of Christianity, very little changed prior to 1950. Why? Partly because refutations such as Christianity being a fraud and Jesus being an imposter remained in the domain of academics and never filtered down to the masses, and partly because the Churches suppressed all attempts to keep the masses ignorant of any negative criticism. The end result was that immediately after WW II, Christianity, both Protestant and Catholic, was alive and well in most Western countries.

But in the mid-twentieth century, changes began to occur. Interest in religion and church attendance began to gradually decline as societies became more secular and less religious. Today in Canada, surveys show only 21% of the populous is "religiously committed." In some European countries it is as low as 5%. This drop in religiosity obviously begs the question: what was the principal cause of the decline? Were the criticisms of Christianity by secular minded scholars finally having an effect or was it something else? I believe it was something else, and that something else is improved economic conditions and adequate social safety nets such as universal health care.

In the October 2016 issue of *The Enlightenment*, an article entitled "The Lessons of History" contains a section on economics documenting the growth in prosperity that occurred in the West after WW II in what is sometimes termed a "golden age." Middle-class prosperity improved and life became less stressful as social safety nets came into place in most Western countries, with the United States being an exception with fewer social safety nets and higher religiosity. Unfortunately these favourable economic conditions did not last as real income for the middle-class stagnated, while incomes for the well-off increased dramatically. This income disparity is a serious concern today along with many other concerns, but this is not the place to tackle these problems. We must get back to Islam. Like Christianity, will it take a reformation, the end of a major war, and improved economic conditions to make a difference?

As has been the case with Christianity, attempting to convince Muslims that there is no Allah and that the Qur'an is not infallible is likely to be futile because Islamic doctrine is so firmly imbedded in the minds of most Muslims, let alone the fact that anyone attempting to convey this message would most likely be shot or even beheaded, making it difficult for any kind of reformation to occur. A logical first step could be the cessation of the Sunni/Shia conflict by arriving at a solution to the Syrian civil war in the same manner that the end of the 30 Year's War (1618-1648) in Europe brought an end to the Protestant/Catholic schism.

But in the long run, nothing will do more to foster improvements than establishing prosperous economic conditions in Islamic countries and elsewhere, in order that young people are gainfully employed and not interested in seeking excitement by joining organizations such as ISIS, whether in the Middle East or in cells in Western countries. This is a tall order and a challenge for world leaders to find solutions through negotiations rather than through warfare in a world going through tremendous technological change in the current and future digital environment. The solutions involve politics and changes in ideologies requiring competent world leaders. Conclusion: The challenges ahead are monumental! More about this in a future *Enlightenment*. (DAH).

Why Study Philosophy?

By Oxford Professor – Peter Hacker

The history of philosophy is a capital part of the history of ideas. To study the history of philosophy is to study an aspect of the intellectual life of past societies, and of our own society in the past. It makes a crucial contribution to the understanding of the history of past European societies. Equally, to understand our contemporary forms of thought, the ways in which we look at things, the study of the history of philosophy is essential. For we cannot know where we are, unless we understand how we got here!

The study of philosophy cultivates a healthy scepticism about the moral opinions, political arguments and economic reasonings with which we are daily bombarded by ideologues, churchmen, politicians and economists. It teaches one to detect 'higher forms of nonsense', to identify humbug, to weed out hypocrisy, and to spot invalid reasoning. It curbs our taste for nonsense, and gives us a nose for it instead. It teaches us not to rush to affirm or deny assertions, but to raise questions about them.

Even more importantly, it teaches us to raise questions about questions, to probe for their tacit assumptions and presuppositions, and to challenge these when warranted. In this way it gives us a distance from passion-provoking issues – a degree of detachment that is conducive to reason and reasonableness.

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