



# The Enlightenment



A Mini-Journal of the Humanist Association of London and Area  
Visit Our Web Site at [www.humanists-london.org](http://www.humanists-london.org)

Volume13

Number 3

Special Issue

March 2017

## Multiculturalism and Religions

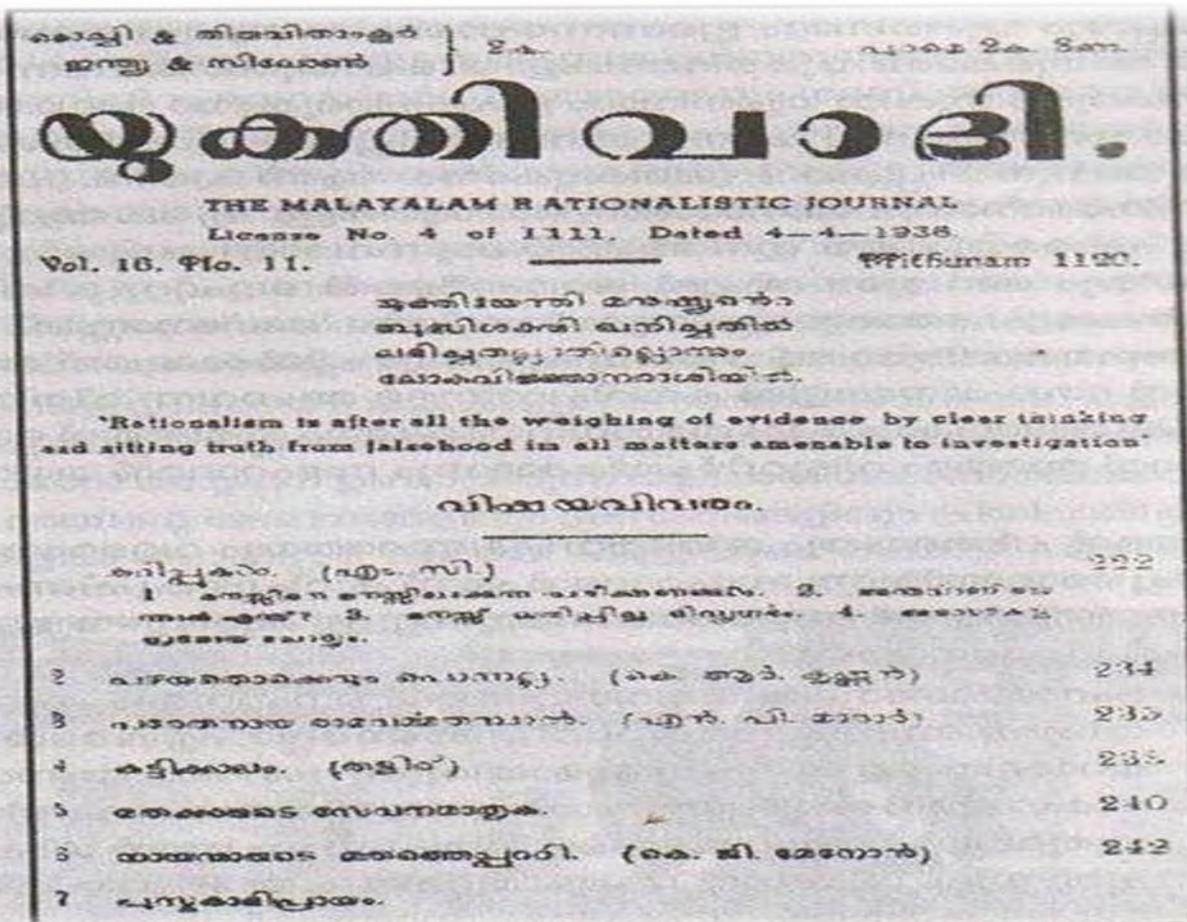
*By George Cherian*

When I was asked to talk about my journey to be a humanist, I decided to give a title that reflected the place and the religious community of my birth. I was born into a Syrian Orthodox Christian family in a southern state in India called Kerala, a unique state where the communist party was first elected with majority in a democratic election. The people in this state live peacefully with several different religious beliefs but respect each other, unlike other parts of India where religious disputes and fights among Muslims and Hindus are common. This difference can be explained by the history of this part of India where several people came from abroad by sea for the spice trade and settled in a multicultural environment.

During the first century, a group of Jewish people came to south India from Jerusalem after the destruction of the second temple, as refugees running away from Roman persecution. Later a second group came from Judea, and these migrations are documented in Jewish history in the Tel Aviv museum. The local Hindu king accepted these refugees and they settled in India. It is believed that one disciple of Jesus, St. Thomas, came with this group in 52 AD, and he spread Christianity in South India. Migration of Christian refugees continued from the Middle East and Syria during the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries. The origin of my ancestors was from these refugees, and their church is known as Malankara Syrian Orthodox Church. They continue to use Syriac/Aramaic in their liturgy. As a boy, I went to the church and Sunday school until they started teaching midnight prayer. I told my father that I am not going to pray at midnight and questioned these types of church teachings. My father agreed and that was the end of my Christian learning.

We all are born as *homo sapiens*, but unfortunately into pre-existing “imagined orders” such as religions, class or caste, and most of us will just follow them throughout our life without challenging these orders. But I took a different approach to my life. I was not much interested in religions while I was studying and working. After my retirement, I started reading the history of religions, and found very interesting stories in the Bible, Gita, Qur’an etc., but they were just stories, not based on any facts. I refused to accept that any of these writings came from God, but rather we created them from our own imagination. Thus, Hindus justified the caste system by their creation theory. It is also important that most of the slave trade occurred in the religious Bible belt states in the USA. Thus, religions played a major role in both the caste system and slavery in different cultures, and no religion can be proud of these activities. Many wars have also been fought in the name of religion.

Although my father was not that religious, our family had a bishop who tried to abolish the caste system among Hindus by converting the lower class (Shudras) into Christianity, which did not follow any caste system. Our family was very proud of him and every one used to talk about him. But recently, I found a family secret that this bishop's first cousin, Advocate M. Cherian Joseph (1887-1981) was a rationalist (atheist), and no one talked about him in the family. He founded and edited the first ever rationalist/atheist magazine, *Yukthivadi* (rationalist) in Kerala in the local Malayalam language. It was first published in August 1929. Under his editorship, this magazine was published continuously for 45 years. He wrote several articles and published 14 books, mainly on criticism of all organized religions and superstitions. He once said that if he utters the word "GOD," that means he is unconscious. A copy of the magazine is shown below.



The rationalist movement started with this magazine against the caste system and many other superstitious rituals in India. According to their definition, rationalism is not a religion but a movement to gain knowledge based upon reason and accept it as fact; weighing of evidence by clear thinking to distinguish truth from falsehood on all matters amenable to investigation. This movement played a major role to stop the caste system. India is still a very religious country but there are many atheists and they come from all religions: Hindus, Muslims, Christians, etc.

I am very proud to know that one of my family members (M. C. Joseph) was very much involved in the early rationalist movement and his magazine, *yukthivadi* had a major influence in this movement. Personally, I respect all religions, but do not believe in any of them.

The above talk was delivered by HALA member George Cherian at the regular HALA meeting on February 8<sup>th</sup> as part of a “How I Became a Humanist” evening.

## **The Challenges of Islam**

The recent killing of six male Muslim worshipers as they were engaged in prayer at a Quebec City mosque by a lone gunman on January 29, 2017, prompted many people and various organizations to send messages of sympathy to the victims’ families and other members of the mosque. HALA was one organization that did so. The following is the message sent by our President, Rod Martin.

Chers membres du Centre Culturel Islamique de Québec,

Je suis président de l'Association humaniste de London et région, en Ontario. Au nom des membres de notre organisation, j'écris pour exprimer nos sincères condoléances à tous ceux qui ont perdu des êtres chers lors de la récente et terrible attaque contre votre mosquée. Il est difficile pour nous d'imaginer la douleur et l'angoisse que vous éprouvez. Nous tenons à vous assurer de notre sympathie et de notre soutien, et à affirmer que nous sommes solidaires avec vous en condamnant de tels actes de violence, de haine et d'intolérance. Les humanistes se consacrent à la promotion des droits de l'homme, y compris le droit des individus de pratiquer librement toute religion qu'ils choisissent ou pas de religion du tout, sans crainte d'attaques, de persécutions ou de discrimination. Nous espérons que cet acte déplorable ne mènera pas à une augmentation de haine et de soupçon, mais plutôt nous rapprochera tous ensemble, en affirmant le droit de tous les canadiens de vivre ensemble paisiblement dans une nation diversifiée, ouverte, tolérante et accueillante.

[I am the President of the Humanist Association of London and Area in London, Ontario. On behalf of the members of our organization, I am writing to express our deep and heart-felt condolences to those who have lost loved ones in the recent terrible and vicious attack on your mosque. It is difficult for us to imagine the pain and anguish that you are experiencing. We wish to assure you of our sympathy and support, and to affirm that we stand together with you in condemnation of all such acts of violence, hatred, and intolerance. Humanists are dedicated to the promotion of human rights, including individuals’ right to freely practice any religion they choose or no religion at all, without fear of attack, persecution or discrimination. We hope that this deplorable act will not lead to further hatred and suspicion, but instead will draw us all closer together as we affirm the right of all Canadians to live together in peace in a diverse, open, tolerant, and welcoming nation.]

Sincèrement,  
Dr. Rod Martin

The mosque responded: Bonjour. Merci beaucoup pour votre soutien et pour votre sympathie!!! Ça fait chaud au cœur de vous lire. CCIQ. [Thank you very much for your support and sympathy! It warms our hearts to read you.]

This was certainly the right thing to do. There is no place in Canada for despicable actions caused by xenophobic hatred of those different from oneself. And one would hope that the majority of Muslims are moderates of the sort described by Duncan Watterworth in the article that follows, entitled *All Smiles at the Mosque*. He describes his positive experiences at a London mosque, a mosque that appears to be an example of a group practising a version of moderate Islam.

But as we well know, there are factions of misguided Islamic fundamentalist terrorists such as Al Qaeda and ISIS that are causing great strife and suffering in the Middle East and elsewhere, as well as cells of radicals threatening to set off bombs in Western countries. Also, there are theocratic non-democratic Islamic countries with no separation of religion and state, many of which practice versions of Sharia law. And there are the ultra-conservative Saudi Arabian Wahhabis who finance the construction of mosques and madrassas that indoctrinate youth with extreme interpretations of the holy Qur'an.

These are the realities that I believe cause Conservative leadership candidate Kellie Leitch to advocate stricter screening of immigrants to make sure they will adhere to Canadian values. I have some sympathy for this because the last thing we want is to admit anyone who advocates promoting and practising Sharia law in Canada. Duncan Watterworth ends his article by suggesting it is up to moderate Muslims to bring about reforms to Islam in the same manner that Christianity reformed. This is a huge challenge and perhaps we will hear more about this when Raheel Raza speaks at the HALA Wolf Hall event next October.

## **All Smiles at the Mosque**

Getting a Handle on Christianity's Sister Religion

*By Duncan Watterworth*

It's a glistening afternoon in Kandahar, Afghanistan in 1972. I'm on a park bench with another backpacker named Joe, mowing through a bag of cookies from a bakery nearby. We finally realize we are getting nasty stares from passersby, and even snarls. What? We finally clue in. It's Ramadan – the Muslim holy month – when everyone fasts from sunrise to sundown. Our public gluttony is on a par with mistaking a baptismal font for a urinal. Oops. But they don't cut off our heads; they cut us some slack.

Islam was not even on my radar as I was growing up in rural Southern Ontario. So I am still learning about Christianity's great sister religion through my encounters with Muslims, and my reading.

Over my lifetime, I have spent almost three months travelling in six Muslim countries. I traveled close to the ground – no guides or resorts. I have had no difficulties from the people, but many acts of kindness. I think of the man I sat beside on a bus in Morocco, wordlessly sharing his bag of cookies with me as we rumbled up the coastal desert.

At the recent Doors Open weekend in London, I spent a couple of hours touring the Muslim Mosque. Smiling greeters and guides were everywhere. In the gym was a fashion demonstration of hijab head

coverings. Two women were selling home-made baked goods. I bought some cookies, and a young boy insisted on finding me the package with the most chocolate ones. At a table a bearded man wrote my name for me in curving Arabic script. I reclined on cushions and enjoyed dates and coffee. I told the coffee server my Ramadan-cookie story. His eyebrows shot up.

In the large, unfurnished prayer room, I left my shoes at the door and chatted for half an hour with a soft-spoken gentleman in a grey sweater - a retired professor. We each have a spiritual side and a material side, he said, and too often the material side prevails. The fighting in Syria is more politics than religion. Those with a true understanding of Islam know that the Qur'an absolutely forbids the killing of innocent people. If captured in war, they must be fed and released, or ransomed. But people are people, and may act in anger. He mentioned the American drone attacks, which are killing innocent people along with combatants.

When the afternoon prayer was about to start, men were dropping their shoes and streaming in. Most said hello to me as they passed, or gave a friendly nod. Then they quietly greeted each other, sometimes with a handshake or pat on the shoulder. The goodwill and fellowship were palpable. I know this feeling, I thought. It is just like church. Downstairs was a row of tables, each manned by a friendly face, usually bearded. Here were the educational posters, pamphlets and booklets explaining Islam. Peace, love, tolerance. It sounded like Christianity on a good day. These people were trying hard to make a good impression on the wider London community. They are a long way from the Islamists in the international news.

The worldwide community of Muslims is deeply fractured, says Reza Aslan in his insightful book on Islamic history: *No God but God*, being played out now on the world stage is not a conflict between Islam and the West. Rather, it is an internal struggle between the Muslims who wish to adapt to modernity, and those who wish to revert – sometimes fanatically – to fundamentalism. Christianity had its bloody reformation: now it is Islam's turn.

## **Extreme Patriotism Can Be Messy**

*By Goldwin Emerson*

Patriots are citizens who love their county. They are proud of their nationality, ethnicity, traditions and achievements. A moderate amount of patriotism is healthy. It can help bring about one's best personal accomplishments. A reasonable amount of patriotism also helps bring order and structure and direction and self-discipline to our lives. This type of patriotism can inspire us to work hard and achieve results that will be respected by those who are part of our country and those who are not. Yet, sometimes patriotism can go too far.

Extreme patriotism develops gradually and often follows a pattern of progressive steps leading to unfortunate results. It can begin with the recognition that a country has been able to realize notable achievements made by its predecessors. So far, so good! The next step in excessive patriotism may be a feeling of *exceptionalism*. Because of previous successes, patriotism can easily turn into feelings that a nation is very special above all others. The nation feels favoured by God and by humankind and a concept of *manifest destiny* may emerge. In Hitler's version of exceptionalism his soldiers' uniforms bore the military epaulet and belt buckle, "Gott mit uns" (God with us). With Nazi exceptionalism there came a feeling of invincibility and grandiose racial pride.

Extreme patriotism next turns its attention to finding a strong leader who best represents most of the qualities of exceptionalism. The new leader doesn't have to be perfect, but he has to believe that he is an exceptional leader suitable for a nation that stands above all others. Usually, the chosen leader is male, Caucasian, verbose and not too aware nor caring about those outside his own country. Al-Assad, Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin and other dictators were not inclined to respect democracy or value truth-telling as part of their leadership styles. Political power is usurped by a strong, authoritarian leader who is entrusted to know the best policies for his nation. Wherever it's convenient, the leader may change previous laws so as to weaken opinions about free speech and other hard-earned protections acquired earlier by ordinary citizens. Free speech, public media such as radio, television and newspapers become the enemy, and laws can be changed to either regulate or shut down public media. Political correctness is mocked as political weakness. Free speech and factual news become fake news with alternative facts and political expediency. This makes it possible for a strong leader to lead his political party in whatever directions he wishes. If the leader is supported by politicians who already hold a majority of votes against opposing politicians there is not much opposition parties can do to influence the strong majority leader.

For determined leaders who love power, it is not a big step to change democracies into extreme governments where decisions are made from the top down. Dictatorial leaders promise citizens that their lives will become better under their leadership. Promises of jobs for all, and health care and good practical education for all, and military superiority, and security from foreign threats, will be exactly what citizens want to hear. Such promises are precisely what ordinary people are anxious to believe in, and they hope good things will occur under their newly chosen strong leader.

Winston Churchill once said democracy is the best system of government, yet he realized democracy can be weakened and changed fairly easily. It is not unusual throughout history that democracies have been shown to be fragile. They can be contaminated by extreme patriotism. Like good marriages and good friendships, and good humanistic principles, democracies need to be nourished and valued and protected. Where democracies fail, often they do so gradually and before citizens realize they have given up rights and freedoms developed earlier through the hard work of their predecessors.

Canadians are now celebrating our one hundred fifty year anniversary. Let us hope that our chosen leaders will stand up for democratic principles and for the rights and freedoms we currently enjoy. Too much contentment with our past achievements may make us too easily satisfied with ourselves.

A good way to evaluate American exceptionalism would be to solicit the opinions of those who live in countries outside the United States and to be moderate in patriotic aggrandizement.

### **The Board of the Humanist Association of London and Area (HALA)**

President – Dr. Rod Martin - (519) 673-6635 – email – [ramartin@uwo.ca](mailto:ramartin@uwo.ca)

Vice President – Carl Goldberg – (519) 657-1362 – email – [carlg1948@gmail.com](mailto:carlg1948@gmail.com)

Secretary – Dr. Elizabeth Bright-See - (519) 471- 3963 – email – [ebright@uwo.ca](mailto:ebright@uwo.ca)

Treasurer – Brian Prachar – (519) 668-0237 – email – [brianprachar@hotmail.com](mailto:brianprachar@hotmail.com)

Member at Large – Peter Evans – (519) 614-7419 – email – [paevans50@hotmail.com](mailto:paevans50@hotmail.com) - Membership

Member at Large – Brad Banks – (519) 902-1213 – email – [elbankster@gmail.com](mailto:elbankster@gmail.com) - Publicity

Member at Large – Sherry Keddie – (226) 926-2426 – email – [sherrykeddie@gmail.com](mailto:sherrykeddie@gmail.com) - Social