



# The Enlightenment



The Newsletter of the  
**Humanist Association of London and Area**  
An Affiliate of Humanist Canada (HC)

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## Les Philosophes

From the 1750s to the 1770s, the Paris salon of Baron Thiry d'Holbach was an epicenter of debate, intellectual daring, and revolutionary ideas. It brought around one table, vivid personalities such as Denis Diderot, Lawrence Sterne, David Hume, Adam Smith, Horace Walpole, Benjamin Franklin, Ferdinando Galiani, the radical ex-priest Guillaume Raynal, the Italian Cesare Beccaria and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who later split with the group.

It was a moment of astonishing radicalism in European thought, so uncompromising and bold that it was viciously opposed by rival philosophers such as Voltaire and eventually by Rousseau. It was finally suppressed by Robespierre and his Revolutionary henchmen. This climatic moment in Western history has largely been forgotten by historians, who have looked no further than what the official version of events showed.

In a recently published book entitled *A Wicked Company*, acclaimed historian Philipp Blom retraces the fortunes and characters of this exceptional group of friends and brings to light their startling ideas. The thinking of these brilliant minds, full of wit, courage and humanity, created a different and radical French Enlightenment based on atheism, passion, empathy, and a compelling insightful perspective on society. The vision they discussed around the baron's dinner table was one in which women and men would no longer be oppressed by the fear and ignorance instilled by religion, but could instead live their lives to the full. Instead of sacrificing their desires to the vain hopes of an afterlife, they would be able to walk freely, to understand their place in the universe as intelligent beings of flesh and blood and pour their energies into building individual lives based on desire, empathy and reason. Desire, erotic and otherwise, would make their world beautiful, empathy would make it kind, reason would allow understanding. Holbach, best known as author of *Christianity Unveiled*, was the host and organizer of the group. Diderot, best known as editor of the *Encyclopédie*, was the spark plug. To read more on Les Philosophes, go to the book review on page 3.



**Baron d'Holbach**



**Denis Diderot**

## President's Remarks

In recent years, atheism has gained a considerable amount of public attention and even some degree of respectability. Best-selling books by “new atheists” like Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens have gone on the offensive against religion, strongly condemning belief in God as a delusion and religious faith as unscientific superstition. For many of us who are Humanists, these books have been a welcome breath of fresh air, expressing very clear and cogent arguments for a point of view that we hold dear. While applauding these authors for courageously championing the cause of unbelief, however, we need to ask ourselves, is Humanism more than simply the rejection of religion and belief in God? To say that I’m an atheist says something about what I *don’t* believe, but nothing about what I *do* believe, value, and live for. In his book “Good without God: What a billion nonreligious people *do* believe”, Greg Epstein has presented a very compelling vision of Humanism as an affirmative, dynamic alternative to religion. In Epstein’s view, “Humanism is being good without God. It is above all an affirmation of the greatest common value we human beings have: the desire to live with dignity, to be ‘good’.” He argues that Humanism offers a way for people to find a sense of meaning and value, a supportive and caring community, and a basis for living a moral life of concern for others, without a need for supernatural beliefs. I find this a very refreshing perspective. In addition to rejecting outworn religious dogmas, we need to positively affirm our principles and take action together for our own good and for the good of the world. ~ Rod Martin

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The Humanist Association of London and Area meets at the Cross Cultural Learner Centre, 505 Dundas Street in London, on the second Wednesday of the months September to July inclusive at 7:30 p.m. Please use the rear door off the parking lot. *The Enlightenment*, edited by Don Hatch, is published quarterly in January, April, July and October. Please note: We reserve the right to edit and publish articles at our discretion.

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**New members are welcome.** Contact Membership Secretary, Walter Heywood (519) 434-9237 e-mail [wjheywood@yahoo.ca](mailto:wjheywood@yahoo.ca) Membership fees are listed below.

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## Book Review

### ***A Wicked Company by Philipp Blom***

*The Forgotten Radicalism of the European Enlightenment*

Reviewed by Donald Hatch

When thinking of French philosophers of the eighteenth century, the names Voltaire and Rousseau immediately come to mind. The writings of these Deists, including Voltaire's *Candide* and Rousseau's *Emile*, became very popular. On the other hand, the works of avowed atheists such as Baron d'Holbach and Denis Diderot, remained obscure to most readers for a couple of centuries. In Catholic France, as late as the eighteenth century, atheism was considered to be blasphemous and practitioners could be severely punished by pillorying, flogging, branding, or even by execution. The works of the atheist writers had to be published anonymously and printed outside the country, requiring that they be smuggled in. Consequently, the real identity of these freethinkers remained unknown for a long time. They did not, however, claim to be the originators of humanist free thought, but credited forerunners including Epicurus, Lucretius, Spinoza and Bayle as their sources of inspiration.

Paul Heinrich Dietrich Holbach was born in Germany in 1723. While a young boy he was taken to Paris by a wealthy uncle whose fortune and title he inherited. He then became known as Baron Paul Henri Thiry Holbach or more simply, Baron d'Holbach. He had a keen interest in science and enrolled at the University of Leiden in the Netherlands, one of the leading scientific institutions in the world at that time. (Think of the Leyden jar). While at Leiden he learned about the writings of the French philosopher Julien Offray de la Mettrie, author of *Man a Machine*. Like Spinoza, la Mettrie believed the body and the mind to be one, without an immortal soul destined to end up in heaven or hell. Holbach was impressed with this line of thinking.

When Holbach returned to Paris in 1748 he had a desire to reproduce the wonderful times he had known at university. He decided he wanted to hold dinners, known as salons, styled as intellectual get-togethers for friends and their friends. In 1749 he settled down and married his second cousin Basile-Genevieve d'Aine, to whom he was thoroughly devoted. On Sundays and Thursdays, the Holbachs, the consummate hosts, received likeminded men of letters on the first floor of their elegant, but unassuming Town house, on rue Royal Sainte Roch. Today it is named the rue des Moulins and the house, number 10, is still there. The meals were sumptuous and the guests enjoyed a variety of fine wines from one of the best wine cellars in Paris. (Oh, to have been a fly on the wall at these sessions.) Most unfortunately, Basile-Genevieve died in childbirth in 1754 and Holbach was devastated. After a period of mourning he married his first wife's half sister, Charlotte-Susanne d'Aine and remained happily married for over thirty years.

Holbach's first book was *Christianity Unveiled*, published anonymously in 1761. In this volume he elucidates the shortcomings and absurdities of the Christian religion. He believed Christianity was not only nonsense, but harmful nonsense, reducing believers to pale shadows of their human potential and turning them into slaves of an illusory power. This power was represented by the very real interests of priests and magistrates, who had grown rich and powerful on the backs of superstitious people. His aim was to expose the internal contradictions hidden by religious doctrine and in this he succeeded. *Christianity Unveiled* was translated from French to English by W.M. Johnson in 1819. In the Preface he states, "this publication, along with other works whose free and independent sentiments have introduced a happy change in the public mind, will probably prove the harbinger of the complete triumph of reason. Persecutions and

wars will then cease forever throughout the civilized world.” (As we all know, this was wishful thinking. Even today the end of warfare is nowhere in sight).

Other books authored by Holbach were *The System of Nature*, *Portable Theology*, *Natural History of Superstition*, *Historical Critique of Jesus Christ*, and numerous articles for Diderot’s *Encyclopédie*. David Hume described *The System of Nature* as, “the boldest reasonings to be found in print.” But Holbach was not a great stylist and his works required extensive editing, which was willingly and competently done by Diderot and others.

Denis Diderot was born in the small town of Langres in France in 1713. His father was a well-to-do cutler who wished Denis to become a priest. To this end he sent his son to Paris to study for the priesthood, but soon realized Denis would not become a man of the church and encouraged him to become a lawyer or doctor. Instead he became a lover of the theatre. As a last attempt to reform his son, his father cut off his allowance. Denis survived for a while by becoming a tutor to the children of a wealthy family, but this did not satisfy him for he wanted to become a writer. He became acquainted with a number of clandestine writers whose works took on an angry antireligious position. One of Denis’ first works was *Of the Sufficiency of Natural Religion*. Another was *A Sceptics Walk*. Sometime after marriage in 1743, he was commissioned to edit a multi-volume work to be called the *Encyclopédie*. His coeditor would be the mathematician Jean Le Rond d’Alembert. This huge undertaking occupied much of Diderot’s life’s work (d’Alembert dropped out half way through) and was finally completed in 1772. It consisted of seventeen volumes of texts and eleven volumes of engravings. Twenty-five thousand sets were sold by the end of the century. While working on the *Encyclopédie*, Diderot was jailed for a period for writing the supposedly subversive *Lettre sur les aveugles*. It was after his release that he met Baron d’Holbach in 1750 and a life-long friendship ensued. As mentioned above, he became a major editor of Holbach’s writings.

A prominent theme in some of Diderot’s writings is passion. His marriage did not work out well, although he provided well for his wife Anne-Toinette and his daughter Angélique, whom he greatly adored. He had several mistresses including his intellectual equal Sophie Volland. Many of his letters to Sophie have been preserved and they reveal a wealth of information about the goings-on in the lives of Diderot and his friends. On occasions, Diderot’s language soars as he writes about the pleasures of the flesh. He posits that physical love is natural, necessary and right, the very stuff of life. His ideas were of course in stark opposition to the conventional Catholic doctrine that considered sexual pleasure to be a terrible danger and at all times a necessary evil. Some of his writings contain sexually explicit comments of a no-holds-barred nature which are considered too risqué for this review. Read *A Wicked Company* if you want more detail.

A whole chapter of the book is devoted to “The Sheiks of the Rue Royale,” the personalities who dined and discussed philosophy around Holbach’s table. “A Glossary of Protagonists,” at the back of the book lists twenty-five people who participated at one time or another. Most of course were French, but there were a few famous foreigners, including David Garrick, Adam Smith, Horace Walpole, Benjamin Franklin, Laurence Sterne, Edward Gibbon and David Hume. In fact there is a whole chapter devoted to “Le Bon David.” David Hume served as an embassy secretary in Paris for a few years beginning in 1763. By this time he was famous as the author of a *History of England* and *Essays Moral and Political*, and he was welcomed into Holbach’s “men of letters” group with open arms. When Hume asked if there were any atheists in the group Holbach answered, “There are eighteen people present, fifteen are atheists and the other three haven’t yet made up their minds.” But Hume always thought of himself as an agnostic. He

stated that it is impossible to prove or disprove the existence of God, and therefore for the true philosopher, agnosticism is the only reasonable stance. This difference in philosophical stances led to a certain amount of good-natured mutual teasing.

The foregoing is just a smattering of the contents of *A Wicked Company*. I found this book to be a well-written page-turner, providing a clear picture of the lives of freethinking humanists in eighteenth century France. So much of this was not known until recently, because at the time, the works of atheistic authors were successfully suppressed by the Catholic Church. Philipp Blom, the author of *A Wicked Company* was born in Hamburg and trained as a historian in Vienna and Oxford. His articles have appeared in numerous newspapers and magazines. He now lives in Vienna. It is gratefully acknowledged that much of copy on the cover page of this *Enlightenment* was taken from the dust jacket of the book.

## **The Sweet and the Bitter**

To paraphrase Robert Louis Stevenson's childhood rhyme:

"The world is so full of such wonderful things,  
I'm sure we should all be as happy as kings."

Yes indeed, the world is full of wonderful things. Who cannot be in awe of the magnificent geographical features on our planet, the majestic mountains, the Grand Canyon, scenic waterfalls, northern lakes and forests decked out in autumn splendour, the huge expanse of the prairies, tropical islands and sunsets over the ocean? Who cannot be in awe of the almost endless variety of plants and animals living in our environment? Who cannot be in awe of Homo sapiens, perhaps the greatest biological creation in the universe, a creature with the capacity to love, to learn, to communicate verbally, to reason, to discover and create; a being epitomized in the words penned by Shakespeare in the play Hamlet: "What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason! How infinite in faculty!" And who cannot be in awe of the creative achievements of the great composers, writers, artists and architects? Who cannot be impressed by the accomplishments of humankind since the dawn of contemporary civilization a few short millennia ago, and not be especially impressed by the advancements made in our current scientific age? Human discoveries and inventions such as the steam engine, electricity and electronics, the internal combustion engine, medical discoveries, the computer revolution, the internet and the unravelling of the code of the DNA helix, have been nothing less than spectacular. And more recently, the creation of hand-held communication and entertainment devices has been mind-boggling. Having been blessed with all these "wonderful things," we should indeed be "as happy as kings" and able to concur with the poet Robert Browning, who wrote the lines, "God's in his heaven, all's right with the world."

Unfortunately, the reality is that a large segment of humanity is not "as happy as kings." Offsetting the many positive attributes and achievements of humankind are many negatives. While most people are loving, giving, tolerant and caring, others can be intolerant, avaricious, malicious, and hateful, hindering the development of a peaceful, prosperous world. Instead of universal peace and prosperity, our world has experienced vicious wars, religious and racial hatred, and other evils. We have also allowed huge areas of our cities to turn into depressing slums filled with poverty, drugs and crime. Perhaps worst of all, we have taken some of the fruits of scientific discoveries and devised the means to destroy life on earth, especially if these weapons get into the hands of terrorists organizations. No, we cannot say "all's right with the world," and we are forced to ask, is there really a "God in His heaven" and, if so, why is there so much misery and suffering on our miraculous planet?

The reasons for the failure of humankind to evolve into peaceful, loving, tolerant and compassionate individuals are many and complex. In broad terms, failures must be attributed to characteristics inherited in our genes and to environmental factors such as living conditions and the moral and ethical values learned in

formative years. This is often referred to as nature versus nurture. It is an unquestionable fact that progress in the evolution of human characteristics for the better, has been much slower than advancements made in scientific fields. The reality is that some, but certainly not all, individuals will continue to inherit characteristics that make them overly aggressive, greedy, egotistical and even violent and cruel. Perhaps the most effective method we have of modifying these undesirable characteristics is through imparting realistic and sound morals and ethics to children during their formative and maturing years, as discussed further below.

In his recent book, *The Empathic Civilization, the Race to Global Consciousness in a World in Crisis*, the American educator and author Jeremy Rifkin argues that civilization cannot continue on its present path, if it does not want to destroy itself. He describes the period up to about 1700 as the "Age of Faith," when humans were led to believe that they were sinners in a fallen world. If they wished for respite, they would have to settle for salvation in the next world. With the advent of The Enlightenment period, we entered the "Age of Reason," whereby the advances of science and technology, along with the development of democracies, enabled the gradual reduction of drudgery and the realization that life should be enjoyed in the here and now, not in some idyllic heaven that may or may not exist. But the hopes of the Enlightenment philosophers for peace and prosperity and an end to wars were short lived. Human relations had not advanced to the point where ego, greed, vindictiveness and xenophobia were to be left behind, and in fact they are still with us. The twentieth century was the most violent in the history of the world, with nationalistic wars, and the twenty-first is threatened by religious wars and terrorist attacks.

And these are not the only problems. We are faced with population explosion, global warming that may be causing an increase in natural disasters, and the exhaustion of natural resources, particularly fossil fuels. Rifkin puts it this way: "We now face the bittersweet prospect of approaching global empathy in a highly energy-intensive interconnected world, riding on the back of an escalating entropy bill that now threatens catastrophic climate change and our very existence. Resolving this empathy/entropy paradox is the critical test of our species' ability to survive and flourish on Earth in the future. This will require a fundamental rethinking of our economic, and social models – a Third Industrial Revolution ushering an era of 'distributed capitalism,' and the beginning of biosphere consciousness." Rifkin asks, "Can we reach global empathy in time to avoid the collapse of civilization and save the Earth?" In other words, can we bring about the Empathic Civilization in time to save humanity?

In his book, Rifkin points out the necessity of educating children through workshops on empathy, compassion and knowledge of the fragile biosphere. He mentions the work of the Canadian educator Mary Gordon who has successfully introduced her "Roots of Empathy Project" into classrooms across Canada. The procedure involves mothers taking their babies into the classroom once a month for students to observe the loving empathic relationship between the baby and its mother, and how this empathic relationship enables the baby to develop emotionally and physically. Gordon makes the telling observation that "love grows brains, and that the Roots of Empathy classroom is creating citizens of the world – children who are developing empathic ethics and a sense of social responsibility realizing that we all share the same lifeboat. These are the children who will build a more caring, peaceful and civil society, child by child." Surely it is the education of children in the manner described above, that can be one of the principle means of bringing about the empathic civilization that Rifkin visualizes.

So we have gone from the "sweet" described in the first paragraph of this discourse, to the "bitter" depicted in the four that followed, and then returned to the sweet in the paragraph above. We now ask the question: What should humanists be doing to help make things a little sweeter? Perhaps some suggestions may be found in the book *Good Without God* by Harvard Humanist Chaplain Greg Epstein. Greg is a moderate humanist who separates himself a bit from the "New Atheists" by not arguing with believers about whether God does or does not exist, but by pointing out that we should simply try to be good together. His definition of humanism is "being good without God."

Unlike Robert Browning, who is quoted above, we cannot say, "God's in his heaven, all's right with the world," for it is not. The challenge for humanists is to work with others of like mind to help make our world a better place. This is getting to be a cliché, but it is worth repeating. (DAH).

## **More Spirituality and Less Religion**

A short time ago a local resident submitted a Letter to the Editor of a weekly newspaper in Bancroft Ontario, asking for fewer articles on religion and a little more on secular spirituality. This letter inspired humanist Dagmar Gontard-Zelinkova to respond by sending in the well-thought-out letter printed below:

Thank you for your words, "Can we please have more spirituality and less religion." They offered to me and to many others, I'm sure, food for considerable thought. We live in troubled times with religions all over the world killing people in the name of God. In the Middle East, Christians are massacred, in Mumbai, where Jews have been living in peace for centuries, they are now targeted for persecution. Not so long ago, a minister in Florida threatened to burn copies of the Koran. In British Columbia, a religious sect is demanding the legalization of polygamy. Elsewhere faith groups strike alliances and lash out against atheists. Everywhere, religions compete with each other. In the UK, Muslim schools, financed by Saudi Arabia, educate children in the niceties of chopping off hands. In Southern Ontario, the Gideons insist on distributing the Bible while Muslims claim the right to distribute their Koran.

In 2004, atheist writer Sam Harris predicted "the end of faith" in his book of the same title. Oddly enough religiosity seems to be increasing, with no end in sight. What is it that we are really seeing? Is it not the misuse of religion to pursue some social or cultural agenda, with religion being hijacked for political purposes? Wearing of the burka in public is perhaps the best example of the misuse of religion in this regard. Some have been calling it "reasonable accommodation." Others are beginning to call it "blind faith accommodation."

Perhaps it's time to pause and think. It seems to me that something very important is being obscured here, something that harks back into the infancy of humanity. That something is the profound yearning for a true spirituality, no matter what source we get it from. Some may get it from sending prayers to some supernatural being, others may get it from nature, by simply listening to babbling brooks. No matter what the external envelope of any particular faith this need for spirituality takes on, it is part of every human being.

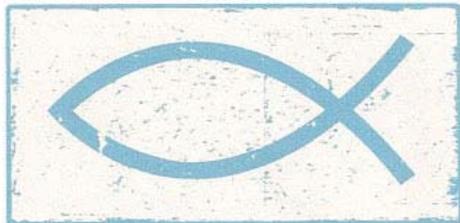
In order to stop killing and persecuting one-another, we must acknowledge our different approaches to the spiritual, and we must learn to respect it. Secularism is the only way for permanent peace. Secularism boils down to two words, separation and respect. Secularism strives to guarantee the right of people, all peoples of the world, to choose and practice the religion of their choice, or no religion at all. In order to avoid inter-religious strife, secularism invites people to worship in their respective churches, synagogues, mosques, temples and other places designated for that purpose, and in their homes, rather than in public. Faith should remain a private matter. Separation and respect are the cornerstones of social harmony.

So yes – more spirituality and less religion, please.

Dagmar Gontard-Zelinkova

Baptiste Lake, Ontario.

# The Evolution of Belief



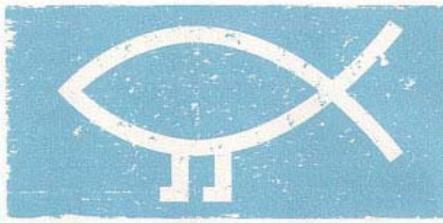
## Faith Perspective

7-9 pm Wednesday, May 18

Despite appearances, Christianity has been evolving over the centuries to the point where it is now set to make the leap from setting doctrinal standards to supporting virtue-based living. The relevant question for those within the church, as well as those outside of it, is: "Will it?"



Rev. Gretta Vosper is founder of the Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity and was named one of 2009's Most Compelling Women by *More* magazine. Her bestselling book, *With or Without God: why the way we live is more important than what we believe*, challenges the clergy's silence on contemporary scholarship that refutes the Bible as the authoritative word of God for all time. She calls on the church to create communities grounded in life-enhancing values rather than indefensible doctrinal beliefs. *With or Without God* was featured in a cover article of *Macleans* magazine in 2008.



## Humanist Perspective

7-9 pm Wednesday, June 8

Throughout history, religious faith and ritual have played an important role in all cultures of the world. Modern scientific evidence for biological evolution raises questions about the existence of God and the supernatural while shedding light on the natural origins of religion. Humanism offers a meaningful and satisfying alternative to religious faith and spirituality while remaining grounded in a scientific worldview.



Rod Martin has a Bachelor's degree in theology and a Ph.D. in psychology from the University of Waterloo and has been a professor of clinical psychology at the University of Western Ontario since 1984. His research on humour and psychological health has been published in two books and numerous scholarly articles, and featured in national and international newspaper and magazine articles and radio and television programs. He is currently President of the Humanist Association of London and Area.



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