

LECTURE

TOPICS

By John D. Boenke

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John D. Boenke was born in 1926 in Rossford, Ohio and grew up during the Great Depression. He served in the U. S. Army in 1946 - 47 in the Medical Corps. In 1951 he received a degree of Bachelor of Science in Physics from the University of Michigan. After college, Mr. Boenke worked in research and engineering for the General Electric Company. Later he was the Manager of an engineering test laboratory for Lau Blower Company, then Chief Engineer for Halsey Taylor Water Cooler Corp. and Senior Design Engineer for The Werner Ladder Company. Before retiring in 1989, Mr. Boenke also owned and operated a small motel in Ashtabula, Ohio.

Since retiring, Mr. Boenke has been interested in reading and studying in the areas of Cosmology, Theoretical Physics and Philosophy. In addition, he has an interest in the origins of religions. He has privately published several short stories and some poetry.

SPACE, TIME, AND THE MILLENNIUM
OR
SOMEWHERE THE SUN IS SHINING

John D. Boenke

At this time of year we are required to be concerned with the advent of a NEW YEAR and make plans accordingly. It is tradition to look back on an "old" year and look ahead to a "new" year. It is a time for reflecting on the developments and problems as well as the joys and progress of the previous twelve months and to resolve now to live more and better in the days to come.

This is all very well and good, but perhaps we should take time to step back a little farther and consider what it is we are really dealing with. What is time? What is Space? And what are we doing here? Time, as everyone knows is measured in seconds, minutes, hours, days, etc. Time is an expression of the rotation of the Earth. It is defined quite precisely and is very stable in its progression.

Space, according to Newton, comes in three varieties and the whole physical universe can be described by these three reference numbers. Unfortunately, Albert Einstein with the aid of Hermann Minkowski threw a monkey wrench into the works and redefined everything in what is called a space-time continuum. This has to do with relatively. I am sure you all understand relativity. It means everything relates entirely with where one is standing. Here are just a few numbers to clarify or confuse the issue, whichever you prefer.

Relative to the planet Earth, the fastest speed humans have achieved was 24,791 miles per hour (39,914 km/hr)./ This was accomplished by the Apollo 10 astronauts, on their return trip from the moon in 1969. They, of course maintain that relative to each other, they were not moving at all.

But the Solar System is much bigger than just the Earth-Moon system in which they were operating, and we find that everything moves. If our Sun is taken as a fixed point, then everything on Earth including all us humans, we here and now, are moving at about 66,660 miles per hour(107,320 km/hr) as the Earth follows its orbit around the Sun.

Then again looking at the bigger picture, if we take the center of the Milky Way galaxy as a fixed point, we find that the Solar System is moving at about 500,000 miles per hour (800,000 km/hr) in its orbit around the galaxy. From an even broader reference frame out in the cosmos, our entire local group of galaxies is moving at about one million miles per hour toward another galaxy group called the Virgo Cluster. It's enough to give one chills. What all this means is we must now take the space-time continuum into account as we count the seconds to the point which is our own millennium, so we shall certainly do that, but

it won't make much difference.

As for what we are doing here, why we are commemorating a particular unfolding of a point in time, or is that now a position in space? Consider the following ideas. What if we lived on Mars. Well that is not too bad. The rotation of Mars is only slightly slower than the Earth's. It takes 1.03 Earth days for Mars to rotate once. Not too much different than Earth. It is not the sort of thing you would lose sleep over. But, a Martian year is 686.98 Earth days long. Now that presents a bit of a problem. That is almost twice as long as Earth. In Earth days one would be about 39.5 Earth years old to reach 21 Martian years, the age of emancipation. Or to make the situation better, how about living on Saturn. Then a day would be only about 10 and 3/4 hours long. Think how many more days we could live. Unfortunately, the year on Saturn is 10,759.5 Earth days long. Most of us would not get to our third birthday. That's not so good.

This gets worse and worse. Let's re-evaluate quickly. Maybe being where we are isn't so bad after all. Let's stick with what we know. We know the dating of Anno Domini, AD, or as it is now called Current Era, CE began with the birth of a particular baby in the land of Palestine, as it was known then.

Looking under the heading of "calendars" in the encyclopedia one finds a rather lengthy article which explains all the troubles with ancient calendars and the inaccuracies involved with them. However, the Christian era basis which is now used almost exclusively throughout the Western world for civil chronology, was first used in 525 AD by the Christian monk Dionysius Exiguus (c. 500-60). He fixed the birth of Christ in the year of 753 on the Roman calendar. Dionysius's chronology was introduced into historical writings by Bede the Venerable in the 8th century. This is more than 700 years after the event in question. This developed into the calendar system we have today. It is generally agreed that this date should have been fixed a few years earlier as that particular birth probably really took place 4 to 6 years prior to the year 1 AD from where the current calendar system started counting. That is, if it took place at all.

All that aside, we seem to agree that we are now in the year 1999. That is, it is 1999 years since that birth which is commemorated. What we are doing here is celebrating 2000 years of history either a year early or three to five years late depending on whose counting you trust. Regardless of the number system, we will happily conform with our culture/ and celebrate at the stroke of midnight and welcome the new year. It occurs to me though, that perhaps we should have celebrated around 6 o'clock this evening which is when the year began at the prime meridian in Greenwich. Or conceivably we should have had our observance a few hours earlier when the midnight hour occurred over Israel where all of this supposedly began many years ago.

What a quandary! What shall we do? To cover all bases it would be safest to celebrate every hour on the hour as the day change makes its way around the Earth., This would require 24 celebrations which would demand a little stamina on our part, but to properly recognize the event we should be willing to make the sacrifice. Yes, that's right. Let's get in more supplies and hunker down for a long night. It is probably our duty or something, although we are already too late as most of the World is already in the next year: or the next millennium?

By 6:00 AM here the deed will be done. The midnight hour will be passing over the International date line in the Pacific Ocean. But in the process let us remember that the development of the universe is a gradually unfolding event having covered some 13 or more billion Earth years so far. Every second in time, and seconds are defined as Earth seconds, is exactly the same as every other second. Our beginning point is completely arbitrary. It may be midnight or 3:00 AM or 2:00 in the afternoon or whatever. Remember even now, the Sun is shining somewhere.

2000 YEARS, MORE OR LESS

By John D. Boenke,
December 1999

Y2k, Y2k, have a happy New Year's day,
Look ahead, do not fear, there will really be a year,
Time goes on, worlds do spin, continuity will win,
Years from now, we'll tell how, year 2000 took it's bow,

Plan ahead, we're not dead, morning Sun will come up red,
Spring is due, Summer too, in the Fall we' ll have the flu,
Life goes on, it's no con, we are in a marathon,
Have a drink, do not think that we're coming to the brink,

Girls and boys, make some noise, but refuse to lose your poise,
Everywhere, people care, life alone we need not bear,
Don't give up, drink your cup, life is like an eager pup,
Running here, bouncing there, ending up we know not where,

Give a gift, get a gift, time is passing rather swift,
In each nook, have a look, life is like an open book,
Get your share, foul and fair, play the game and take the dare,
Share some cheer, wine or beer, then you'll see the future clear.

Winters end, Summers mend, happily they forward send,
Time and space, to a place, where we have a slower pace,
Bye and bye, you and I, enjoy another August sky,
For us each, time will teach, year 2000 is a peach.

Modern Atheism and Evolution

John D. Boenke

We all have some understanding of evolution. A concise definition might be, "Evolution is the variation of genetic makeup from generation to generation." This is physical evolution, which is the kind of evolution generally considered. This complex genetic composition is why we are all physically different. Most aware and thoughtful persons accept evolution as the mechanism by which we have arrived where we are today. It is the logical, rational description of the workings of the biological world.

There are representatives of many levels of genetic evolution still in existence today from the pre-life forms such as viruses to the highest primates and a wealth of species in between. These stages of evolution help illuminate the truth of the biological event known as evolution. We can understand in a better way why we are here today, because we see where life was all along the journey to our present complex structure. It is probable that there will always be representatives of the earlier species, until the Earth runs out of resources and the capacity to sustain them.

There is also a similar cultural evolution of the animal kingdom, particularly among us, the species *Homo Sapiens Sapiens*. This might be called memetic evolution which is the way memes are passed along and changed from generation to generation. This meme change is the mechanism by which human cultures evolve. What are memes? The Oxford American Dictionary says memes are, "Any element of a culture or system of behavior that may be considered to be passed from one individual to another by non-genetic means especially by imitation." Memes produce English speaking persons in an English speaking culture, or nomads, in a nomadic culture, or potters, weavers and metal workers in their respective cultures. Memes are all the environmental influences we experience in growing up and to which we continue to be exposed all of our life.

Memetic evolution exhibits parallels to genetic evolution. In the same way that much of genetic evolution is from the simpler to the more complex organization, so the memetic evolution is from the simpler ideas and actions to the more complex ideas and actions: Because we each have a different memetic history, we are further differentiated from one another. The distinction is that while genetic variation happens without material external influences, memetic evolution is complicated by the effect of the human mind on the development and transmission of the meme.

One can only speculate on the pre-Pagan world or pre-Pagan development. Rudimentary Ethics and Morals needed to evolve before human groups could form and maintain themselves. Simple rules of dominance and interaction probably came into being. This is barely above the animal instinct level, but it may have been the beginning step. Rudimentary Ethics and Morals probably even predated the first concern of a leader who asked himself the questions, "What is the world, and why are we here?" This kind of concern about those ideas may have resulted in the initial primitive god concept. I propose that Modern Atheism

is an evolved state of consciousness. Meme changes over time have allowed some individuals to advance beyond the shackles of emotional conditioning and cultural straight jackets. Let us look in more detail at this memetic evolution to a state of reason.

Genetic evolution is inherently slow. There is one opportunity for change with the birth of every human. Memetically, there are opportunities for change every hour of every day of an individual's life. Natural events, reason, and emotion can mold the individual and affect the memes of a group. Although reasoning and persuasion are perceived as extremely slow, they are much faster than genetic evolution. I doubt that there is any great biological difference between modern humans and the people of 2000 years ago. But consider the difference in our lives and culture today compared with what we know of that earlier time. Memes have changed significantly while the genes are still fairly much the same. Even so, it appears that persuasion is a slow, tedious way of changing minds. This seems apparent to us since our lives are brief compared with the panoply of history. The limited time frame of our individual lives makes an authentic perspective on human progress extremely difficult.

Memes are affected by environmental considerations and by two human mental qualities. These two qualities are our emotional nature, and our ability to think and reason. Since we evolved as emotional animals, our emotions are by far the strongest influence on memes. Reasoning and thinking and discovering facts (the same results from the same actions) are relatively new human capabilities and are not as well ingrained in our neural makeup as our emotional responses which have had millennia to become entrenched.

Since we are primarily emotionally driven, memes have a fertile environment in which to flourish. In our family and our safe group environment we are exposed to many influences and actions. Due to our basic emotional nature, the unthinking acceptance of all these actions is readily effected. Cultures tend to stagnate and become more and more ingrown as they mature. Ideas and social rituals perpetuate easily, because the strong inner feelings of most individuals do not dispute the prevailing memetic ambience. When reason comes into play and contradicts the established meme, it is often discounted and ridiculed as being anti-social besides being counter to what everyone knows is "true."

Because of this blocking by the emotional response, social and attitudinal changes are extremely difficult and slow. Reasonable change takes a back seat to the prevailing attitudes of what is "right," particularly when that change affects basic "feel good" sensibilities and fearsome unknown futures. Due to this reaction against reason, our emotional natures have a great inhibiting influence on memetic evolution. For the human animal, there has always been safety in numbers, and this is no less true for maintaining the status quo against the assault on beliefs and life outlooks as it is for the preservation of the body politic against physical attacks.

"We are all created equal," is the maxim of modern democratic societies. This obviously refers to the fact that we are all sentient human beings, and we deserve to be treated fairly with dignity, respect and equality in the community. We are just as obviously all different physically and intellectually with different

dispositions, and we are skilled and talented to varying extents in a broad variety of realms. We have a range of physical size and strength. We vary in our interests and those things which please us. The wide range of I Q and similar tests indicate we have diverse and unequal mental faculties.

Intellectually, some persons are more open to considering new ideas and trying to discover facts about our world. These are the individuals who may not accept the current ideas or actions. Very often this is because they have applied clear thinking to the situation. This more easily happens in the mind of a person who has a questioning nature and is intelligent enough to recognize the inconsistencies in the generally accepted norms when they clash with the facts.

This recognition makes the person uncomfortable enough that they rebel within themselves and admit they cannot accept the irrational norm. This discomfort is known as cognitive dissonance. If they have the strength of conviction to express themselves publicly, they have brought reason into the public awareness arena and may influence a meme change in the greater culture. This requires intellectual interaction with others, and the ability to persuade the community effectively of the correctness of the meme change.

Persuasion meets with much resistance when it encounters our emotional nature. Our emotional reactions are deeply entrenched and therefore seem very right to us. Changing them is upsetting and feels wrong. This is the primary factor which slows meme change. Personal experience and familiarity with concrete situations concerning a meme change are usually much more convincing and speedy methods of making the change. If we become intimately familiar with a person of another race and discover their "Humanness", our attitude towards that race changes. If we love a relative or other person and discover they feel at odds with the general society, we often are willing to examine why they are different. We do this because of our personal relationship with them.

Sometimes we change our thinking to accept their difference which effects a change in the collective cultural meme. Regrettably, these enlightening events are not always available, and persons remain resolute in their ideas, however wrong they may be. We are usually constrained to the much easier process of just allowing the emotional acceptance of memes to occur, rather than switching to a new rational meme.

Genetic evolution results in the wide diversity of life which we see around us. Memetic evolution results in the wide diversity of human opinions, attitudes, aims, beliefs, practices, social organization and religions which make life studies fascinating, but at the same time makes agreement about world view among diverse groups very difficult. There is no better example of these differences than the multiplicity of religions to be found in human society. Religion is perhaps the strongest and most deeply ingrained meme to be found in Homo Sapiens.

Modern religions come in many varieties. In a very general sense, religions evolved from the early earth god; to female gods when the idea that females were the wellspring of all life; to male gods when it was thought males were the source of life and females were simply incubators; to later, more sophisticated ideas which admit that both sexes have something to do with the source of life; to esoteric ideas of mystical gods with other than material existence; to

unnamable super forces which control the universe; to the rejection of all these previous cabalistic doctrines of religions and gods in every form as being without substance. The Modern Atheist position denies the validity of myths and speculation as worthwhile foundations for life decisions or for methods of viewing existence. Science has invalidated most of the ignorant positions on which religions were founded and makes Modern Atheism a much more tenable position.

I claim that all these forms of philosophical positions will continue to exist because of the inexact cognition faculties of individual humans and the pervasive appeal of emotional memes. Just as genetic evolution leaves a trail of it's unfolding, so memetic evolution leaves a trail of intellectual maturation. There are those individuals who still profess the existence of gods in rocks or other Pagan ideas through all the enormous range of religious fancies to the Modern Atheist. We will probably always have representatives of the ancient ideas with us, just as we have representatives of many evolutionary forms of life existing to the present day.

I believe that the grounds for most international disputes are found in religion and the attitudes that, "I am right, and you are wrong", or "This is inherently mine and you have no claim on it." Consider the disputes of the three major religions over the so called "Holy Land." Since it is part of the history of all of them, at one time or another, they all have felt it should be under their control. I am convinced that without the religious components, the parties could arrive at equitable positions with a reasonable negotiation. But the fighting has been going on for hundreds of years and there seems to be no end in sight. It is one of the most outrageous situations in the world where religion is the problem, not the solution. It is not difficult to find religion to be the culprit in most other such conflicts.

What can we do to help the situation? Education is at the root of resolving the difficulty. A sign of hope is that there is a correlation of higher intelligence with the easier acceptance of the Modern Atheist position. The article "The Effect of Intelligence on Religious Faith" by Burnham Beckwith in FREE INQUIRY Spring 1986, and the Atheist- Statistics page on the Internet document. Because of the explosion of knowledge, we are rapidly evolving in the scientific world. However, this demands the acceptance of the scientific method and reasonable thought and logic processes.

As higher intelligence and rationality are rewarded by success in life, they must be directed to the issues of mystical beliefs and exposing them to critical analysis. If a pattern of more meticulous thinking becomes widespread, it may enable a greater number of persons to develop better cognition and to question the basis for their early religious ideas also. This could affect the religion meme and promote a reasonable, not an emotional, outlook on life, although there will always be those who need the comfortable support which their irrational beliefs offer.

A total change toward Atheism is unrealistic. Perhaps only a little greater change would be sufficient. Even for those who cannot accept the position of denying the existence of god, it seems to me that reasonable arguments can sometimes lead them to accept rational cultural ideas and mesh them with their

religious tenets. The human mind is capable of fascinating acrobatics when a person wishes to make disparate concepts come into alignment. It is not necessary to completely change the underlying attitudes to make reasonable ideas acceptable.

Our hope is that the use of reason will become the standard method of cultural memetic advancement, and that memetic evolution along the religion to non-religion continuum will become more rapid. Reason, not ingrained fancies, will have to prevail for the success of world wide efforts to preserve our environment and our species. Until we, as the human race, can put aside unsubstantiated attitudes and face our common problems with the intellect of which we are capable, we will have a difficult time in finally making the world a desirable place for everyone. Bringing reason to the problems and broadcasting the sensible, intelligent aspects of the solutions is the challenge we face. Basing our culture on reason is the end toward which we Modern Atheists must direct our efforts.

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EMOTIONS:

The Bane of Human Existence

We human animals are emotionally driven. Animal life has dealt with emotions ever since the first small primitive animal recoiled from a perceived bad situation, or moved toward perceived food. I do not claim to be an expert on emotions, but I am an expert on being an 85 year old man who has experienced and observed emotions all my life. I am a practical person, and this will be a practical dissertation on my ideas on the effect of emotions as best as I can enunciate my thoughts.

There are those who would claim that most of everything we do is based on our emotions. This seems probable to me, and I would not refute it. However, I do believe there must be some room for what we call reason, also. But before we consider reason let us first examine emotions.

As mentioned above, the earliest simple organisms reacted to their environment. The evolution of these reactions produced the various senses which all animals have to greater or lesser degrees. As evolution proceeded these senses became tied together in a central sensory zone which we call a brain. Having senses and a brain turned out to be favorable qualities for promoting the survival of animals and thus fostering the evolution of greater and more complex systems of brains and senses.

The evolution of more complex senses paralleled the evolution of more complex physical animal structures with their greater capability to manipulate the environment. This amazing evolution has resulted in the human animal which is the most complex and most highly developed animal yet to exist. An animal

which can now control its environment for better or for worse.

What are emotions? I think emotions are nothing more than the composite and variegated reactions between the senses. Being tied together in the brain all the senses can quickly interact to affect the total body responses. Our senses and the analysis provided by the brain result in what we experience as emotion.. Our brain is the moderator and decides what we feel which drives us to accommodate and to progress in a fashion to quell the emotion or do whatever else is necessary for experiencing the emotion and for adjusting our reactions.

One of the qualities of these complicated gadgets we call brains is that we are aware of ourselves and our surroundings. Since we are aware and have sensual input all the time, the senses interact in the brain and result in the emotions affecting various parts of the body and result in our feelings. We are aware of an event in the environment, and we have visceral reactions. We “feel” it in the pit of our stomach or “in our heart”. The event can cause us to laugh or cry or have other reactions through the reciprocal influences going on in the brain.

These emotions have a very strong influence on our behavior. They are the bane of our existence because they are the “first responders”. They are deeply ingrained in our psyche.. They often lead us in a direction which is not constructive for resolving the situation in which we find ourselves. They do this because they have had literally millions of years to develop and to hone their capacity of leading our actions.

Emotions per se are neither good nor bad. They evidently have enabled us to survive and thrive in an hostile World. For that reason I would say they are all beneficial to us. They may become “Good” or “Bad” in how we use them and how the human culture views our actions. Major determinants of our actions are the ingrained mores of the social system in which we grew up and with which we were indoctrinated. However, sometimes inappropriate reactions still had satisfactory outcomes and we did not learn to discriminate as to which are useful and which are not useful emotions. This is where reason must now step in.

Because of our training and our observation of others, we have learned certain customary predispositions to act in particular ways. As infants we had no defense against receiving this input. However as we grow older we may learn to question the usual behaviors and form our own opinion of them. Not everyone does this. Many people live their whole life with no desire ever to dispute what they are told by those who they perceive to be in charge and who assume the roles of leaders or masters.

There seems to be some other quality in many person’s brains which fosters doubt. Those brains discover that questions sometimes bring satisfaction in creating change or in learning more about their cultural or physical environment. This quality, like most other physical and intellectual qualities, has different strengths in different individuals. Perhaps this questioning nature is at the forefront of intellectual and social evolution of the species. It may lead the way to intellectual advancement and further control of the environment. Growing up need not be a finite process. It may well be a life long pursuit, and even be

enjoyable also. Not all individuals may have the same penchant for growing up. Just as all human qualities are variable, this is no different.. I believe those who make the effort can continue to “grow up” through their entire life and through their experience become the wise old people which society needs to continue to adapt to worldly changes.

This doubting quality of some brains led to the reasoning process which developed into a search for facts. The function of being inquiring enables us to understand new attitudes and situations. This reasoning process is the foundation of scientific inquiry and results in the best available answers to all questions. However, this clear thinking process is not very old in terms of development compared with the eons over which the emotions have evolved. Being the newcomers on the block the reasoning process is at a disadvantage with respect to the well ingrained emotional responses. For this condition of being in second place, we must be constantly doubly diligent in considering reason over emotion in all situations.

Perhaps it would be wise to keep a skeptical attitude just below the surface of our consciousness, not to be continually negative, but to be ready to question, at least to ourselves the validity of the inputs we receive. This would function as a fact filter which would examine the information we are receiving and being exposed to and serve as a determining process for moderating how factual the new information is. This is not difficult to do if we keep in mind what facts are. Facts tend to come from valid authoritative sources, such as qualified scientific groups and from correctly perceived and understood personal experiences. The groups which continually examine their premises, tests, logic and results are the most reliable foundations for information. They are the groups which are willing to change their understanding when new and convincing evidence is available and proven correct.

Non-factual sources are opinions, speculations, propaganda, rumors, and other such unrestrained ideas which are not critically examined. They are ideas which might be right, but on the surface demonstrate no convincing evidence or truth. Unfortunately, these are the bulk of the information sources to which we are exposed. It is no wonder that most persons are confused or sometimes erratic in their beliefs and ideas when we are bombarded by a cacophony of conflicting ideas and misinformation all the time. It is in face of this a onslaught that our ability to reason must be ever vigilant. We must be able to keep in mind that facts are the only responsible route to truthful reality. They are the best guide to accurate ideas.

To live according to the best information available, we must all be well versed in the in the examination of facts and the structure of logic. Emotions are fine for experiencing life and enjoying the human interaction with the World and other people, but when we must interpret the World and plan our individual actions, we must always be prepared to invoke reason over emotions to obtain the best result. Reliable results are based in fact.

NON - THEISM IN THE MODERN WORLD
SUNDAY, MAY 28TH, 2000
JOHN BOENKE

Religion! As an adjective, religious means pertaining to religion. As a noun, it refers to a very religious person. This one set of words is used to describe most of the people who believe in some sort of God. They are religious.

Non Theism! On the other hand, those who do not believe in a god have been labeled with a plethora of names. Some of these are atheist, which simply means apart from god; and agnostic, which is a word coined by Thomas Huxley circa 1840. It is from the Greek agnostikos which translates as “not knowing”. He intended this word to indicate there was insufficient evidence for the existence of god, and he was still seeking for the proof. Then there are heretic, infidel, heathen or pagan, which are all intended to be derogatory. Some other names are chosen by groups to indicate their particular position, such as secular humanist, logical positivist, free thinkers, humanists, deists, ethical culturists, and so on.

Throughout all of ancient time there were those few who, for whatever reasons, objected to the church and its formalized rituals and controls. These were the ones for whom the previously mentioned derogatory names were conceived. Oftentimes even the highly religious were condemned as “atheist” simply because they did not completely agree with the current doctrines and challenged the existing hierarchy.

All of these philosophical positions can be described as Non-Theist. They all indicate a certain degree of disagreement with the idea of gods, especially the single god concept. Because they disagree with the prevailing majority position, they are defined in the negative. But Non-Theism is not a negative position. Indeed, most non-theist groups look on the human community in a positive way, and declare the inherent goodness of the human animal. We prefer to think of non-theism as a positive position.

Why non-theism? We non-theists like things which make sense. We are impressed not only by the illuminating qualities of the advances of science, but by our own personal experience with the real world. This knowledge demands that we have reasonable explanations of the wonders of the natural world. We believe in science and the scientific method. We require rigorous proofs. We are not persuaded by anecdotal sources, one of a kind experimental results, or uncontrolled methods of experimentation. We like new information to be consistent with that which is already known, and to be reproducible by many competent sources. Mythical stories, unproveable histories, and mystical beliefs just do not hold water for us.

Why do we not believe in god? I can speak only for myself. My position is that there is insufficient proof that a god or gods exist. Turning that question around, I would ask the religious to critically analyze how they have arrived at the position of believing in god? What is the background of their belief?

And why their particular god? Why not one of the many other available gods? Where is the justification? What is the clear history or validating information that proves their god indeed exists?

Think about that for a moment. If we had grown up in ancient Rome would we not also believe in all the gods they had at their disposal? I think we would. We all believe things on the basis of what we can justify to ourselves. That a polytheistic position is not the accepted norm in these days in our culture, is an outgrowth of the influences we all felt growing up in this society. A monotheistic system seems “right” to us because that is what we have mainly experienced all our lives.

Unfortunately, I believe most of us accept only what our parents, friends, and surrounding culture claims is right. I did that for a long time, but eventually I questioned myself strongly enough to change my attitude.

Taking a serious look at what you believe and why, especially why you believe it, is a very enlightening experience. It is particularly edifying if you take the trouble to write it out. Putting ones beliefs into words which justify your position, makes one really think of what he or she is actually saying. Generating hard copy and reading it back to yourself is an interesting experience.

I like the quote from Stephen F. Roberts which says, “I contend that we are both atheists. I just believe in one fewer god than you do. When you truly understand why you dismiss all the other possible gods, you will understand why I dismiss yours.”

Non-Theism in the modern world!! Thankfully, it is becoming more and more easy to feel comfortable as a non-theist. With all the knowledge developed in the last century, the 20th century, it becomes more and more apparent that this physical world in which we find ourselves needs no justification at all. It is simply a physical world doing what physical worlds do. Things that exist are finding their explanations in the facts of science and are leaving the vanishing sphere of mysticism behind.

Consider our earliest ancestors who learned to plant seeds and harvest plants. They did not understand the process going on, but they needed to explain it. This is because the human mind is a pattern seeking device which demands answers. To satisfy the unfinished loop; the unanswered question of why plants grow; the idea of an earth “god” was conceived. The Earth God makes the plant grow out of the ground. That answered the question, and the human could go on and deal with the other, more serious, problems in its life. Similarly with other natural phenomena, Gods were established who oversaw all of the unexplained events in the world from the daily light and dark, to thunderstorms, to emotional experiences. In this manner humankind entered the age of polytheism or Paganism as many would call it.

This was a constructive development as it allowed peace in the minds of human beings. Thus the human mind was free to explore more of the environment. Not having to worry about the unexplainable, allowed human beings more time to pursue other important matters relating to survival.

However, over a period of time the concept of many gods became cumbersome. For a variety of reasons, the idea of a single god evolved as being more convenient. If you look at all the major religions, single gods or at least one major god have become the dominant concept in the area of faith centered convictions.

This was useful for quite a while in the development of civilization and cultural communities. It led to the formalization of the belief into the organizations called churches, temples, mosques, etc. The church leaders enunciated doctrines and prescribed rites to consolidate the religious ideas. This helped to establish stable communities which contributed to the development of more complex cultures. Through this process the churches and the head persons of the church became very strong influences in the society.

However, as knowledge grew and humankind learned more of the working of the physical world, conflicts arose. Practical persons who learned truths through observations, measurements, reasoning and deductions, were strongly opposed by the church when these truths clashed with church doctrines. There are many such examples of this in history. The discoveries of Gallileo, Copernicus and Darwin come to mind. So the human race developed a conflict in its attempts to progress. The church demanded things remain in the status quo, and the Intelligencia understood that the church position was simply wrong. Although the idea of religion and the church was a boon to early humankind, it became the greatest obstacle to progress in later years.

Indeed, many entrenched religious beliefs are still the greatest barrier to the acceptance of each step in the revelations of scientific development. Even here in the 21st century, the bulk of the human population does not understand science, and most people do not accept the inconsistency of their mystical beliefs when compared to facts, nor yet do they realize the mental processes or the basis for mystical beliefs.

Because of this conflict between physical facts which have been discovered and illuminated by science, and the tenets of religious faith based in myths and ancient stories, the dissenters grew in numbers during the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries.

Some of our heroes from this era are Ludwig Feuerbach, who maintained that worship of god was only the worship of the idealized self; Bruno Bauer, a theologian and religious writer who criticized the bible and became an avowed atheist; Charles Bradlaugh, who was prosecuted for printing birth control information, but who was also able to get a law passed allowing simply affirming the truth to be acceptable in a court of law rather than swearing to truth on the bible; Karl Gjellerup, a Danish Nobel Laureate and atheist; Bertrand Russell, philosopher, mathematician, Nobel Laureate, and champion of free thought; and Robert Ingersoll, lawyer, orator and agnostic who claimed the only way to find happiness was to make others happy.

These are not necessarily the most outstanding examples of non-theists, but they are representative at least, and each occupies an important niche in the evolution of dissension and non-theism. They were often the only clarion voices in the whirling maelstrom of irrational belief and action. As the years pass their heritage grows more important with each generation of those who would not be stifled by dogmatism and the few who resist being made to conform.

This process of learning truths and dropping faith centered ideas, continues in an ever increasing and self generating process. As more and more people become aware of the truths to be found in the physical universe, they find better ways of dealing with the vicissitudes of living in the modern world by the acceptance of reality and by utilizing a reasonable response which is not conditioned by mysticism.

Even the current experimental investigations of the human brain indicate there are valid and understandable explanations to the way brains work and how and why we experience our feelings. Emotions are certainly among the most complex of all biological reactions in the physical world.

Outstanding scientists such as Sir Francis Crick the co-discoverer of the DNA molecule who wrote *The Astonishing Hypothesis*, Joseph LeDoux whose latest book is *The Emotional Brain*, and science writer Daniel Goleman who wrote *Emotional Intelligence* and other books, have contributed much to the popular understanding of the workings of the brain and emotions. Although the subject of emotions and how we feel, and the way we go about interpreting our experiences is intriguing, it would require much more time than we have available now for a thorough exposition.

I predict the 21st century will be different than the last several centuries in the area of personal belief of people. The human race will finally have to face courageously the real “facts of life”. Science has grown, and is growing increasingly rapidly in all areas of human activity. From quarks, the smallest particles, to the largest black holes, galaxies and families of galaxies; from the human genome to the interactions of people at the world culture and global communication level; and from ordinary everyday life to interplanetary experiences; the human animal is spreading through the physical world and acquiring greater and greater knowledge in every aspect of physical existence. This knowledge is factual knowledge, it is consistent knowledge, and it is repeatable, understandable and reliable in all senses of these words.

It will take a realistic understanding of the physical world to cope with the needs of the 21st century. It will take courage and determination based in a sense of human responsibility and accountability. It will take facing up to the fact that we human beings are the ones creating the problems, and ultimately we must be the ones to solve them. No god is going to solve the problems for us or take care of us. With the population at 6 billion individuals and growing, it will take moral fiber which is learned by experience and reason. Inflexible codes which are prescribed by entrenched leaders with parochial views will no longer be adequate.

Consider where we were 1000 years ago. That period is called the dark ages for very sufficient reason. It was in about the year 1050 AD when the

migrations of the middle ages ended with the beginning of stable towns and the growth of town life. None of what we deal with every day in the year 2000 CE had even been conceived at that time. Very little of the thought and knowledge we take for granted today would be developed until much later. Indeed, not until the last decades of the last century did our burgeoning intellectual wealth become so great that some of it is beyond the comprehension of most of us.

With the continuing studies and research going on in the world today, greater and greater understanding of the way that world works emerges momentarily. At no previous time in our history have we been so well positioned to comprehend our world and the physical processes which control it. Regard where we start this millennium compared with where we started the last millennium, and the expanding future of the human race is practically unimaginable.

In the modern world, where more and more of the physical world is understood; less and less of it is left to the explanation of uninformed, illogical individuals who depend only on their imagination. The concept that “God” is doing all that we experience becomes less attractive as an explanation. That which depends on fact rather than faith is much more appealing as a realistic position.

Non-Theism is currently a resurgent conviction among many groups of persons. There are the American Humanists, the Freedom From Religion Foundation, the Secular Humanists, the American Atheists, the Infidels, and many other such groups with growing followings. Non Theism encompasses all of these. The interesting thing about these groups is that they espouse the highest of moral values and promote high ethical standards in the pursuit of living satisfying lives without using a god who is trying to enforce good behavior. It is not necessary to have an intimidating God looking over your shoulder to live perfectly decent and indeed, very worthwhile and useful lives. Finally: Why am I a Non-Theist? To me it is very simple and clear.

1.) I do not believe there is any credible evidence that God exists. Nothing nor no one exhibits any irrefutable proof of that. As our physical world becomes more knowable to us, it is less necessary to make up gods to explain things. Our emotional support comes basically from people; not from mystical things. Human beings have been looking for a god for thousands; and tens of thousands of years. No credible god has been found yet. How long should we keep looking?

2.) God is not necessary for a physical world to exist. The physical world is full of facts and reasons and mechanisms which show why things are the way they are. It is simply a physical world doing what physical worlds do. We are deeply enmeshed in it and have evolved as an inseparable part of it. It is superfluous to create a god to explain that which has very reasonable explanations in the real world. But I understand this is the point which most people have trouble accepting.

3.) I, and all of us, can subscribe to ethical behavior and moral actions on the basis of reason and without the coercion of religious proscriptions. Moral and ethical codes grew up independently of religion and largely prior to its formalization. Even before the code of Hammurabi of Babylonia almost 4000 years

ago, people had learned through social evolution a great deal of what it takes to live peaceably and constructively together. Being moral and ethical is just good common sense in interacting with the rest of the human race.

4.) I am perfectly capable of enjoying my emotions and the pleasures of life, the world, and knowing and interacting with other people without needing the concept of god to instruct or to guide me.

5.) Without the baggage of an entrenched mystical belief, I feel I am more free to follow reason and logic which are based in provable facts while seeking positive actions to work towards solving the pressing problems in the world. Unencumbered by irrational ideas, I can realistically assess the facts of life and relationships to find the most constructive methods of living a useful, rewarding, and satisfying life.

So there you have it. Non-Theism works for me and will work for many people in the new millennium. Consider all this carefully and observe whether it seems reasonable to you also. Thank you for listening.

READINGS:

NON THEISM MAY 28th 2000

There are three readings today. The first two are quotes from Dr. Albert Einstein who was very appropriately named the person of the 20th century. These quotes are reported in the book, “Albert Einstein: The Human Side” 1954 Princeton University Press, which was edited by Helen Dukas and Banesh Hoffmann, two long time associates of Dr. Einstein.

In 1936, responding to a child who wrote and asked if scientists pray, Einstein said, “Scientific research is based on the idea that everything that takes place is determined by laws of nature, and therefore this holds for the action of people. For this reason, a research scientist will hardly be inclined to believe that events could be influenced by a prayer, that is, by a wish addressed to a Supernatural Being.”

The second quote is, “It was, of course, a lie what you read about my religious convictions, a lie which is being systematically repeated. I do not believe in a personal God and I have never denied this but have expressed it clearly. If something is in me which can be called religious then it is the unbounded admiration for the structure of the world so far as our science can reveal it.”

The third reading is from the American Atheists, an organization which evolved out of a court case begun in 1959 by the Murray family. They challenged prayer recitation in the public schools. That case -- Murray v. Curlett -- was a landmark in American jurisprudence on behalf of our First Amendment rights. It began:

“Your petitioners are Atheists, and they define their lifestyle as follows. An Atheist loves himself and his fellow man instead of a god. An Atheist accepts that heaven is something for which we should work now -- here on earth -- for all men together to enjoy. An Atheist accepts that he can get no help through prayer, but that he must find in himself the inner conviction and strength to meet life, to grapple with it, to subdue it and to enjoy it. An Atheist accepts that only in a knowledge of himself and a knowledge of his fellow man can he find the understanding that will help to live a life of fulfillment.”

I Know What I Believe !!!!
John D. Boenke

We all know what we believe. A problem arises when we don't understand the difference between knowing and believing. Recently, I read an article in the Nov - Dec 2000 Skeptical Inquirer, titled "Why Bad Beliefs Don't Die", by Dr. Gregory Lester. It gives a bit better insight to the belief problem and a greater understanding of what is going on with beliefs. Among other things, Dr. Lester says, "Because beliefs are designed to enhance our ability to survive, they are biologically designed to be strongly resistant to change. To change beliefs, skeptics must address the brain's 'survival' issues of meanings and implications in addition to discussing their data." When Dr. Lester uses the term "designed", I believe he means the process of being developed by the actions of natural selection in evolution.

There are things we know, and then there are things we believe. A difficulty arises where we cannot separate the two. For instance, I know the color of my shirt. I can look at it, see the color and express what it is. The shirt is here and I have immediate sensory perception of it. I also know that two plus two is four and I can prove it. If I have two piles of two beans each, and a third pile of four beans, I can count them. Pile one: one, two. Pile two, one, two. Pile three, one, two, three, four. Now if I put the first and second piles together, essentially add them, and count, they are: one, two, three, four. They match one for one the pile of four beans, hence they number four. Two and two is four. Now I know that is true even though I may not have the beans here in front of me to demonstrate it. The concept is so well established that there is no counter belief to confront it. And if there were a contrary opinion, it could easily be refuted. Without some tangible way to prove two plus two is four though, I base my belief on vast earlier experience, and most would not challenge that, but again, to be absolutely sure, I would have to go through the proof. Another thing which I know is that my car is parked out in the parking lot. I know it is Maroon in color and the license is TIQ 466. If I am lucky, I might even remember where in the lot it is parked.

These three examples represent different kinds of knowing. I know the color of my shirt because I have immediate sensory input which tells me the color, and I do not need to rely on any other information. I know that two and two is four even though there may be no immediate sensory information, because of a deep ingrained past experience with numbers. I also know the car is in the parking lot because I remember that is where I left it.

These later two situations though, have to be in the area of beliefs. At the moment, I do not see, hear or feel my car, but I believe it is where I left it. Therefore, I can go on with other activities and not worry about the car. Nevertheless, the car may no longer be there. It could have been stolen, and I would not know that until I went looking for it. At that point, I would gain new knowledge which would drastically refute my previous knowledge. Until I have direct sensory experience though, my beliefs remain unchanged. Even with the tangible experience, I might say, "No, this can't be. My car must be here somewhere. I just don't remember where I parked."

Eventually though, I would have to accept the new facts unless I invented another solution to the mismatch by saying, "The car is here. It has just become invisible, so I can't see it." That would be another solution to the problem and may relieve me a little, but it would not have any practical value.

The origination of Beliefs produced a method of replacing and supplanting direct knowledge when direct knowledge was not available. Consider the "cave man" leaving his cave very cautiously because he believed there might be dangerous animals outside. He could not see any or hear them, but they had been there before and he thus "believed" they might be there again. Beliefs can keep us comfortable or uncomfortable about the state of our world even though there is no direct evidence at the moment of the way things are. The beliefs are based on past experience, and reality may have changed since the situation was last encountered.

According to Michael Shermer in his book, *Why People Believe Weird Things*, "Humans are pattern seeking animals. We search for meaning in a complex, quirky, and contingent world. But we are also storytelling animals, and for thousands of years our myths and religions have sustained us with stories of meaningful patterns—of gods and God, of supernatural beings and mystical forces, of the relationship between humans with other humans and their creators, and of our place in the cosmos. One of the reasons why humans continue thinking magically is that the modern, scientific way of thinking is a couple of hundred years old, whereas humanity has existed for a couple of hundred thousand years."

In a very real sense, we are the slaves of our beliefs in a similar way in which we are slaves of our emotions and our habits if they are not controlled. The belief mechanism evolved the same way emotions evolved. They both have a long head start on so called "rational thinking". Life began three or more billions of years ago. During all that time sensory reactions and then later, emotions, were becoming inextricably well embedded in our behavior. Since the evolution of complex brains in early humans some hundreds of thousands of years ago, belief engines have operated and have also become well entrenched in our reactions and in our basic make up.

In his book, Mr. Shermer emphasizes the situation that belief engines in our brains had thousands of years to evolve, but reasonable thinking has had a relatively shorter time span. Thus, it is no wonder that beliefs are stronger and more deeply entrenched than rational, or as I prefer, reasonable thinking.

Mr. Shermer goes on to say in a later paragraph, "We evolved to be skilled, pattern-seeking, causal-finding creatures. Those who were best at finding patterns (standing upwind of game is bad for the hunt, cow manure is good for the crops) left behind the most offspring. We are their descendants. The problem in seeking and finding patterns is knowing which ones are meaningful and which ones are not. Unfortunately our brains are not always good at determining the difference. The reason is that discovering a meaningless pattern (painting animals on a cave wall before a hunt) usually does no harm and may even do some good in reducing anxiety in uncertain situations. So we are left with the legacy of two types of thinking errors: *Type 1 Error: believing a falsehood* and *Type 2 Error: rejecting a truth*. Since these errors will not necessarily get us killed, they persist. The Belief Engine has evolved as a mechanism for helping us to

survive because in addition to committing Type 1 and Type 2 Errors, we also commit what we might call a *Type 1 Hit: not believing a falsehood* and a *Type 2 Hit: believing a truth.*"

So beliefs filled very important functions in maintaining and propagating the race. For that reason they survived, and the brain mechanisms which were responsible for them survived and prospered also. Now that we are reasonable beings and can think for ourselves, or that is what we like to think and it is a commonly accepted view, we should concern ourselves with questioning the old beliefs which were needed for survival in the past but which today are superfluous. That is my opinion because it feels to me to be much safer to periodically examine where we are, than to speculate that nothing has changed. Basically, we should rely on things which can be proved rather than things which are merely assumed to be true. But how do we go about changing beliefs? How do we change ours? How do we change the beliefs of others?

It seems to me there are three phases to changing beliefs. Actually they are the same steps we go through in learning beliefs in the first place. We have all gone through them. Think for a moment about the things you believe now compared with the things you believed as a child. Certainly, they have changed. How did the change occur? First, you were exposed to alternate ideas. You became aware that your beliefs could be otherwise than what they were by someone pointing out another way of viewing the belief. Second, somehow you were convinced that adopting a new belief or changing the belief you held was not life threatening or even a major inconvenience in any way. And third, you became comfortable with the alternative belief and even saw advantages to holding it. Let us examine these stages in more detail.

The first step is an obvious first one. We must be aware of alternate views before we can even start considering them. We learn of other beliefs by reading them in books, hearing others espouse them, or seeing them in operation. Beliefs are so deeply entrenched, our natural reaction is to try to discredit new beliefs which challenge our convictions because the new ideas interfere with the operation of our total being. This is an inborn defense mechanism which protected us as a species in the early days of our development. We had to believe things while we had no immediate sensation of them, and we had to believe the things which had worked in the past. This ability allowed us to deal most effectively with the then present conditions.

The second step is perhaps the most critical one. It requires being open minded and recognizing there are alternative ways of viewing reality. This can happen just by being exposed to persons with other beliefs and becoming comfortable with them. But in the modern world it also happens by what we choose to call scientific investigation which is a purposeful examination. We have become what we call rational beings. We can look at situations and decide the similarities or repetitive nature of them. We can analyze and measure them. We can communicate with others and reach an agreement as to what is going on in the situation and make rules about it. When we see a new consistency in the situation, it is easier to acknowledge a change in belief and allow its acceptance because of the new reliable findings.

This is especially true if the new ideas can be shown to be non threatening or not inconsistent with the rest of our understanding. In its best form this analytic method is strictly controlled and is called the scientific method. Perhaps it would be well to elaborate at this time a little further on what the scientific method is and is not.

First, what is science? Again from Michael Shermer's book, *Why People Believe Weird Things*, I quote the following taken from a Creation Science case, *McLean vs Arkansas*, in 1981. "Overton (Federal Judge William R. Overton) then listed the 'essential characteristics' of science as outlined by the expert witnesses, '(1) It is guided by natural law; (2) It has to be explanatory by reference to natural law; (3) It is testable against the empirical world; (4) Its conclusions are tentative; and (5) It is falsifiable.'" This, I think is a rather concise and clear description of what science is. The scientific method then is, organizing the investigation of science by forming Hypotheses, testing them, adjusting them, comparing them with other scientists and continually probing and verifying them. It is an on going process which is always open to new reliable information. It leads to consistent Theories and Laws which are the best and most realistic explanations of the natural world which we have.

Normally, I would say people are allowed to belief whatever they wish as long as their behavior is not anti-social. There is a problem in this universal acceptance though, in that some beliefs are harmful to those who hold them, hurtful to others, and some beliefs even menace the world in which we all must live. In those cases, the belief of others may threaten everyone, and there is a good reason to attempt to change them. Of course, this is debatable, and some would say there is never a reason to try to change another persons belief, but I do not hold with that. Presuming we have a good reason to change beliefs, how do we do it?

I maintain the process is mostly an educational procedure. The three steps must be followed. First, present alternatives, second show they are non threatening and are consistent with reasonable and safe outlooks on life, and third help others to become comfortable with the new ideas and beliefs. I would emphasize the critical step is the second one where a person must be made to see that a new belief can be integrated into their basic outlook on life and will not jeopardize their Psyche, their soul, their spirit or whatever else is important to them. Obviously, this is easier said than done, but the manner of achieving the change is in itself very simple and straight forward. Education is after all the prime mover.

A SECULAR CHRISTMAS

John D. Boenke

We come again to that time of year when Santa Clause comes to the mall and the infant Jesus comes to church. What does the committed Atheist, Secular Humanist, or Non Theist do in this sort of environment? The Christian religious activities have permeated our culture to the degree that they are inescapable and surround us physically and socially. Christmas trees and Santa Clause are unavoidable wherever we turn. We are assaulted with Christmas Carols in public and private places, and we are sent Christmas cards and expected to send them in return. Children expect presents and feel left out if they do not receive them because their peers brag about what they received.

In a Forum article in the Winter 2005 U U World magazine, Meg Cox raises the question of what do non theists do at Christmas time? Her suggestions range from ignoring it, to revising celebrations, or co-opting other activities with a Secular spin, or looking for new rituals. We certainly do not have to conform to society, if what society does is uncomfortable for us. But likewise we do not have to discard the season as though it were totally corrupting and had no social value. Let us take a new look at our society and consider an approach which is satisfying yet uncompromising to our basic outlook.

Molleen Matsumura talks of standard traditions in an article from the Fall 1993 Free Inquiry magazine. However, she advocates avoiding participation and is able to combine the traditions of the Japanese culture in the events. She feels accommodation is appropriate to avoid injuring other persons feelings especially the older generation as in joining in singing Christmas carols. But she also makes a case for new secular holidays.

At the opposite end of the spectrum is Tom Flynn, editor of Free Inquiry magazine. In an article in Free Inquiry in The Fall 1993 issue, he says in part: "As members of an unpopular out-group, we should consider the message we send the larger culture when we yield so easily to Christmas. Accommodation earns only contempt. If non-Christians keep feasts, whether winter solstice or Chanukah, so much like Christmas that the difference goes unnoticed, the myth of religious and philosophical unanimity in American life is reinforced. We infidels have a stirring, even inspiring message. We tell of an undersigned, unintended and unmanaged universe filled with possibility. We proclaim that this life is all we have, that the only meanings we can depend on are the ones we create for ourselves. We embody the ideals of life and love without religion. Yet who will listen to us if we appear as hypocrites because we cannot muster the will to forgo a holiday whose history and principles we would reject in any other setting? I cannot think of a more graphic way for atheists, agnostics, freethinkers, and secular humanists to "out themselves" than for large numbers of us to live our beliefs openly, and unmistakably sit out the winter holidays."

Mr. Flynn continues. "Let's move briefly beyond Christmas and ask a really broad question. If we were starting from scratch, might we opt to do without holidays altogether? Have we humans grown up so far, so fast, that we no longer have need of festivals and for the ritual and ceremony that went with them? Our ancient holidays developed in a world of mystery and privation quite unlike the world most of us inhabit today. Consider the revolution that science,

technology, and the naturalistic world-view has wrought. Today, at least in the First World, most humans die of old age. Most children live to become adults. There is usually enough to eat. Many diseases are curable. Small families are sufficient to ensure that society goes on. Men and women can view the phenomena of nature with understanding and respect, instead of with superstition and uncomprehending fear. Even when a natural disaster is unavoidable, there is often advance warning. Aid comes quickly, and the victims can confront their experience fortified by their understanding of the physical processes involved."

Still in Mr. Flynn's words. "Life is far from perfect, but the terms on which it is lived have changed more in the last two hundred years than in all the rest of human history. I suspect that they have changed so drastically that the whole idea of a holiday, that is , a special day set aside from the humdrum grind of life for the enjoyment of socially approved excess, no longer serves real social or emotional needs.

"Christmas, what is the answer? For infidels, the most appropriate answer is `Ho ho ho? Thanks. I'll pass.' More atheists, freethinkers, and secular humanists need to treat Christmas as 'just another day.' Skip the feasts. Sit out the exchange of gifts. Put in a normal day's work if you can. Infidelity is hard for believers to take seriously when its advocates so visibly cashier their principles rather than pass up an excuse to eat, drink, and be merry."

Flynn finishes thusly: "Some infidels find my approach overzealous. They think it carries too high an emotional cost. Or they think it's too much work. They dismiss it as one more case of throwing out the babe with the bathwater. Yet many of us—certainly those of us who gave up Christianity to become infidels—threw out the Babe long ago. The mystery is, why are we so reluctant to part with the bathwater?"

Tom, I think, makes some valid points, but what should we do? Personally, I think to reject everything related to the seasons celebrations is as unthinking as to accept everything. Traditional events should be evaluated on their merit not their genesis. Actually all religious events, especially Christian religious events have their foundation in much older pagan rites. We have every right to pick and chose and interpret as we wish from all the tradition and customs which are available, and celebrate or not celebrate them as we wish. Let us begin by considering the purpose of so called "Holidays" in general. I believe they are intended to provide a brief respite from ordinary life and make existence more enjoyable and bearable. So instead of the term, holiday, which comes from holy day, why don't we just call these short vacations Respite Times or Respire Activities. There are, of course, many other terms which could be used, such as hiatus or vacation or intermission, but I think it would be useful to drop the term holiday altogether.

Intuitively, there is something attractive about considering the end of the year as a new beginning time. Whether it is because of the artificial numbering of our calendar, or the consideration that it is the shortest period of daylight in the northern hemisphere and we begin returning to lighter days, or for any other reason; it feels useful to stop and consider the past and plan the future at this time. This is a natural function we should do often anyway. Thus the end of December is one of the prime times to create a Respite. This Winter Break has been celebrated many ways, but the underlying character is that of seeking enjoyment and social activity to help combat the doldrums of Winter. Also, it becomes a time to evaluate the old year and plan the new one. Both of these

activities are
physically and psychologically healthy, so let's do them!

Instead of listening to Christmas Carols, though, let's listen to concerts of other, equally satisfying classical music; or popular music, rock music, country music or whatever pleases us. Having feasts, just for the fun of eating fancy or special food and enjoying sociability is certainly acceptable and even enlivening occasionally. Serve "traditional" food if necessary, or experiment with new and special dishes to excite the palate and spice up the season. The foods need no other meaning than to take pleasure in tantalizing our taste and exploring our culinary environment.

Instead of sending Christmas cards, we can let our local friends know we hope they have happy days during the Winter Respite Times whenever we see them, and let them know the money we save in not sending them cards we are donating to local charities. We have personally done this for years. However, distant friends are fair game for the dreaded yearly, "What we all did this year" letter which can include as much or as little of seasonal greetings as you wish. In other words we can participate in our own way to whatever degree we wish, and not feel compelled to do all the Christmas type things the rest of society is pursuing.

Furthermore, there are other possibilities for Secular Respites. For instance, Darwin's birthday February 12th, or Earth Day April 22nd, or UN Day October 24th, or Election Day, or others I am sure we are capable of thinking up. In fact, there is a movement underway to establish a system of Secular Respites. There is a web site at: <http://www.secularseasons.org/index.html> which lists the possibilities, if you are interested. I have the list here to pass out . What are your thoughts?

Celebrations by Season: <http://www.secularseasons.org/index.html>

The highlight of the Secular Seasons project, is the collection of events celebrated within the non-religious community at various times throughout the year. In addition to the calendar provided on the home page, here we index these events by month.

January

New Year Reality Revival - January 1-31

Thomas Paine Day - January 29

February

Charles Darwin Day - February 12

March

Spring Equinox (Northern Hemisphere)

Autumn Equinox (Southern Hemisphere)

April

April Fool's Day - April 1

Earth Day - Excitement of Life - April 22

May

Rational Day of Thought / National Day of Reason - May 8

June

World Humanist Day - June 21

Summer Solstice (Northern Hemisphere)

Winter Solstice (Southern Hemisphere)

Camp Quest ~ Week of June 21

July

Lake Hypatia Independence Day - July 4

Indivisible Day - July 4

August

August

Robert Ingersoll Day - August 11

September

Autumn Equinox (Northern Hemisphere)

Spring Equinox (Southern Hemisphere)

Banned Book Week ~ September 23

October

Freethought Month - October 1-31

Freethought Day - October 12

November

Church/State Separation Week ~ November 24

December

International Human Rights Day - December 10

Human Light Celebration - December 23

Winter Solstice (Northern Hemisphere)

Summer Solstice (Southern Hemisphere)

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V E R I T A S

John D. Boenke

I believe Rene Descartes had it mostly right. He said, “*Cogito ergo sum*”, or “I think, therefore I am.” However, I am of the opinion there is one more step of reduction back to the most basic idea, or perhaps a slightly different way of looking at it. I would say simply. “I sense things, I am aware.” This already implies two things. It jumps right into the declaration that there is an “I”. There is simply no way around this step. To discuss “the world” and my relationship to the world, it is an imperative first step to say “I”, at least. Having said “I”, it is necessary to say something about the “I”. The most basic fact of intellectual life is simply to sense the surroundings, that is, be aware. Being aware is realizing there is sensory input to the brain. It is nothing more beyond that. It does not necessarily imply anything is done with the input, only that it has been received. This then is my starting point, “I am aware.”

Further, I maintain this is the only position a truly reasonable person can take. The only opposite to “I am aware” is “I am not aware”. How can anyone say “I am not aware”? This is using their awareness to claim it does not exist, to negate it. This would be the operation only of an irrational brain. It would be a brain operating outside of that which is normal mental functioning. It would, in short, be insane.

Being aware, I then recognize there is sensory input to my brain. I see, I hear, I feel, and I experience in my brain the responses to all my other senses. In the way brains work, these responses even become integrated by the brain. For instance, I can see and hear co-incidentally a mallet striking a gong and recognize these sense experiences are occurring at the same time.

This then is the primary situation, the basic step, in examining “I” and my relationship to the world. I am aware, and I have sensory input to my brain. Because I have sensory input to my brain, I must accept the fact I do have a brain. These facts demand that there is something inside my head which leaves me

with the sensations of “Knowing” things. Because of my previous experience as a child and all the years of my maturing and living to where I am now, my brain has developed in a unique method of operating which makes me the person I am now.

I have learned over the years that my brain leaves me aware of the sequence of events and interprets this as the passage of time. It also has the facility of remembering many past events for greater or lesser periods of time, although some happenings are retained with much greater clarity than others. I must admit then of the capability of my brain to inform me of the sequence and substance of past events. As a practical matter I recognize this happens. How it happens, and what is going on in the brain is beyond our current knowledge, or certainly my current knowledge. Nevertheless, it happens. Pragmatically, I must accept that fact and proceed from that stance incorporating the limitations of my brain into my reasoning about the world I perceive.

Not only does my brain perform as outlined above, but I realize the “I”, of which I am conscious can muse or concentrate on the sensory input by processes within the brain. Being mindful of the sensory input is most easily dealt with in a sequential fashion. I usually do not bring my full attention to more than one type of sense input at a time. Moreover, I can chose to “block” certain inputs and concentrate on others. This is the next step leading to the more complex process of “thinking”.

Since I can select the input I want to deal with, I am forced to accept the fact that “I think”. . That is, I am aware I can select, and the ability of selecting justifies the admission that I have a mechanism for doing so. That mechanism is described as the mind. This “mind” encompasses all the functions of the brain. It can be described as having several capabilities. It is first aware. Then it is interpretive. It is then contemplative, and it remembers. Moreover, in remembering and interpreting and contemplating together, it “thinks”, it makes choices, and it guides the rest of my body in actions as a result of this “thinking” process. Thinking in the brain seems to be a procedure for reviewing sensory input then comparing and evaluating it with other input.

The “I” referred to above has only one place it can be located. That is, it is integral to the mind with which it is so closely associated. It is in my mind, in my brain, within my head. That also is where “I” seem to be. It feels as though my Psyche is in my head.

My basic claim is then, that I exist and I reside within my brain with my thoughts. I am an integral part of my mind, and in fact, I am the coordinator of all my mental activity. Definitively then, I consider the brain as the mechanism for all my mental activity. The “I” is one with my mind and is the integrated total activity of the brain.

There are two other qualities which evidence themselves in my brain. One is my impression of having the freedom of choice, the other is discerning that there is an “I” actually existing within my brain, that is, my “I” knows it exists. Both of these ideas have troubled the philosophers through the ages. However, I maintain they are self evident. Why deny them? Whether I truly have freedom of choice, and by what mechanism I have it are questions beyond answer at the

moment. Perhaps researchers will in the future uncover the answers. Until then, it is counterproductive not to accept my freedom. With that, I am justified in acting as though it were a fact of life. Likewise, defining myself, and how I actually function in all the glands, lesser organs, nerve cells and complex connections in my brain is fertile ground for much scientific investigation. But as of the moment, not now knowing how it works is no reason not to use the concept to the fullest. After all, how many persons really understand all the workings of their automobile? Does this restrain them in any way from using it to their complete advantage?

I have come to understand that these mechanisms of sensation, interpretation, remembering, thinking, the impression of freedom of choice, and the recognition of the self, “I”, are all mind functions and have been part of my brain ever since it formed, grew and developed as all the rest of my body was formed, grew and developed in the natural processes prior to and after my birth. These various functions came into play as my brain gradually became operative over a period of time. It grew, developed, and began working, through time. My brain continues today to generate new connections, remember new thoughts and sense new events, as any healthy living brain does. As it developed complex arrangements and connections, and thereafter had sensory information imposed on it, I became aware of my existence. I now remember with varying degrees of clarity, my past history up to the present. The immediate present is something of which I am continually aware while conscious.

Understanding the brain is the crux of understanding humans and the human condition. The brain and the mind residing in it is at the core of knowing the world, ourselves, and the relationship between the two. Ancient philosophers struggled with interpreting how we “work” mentally, because they had no good information about the brain and how it operates. Plus, they were hung up on culturally ingrained concepts about mysticism, spirituality, and gods. We have been able to shed these obstacles, and science is continually providing us with greater knowledge about the brain and how it actually works. Therefore, it follows, we should now be able to produce a much more consistent and acceptable philosophy of life.

All that I am, my knowledge, my personality, my beliefs, fears and joys, are the “I” concept. My total Psyche, is in my head, that is, it is within my brain and the associated parts of my body which work with the brain. Since my being here at all is a natural consequence of the emergence of life in the physical world, I am not obligated to any spiritual or mystical power for my presence. I do not see the need for a god, nor, in fact, do I believe there is any rational proof of the existence of a god or gods.

Ethical and moral values grew out of the experiences and the interactions of human beings as cultural groups grew over time. There is a vast amount of historical material available from which we can generate ethical and moral rules for life which are fair to everyone. Values do not have to be dictated by some exotic super spirit to have useful results in their observance. The human race has already constructed fairly widely accepted standards of behavior, and we know what is expected of rational beings. I cannot now bring myself to believe in gods. They are not required for me to be here and to be what I am. They are superfluous. Belief in them can and usually does interfere with and confound the normal interactions of various groups of Human Beings.

I am on my own as are all other living things. I have the advantage over the “lower” animals of having the faculties of awareness, knowing, understanding, thinking, planning, and to a fairly great degree, of comprehending what is going on in the “world” I know.

A continuous “stream of consciousness” is a characteristic which Minds exhibit while they are awake. As long as we are neither sleeping nor unconscious through trauma or drugs, our mind is active with processing information and thoughts, and following the events in the environment through the sense inputs.

My position is quite straightforward. I am an aware living being. My Psyche is the sum total of all that I am which has come about naturally. The process of evolution has made me what I am physically. Mentally, I am a result of the conditioning of my environment and my culture. There was no god involved in either of these processes as they are completely possible by the operation of the existing physical world. There is no point in believing in god as this adds unnecessary complexity. By Occam’s Rule, the simplest explanation of a process is probably the correct one, so I am left with no necessity for god.

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WHAT SECULAR HUMANISM IS

John D. Boenke

A Talk For UU Non-Theists Meeting December 2002

ABOVE ALL, SECULAR HUMANISM IS A POSITIVE OUTLOOK ON LIFE. TO BEST DESCRIBE IT, LET US FIRST CONSIDER THE RELATED POSITIONS AND DEFINE THEM. THEN WE CAN CONSIDER HOW SECULAR HUMANISM IS DISTINCTIVELY DIFFERENT. ONE HEARS THE TERMS AGNOSTIC, ATHEIST, HUMANIST, INFIDEL, HERETIC, RELIGIOUS, AND SECULARIST USED FAIRLY COMMONLY IN DISCUSSIONS OF BELIEF AND DISBELIEF. MY UNDERSTANDING OF THESE TERMS DERIVES FROM THE DEFINITIONS GIVEN IN THE NEW OXFORD AMERICAN DICTIONARY. WITH MY PARAPHRASING THEY ARE AS FOLLOWS.

AGNOSTIC SIMPLY MEANS WITHOUT KNOWING, AND WAS COINED BY THOMAS HENRY HUXLEY CIRCA 1840. IT IMPLIES THAT ANYTHING BEYOND THE PHYSICAL WORLD IS PROBABLY UNKNOWABLE. IT IS EXTENDED TO REFER TO SOMEONE WHO IS STILL SEARCHING AND NEITHER AFFIRMING NOR DENYING THE EXISTENCE OF GOD OR THE SUPERNATURAL.

ATHEIST MEANS WITHOUT GOD AND REFERS TO ANYONE WHO SIMPLY DENIES GOD EXISTS.

HUMANIST REFERS TO ONE WHO BELIEVES IN ATTACHING PRIME INTEREST TO HUMAN MATTERS RATHER THAN TO DIVINE OR SUPERNATURAL CONSIDERATIONS.

INFIDEL IS USED TO DESCRIBE A NON BELIEVER IN YOUR RELIGION.

HERETIC RELATES TO SOMEONE WHO GOES AGAINST THEIR OWN RELIGION.

RELIGIOUS IS PERHAPS THE MOST DIFFICULT TO DEFINE AS IT COVERS SUCH A WIDE RANGE OF SITUATIONS. HOWEVER, A GENERAL DESCRIPTION MAY BE, BELIEVING IN AND WORSHIPPING A SUPERHUMAN CONTROLLING POWER OR POWERS ESPECIALLY A PERSONAL GOD.

SECULARIST DENOTES ATTITUDES AND ACTIVITIES WHICH HAVE NO RELIGIOUS OR SPIRITUAL BASIS.

WITH THESE TERMS IN MIND, LET US NOW CONSIDER SECULAR HUMANISM. IN AN ARTICLE IN THE MAGAZINE, *FREE INQUIRY*, TITLED, A **SECULAR HUMANIST DEFINITION**, TOM FLYNN, WHO IS THE EDITOR OF THE MAGAZINE, STATES, “SECULAR HUMANISM’S COGNITIVE THRUST LIES IN ITS *NATURALISTIC WORLD VIEW*; ITS EMOTIONAL OR AFFECTIVE THRUST LIES IN ITS *POSITIVE ETHICAL OUTLOOK*. EACH ELEMENT IS EQUALLY ESSENTIAL TO SECULAR HUMANISM; NEITHER STANDS ALONE. I SUBMIT THAT THIS MEANINGFULLY DIFFERENTIATES SECULAR HUMANISM FROM RELIGIOUS HUMANISM AND FROM SIMPLE ATHEISM AS WELL. --- SECULAR HUMANISTS *NECESSARILY* DISBELIEVE IN GOD (NATURALISM) AND *JUST AS NECESSARILY* OPPOSE THUGGERY AND TRIBALISM ON PRINCIPLE (AN OUTGROWTH OF ETHICS). OF COURSE, MANY ATHEISTS, AGNOSTICS, AND RELIGIOUS HUMANISTS DO THE SAME. BUT WHEN ATHEISTS AND AGNOSTICS ADOPT POSITIVE ETHICS, THEY DO SO FOR REASONS INDEPENDENT OF THEIR ATHEISM OR AGNOSTICISM. WHEN RELIGIOUS HUMANISTS DEFEND NATURALISM, THEY DO SO FOR REASONS OUTSIDE OF THEIR RELIGIOUS HUMANISM. ONLY FOR THE SECULAR HUMANIST DO BOTH COMMITMENTS ARISE ORGANICALLY WITHIN HIS OR HER LIFE STANCE.” (END OF QUOTE)

WELL! THAT SOUNDS GREAT, BUT WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

FIRST WORLD VIEW.

I BELIEVE IT MEANS THAT THE SECULAR HUMANIST IN LOOKING AT THE WORLD ADOPTS AN OUTLOOK WHICH ACCEPTS ONLY THE FACTS OF THE REAL WORLD. THAT IS THE WORLD WE EXPERIENCE THROUGH OUR SENSES, AND WHICH WE KNOW ABOUT BY THE ACTIONS OF OUR BRAINS. HE OR SHE DOES NOT ACCEPT THOSE THINGS WHICH HAVE NO BASIS IN THE REAL PHYSICAL WORLD. SUCH THINGS AS MYTHS AND FAIRY TALES, OR SPECULATIONS ABOUT MYSTERIOUS UNKNOWN FORCES DO NOT HOLD ANY RELEVANCE FOR THE SECULAR HUMANIST. I BELIEVE THIS ALSO MEANS THE SECULAR HUMANIST IS VERY CAREFUL IN INTERPRETING THE FUNNY THINGS OUR BRAINS DO TO US IN EXPERIENCING THE INTERACTIONS OF OUR EMOTIONS AND SENSORY PERCEPTIONS.

MR. FLYNN GOES ON TO SAY: “UNLIKE RELIGIOUS HUMANISM, SECULAR HUMANISM ESCHEWS TRANSCENDENTALISM IN ANY AND ALL FORMS, DEPENDING ON THE CONTEXT, TRANSCENDENTALISM CAN MEAN OUTRIGHT MYSTICISM, THE ‘SPIRITUAL’ (ITSELF A TERM WITH MANY MEANINGS), OR SIMPLY A RUSH TOWARD EMOTIONAL CLOSURE DISPROPORTIONATE TO THE KNOWABLE DATA. HOWEVER DEFINED, TRANSCENDENTALISM IS REJECTED BY SECULAR HUMANISTS IN FAVOR OF RIGOROUS PHILOSOPHICAL NATURALISM: ‘NATURALISTS MAINTAIN THAT THERE IS INSUFFICIENT SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE FOR SPIRITUAL INTERPRETATIONS OF REALITY AND THE POSTULATION OF OCCULT CAUSES’ (FROM *HUMANIST MANIFESTO 2000*, **FREE INQUIRY**, FALL 1999)” (END OF QUOTE)

ATHEISM IS A TERM WHICH HAS BEEN USED FOR MANY AGES. BUT SECULAR HUMANISM IS MORE THAN ATHEISM. ATHEISM IS SIMPLY A DENIAL OF GOD AND IS A BEGINNING POINT. ATHEISM IS HELD TO BE A NECESSARY CONDITION FOR SECULAR HUMANISM, BUT NOT A SUFFICIENT ONE.

YOU MAY HAVE NOTICED MISTER FLYNN ALSO MENTIONED RELIGIOUS HUMANISM. IN CONTRADISTINCTION TO SECULAR HUMANISM. RELIGIOUS HUMANISM, THOUGH CONCERNED PRIMARILY WITH THE HUMAN CONDITION, ALLOWS FOR THE ACCEPTANCE OF OUT OF THE REAL WORLD FORCES OR CONTROLLING INFLUENCES. THAT IS, THINGS WHICH DO NOT BEAR REASONABLE SCIENTIFIC EXPLANATION.

SECOND ETHICAL STANCE

SPEAKING ON THE SECOND ELEMENT NEEDED FOR SECULAR HUMANISM, I BELIEVE MR. FLYNN MEANS THAT THE SECULAR HUMANIST RECOGNIZES THAT ETHICS HAVE ARISEN AND EVOLVED OUT OF THE CULTURAL EXPERIENCE OF THE HUMAN ANIMAL OVER THE MILLENNIA WHILE THE HUMAN BEING AT THE SAME TIME EVOLVED BODILY AND ORGANICALLY OUT OF THE LOWER

PRIMATES. LIVING IN GROUPS FOR PROTECTION NECESSARILY GIVES RISE TO CODES OF INTERACTION EVEN THOUGH THEY MAY HAVE BEEN ONLY TACITLY RECOGNIZED BEFORE THEY COULD BE ARTICULATED. THIS EVOLVED LEARNING FORMED THE BASIS FOR ENUNCIATING THE ETHICS OF A CULTURE. THOSE VALUES SURVIVED WHICH BEST ALLOWED THE CULTURE TO SURVIVE, AND WHICH PERMITTED THE MEMBERS OF THE CULTURE TO BE COMFORTABLE WITH THEIR SITUATIONS. THE PROCESS WAS TRULY EXPERIMENTAL. AS PEOPLE LEARNED THE CONSEQUENCES OF THEIR ACTIONS, THEY UNDERSTOOD BETTER HOW TO REACT IN FUTURE SIMILAR SITUATIONS TO ACHIEVE THE MOST SUITABLE RESULTS. ACCORDING TO THE RULE OF OCCAM’S RAZOR WHERE THE SIMPLEST EXPLANATION IS PROBABLY THE MOST ACCURATE, THIS ETHICAL EVOLUTIONARY TRANSFORMATION SEEMS TO ME TO BE CLEARLY AN UNCOMPLICATED PROCESS OF ENCULTURATION WHICH IS NATURAL AND MOST APROPOS.

IN TOM FLYNN’S WORDS, “SECULAR HUMANISM PROPOUNDS A RATIONAL ETHICS BASED ON HUMAN EXPERIENCE. IT IS *CONSEQUENTIALIST*: ETHICAL CHOICES ARE JUDGED BY THEIR RESULTS. SECULAR HUMANIST ETHICS APPEAL TO SCIENCE, REASON AND EXPERIENCE TO JUSTIFY ITS ETHICAL PRINCIPLES. OBSERVERS CAN EVALUATE THE REAL-WORLD CONSEQUENCES OF MORAL DECISIONS AND INTERSUBJECTIVELY AFFIRM THEIR CONCLUSIONS. KURTZ (PAUL KURTZ) AND OTHER SECULAR HUMANISTS ARGUE THAT ALL HUMAN SOCIETIES, EVEN DEEPLY RELIGIOUS ONES, INVARIABLY CONSTRUCT CONSENSUS MORALITIES ON CONSEQUENTIALIST PRINCIPLES. MILLENNIA OF HUMAN EXPERIENCE HAVE GIVEN RISE TO A CORE OF ‘COMMON MORAL DECENCIES’ SHARED BY ALMOST ALL. (FROM *FORBIDDEN FRUIT* PAUL KURTZ, PROMETHEUS BOOKS 1988)” (END OF QUOTE)

THIRD COMPARISON TO RELIGIOUS HUMANISM

FLYNN PLACES SECULAR HUMANISM ON A CONTINUUM OF VIEWS BETWEEN ATHEISM AND RELIGIOUS HUMANISM. HE SAYS, “ATHEISM LENDS A VALUABLE CRITIQUE OF OUTMODED, REGRESSIVE SYSTEMS. WE WELCOME ITS VISION OF A UNIVERSE UPON WHICH MEANING WAS NEVER IMPOSED FROM ABOVE. BUT SECULAR HUMANISM GOES FURTHER, CALLING ON HUMANS TO DEVELOP WITHIN THE UNIVERSE VALUES OF THEIR OWN - AS IT WERE, FROM BELOW. FURTHER, SECULAR HUMANISM MAINTAINS THAT, THROUGH A PROCESS OF VALUE INQUIRY INFORMED BY SCIENTIFIC AND REFLECTIVE THOUGHT, MEN AND WOMEN CAN REACH ROUGH AGREEMENT CONCERNING VALUES, CRAFTING ETHICAL SYSTEMS THAT DELIVER OPTIMAL RESULTS FOR HUMAN BEINGS IN A BROAD SPECTRUM OF CIRCUMSTANCES.

AT THE SAME TIME, WE ACKNOWLEDGE RELIGIOUS HUMANISM’S COMPASSION AND ITS FOCUS ON HUMAN- CENTERED VALUES. NONETHELESS, SECULAR HUMANISTS REJECT RELIGIOUS HUMANISM’S CONVICTION THAT LEANING ON SPIRITUAL OR TRANSCENDENTAL MOORINGS - EVEN IF LIGHTLY - IS ESSENTIAL FOR THE GOOD LIFE.

SECULAR HUMANISM IS INVIGORATED BY THE BEST THAT ATHEISM AND RELIGIOUS HUMANISM HAVE TO OFFER - THOROUGHLY NATURALISTIC, YET INFUSED BY AN INSPIRING VALUE SYSTEM, IT OFFERS A NONRELIGIOUS TEMPLATE THAT MAY ONE DAY GUIDE MUCH OF HUMANITY IN PURSUING TRULY HUMANE LIVES. THIS IS THE FULFILLMENT OF SECULARISM AS GEORGE JACOB HOLYOAKE IMAGINED IT (SEE FIRST SIDEBAR): THE SUCCESSFUL QUEST FOR THE GOOD LIFE, INTELLECTUALLY, ETHICALLY. EMOTIONALLY RICH, AND WITHOUT ANY RELIANCE ON RELIGIOUS FAITH.” (END OF QUOTE)

SIDEBAR - DEFINITION OF SECULARISM; COINED IN 1841 BY ENGLISH FREETHINKER, GEORGE JACOB HOLYOAKE (1817-1906), WHO DEFINED IT AS, “THE EXTENSION OF FREETHOUGHT IN ETHICS” PLAINLY HOLYOAKE INTENDED SOMETHING VERY LIKE THE SYNTHESIS OF UNBELIEF AND RATIONAL ETHICS SEEN TODAY IN SECULAR HUMANISM.

IT SEEMS TO ME THE CLEAR DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SECULAR HUMANISM AND RELIGIOUS HUMANISM IS THAT RELIGIOUS HUMANISM ACCEPTS SOME DEGREE OF ADHERENCE TO UNKNOWABLE IDEAS AS BEING BASIC TRUTHS, WHEREAS SECULAR HUMANISTS REJECT ALL SPECULATIVE AND UNFOUNDED BELIEFS.

FOURTH SECULAR HUMANISM DEFINITION

I THINK THE ABOVE QUOTES AND DISCUSSION LEAD REASONABLY TO THE DEFINITION OF SECULAR HUMANISM WHICH TOM FLYNN THEN ENUNCIATES AS THE MOST CLEAR AND COMPLETE DESCRIPTION OF THE TERM. TOM FLYNN SAYS SECULAR HUMANISM IS, “A COMPREHENSIVE NONRELIGIOUS LIFE STANCE THAT INCORPORATES A NATURALISTIC PHILOSOPHY, A COSMIC OUTLOOK ROOTED IN SCIENCE, AND A CONSEQUENTIALIST ETHICAL SYSTEM.” (END OF QUOTE)

THAT DEFINITION MAKES ME A SECULAR HUMANIST. I THINK I CAN EXPLAIN WHAT I BELIEVE IN CLEAR TERMS. I CAN ALSO EXPLAIN WHY I BELIEVE IT. AND MOST OF ALL I CAN EXPLAIN WHY THAT BELIEF IS IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE PHYSICAL WORLD WE ALL EXPERIENCE, AND WHICH HOLDS QUALITIES WE CAN ALL SEE TO BE CONSISTENT. I DO NOT BELIEVE THAT RELIGIOUS ORIENTED PERSONS CAN MAKE ALL THOSE CLAIMS.

I FEEL THE RELIGIOUS PERSON HOLDS THE UNKNOWN AND UNKNOWABLE IN THE HIGHEST REGARD. THOSE ARE IDEAS AND

CONCEPTIONS WHICH DO NOT YIELD TO CLEAR EXPLANATION. WHEREAS THE SECULAR HUMANIST HOLDS IN THE HIGHEST REGARD THE VIEWS OF SCIENCE AND ALL THAT IS CONSTANT AND KNOWABLE IN OUR UNIVERSE. THESE ARE THE STANCES AND PROPOSITIONS WHICH **DO** APPEAL TO REASON AND **CAN** BE DEMONSTRATED TO BE CONSISTENT.

AS A CLOSING, LET ME READ A QUOTE FROM ROBERT INGERSOL, A GREAT AMERICAN SELF PROCLAIMED AGNOSTIC OF THE 19TH CENTURY WHO WAS RAISED AS A ROMAN CATHOLIC. HE SAID, “WHEN I BECAME CONVINCED THAT THE UNIVERSE IS NATURAL - THAT ALL THE GHOSTS AND GODS ARE MYTHS, THERE ENTERED INTO MY BRAIN, INTO MY SOUL, INTO EVERY DROP OF MY BLOOD, THE SENSE, THE FEELING, OF THE JOY OF FREEDOM. THE WALLS OF MY PRISON CRUMBLLED AND FELL, THE DUNGEON WAS FLOODED WITH LIGHT, AND ALL THE BOLTS, AND BARS, AND MANACLES BECAME DUST.”

Religion is the Problem Not the Solution

John D. Boenke

Religion is the human emotional response to the conundrum of finding ourselves here in life and being aware of existing and yet not knowing or having any indication of why we are here. It is emotionally unacceptable to be aware and not know what is going on. I believe this feeling of needing an answer, religion, arose as a side issue of the evolution of the brain in dealing with more prosaic problems such as the decisions to run, attack or ignore an unusual situation. In such a circumstance an answer was needed, and the right answer could be crucial resulting in life rather than death. It became ingrained in our mind that answers were always needed, and the brain developed to accommodate to that need. Religion then attempted to answer the question of why we were here, but had no, or very little, information to work with. Hence the fabulous stories which pervade every culture and form the basis for religions. They filled a need. In totally emotionally driven animals this solved the problem.

As the quality of reason began to develop, some individuals experienced problems with their fabulous stories not matching a reality which was quite apparent and which demanded recognition. The early Greeks developed the discipline of Philosophy to try and bring the mythical ideas into agreement with the

obvious truths of the world. These were the early conflicts of truth and religious fiction. Many divergent views developed including the idea that there were no gods. This was not popular as it stripped people of the safety and security of god power which guided the world. The concept that there were no gods left most people feeling helpless and vulnerable, so they rejected the idea. However the conviction has persisted throughout the ages.

As the mental competence and capacity of the human race grew and matured, the god ideas became more sophisticated also. The early god (esses) were female, perhaps because females produced the new life and new individuals in the world. They were thus seen as all powerful. When it became understood that males contributed to this new life, the attitude arose that females were simply the incubators for the “seed” of the male. Thus it was the males who were all powerful, and the most powerful gods were then male. Later when it was recognized both male and female contribute to new life, the view that gods should be both male and female came into play. Modern Christianity has elevated Mary, the mother of Jesus to almost god status. In the new age, gods have become mysterious super forces which are sexless. This acknowledges that an all powerful god does not need sex to explain anything of the workings of the universe.

Gods then have been perpetuated because they satisfy the need to feel safe in the world and the posited hereafter, whatever that is. They have easily survived because they appeal to the strong emotional nature of human beings. However in having such great influence on humans, religions have often stood in the way of the advancement of facts in the real world. It is well documented how the Roman Catholic Church has needed to be dragged kicking and screaming into the mainstream of facts and knowledge. On the other hand, Atheists and Secular Humanists are not hampered by mythic nonsense. Getting rid of gods and mysterious forces clears the decks and makes dealing with facts much simpler.

The human race is plagued by many problems. We are all individuals with different backgrounds and experiences influencing us as we grew up and continuing every day of our life. Because of the nature of our self awareness and self centered mental functioning, we find it difficult to completely agree with other humans who have slightly different experiences than we do. Ideas, thoughts and emotions are imperfectly communicated by words, and we all feel that usually others do not quite understand us. This imperfect communication results in misunderstandings between individuals and groups of individuals. Misunderstandings are the roots of conflict and wars.

Most, if not all, of the conflicts in the world have religious components, and they will not be completely solved until the religious part of the conflict is put aside and the factual issues are dealt with realistically. This, of course, is the crux of the issue. Religions stand in the way of stability and peace in the world even as they seem to provide contentment for their followers. Yet their followers will not recognize this and adopt a new attitude of limiting their religion to themselves. The world community must admit that religious differences are emotional differences and must not be brought to negotiating tables. Consider the conflict between to Palestinians and the Israelis

The time has come for individuals to examine their ideas, and realistically evaluate their beliefs. Is there value in subscribing to totally unfounded ideas? Would it not be more useful to expand ones outlook to encompass the great reality which stands in front of us all the time?

MODERN ATHEISM AND MORALITY

A Talk by John D. Boenke

I believe one of the most sincere and troubling questions by those who are not atheists is, “How can you be moral without God or Religion?” I appreciate that this is probably at the core of their rejection of the atheist idea. To help alleviate this concern, let us examine both Atheism and Morality.

Modern Atheism or as I prefer, Secular Humanism is in a much more reliable circumstance than it has ever been in the past. This mysterious universe has troubled the human race since the first Homo Sapiens brain became aware of it. However with the advent of modern science, so much has been learned of the physical world in the last 200 years that the unexplained phenomenon is becoming a rarity. There are excellent reasons to believe that everything can ultimately be made clear, and the mysterious supernatural is non existent.

The Greek Philosopher, Thales was perhaps the first atheist. He sought explanations based on natural causes rather than gods. He and the other monists (one source) such as Anaximander, Anaximenes, and Pythagoras looked for explanations of the world in single causes, such as conflict or numbers or air or sea water. They had little science to guide them but they nevertheless rejected gods and looked for other answers. They were perhaps not sophisticated enough to discount all mythology, but they had the germ of the idea that the world is a natural place.

We are in a much better situation today. Science and reason can answer many questions which until now were accounted for only by myth and speculation. The illusions of magic have explanations and a firm foundation in physics. Natural phenomena such as aurora, tornadoes, lightening, meteorites, magnetic storms, supernovas and other cosmologic events, diseases, the workings of biology and even the processes of the human mind are either well

understood or on the path to being understood. There has never been more certain or more complete information about us and our world.

The Modern Atheist then is much more comfortable with the idea that there is no god, since no god is found in all these investigations, nor indeed is a god necessary for us and all of the physical world to exist and to be reasonably explained. We must admire the early atheists however, since they had very few facts with which to work.

But how then can these modern Secular Humanists be good and moral? First of all what is morality? I will be referring extensively to an article by Chapman Cohen (1868- 1954) titled, “Morality Without God”. Mr. Cohen was the third President of Britain’s National Secular Society. The article may be found on the American Atheist Web Page.

It seems to me a religious view of morality says that the rules governing moral behavior are laid down by god, and the righteous must follow them to get to heaven when they die or to hell if they do not follow them. Heaven, of course, is a wonderful comfortable place, and hell has many definitions. This view assumes humans would not behave morally except for the command of god and the promise of a nice reward or the threat of dire consequences. This raises the question, “Is a person really moral if they are forced to be good? Isn’t a truly moral person one who is inherently good?” According to Cohen, “The man who is conscious of a restraint when he does a decent action is not a ‘good’ man at all. He is a potential criminal who does not commit a crime only because he is afraid of being caught.”

Quoting Cohen further, “Nature is amoral. In nature there are no rewards or punishments, there are only actions and consequences. There is no ethical quality to natural happenings. Laws of morals are human creations; that is, they are generalizations from experience. Man did not first discover the laws of physiology in order to realize the need for eating or breathing, to digest food or to inhale oxygen. Nor did the rules, Thou shalt not kill. Thou shalt not steal, etc. first make killing and stealing wrong. A moral law makes explicit in theory what is implicit in fact. The fact creates the rule; it is not the rule that creates the fact. The first point to remember is that there is no such thing as good in the abstract. A thing is good in relation to its consequences, or as it realizes the end at which we are aiming.” The human animal is a social animal. We do not live and survive in isolation.

So ethics and morals come about as a result of group opinion. If society decides it is wrong to randomly kill people, killing becomes wrong and immoral. If society feels that honesty contributes to a more stable and workable community, honesty becomes good and a virtue. This was by way of essentially the same mechanism in both cases. Our acquiring morals did not require a god handing down pronouncements to an unintelligent human being. It merely required an intelligent Homo Sapiens regarding the consequences of its actions, and remembering them.

There is an aspect of evolution here also. If there is no consensus on proper moral and ethical behavior, a chaotic situation exists which is not conducive

to optimum survival rates, and it is survival that determines who reproduces. This results in the ideas which are most conducive to surviving getting passed along. What works is good, and it survives. Our ethical codes and moral values evolved over the years even as we evolved biologically, and humans survived and learned which ideas were the most useful in surviving.

ONWARD AND UPWARD a Talk by John Boenke

I am disgusted with seeing cowardly hooded thugs killing innocent persons on TV in the name of their god. I am dismayed that a self proclaimed messenger of god believes god wanted him to be President, and that he views his actions as god inspired. I am discouraged to see two religious leaders fighting over a piece of ground as though one has more right to it than another. I am wearied by many persons blithely proclaiming they are right and others wrong while none of them resort to facts but only to their own biased opinion. In short, I am very disillusioned with the human race for being such complete fools, when they have the capacity to be so enlightened.

Religion and belief in supernatural powers was useful in the early days when humankind did not have the knowledge for greater understanding of itself and the physical universe. But that was back in the childhood days of Homo Sapiens. We should by now at least be leaving childhood and exploring the requirements of young adulthood. however immature we may still be. If we are to continue growing and expanding into full maturity, some changes are needed.

It is no longer constructive to claim a god controls our life. This denies the authentic truth of Reality and the obvious and evident operations of the Physical World. Gods do not make war, people do. Gods do not hate people, other people do. Gods do not destroy living things, natural cataclysms and the ways of other living things do. Gods should now be now recognized for what they have always been. That is, they are a convenient way to escape Reality and let us feel right with ourselves even though we may be completely wrong. With the scientific and worldly knowledge humankind has discovered and developed, gods and the strange things they suggest have now become an impediment to the peace and harmony we need to solve the very real problems in the present day Physical World.

If the human race continues on this path of saying, My god is better than your god,” or even believing, “You may be right, but I am righter,” the future holds nothing but further conflict, misery and disasters. We need a new pattern of behavior. An eye for an eye does not work. It only provides excuses for continuing aggression. Turning the other cheek results in pain and the destruction of individual dignity. We need a paradigm in which persons really are equally respected, where individual rights are recognized and consideration is given to personal needs. As the primordial family evolved into an extended

family, and the extended family evolved into a tribe, and the tribes combined into clans and so on to larger and larger groups; in the same way we must continue the process so there is no longer “us” and “them”, but only “all of us.” In the words of Wendell Wilkie whom I am sure few of you remember, “One World.”

One World should be the aim of every thoughtful person. It might come about if our nations and institutions could put aside self interests and consider their action simply in the light of facts. Instead of, “This land is mine because my ancestors came from here,” it should be, “We all need to exist here, How can we best do this together?” This enlightened behavior will not happen until we as individuals can do the same thing and run our lives and our interactions with others on that same fact based Paradigm. When we have this method instilled in our own life, then we can demand it of our leaders.

So how do we do this? How do we reach this happy state of rationality in human relations? As with all journeys, it is said they begin with a single step. Can we find a single small step we could allow ourselves to make without undue stress? Shall we look at our own foibles and decide on the least, the smallest irrational idea we have? Then may we decide how to bring in facts and let ourselves be guided by reason in our position instead of opinion or biases? If we can do this one small thing, we have started on the long trek to reason in human affairs. This step is not easy. In fact it may be the hardest part of the trip. Deciding we really want reason not speculation to guide us is the difficult way. It is not the easy way of supernatural powers which we have followed for millennia. Saying, “god did it”, abdicates our very real personal strengths.

One possible beginning might be to stop using the phrase, “thank god” when we discover a happy ending to a stressful situation and need to express our relief. I have learned to say instead, “thank goodness” This might not seem like much, but at least it removes the archaic concept of “god” from the picture and substitutes a less emotionally charged word. Another simple step may be to stop using “god bless you” when someone sneezes. This arose from the idea that when you sneeze you blow all your good spirits out and you need a special blessing to ward off evil spirits until the good ones can return. What a crazy idea! Other cultures use other sorts of responses. In German, for instance, it is customary to say, “Gesundheit”. This literally means “to your becoming well time.” It arose from the belief that we sneeze when we are getting sick and also when we are getting well. So their hope is that you are in the getting well time. This may not be true, but again it is less emotionally charged.

If you can get beyond these two ideas, I am sure you can examine your own habits and ways of reacting to the world and viewing it to find other equally ridiculous ideas you are stuck with. You then have begun a course of thinking and acting to wipe out the irrational from your life.

Another course of action might be to write out your beliefs. Put them into words in black and white on paper. Be sure they are complete and cover all that you believe. When you are satisfied that what you have written truly expresses your belief, then comes the hard part. Now go back and write again. Answer the question, “Why do I believe this?” Is it because that is the way you were brought up? If so is that the way you would choose to be brought up? Is it because you believe the inerrancy of certain books you have read and adopted their ideas? Did you try to examine how true the ideas are?

WHY EXTREMISM?
Why Do People Do Irrational Things?

John D. Boenke

WE HEAR MORE AND MORE ABOUT EXTREMISM THESE DAYS. CURRENTLY IT IS BEING APPLIED TO MUSLIM YOUTH WHO ARE INTENT UPON DAMAGING THE WESTERN WORLD AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE. IT ALSO APPLIES TO OUR OWN RELIGIOUS RIGHT IN THEIR EFFORTS TO IMPOSE THEIR THEOLOGICAL IDEAS ON THE REST OF SOCIETY. SYNONYMS FOR EXTREME ARE UTTERMOST, FINAL, MOST REMOTE, ETC.

BUT WHY DO PEOPLE ARRIVE AT AN EXTREME POSITION? THE BULK OF SOCIETY NOTES THAT THE EXTREME POSITIONS OF THE RIGHT ARE UNREASONABLE, ILLOGICAL AND NONSENSICAL. WHY DO PERSONS BECOME SO FAR OFF THE MAINSTREAM THOUGHT AS TO BE DESTRUCTIVE OF SOCIETY AND THEMSELVES?

I PROPOSE THAT THE BASIC PROBLEM WITH EXTREME RELIGIOUS BELIEFS BEGINS WITH THE INITIAL FAITH BELIEF. I THINK MOST WOULD AGREE THAT THE HUMAN RACE FINDS ITSELF IN A VERY SMALL, USUALLY BENIGN ISLAND IN A SEA OF UNIMAGINABLE FORCES AND CATAclysms. I BELIEVE LIFE AROSE AS A NATURAL GRADUAL PROGRESSION IN A PHYSICAL WORLD WHICH HAPPENED TO BE FORTUITOUSLY EVOLVED FOR LIFE TO DEVELOP. BUT HUMAN LIFE, AND ALL LIFE, IS SUBJECT TO FORCES AND EVENTS WHICH RESULT IN ITS EVENTUAL END. WHEN HUMAN BEINGS EVOLVED TO THE STATE OF AWARENESS, THEY REALIZED THERE WAS NO DEFENSE AGAINST DEATH AND VERY LITTLE DEFENSE AGAINST THE NATURAL WORLD WHICH AT ALL TIMES WAS INDIFFERENT TO WHETHER IT HARMED OR HELPED THEM.

ALL OF US HAVE DIFFERENT LEVELS OF TOLERANCE FOR FACING REALITY. CERTAINLY THE EARLIEST PEOPLES HAD AN UNUSUAL PROBLEM WITH TRYING TO UNDERSTAND AND COPE WITH A WORLD WHICH WAS CAPRICIOUS, AND AT TIMES VERY DESTRUCTIVE AND COMPLETELY INCOMPREHENSIBLE TO THEM. WITH THIS IN MIND, CONSIDER THAT THE HUMAN BRAIN EVOLVED IN A MANNER WHICH REQUIRED PROBLEMS TO BE SOLVED AND ANSWERS TO BE GIVEN TO THE EVENTS HAPPENING TO THE HUMAN.

LET US TALK ABOUT THE HUMAN BRAIN FOR A BIT. IN HIS BOOK, ***“EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE”***, IN TALKING ABOUT THE DUALITY OF THE HUMAN BRAIN, DANIEL GOLEMAN SAYS, “ONE, THE RATIONAL MIND, IS THE MODE OF COMPREHENSION WE ARE

TYPICALLY CONSCIOUS OF: MORE PROMINENT IN AWARENESS, THOUGHTFUL, ABLE TO PONDER AND REFLECT. BUT ALONGSIDE THAT THERE IS ANOTHER SYSTEM OF KNOWING: IMPULSIVE AND POWERFUL, IF SOMETIMES ILLOGICAL - THE EMOTIONAL MIND.” HE GOES ON TO SAY IN THE APPENDIX, “THE EMOTIONAL MIND IS FAR QUICKER THAN THE RATIONAL MIND, SPRINGING INTO ACTION WITHOUT PAUSING EVEN A MOMENT TO CONSIDER WHAT IT IS DOING. ITS QUICKNESS PRECLUDES THE DELIBERATE, ANALYTIC REFLECTION THAT IS THE HALLMARK OF THE THINKING MIND. IN EVOLUTION THIS QUICKNESS MOST LIKELY REVOLVED AROUND THAT MOST BASIC DECISION, WHAT TO PAY ATTENTION TO; AND ONCE VIGILANT WHILE, SAY, CONFRONTING ANOTHER ANIMAL, MAKING SPLIT SECOND DECISIONS LIKE, ‘DO I EAT THIS, OR DOES IT EAT ME?’ ACTIONS THAT SPRING FROM THE EMOTIONAL MIND CARRY A PARTICULARLY STRONG SENSE OF **CERTAINTY** (MY EMPHASIS), A BY PRODUCT OF A STREAMLINED, SIMPLIFIED WAY OF LOOKING AT THINGS THAT CAN BE ABSOLUTELY BEWILDERING TO THE RATIONAL MIND.”

IN “***THE BLIND WATCHMAKER***” WRITTEN BY RICHARD DAWKINS, HE SAYS, “PRETEND AS THEY WILL TO SCIENTIFIC CREDENTIALS, THE ANTI-EVOLUTION PROTAGONISTS ARE ALWAYS RELIGIOUSLY MOTIVATED, EVEN IF THEY TRY TO BUY CREDULITY BY CONCEALING THE FACT. IN MOST CASES, THEY KNOW DEEP DOWN WHAT TO BELIEVE BECAUSE THEIR PARENTS RECOMMENDED AN ANCIENT BOOK THAT TELLS THEM WHAT TO BELIEVE. IF THE SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE LEARNED IN ADULthood CONTRADICTS THE BOOK, THERE MUST BE SOMETHING WRONG WITH THE SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE.”

IN HIS BOOK “***THE EMOTIONAL BRAIN***”; JOSEPH LEDOUX SAYS, “THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS THE ‘EMOTION’ FACULTY AND THERE IS NO SINGLE BRAIN SYSTEM DEDICATED TO THIS PHANTOM FUNCTION. IF WE ARE INTERESTED IN UNDERSTANDING THE VARIOUS PHENOMENA THAT WE USE THE TERM “EMOTION” TO REFER TO, WE HAVE TO FOCUS ON SPECIFIC CLASSES OF EMOTIONS.”

WHAT DOES ALL THIS COMMENT ABOUT THE BRAIN AND EMOTIONS MEAN? IT MEANS BRAINS EVOLVED TO PROTECT INDIVIDUALS IN THE PRIMORDIAL VIOLENT WORLD. IT MEANS EMOTIONS ARE SO OLD, THEY ARE VERY DEEPLY INGRAINED IN OUR NATURE. IT MEANS EVEN THOUGH OUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE WORLD HAS CHANGED TO GIVE US SLIGHTLY MORE CONTROL AND MAKE IT A BIT MORE BENIGN IN GENERAL, OUR EMOTIONS ARE STILL PRODUCING OUR RESPONSES, IF WE DO NOT MAKE AN ATTEMPT TO CONTROL THEM. IT ALSO MEANS THAT BRAINS ARE DESIGNED TO FOOL US AND TO MAKE US FEEL COMFORTABLE. FOR THAT REASON, WE MUST BE EXTREMELY CAREFUL IN WHAT WE LET OUR BRAINS DO TO US AND KEEP CONSTANTLY AWARE OF THE REASONABLE VERSUS THE EMOTIONAL CONTENT OF OUR THINKING.

PROBLEM SOLVING IN EVERY DAY EVENTS AIDED IN THE PRESERVATION OF LIFE IN EARLY TIMES, AND THUS THE PRESERVATION OF THE SPECIES. IN THE MODERN WORLD IT CAN BE AN EVEN GREATER ADVANTAGE IF USED CORRECTLY. THIS ABILITY OF THE BRAIN CARRIED WITH IT THE NECESSITY TO HAVE ANSWERS TO ALL PROBLEMS, EVEN WHEN THE ANSWERS WERE WELL BEYOND

THE CAPABILITY OF THE HUMAN TO DISCOVER.

HOW COULD CRO-MAGNON PERSONS HAVE BEEN ABLE TO CONCEIVE THAT THEIR WORLD WAS REALLY AN ENORMOUS BALL FLYING THROUGH EMPTY SPACE, CIRCLING THE SUN, A COLOSSAL SUPER HOT GAS BALL WHICH WE NOW CALL A STAR, AND THAT THE OTHER LIGHTS IN THE SKY WERE OTHER PLANETS AND OTHER STARS AT FANTASTIC DISTANCES FROM US?

THE ANSWER IS THAT THEY COULD NOT. THEREFORE, THEY DEVISED SATISFYING ANSWERS WHICH THEIR BRAINS WERE VERY CAPABLE OF PROVIDING. THEY DID THE SAME WITH EVENTS ON EARTH AND IN THEIR LIVES. THIS RELIEVED THEIR CONFUSION AND PERPLEXITY WITH WHAT WAS HAPPENING AROUND THEM. THE WORKINGS OF THEIR MINDS DEMANDED THAT THEY DO THIS. MYTHS AND GODS AROSE FROM THE PROCESS OF THE MIND ATTEMPTING TO FUSE PRIMITIVE UNDERSTANDING WITH REALITY. FORCE OF CIRCUMSTANCES CAUSED EARLY HUMANS TO CREATE GODS AND RELIGION. THIS SITUATION EXISTED OVER HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF YEARS AND BECAME DEEPLY ENTRENCHED IN HUMAN CULTURE AND IN THE MAKE UP OF THE HUMAN BRAIN. EVEN TODAY MOST PERSONS CANNOT TOLERATE THE AMBIGUITY OF NOT HAVING AN ANSWER TO A PARTICULAR PROBLEM.

ABOUT TWO TO THREE THOUSAND YEARS AGO, WHICH IS A VERY SHORT TIME COMPARED WITH ALL OF HUMAN HISTORY, THINGS BEGAN TO CHANGE. SOME HUMAN BRAINS BEGAN TO LOOK AT THINGS DIFFERENTLY. PYTHAGORAS (CIRCA 582 BCE TO 500 BCE) BROACHED THE IDEA THAT THE EARTH AND OTHER PLANETS REVOLVED AROUND THE SUN. EVEN THE IDEA OF ATOMS AROSE IN THE CLASSICAL GREEK TIMES. ANAXAGORAS (CIRCA 500 BCE TO 428 BCE), LEUCIPPUS (CIRCA 450 BCE TO 370 BCE), AND DEMOCRITUS (CIRCA 460 BCE TO 378 BCE) ALL PROMOTED THE OUTRAGEOUS IDEA THAT THE TOTALITY OF MATTER WAS COMPOSED OF VERY SMALL INDIVISIBLE PARTICLES WHICH THEY CALLED ATOMA FROM WHICH WE GET THE TERM ATOMS.

THUS BEGAN THE PROCESS OF TOPPLING AND DISCREDITING MYTHICAL, FABRICATED, BELIEFS. THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE PHYSICAL SCIENCES FROM THEN TO THE PRESENT TIME IS WELL KNOWN. BUT EVEN THE ADVENT OF REASONABLE, TESTABLE, THINKING BEGAN ONLY TWO TO THREE HUNDRED YEARS AGO. REASONABLE, LOGICAL THINKING IS ONLY IN ITS INFANCY AS FAR AS THE REST OF HUMAN DEVELOPMENT IS CONCERNED. IT HAS NOT BEEN WITH US VERY LONG AND IS STILL DEVELOPING. EVEN THOUGH THE RESULTS OF CLEAR REASONABLE THOUGHT ARE COMPELLING, WE ARE STILL GOVERNED BY THE LONG PRECEDING HISTORY OF INEXACT EMOTIONAL LOGIC WHICH IS DEEP-SEATED IN OUR BRAINS.

THE GOOD RESULT OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF KNOWLEDGE IS THAT TODAY WE CAN BE MUCH MORE AWARE OF WHAT IS REALLY GOING ON IN THE UNIVERSE, ON THE EARTH, AND IN THE LIFE PROCESS; AND UNDERSTAND HOW WE HAVE EVOLVED TO DEAL WITH

THOSE THINGS. THAT IS, WE CAN BE AWARE IF WE WISH TO BE, AND IF WE CAN OVERCOME THE LONG TERM INHERENT CULTURAL HABITS OF THE PAST.

AS MENTIONED EARLIER, A MAJOR PROBLEM IS THAT WE ALL HAVE VARIOUS DEGREES OF TOLERANCE FOR THE REALITY OF LIFE. OUR HUMAN BRAINS ARE STILL SEEKING SATISFYING SOLUTIONS TO THE PROBLEM OF FEELING GOOD WITH THE CIRCUMSTANCES IN WHICH WE FIND OURSELVES. MOST PEOPLE STILL GRATIFY THIS LONGING FOR SAFETY AND SECURITY BY USING FICTITIOUS MYTHICAL BELIEFS.

SINCE THEY ARE NOTHING BUT FANTASY, THE IDEAS CAN BE SHAPED IN ANY MANNER NECESSARY TO APPROPRIATELY FULFILL THE NEEDS OF EACH INDIVIDUAL. MYTHS ARE EASIEST TO BELIEVE BECAUSE HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF YEARS, IF NOT MILLIONS OF YEARS, OF CULTURAL INGRAINING CAUSES AN INBRED NATURAL ACCEPTANCE OF THEM.

THE PROBLEM OF EXTREMISM ARISES WHEN A VULNERABLE INDIVIDUAL IS BOMBARDED BY THEIR CULTURE AND TRAINING TO BELIEVE A CERTAIN SET OF IDEAS WHICH MAY HAVE LITTLE OR NO RELATIONSHIP TO THE FACTS, BUT WHICH ARE THE GUIDELINES THEIR CULTURE USES TO COPE WITH THE LIFE THEY UNDERSTAND. THESE INDIVIDUALS, DRIVEN BY THE CERTAINTY COMPONENT OF THEIR EMOTIONAL MAKEUP, THEN CONSIDER THESE CONCEPTS ABSOLUTELY TRUE, AND DEVOTE THEIR BEST EFFORT TO SUPPORT THEM. THE LESS THEY UNDERSTAND ABOUT THE REALITY OF THE SITUATION, THE MORE THEY NEED THE ANSWERS THEY HAVE, AND THUS THEY NEED TO DEMONSTRATE THEY ARE TRUE.

WHY ARE SOME PERSONS LESS VULNERABLE THAN OTHERS? THAT INDEED IS AN INTERESTING QUESTION. IS IT THAT SOME ARE MORE INDIVIDUALISTIC, MORE “INTELLIGENT”, MORE AWARE, LESS AFFECTED BY THEIR CULTURE TO ACCEPT POPULAR OR EASY TRENDS? I HAVE NO ANSWER TO THAT. I AM NOT SURE ANYONE HAS AN ANSWER TO THAT, BUT WE KNOW IT AS A TRUTH THAT EVERYONE IS DIFFERENT. THIS SEARCH FOR OTHER AVENUES OF THOUGHT IS JUST ANOTHER WAY IN WHICH WE ARE DIFFERENT.

SO WHY EXTREMISM? THE PATH FROM REALITY TO EXTREMISM IS A CONTINUUM. TO DIFFER IN MINOR WAYS AROUND THE OBSERVABLE FACTS IS THE PROCESS OF SCIENTIFIC INVESTIGATION. BUT TO SLIP AWAY COMPLETELY AND DISREGARD THAT WHICH CAN BE DEMONSTRATED TO BE TRUE IS THE ROAD TO CATASTROPHE. IF A PERSON CAN BELIEVE A LITTLE OF THAT WHICH IS KNOWN TO BE IMAGINARY, THEY CAN EASILY BELIEVE A BIT MORE OF FANTASTIC OR IRRATIONAL IDEAS.

MARY AND I LIKE TO DO CRYPTOQUOTES AND OTHER SUCH WORD PUZZLES. A RECENT ONE BY AUSTIN O’MALLEY, WHEN

SOLVED READ, “THOSE THAT THINK IT PERMISSIBLE TO TELL WHITE LIES SOON GROW COLORBLIND.” OF COURSE, THE IDEA IS THAT IF A WHITE LIE IS OK, THEN A GRAY LIE IS OK, AND FUTURE LIES GET GRAYER AND GRAYER UNTIL THEY ARE VERY BLACK. EVENTUALLY, IT BECOMES IMPOSSIBLE TO TELL THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN TRUTH AND LIES.

I THINK EXTREMISTS ARE IN A SIMILAR POSITION. THEY JUSTIFY ONE THING AS ALL RIGHT AND LEAD THEMSELVES INTO BELIEVING ANOTHER THING A BIT MORE RADICAL IS ALSO ALL RIGHT. THE WHITE LIE SLIPS INTO BEING A GRAY LIE, AND THE JOURNEY TO EXTREMISM HAS BEGUN.

WHERE DOES ONE DRAW THE LINE BETWEEN FACT AND FANCY? HOW SAFE IS IT TO BELIEVE ANYTHING NOT BASED IN FACT? THOSE, I THINK, ARE QUESTIONS WE MUST ALL ANSWER FOR OURSELVES AS WE GROW INTO MATURITY. BELIEVING IN THE EASTER BUNNY WHEN WE ARE THREE MAY BE ALL RIGHT, BUT BELIEVING IN IT WHEN WE ARE THIRTY IS CERTAINLY NOT ALL RIGHT IN MY ESTIMATION. ENJOYING HARRY POTTER AS A STORY IS FUN. SUBMITTING TO FORTUNE TELLERS IS STUPID. IT IS TIME FOR THE HUMAN RACE TO GROW UP AND FACE THE FACTS AND CONFRONT REALITY SQUARELY.

THESE FACTS I SPEAK OF, ARE FACTS AS THEY ARE JUDGED BY THE BEST HUMAN BRAINS AROUND, OR AS THEY MIGHT BE UNDERSTOOD BY A SUPER INTELLIGENT ALIEN RACE WHICH HAPPENED UPON US. THAT WE WILL HAVE THE BENEFIT OF AN INTELLIGENT ALIEN RACE IS HIGHLY UNLIKELY, SO WE MUST SETTLE FOR THE BEST HUMANS WE HAVE.

I TRUST INVESTIGATORS WHO ALWAYS LEAVE THEMSELVES OPEN TO THE INVESTIGATIONS OF OTHER SIMILARLY QUALIFIED SCIENTISTS. THE GENERAL TERM “SCIENTIFIC METHOD” IS THE MOST RELIABLE PROCEDURE FOR DETERMINING TRUTH. AS LONG AS IDEAS ARE OPEN TO TEST, TO RE-VERIFICATION OR REFUTATION, THEY ARE HEALTHY AND RESULT IN THE BEST CURRENT IDEAS.

EXTREMISM RESULTS THEN WHEN WE STRAY FROM FACT AND ENGAGE IN FANTASY. THIS FANTASY IS NOT JUST THE MAKE BELIEVE OF CHILDREN, BUT THE SINCERE BELIEF IN THINGS WHICH JUST CANNOT BE SUBSTANTIATED BY REASONABLE, SENSIBLE AND LOGICAL INVESTIGATION. THE PROPENSITY TO ACCEPT NON FACTUAL INFORMATION AS SOUND AND WORTH USING FOR MAJOR DECISIONS IS THE METHOD BY WHICH PERSONS SLIP INTO UNREALITY. THIS IS HOW EXTREME POSITIONS CAN DEVELOP AND BE ACCEPTED. THIS PROCESS SHOULD BE GUARDED AGAINST AND AVOIDED BY INTELLIGENT PERSONS.