

Rain Dances Won't Save Us

Sheila Ayala



Once upon a time, not so long ago, three distinguished atheists wrote best sellers. The essence of the message that they delivered to their readers was simple. Religion has inflicted grievous harm on society, religion is dangerous, and any belief in a higher power is irrational. Unsurprisingly, some reviewers were not very kind and took to calling the works simplistic and misguided, diatribes against religion, ineffectual, dogmatic, rambling and self-contradictory, and most expressively, “atheists with an attitude.” After years of quietly ignoring the secular point of view, the mainstream media seemed astonished to find that there were actually non-believers in their midst. When this parade of atheists wandered onto the public arena, the media took note. The topic of secularism versus religion was the fodder for TV talk shows and print articles for months.

It was in this milieu that Secular Ontario (SO) was born and took advantage of the new interest of the media in atheism/secularism/humanism. SO, a tiny organization springing from Ottawa, has been described as the “prayer police,” though the organization’s mandate is

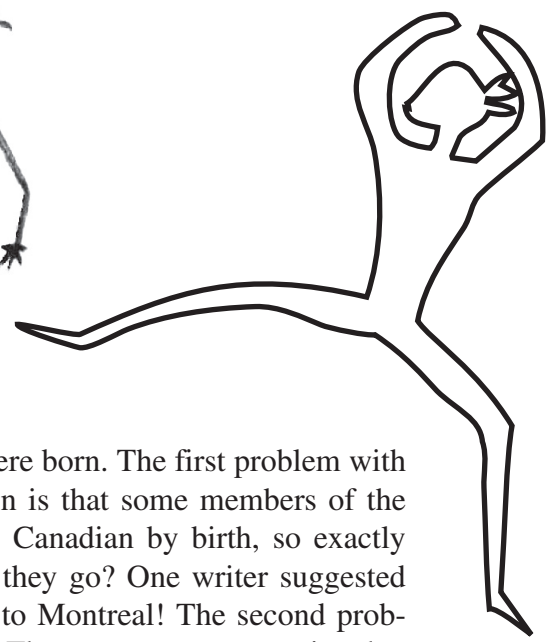
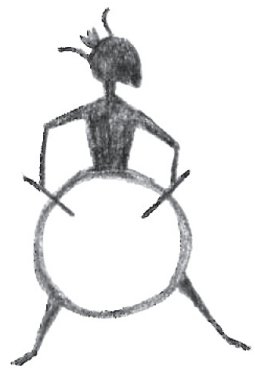
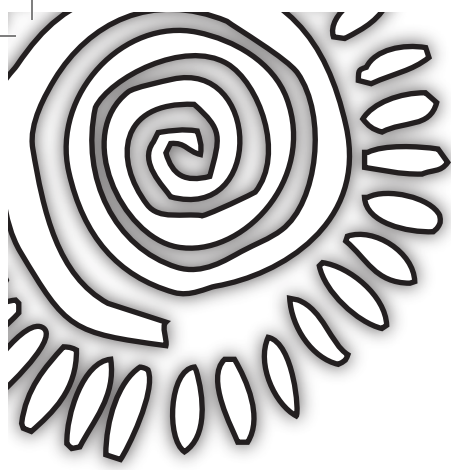
to keep religion out of the public domain. It made waves last year by reminding municipalities to stop saying the Lord’s Prayer at the opening sessions of their council meetings.

In 1999, Henry Freitag, who is Jewish, took the town of Penetanguishene, Ontario, to court, claiming that as a non-Christian, under the Canadian Charter of Rights, the town infringed on his rights to freedom of conscience and religion by reciting the Lord’s Prayer at

public council meetings. The Ontario Court of Appeal agreed with Freitag and ruled the practice illegal. The court ruling applies to all Ontario municipalities, and they should abide by the law. All governing bodies must operate by the rule of law and must set an example to the electorate.

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SO sent 28 offending municipalities a polite reminder of the Freitag case, but to date only one council complied with SO’s request to refrain from saying the Lord’s Prayer. SO is in the process of bringing the issue before the courts again. Contrary to accusations thrown at SO, the group is not denying anyone the right to their religious beliefs but insists that religion is a private matter and has no place in public settings. Some reactions to SO’s stand



were very vocal. The following email (unedited) is one such illustration:

Who the hell are you to tell anybody that they should not say the Lord's Prayer before a council meeting or anything else? The constitution of Canada states that Canadians enjoy freedom of religion, not freedom FROM religion. If I or anybody else wants to say a prayer or any other goddam thing that is our right. You sir, have not a fucking thing to say about it! If you don't like it, don't listen. If you don't like that, then fuck you and your busybody group. Do you want to invite the inevitable howls of derision and ridicule from all sides and be called crackpot and fool and busybody from people who will never again take anything you have to say seriously? Now that this preposterous letter of your's is out there, your credibility is now shot for good.

Have you not anything better to do with your time than to stick you fat fucking nose into other people's business?

Are there not enough facists in this world without you adding your two cents?

Mr Beissel [SO's President], sir, you can take your Secular Ontario and pound it up your mother's ass and keep your worthless opinions to yourself.

Asshole.

Sincerely, and with much laughter you goof.

This email was the most offensive one received, but several other writers advised that if SO members didn't like the status quo they should leave Canada and return to the lands

where they were born. The first problem with this suggestion is that some members of the SO board are Canadian by birth, so exactly where would they go? One writer suggested they go back to Montreal! The second problem is racism. These protesters are saying that only people born in Canada have any right to work towards change and immigrants, although Canadian citizens now, do not have the right to express themselves freely or to work to better Canadian society.

It is hard to have a lucid argument with such ignorance and intolerance. And where, one must ask, is their Christian charity? These defenders of the Christian faith readily disregard their sacred text which teaches its followers to love their enemies. Ignoring this lesson, they instead revile non-Christians. Despite the insults hurled at SO, it is important for SO to continue to insist that the ruling bodies of our society be secular. Why? Because secularists are rationalists in a way religionists can never be. Belief in a faith system means being locked into a dogmatic mindset that tolerates no alternatives. This might not matter if religious doctrine didn't conflict with common-sense, but it does so in many areas, sometimes with catastrophic consequences.

Atheists point to atrocities committed by the religious over the centuries and, albeit in different forms, atrocities in the name of religion continue to occur. The religious coun-

teract this by reminding us of the blood spilled in countries like the old Soviet Union, China and Cambodia. True, these countries are or were atheistic, but it needs to be pointed out that the horrifying policies were carried out in the name of Communism and not atheism. There is a difference.

The Bible enjoins us to go forth and multiply. And so we did, again and again. What the holy book doesn't say, is when to stop. According to Catholic doctrine, birth control is a sin. According to secularists, birth control is a rational way of limiting the growth of an overpopulated planet. Pope Benedict XVI is known as the 'Green Pope' but it is difficult to understand why. When he came to the United States in April last year and later to Australia in the following July, he spoke about eliminating poverty and protecting the environment. Both are critical issues. Yet there was a glaring omission from the mainstream media who failed to mention that the Pope and his Vatican policies on population control are part of the problem. When the world's media become so besotted with a venerated figure that they turn a blind eye to ruinous shortcomings, then it is time to heed the secular view.

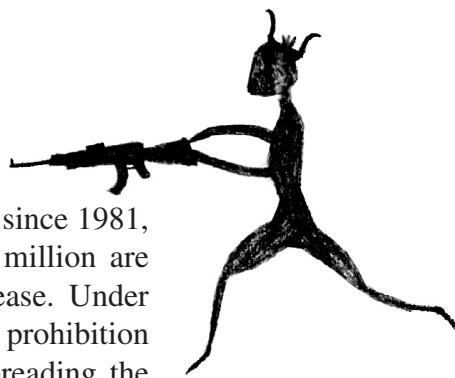
Having at his command immense wealth and the countless treasures of his churches, it becomes hypocritical for the Pope to talk about poverty. If he were really serious about poverty, he would dispose of all his trappings and live among the poor as Jesus Christ, his mentor, did. Perhaps then, instead of traveling the world uttering pious phrases, he would understand that there is a balance in nature. We should not take from nature more than we can give back. There is a causal connection between population growth and the collapse of the environment. But His Holiness won't do that. The ban on birth control ensures a steady increase in the number of Catholic ad-



herents, thus enlarging the Vatican's power base. It is lamentable that the poor can be manipulated so easily and that the Pope does not really have their interest at heart.

There are many aspects to eradicating poverty and protecting the environment, and there is no single solution. Pollution, green house gases, carbon emissions, greed, unstable or corrupt governments and the rape of our resources – all need to be addressed. The most pressing issue is over-population. For a poor family to have more children is not a step towards alleviating its poverty: it is a step backward into greater poverty. The environment comes under stress as more land has to be cleared for food production. Trees are cut down, and the ecosystems is disrupted as the entire flora and fauna suffers. The supply of basic staples like corn, rice, fish, and meat cannot keep up with the demand. Already we find ourselves with food shortages as the world desperately tries to accommodate an ever increasing population. The environment will continue to suffer until population growth is not only kept in check, but reversed.

That is why women the world over must have the right to decide how many children to have and when to have them. Poverty will decrease when there are fewer mouths to feed. The Vatican has influenced donors, particularly in the United States, to refuse funding to agencies like Planned Parenthood. The excuse given is that such agencies promote abortion. Quite apart from the fact that this is not true, the unrealistic policy of encouraging sexual abstinence instead of providing protection and prevention guarantees that poverty will remain and the population explosion will continue. The Vatican's ban on the use of condoms, moreover, guarantees the continued spread of AIDS, contemporary humanity's most devastating affliction. More than 25 mil-



lion people have died from AIDS since 1981, and it is estimated that over 33 million are currently suffering from the disease. Under these circumstances, the Vatican's prohibition of the only protection against spreading the disease is nothing short of criminal.

Religious prejudices that result in suffering and death are not restricted to Christianity. This imposition of the Islamic dress code on women, for example, has not only turned them into faceless, walking silhouettes, deprived of individual identity as well as of a vital source of vitamin D which depends on sunlight reaching their skin and which is essential to healthy bones and teeth. Clothes that cover the entire body deny women this free and vital vitamin. It is emblematic of the degradation of women.

The same inhuman dress code resulted in a terrible loss of life in Saudi Arabia in 2002. There was a fire at a school for girls. Instead of trying to save lives, the religious police refused to let the girls leave the burning building because they were not covered according to the dictates of Islamic dogma. Fifteen young school girls died needlessly. The religious police pushed the girls back into the flaming building where they burnt and choked to death in extreme agonies. Apparently, in Saudi culture, the lives of these girls were less valuable than the appearance of adhering to a religious edict.

Religious dogma can also be degrading in more subtle ways. In February of this year, in Ontario, rabbis refused to shake the hand of Richmond Hill's Deputy Mayor, Brenda Hogg, because of her gender. According to Jewish Orthodox doctrine, men are forbidden to touch women to whom they are not

married. This is the same as the practice, in the past, in some communities around the world, of forcing

Jews to step aside in a public street to let a non-Jewish person pass. Each time such an incident occurred, it reminded Jews that they were considered second-class citizens. By refusing to shake Brenda Hogg's hand, the rabbis reminded women that in some communities they are still not considered the equal of men.

Whatever customs any religious faith wishes to practice in their own circle is, so long as it does not violate the law of the land,

the business and the right of the believers. But outside that circle, all citizens must conduct themselves by the norms of the society of which they wish to be considered a part. It is not society that must adapt to the religious customs of any of the numerous belief systems represented in the

country, but it is the religious who must adapt to the civilized practices in the public life of the land.

The influence of secularists is urgently needed at the UN. A shocking tirade occurred at the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) in June, 2008. The Associations of World Education and the International Humanist and Ethical Union are non-government organizations and have consultative status at the UN. At the June meeting, their representative, David Littman, tried to raise the issue of such appalling human rights violations as the stoning of women, honour killings and female genital mutilation that are sanctioned under Sharia law. On that day, voting del-

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legates from Egypt, Pakistan and Sudan stood up and prevented Littman from continuing to speak. They protested that any discussion of Sharia law, or of any violations relating to Sharia law, was considered an insult to Islam. Thereupon, under the pressure of Islamist delegates, the Council president, Doru Romulus Costea (from Romania), declared that criticism of Sharia law will not be tolerated by the UNHRC. This is a victory for Islamists and follows their abhorrence of any form of free expression, allowing them to control ideas, thoughts, and words of an international organization that should be on the front line to protect human rights.

When stoning a woman, the victim is placed in a hole in the ground, buried up to her waist, and then a series of stones are hurled at her head. Great care must be taken in the selection of the stones. Smaller stones thrown won't inflict enough damage and larger stones would kill the victim too quickly. Medium-sized stones are the proper size to ensure a slow and painful death. Article 5 of the UN Human Rights Declaration states: "No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment." Even Islamists concede stoning to be cruel but sanction it as a just punishment. Thanks to that June UNHRC ruling, abuses can continue unabated. The very body which claims to be the protector of all people has failed.

When the Allied armies liberated Nazi concentration camps at the end of WW II, the world was shocked by what the soldiers found. It wasn't just the deliberate elimination of Jews, homosexuals and gypsies that stunned the victors, but it was also the systematic and efficient apparatus put into opera-

tion by a "civilized" country to achieve this end. It was in this environment that the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights was created. Its principal drafter was John Peters Humphrey, a Canadian humanist.

History will record Stalin's show trials, purges and the mass slaughter of civilians, the Cultural Revolution in China, the killing fields in Cambodia, the butchery in Rwanda, the ethnic cleansing of Muslims in Bosnia, Idi Amin's reign of terror in Uganda, the on-going massacre in Darfur, the unlawful incarceration at Guantanamo Bay by the United States, and the record of human brutalities continues. But the UN Declaration has drawn a line across history. Its 30 articles deal with everything from slavery, torture, cruelty, discrimination, fair trials, false imprisonment, marriage, freedom of thought, conscience, religion and edu-

cation. Any nation crossing that line will now incur the condemnation of the international community. Such condemnation may not immediately stop a tyrant, but tyrants too fall, and then they will be brought to justice.

However, Islamic countries seem to be an

exception to the rule. In August 1990, in Cairo, the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC) drafted their own version of Human Rights which tied them to Sharia law. The Cairo Declaration of Human Rights in Islam explicitly states that: "All the rights and freedoms stipulated in this Declaration are subject to the Islamic Sharia", and "The Islamic Sharia is the only source of reference for the explanation or clarification to any of the articles of this Declaration." It was adopted by 45 Muslim nations and empowers their governments to act with impunity against their citizens, free to engage in such barbaric punishments as chop-

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ping off hands, beheading those who leave Islam, forcing girls as young as nine years to marry and stoning women to death. By ruling the censure of such conduct out of order, The UNHCR has sanctioned such brutal violations of human rights.

The result of this ruling is far reaching and we have already seen how this has already come into play. At an Islamic summit in Mecca in December 2006, the OIC decided to adopt a policy of zero tolerance against any perceived insults to Islam as part of their overall strategy of advancing the cause of Islam worldwide. The measures agreed upon included creating an "Observatory" to monitor all reports of "Islamophobia". Muslims throughout the world were to be encouraged to report any cases of perceived Islamophobia, however trivial. Plans were also put in place to seek changes in national and international law to provide additional "protection" for Islam. The battlegrounds were to include the European and national parliaments, and the UN, including the Human Rights Council.

When a Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*, printed twelve editorial cartoons, most of which depicted the Islamic prophet Mohammed, in September, 2005, Danish Muslim organizations protested. The cartoonists claim that Muslims were not targeted in a discriminatory way since unflattering cartoons about other religions are frequently printed. But the imams refused to accept such explanations or any critical depiction of their religious founder as an expression of free speech that was legal in democratic countries like Denmark. They took their case abroad and orchestrated mass protests. The violence that followed included setting fire to the Dan-

ish Embassies in Syria, Lebanon and Iran, and storming buildings across Europe. It resulted in more than 100 deaths worldwide.

Mark Steyn is another writer called to account by Islamists. A Canadian living in the States, he writes a column for Canada's weekly magazine *Maclean's*. He is also the author of a best seller, *America Alone*. The book asserts that European multicultural policies have already allowed Islamists to over-run Europe and that this trend will continue with the decline of European birth rates versus the increase in Moslem populations. Steyn claims that in the future, the West will become Islamic and America will be left standing alone.

Maclean's run an excerpt from Steyn's book: *The End of the World As We Know It*. Mohamed Elmasry, head of the Canadian Islamic Congress, the same man who tried to introduce Sharia to Canada, complained that the article "discriminates against Muslims on the basis of their religion. It exposes Muslims to hatred and contempt due to their religion." Elmasry wanted *Maclean's* to allow him space for a counter argument. The magazine refused

because allowing outsiders to dictate what they could publish would compromise its independence. *Maclean's* did print several letters in its "Letters to the editor" section, opposing Steyn's argument. This did not satisfy Mohamed Elmasry who appealed to three human rights commissions: On-



tario's, which declared it lacked jurisdiction but went on to castigate Steyn anyway; British Columbia's, eventually ruled in Steyn's and *Maclean's*' favour, and the Canadian Human Rights Commission, which has declined to hear the case. A ruling on the *Maclean's*/Steyn case is crucial to journalists, authors and any-

one who expresses an opinion in public. Our right to free speech is being threatened and the West is doing itself no great service when it panders to the religious.

The latest fiasco where religion triumphs over reason is in the Ontario legislature. Noting the changing demographics and diversity of his province, Premier Dalton McGuinty suggested the time had come to replace the recital of the "Lord's Prayer" at the opening of each day's session in the legislature and invited Ontarians to voice their opinion. More than 25,000 petitions were received from the public. Secularists responded but were outnumbered by the religionists. A motion was passed unanimously on June 13, 2008 that the "Lord's Prayer" would continue to be read daily in the legislature, and that in addition a prayer from a different religion or a moment of silence would be recited in rotation to accommodate the diversity of the Ontario population.

Members of the Legislature must ask the Speaker to have other prayers added to the list; he will then pass requests to a standing committee comprised of politicians from all three parties. The Speaker has to ensure "the faith and non-faith demographics" are "proportionally expressed over time" and rotate the prayers or silent moments accordingly. Presumably the moment of silence is intended to accommodate the secularist community. After forcing them to listen to the Lord's Prayer, such a gesture is sheer hypocrisy.

Worse than that, making the Lord's Prayer a staple pious ritual while allowing the others in rotation only, clearly privileges the Christian religion and discriminates against all the others. Thus the Province of Ontario has chosen to violate the Charter of Rights and Freedoms and is breaking the law as interpreted by its own Superior Court.

Instead of doing the sensible, and the only respectful, thing and having a moment of si-

lent reflection during which anyone can pray silently if they wish, each to his or her own god, politicians are now squandering precious time deciding on a prayer from a muddle of "sacred" texts, and working out the demographics of the religious and non-religious groups. Not only is this a ludicrous exercise, it is also cumbersome and opens the door for politicians to privilege one religion over another or quarrel over the amount of time given to rival prayers, and generally manipulate the situation to their own opportunistic ends. When society pays homage to religion, reason takes a back seat.

It is time for the secularists of the world to open the closet door and step forward. Globally, they represent around 16% of the population or 1.1 billion people. They are the third largest faction behind Christianity at 2.1 billion and Muslims at 1.5 billion individuals. In Canada, the figure for non-religious persons is estimated to be around 19% of the population or about 6 million individuals. It is difficult to reach an accurate figure for this group because it includes atheists, agnostics, secularists, skeptics, freethinkers, humanists and others with no religious affiliation. But the numbers clearly indicate that secularist thought is widespread and is growing. The world needs a rational approach to the many problems threatening our future. Rain dances won't save the world's lowlands from drowning. We need cool heads and rational analysis, and that's precisely what secularists and humanists are committed to. Let's stop pretending religion has the answer to the world's problems.

Sheila Ayala has been an active participant in the Canadian humanist movement. Before retiring in January 2005, she was the Senior Administrator for the Humanist Association of Canada (HAC).

