

# Humanism Around the World

## ***Freedom of Expression***

The representative of the Association for World Education, in a joint statement with the IHEU <<http://www.iheu.org/glossary/term/407>>, has denounced the stoning to death of women accused of adultery and of girls being married at the age of nine years old in countries where Sharia law applies. The speaker, David Littman, was interrupted on no fewer than 16 points of order and the proceedings of the Council were suspended for forty minutes when the Egyptian delegate said that "Islam will not be crucified in this Council". On giving his ruling after the break, Council President Costea said that the Council "is not prepared to discuss religious questions and we don't have to do so... Declarations must avoid judgments or evaluation about religion. ... I promise that next time a speaker judges a religion or a religious law or document, I will interrupt him and pass on to the next speaker".

There was international protest against this ruling on Human Rights Day, 10 December 2008, when four leading experts on freedom of expression issued a joint declaration on the dangers posed to that freedom by UN resolutions combating defamation of religion. Roy Brown, IHEU representative at the UN, Geneva said: "We have been struggling long and hard against the attacks on freedom of expression by the Islamic States and their allies - and even some Western states - and it is good news that the world's

leading experts on freedom of expression have chosen to take a stand:

\* The concept of 'defamation of religions' does not accord with international standards regarding defamation, which refer to the protection of reputation of individuals, while religions, like all beliefs, cannot be said to have a reputation of their own.

\* Restrictions on freedom of expression should be limited in scope to the protection of overriding individual rights and social interests, and should never be used to protect particular institutions, or abstract notions, concepts or beliefs, including religious ones."

## ***The "Tatti Renaissance Library" humanist publications***

Harvard University Press is publishing new translations of the works by the Renaissance writers who initiated what became the European Enlightenment, among them Nicholas of Cusa, Lorenzo Valla, Francesco Petrarca, Leonardo Bruni, Pietro Bembo, Marsilio Ficino and others. New paperback volumes include Lorenzo Valla's *On the donation of Constantine* (in which he proved that the so-called 'Donation of Emperor Constantine' - the claim by the Catholic church that Constantine had donated Italy and Rome to the Catholic Church - was based on papal forgeries) as well as a volume titled "Humanist Educational Treatises" which 'provides new translations of the most important early humanist ef-

forts to reform medieval education'. Web page:

[www.hup.harvard.edu/itatti](http://www.hup.harvard.edu/itatti)

## ***2009: International Year of Astronomy***

The United Nations has declared 2009 the International Year of Astronomy. Coinciding with both Galileo Galilei's celestial discoveries in 1609 and the publication of Johannes Kepler's *Astronomia Nova* (which described the fundamental laws of planetary motion), the International Year of Astronomy celebrates 400 years of discovery and exploration of our universe. It is an unprecedented opportunity to showcase some amazing science -- and to inspire cosmic wonder.

## ***200th Birthday of Darwin***

Charles Darwin was born on 12 February 1809 in Shrewsbury, England. He set sail on the *Beagle* on December 31, 1831 and published *The Origin of Species* in 1859. Darwin originally intended to study medicine but was unable to bear the sight of surgery performed without anesthesia. His second choice of career was as a clergyman but after taking a degree from Cambridge University, he began to focus more on naturalism, taking the position of naturalist aboard HMS *Beagle*, which set sail for the South Pacific at the end of 1831. Darwin's experiences and research on the *Beagle* led to his discovery of evolution as the origin of species. He published his famous book *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* in 1859. He died on 19 April 1882.

## Letters to the Editor

### *A Sense of Qualified Optimism*

While I agree with the central thesis and many of the points raised by James Alcock in his article “Truth, Illusion and Identity”, (Summer, 2008), I have a problem accepting that all of the examples in the “Illusion of Control” section support his case.

Prof. Alcock notes that healthy adults believe that they have a fair measure of control over their personal lives and he gives us belief-control examples such as proper diet, safety measures for driving and a general fairness of societal rules. So far, so good. But then he goes on to imply that such beliefs are illusions and he states that these are easily shattered when one experiences a personal trauma or some other event that is in violation of the accepted rules.

First, if it is conceded that observing common-sense rules such as a proper diet and highway safety measures does, on average, result in more successful outcomes than does ignoring them, then the perception that following such rules leads to a successful outcome more often than not is not an illusion.

Second, it is rather a large leap to assume that most “optimistic” individuals cannot accept that actions that benefit a major-

ity do not necessarily protect all individuals all of the time. Surely most of us who get sick, have an accident, etc., still accept that the truth of the general rules is not brought into question simply because something traumatic has happened to us as individuals. Shelly Taylor’s conclusion that “Through the imposition of logic and order on the world, we spare ourselves the constant realization of the random terror of death.” seems not only over-the-top pessimistic but only weakly supported by her examples, which seem to me to give too much weight to the fact that a disparate group of laypeople of differing ages does not have an inherent knowledge of medical statistics.

One doesn’t have to be an incurable optimist to take comfort in the fact that the average life expectancy in Canada is now eighty-something. Against this, how seriously should the average Canadian fear “the random terror of death?” Bad things happen unexpectedly to good people (and bad) but we, the majority, aren’t sparing ourselves anything or hiding behind an illusion by assuming that we will likely follow the statistically most likely course through life. I would say that this is the only rational assumption in the absence of other data and I suspect that a majority

of Canadians share this sense of qualified optimism.

– *John Janis, Toronto*

### *Absence of Evidence*

Reverend Owen (“Letters to the Editor”, *HP*, Summer 2008) cites a Carl Sagan quote that includes the line: ‘Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.’

I disagree. I think the absence of evidence does in fact suggest an absence. Absence of evidence does not absolutely ‘prove’ absence, but it suggests it. Our beliefs should be determined by evidence. Lacking evidence, we should be skeptical while conceding that without knowing everything some doubt will always remain.

I am sitting in my study writing this. There is no evidence of giant pink elephants sitting here with me watching me type this letter. I use the fact that there is no evidence to believe that there are no pink elephants. The absence of evidence suggests an absence of elephants.

However, as a good scientist I know that there just might be pink elephants in the room who are deviously able to avoid detection. But until some evidence of this fact comes to light I must remain a non-believer.

I think the same holds true for other supernatural entities.  
– *David Reeve, Toronto*

### ***Propaganda Campaign of our Military***

Your excellent editorial (Fall 2008) highlighted the action of the Ottawa City Council in allowing the placing of “Support Our Troops” decals on municipal vehicles including buses and police cars. Their hypocrisy was shown in the wording of the motion; that this action did not mean support for the Harper Government’s involvement in the war in Afghanistan. The editorial prompted me to write to the Mayor and Council to state that their decision clearly showed how they had been co-opted by the propaganda campaign of the Harper Government.

Naomi Wolfe recently stated, “If Germans had been less complacent in the early 1930s, then history would have been much different”. The cause of such complacency is clearly shown today by the propaganda campaign of our military and the Harper Government. Support by city councils such as Ottawa is a major part in the process of misleading the public.

The irony is that our military requires a significant part of our national budget and consequently there is inadequate money for municipal infrastructure. The military and the “Merchants of Death” have such a strong lobby

that the needs of our cities are at the bottom of the list. Councillor Doucet showed this in his book, *Urban Meltdown*. To be specific, the Canadian military posted a notice last summer on its website that it will be seeking \$490 billions over the next twenty years. We can be sure that if Canada returned to its peace-keeping role their budget would be a small

### ***...today no war is winnable***

fraction of this amount.

The supreme irony in all of this is that today no war is winnable. Cheap weapons such as \$10 rifles, IED’s and suicide bombers mean that even the best-equipped forces in the world will eventually lose in any war.

– *Bob Stevenson, Ottawa*

### ***Concerns About Uranium Mining***

In his article, “Militarism in Canada and the World: What do we do about it?”, (Autumn, 2008), Murray Thompson provides a list of possible initiatives which he believes will help bring an end to the militarization of Canada. While I have no quarrel with many of these, I do question his view that we should: “Seek an end to uranium mining and production in Canada”.

These activities are critical to the operation of commercial nuclear power reactors used for electricity production and reactors used to produce medical isotopes such as moly-99 (much in the press these days) and the “work-horse” radioactive element cobalt-60 which is installed in irradiation devices used in a wide variety of medical and industrial applications. Additionally, the existence of infrastructure for fueling and operating CANDU power reactors facilitates the recycling of warhead materials into fuel for power production. Granted, there are also concerns about uranium mining as it applies to the commercial nuclear power industry in Canada; however, a unilateral call for rejection at this time is premature and should not be advocated before all the civilian implications have been assessed.

– *John Janis, Toronto*

### ***Skepticism***

Compliments to the staff that put together this issue of the new *Humanist Perspectives!* I have not read it entirely but I like the page size. It will be easier to store. The print is crisp and easy to read.

I’ve marked one sentence in your editorial that I really like. “Skepticism is a debt we owe to our intelligence.” The entire editorial was important but that sentence was outstanding.

– *Dolores Dickey*