

# An Evolution of Evil

We are celebrating Charles Darwin with a feature article not only because this year marks the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth or because he revolutionized our way of looking at the world, but also because he exemplifies the Humanist approach to reality and experience at its best. He came by his insight into the evolution of life by precise observation of a vast array of organisms, painstakingly accumulating evidence until reason left him in no doubt about the truth of an idea that had been urging itself upon the scientific community for some time, namely that life on this planet evolved its rich fauna and flora by a process of mutation and adaptation determined by an ever changing environment.

It was a momentous discovery that changed the human world forever, and Darwin knew it. He knew that the truth about Nature he had succeeded in demonstrating would represent a serious challenge to all humanity, especially his religious friends, requiring painful adjustments in the way they thought about and lived their lives. His capacious intellect was matched by an equally extraordinary capacity to wait, and he waited more than two decades before making his findings public. This profound patience was rooted both in his sense of awe at the magnificence of the order of Nature that had yielded some of its most closely guarded secrets to him, and in his consideration for others, his love for family and friends, who would be profoundly upset by the implications of the results of his research.

Anthony Cassils, in his prob-

ing and deeply informed essay, gives us a lively sense of what went into the making of Darwin, the man, and his work, of the hesitations and considerations that attended the publication of his epoch-making studies, of the extent to which he was a scientist of his time and yet his own man and mind. As Cassils demonstrates, we are still struggling on many levels with the consequences of his discovery. These include the emergence of fascism, an evolution of evil based on a perverse, unscientific reading of Darwinism.

Darwin's is the Humanist way: reason brought to bear on observation in the formulation of a hypothesis which must be tested patiently by experiment and either verified or discarded; and courage to proclaim and defend a theory evidence verifies as true, notwithstanding erroneous 'eternal verities' or the clamor of those who wish to deny what contradicts convention and tradition. At the same time there is a profound ethical dimension to being a Humanist. We commit to the quest for understanding the world we live in partly because it can be applied to improve the lot of humanity. In a natural order that cares no more for *Homo sapiens* than for *Musca domestica*, we need all the help we can give each other to deal with the vicissitudes of life, to ameliorate the inevitable suffering nature inflicts on us indiscriminately, and to create a community in which all people, indeed all creatures, can enjoy their lives, each according to their wants and needs.

This adds to the Humanist virtues of truthfulness, impartial reasoning, exact observation, pa-

tience and humility, a categorical imperative rooted in compassion: to act so as to ensure a fair, just, and dignified world for all. The forces of nature inside and around us will see to it that we will never fully realize this objective, but unless we commit ourselves to it and struggle to achieve it, the quality of our lives will surely deteriorate. As John Donne put it so unforgettably: *No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main;... any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind.* In other words, we **are** our sisters' and brothers' keepers, each of us responsible for and to each other.

It is in this spirit that I commend the current issue of *Humanist Perspectives* to you. It is the last one I shall edit. I accepted the editorship on an interim basis only. There was no one else at hand when magazine production and printing moved from British Columbia back to Ontario, one year ago. I helped make Ottawa the new production location and then I undertook to put the magazine back on track. Judging by most of the responses we have received, *Humanist Perspectives* is on the right path now, and I am sure the new editor, Yves Saint-Pierre, will move forward in the same direction and enrich the journey for us all.

Given the categorical imperative of our global fellowship, the number of issues that need to be addressed, defined and acted upon is sheer endless: poverty, hunger, repression, corruption, injustice, demagoguery and exploitation, the homeless and the sick, not to mention the most immediate challenges of an

exploding world population and the looming collapse of our habitat as a result of climate change. These are the problems we face – here in Canada as elsewhere in the world. It is true: most of them have always existed. But a vulgar egotistical materialism has descended on us that makes a virtue of past vices and rewards crooks and gangsters for their unscrupulous self-service at the expense of the many. It is crucial that we challenge such abuse, protest such perversion, and urge constructive action to preserve civilization. But a magazine is only as effective and creative as its readers. We need to hear your voices; we need you to write for us about the things that concern, outrage or inspire you and about which you are knowledgeable. All that is needed is a clear eye, an honest pen and a caring heart.

Thus, our second focus in this issue is the so-called Middle East conflict. The rumblings are growing out in the streets to the effect that we cannot allow Israel to go on with a policy towards the Palestinians that can, at best, be called ‘ethnic cleansing’ and, at worst, ‘genocide’. The categorical imperative of Humanists does not allow us to sit by idly while Israeli authorities destroy the lives, the homes, the community and its infrastructure, the very country of our Palestinian fellow-humans. And Israel has been doing so for over 60 years!

There are two additional reasons why we must speak out. The first is the Canadian government’s unqualified support for Israel that has made us all accomplices in the crimes against humanity Israel visits daily upon the Palestinian people. That our government does so to court the Jewish vote and encourage generous contributions to the party coffers represents an intolerable level of cynicism. More Canadi-

ans need to rise up and demand an end to trading votes for human lives.

The second reason is the fact that the Canadian and American media have shamelessly presented only the official Israeli view of the conflict so that the public has an entirely distorted, false picture of the facts on the ground. As the economist Paul Craig Roberts, formerly Associate Editor of the *Wall Street Journal* and recipient of the French *Légion d’honneur*, a man whom the *Forbes Media Guide* ranked as one of the top seven journalists in the United States, explains: *The reason that Israel has been able to appropriate Palestine unto itself with American [and also Canadian] aid and support is that Israel controls the explanation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. At least 90% of Americans [I’d say the percentage may be slightly lower among Canadians], if they know anything at all of the issue, know only the Israeli propaganda line. Israel has been able to control the explanation, because the powerful Israeli lobby brands every critic of Israeli policy as an anti-semitic who favors a second holocaust of the Jews.*

Anticipating the possibility of such scurrilous accusations, let me state clearly: the Nazi holocaust that cost 6 million innocent Jews as well as thousands of gypsies and Germans their lives was a horrendously brutal crime that will haunt the chronicles of our time forever. Those of us who are ashamed that civilized human beings could inflict such savagery on fellow-humans are determined that there shall be no repeat – not against Jews or against any other people. But to (ab)use the sufferings of the victims of Nazi terror in the holocaust to justify the victimization of the Palestinian people is, quite simply, obscene.

For over 60 years, Israel has persecuted the Palestinian people with impunity. The list of Israel’s crimes is long, starting with the erasure of Palestinian villages in 1948 and the expulsion of their inhabitants, and continuing through to the most recent atrocity – the brutal attack on Gaza. In between lie murder, rape, torture, incarceration without charge or trial, to say nothing of the capricious levelling of homes, the daily humiliations of innocent women, children and old men at Israeli checkpoints, the construction of a Wall that separates farmers from their fields and orchards, and children from their parents.

Israel has been the subject of well over a hundred UN resolutions critical of its conduct. It has ignored virtually all of them. Here are two examples: On June, 14, 1967, the UN Security Council passed Resolution No. 237, that calls upon Israel to *ensure the safety, welfare and security of the inhabitants [of the Occupied Territories], facilitate the return of those inhabitants who have fled the areas since the outbreak of the hostilities and recommends the scrupulous respect of the humanitarian principles contained in the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949.* In five subsequent resolutions, the Security Council deplored Israel for its failure to implement Resolution 237. To this day, 42 years later, Israel still has not complied with the UN resolution, and instead continues to defy world opinion and to violate the ethical norms of civilized society.

On March 22, 1979, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution No. 446 which declares *the policy and practices of Israel in establishing settlements in the Palestinian and Arab territories occupied since 1967 have no legal validity and constitute a serious obstruction to achieving a*

*comprehensive and lasting peace in the Middle East; and calls once more upon Israel, as the occupying power, to abide scrupulously by the 1949 Fourth Geneva Convention.* Today, 30 years later, the expansion of the settlements proceeds more rapidly than ever, and Israel continues to ignore the Geneva Convention. And the Canadian along with The American and British governments fully support Israel in its illegal and immoral conduct.

Is it no wonder that a distinguished man like Anton Kuerti, the world-famous pianist who is an Officer of the Order of Canada and the recipient of several honorary doctorates, and whose impassioned performance (here in Ottawa) of Schumann's piano sonata No. 2 brought tears to my eyes last night, is on record as saying recently: *The unbelievable war crimes that Israel is committing in Gaza...it makes me ashamed to be a Jew. The servile way in which Canada is supporting the U.S. position – basically, it's all Hamas's fault because of missiles that they throw over in desperation – I think this reluctance of Canada to use its influence makes me ashamed to be a Canadian.* This the voice of a man of decency and humanity whose heart is aching over the indecency and inhumanity of his people and his adopted country.

There are many such voices in Israel, calling for a just peace with the Palestinians. They constitute a substantial portion of the Israeli public, but not substantial enough to overcome the combination of arms dealers and manufacturers whose riches depend on promoting militarism and war, and the lunacy of religious fanatics who claim that God himself gave Greater Palestine to his chosen people, the Jews, and will stop at nothing to make this infantile fantasy a reality. Nothing

demonstrates more urgently the need to address human problems rationally and compassionately, beyond the mumbo-jumbo of religious delusions and the murderous glint in the eyes of the divinely obsessed, than the terrible, mutually assured destruction of Jews and Palestinians in the Middle East.

But the sane voices in Israel are never heard in North America. You can find them on the net via such links as [www.netivot-shalom.org.il/links.php](http://www.netivot-shalom.org.il/links.php) and [www.jewishvoiceforpeace.org](http://www.jewishvoiceforpeace.org), where you can allow yourself to be informed with integrity by the likes of Naomi Klein and Noam Chomsky. Or you can read the books Bill Broderick (*The False Messiah* by Alan Hart) and Derrick Guilmette (*Blood and Religion* by Jonathan Cook) have reviewed so eloquently for us. There are others that I recommend highly, like *Jewish History – Jewish Religion* by Israel Shahak (Pluto Press, London 1994-2002) and *The Other Israel* (New Press, New York, 2002). The latter is a compilation of 37 "Voices of Refusal and Dissent" which are heart-wrenching in their pleas for an end to Israeli brutality and for an honorable peace with the Palestinians. As Michael Ben Yair, Israel's Attorney General under Yitzhak Rabin, Shimon Peres and Benjamin Netanyahu, put it:

*The six-day war was forced upon us; however, the war's seventh day, which began on June 12, 1967 and has continued to this day, is the product of our choice. We enthusiastically chose to become a colonial society, ignoring international treaties, expropriating lands, transferring settlers from Israel to the occupied territories, engaging in theft and finding justification for all these activities... In effect, we established an apartheid regime*

*in the occupied territories immediately following their capture. That oppressive regime exists to this day.* [2002]

And it still exists. *The so-called 'Palestinian autonomous areas' are bantustans, declared Nelson Mandela. These are restricted entities within the power structure of the Israeli apartheid system.* And the Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Archbishop Desmond Tutu explained that *Yesterday's South African township dwellers can tell you about today's life in the Occupied Territories... More than an emergency is needed to get to a hospital, less than a crime earns a trip to jail, but Tutu is confident that just as it was possible to end apartheid so can the occupation. But the moral force and international pressure will have to be just as determined as the racist forces operating an apartheid regime.* It is in that spirit that Kiran Omar and Devora Neumark have addressed the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, each pursuing a different approach to raising public consciousness of the true situation in the Middle East.

There will be some who, quite properly, demand that we indict the Palestinians for their failures and crimes in dealing with the situation. Let there be no misunderstanding: we abhor and condemn suicide bombings, but to represent such desperate acts of frustration as equal to the calculated and massive terrorism inflicted by official Israel on the Palestinians is like equating the wildebeest's vicious kick at the head of an attacking lion with the ferocious assault by a pride of lions tearing it to pieces.

Israel has the largest, the best trained and the best equipped army in the region, including a nuclear arsenal. Until someone can show me Palestinian tanks

rumbling through the streets of Tel Aviv firing at rock-throwing Israeli teenagers, or Palestinian gunships bombing and strafing Israeli villages and assassinating suspected Israeli war criminals, or Palestinian bulldozers levelling the homes of innocent Israelis merely because a family member has run afoul of the Palestinian secret police – until such time I cannot, as a man of reason, but see the Israelis as Goliath and the Palestinians as David in this conflict.

I fear Netanyahu may continue to take Israel down the road as a pariah among nations. For how much longer this evolution of evil can continue I don't know, but Israelis can also put an end to this senseless bloodletting. They alone have the power to give the Palestinians what is theirs by moral and legal right: their own independent state in the pre-1967 borders; the removal of settlers from the Westbank; the sharing of power in Jerusalem, and compensation for Palestinians expropriated and expelled from their

homes by Israel. The voices in this issue of *Humanist Perspectives* are intended as an appeal to both sides in this conflict to allow reason and compassion to prevail and to walk the path of peace. Let that plea go out to all the peoples of the world and be my legacy as interim editor.

– *Henry Beissel*

## Letters to the Editor

Re: *The Bus to Everywhere*, by Julie Breeze (Vol. 42, No. 1)

I came to Canada in 1957 and worked during the first years as a lab technician at Queen Mary Veterans' Hospital, Montreal. There my congenial boss warned me not to reveal my atheism as that marked me as a communist—disregarding that I had taken part in the 1956 Hungarian anticommunist uprising. When registering for graduate studies at UBC, I was asked to declare my 'denomination'. Atheism was not recognized. One day I asked my professor why he attended Sunday services as a non-believer? "I cannot afford not to do so!" he replied. In Hungary we could not afford to miss ideological brainwashing seminars. I also heard rumors that I could not confirm that some clergymen reported on their clients' political views to the RCMP. Based on my experiences in communist Eastern Europe where the church had informers among its members, I did not find those rumours unreasonable. The difference was that in the eyes of that system religious faith marked you as an anticommunist—disregarding that to be a communist was also a matter of faith! Both were paranoid, shortsighted attitudes arising from utopian ideologies.

Since those days there have been limited improvements. Julie Breeze correctly identifies objective secular education as a factor involved. Postwar influx of immigrants relatively free of religious indoctrination and the end of cold war paranoia that had seen a communist behind every bush helped. Also, more and more North Americans within our modern multi-denominational and multi-ethnic societies realize the absurdity of religious, mutually exclusive ideologies that set people around the globe against one another. Many individuals, like myself, are increasingly frustrated with the dark-age mentality of our political leaders whose actions, beyond greed for wealth and power, are influenced or even determined by Judeo-Christian or Islamic fundamentalist views.

One incident had a lasting impression on me. On a summer evening in 1943 my father, a broad-minded RC, asked our dinner guest, the local parish priest, whether he believed in God. Confessing he didn't, our guest explained that as a priest he was able to help people in need of spiritual support. I asked the same question of an Anglican parson who visited my friends and me in 1956 in Montreal. The answer was the same. By the same

token I had also come across benevolent communists. There are good and bad ones in every group—except that among left and right fundamentalists the bad ones carry the day and at the extremity of right-wing groups good ones are non-existent.

–*Frank S. Tompa, Pender Island, BC*

I write in response to the letter by Angela Beale (Spring 2009 issue).

Ms. Beale writes that religious people who have committed murder, torture and genocide may be compared to atheistic Communists and Pol Pot followers who have behaved similarly. She feels that as atheists, we Humanists must face this issue and enter into debate with religious folks.

I disagree. Stalin and Pol Pot might very well have been atheists, but they were NOT Humanists. In my view, it is our responsibility to make this point and NOT enter a debate on the issue. We Humanists must never allow religionists (or anyone else) to compare Humanism with the actions of atheists who commit such crimes.

–*Terri Hope, Owen Sound, ON*