

# Sex and Secularism

*Humanist Canada Conference 2012*

**Simon Parcher**

The City of Montreal, already known for its nightlife and joie de vivre, was sexier than usual on August 3-5, 2012, as humanists from Canada and ten other countries descended upon the Hilton Bonaventure Hotel to talk about sex.

The international line-up of conference speakers was outstanding. It included Professor Christopher diCarlo; science-fiction trilogy writer, Robert J. Sawyer; one law for all proponent, Maryam Namazie; blogger, Andrea Houston; executive director of the British Humanist Association, Andrew Copson; IHEU President, Sonja Eggerickx and Quebec activist and current PQ candidate, Djemila Benhabib.

This year's conference was co-hosted by the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) and the Association Humanist de Quebec (AHQ). The conference and the IHEU General Assembly (GA) were scheduled for the same weekend in Montreal. This permitted the GA members to attend the conference and the conference benefitted from having several of the GA representatives as speakers. Matt Cherry of the IHEU and Michel Virard of the AHQ represented their respective organizations on the conference planning committee.

Countries represented at this joint event were the USA, Great Britain, Romania, Norway, France, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Italy. Due to the presence of vocal opponents to some religious practices, security for the conference was beefed-up with extra security personnel. Humanist Canada President, Simon Parcher, along with HC board member and security expert, Dale Jackaman, also kept a watchful eye on the crowd.



Humanist Canada Youth Award recipient  
Leanne Iskander (left) with award presenter Andrea Houston.

In the end, there were no problems encountered and all delegates were respectful and well behaved.

Three awards were presented at this year's conference. Renowned sex therapist, Sue Johanson, received the Humanist Canada, Humanist of the year award. The Humanism in the Arts Award was presented to author, Robert J. Sawyer. Ontario schoolgirl, Leanne Iskander earned the Humanist Canada Youth Award for being the catalyst for gay-straight alliances being formed in all Ontario high schools.

Sub-themes to Sex and Secularism were (1) liberating human sexuality from taboos and restrictions, (2) GLBT issues and (3) gender issues in human rights, sharia law, and sex trafficking. On the Friday evening, conference delegates were

treated to colorful critiques of the repression of human sexuality.

Professor Christopher diCarlo opened the conference on Friday evening, August 3, with "Sex 101: Natural vs. Supernatural Sex Education". He noted that many humanists today were once religious or were raised in a religious household and were taught about sexual activity in a specific religious context. Prof. diCarlo explained that as humanists, we think about human sexuality quite differently. Scientific discoveries in biology, physiology, psychology, anthropology, and the

things, he revealed that secular people enjoy sex to a greater extent than religious people. This is at least in part due to a more liberal attitude and less feelings of guilt.

A highlight of Humanist conferences is the presentation of the Humanist of the Year award and this conference was no exception. Canadian celebrity sex therapist, Sue Johanson was the award recipient this year in recognition of her work in educating youth and adults about sexuality, and her long career in radio and television. Sue regaled the audience with an

acceptance speech filled with tales from her work. It was at times delivered in colorful language that only she could get away with using! During her speech, Sue thanked Humanist Canada for the award but wondered if she herself was a humanist. Humanist Canada President, Simon Parcher, assured her that her work in helping people understand their sexuality was 100% humanist.

In the days that followed, Sue left a phone message of thanks. In it, she included, "The conference was spectacular, I enjoyed myself. I really did. I think when it comes right down to it I guess I am a humanist ... yes, I guess I am. I hadn't really thought of that in

terms of me and my lifestyle and my choices but when I heard what the speakers were talking about and listened to the conversation around the table, I could relate to it and was moved". There are likely millions of people like Sue in Canada and other countries who are humanists but just don't realize it. Perhaps humanism will now have one more vocal advocate!

The acceptance speeches by Robert J. Sawyer and Leanne Iskander were equally inspiring and confirmed that HC had made excellent choices in selecting award recipients. Leanne was also presented with a scholarship of \$500 to assist her at university in the coming academic year.

All conference presentations were recorded and will be made available on YouTube in the weeks following the conference after they are



**Humanist of the Year Award recipient Sue Johanson with Humanist Canada President Simon Parcher.**

cognitive and evolutionary sciences have contributed greatly to an understanding of ourselves in a sexual context. He offered some of the evidence from these fields of science to present a naturalized account of human sexuality in a secular context. This account was then compared and contrasted this account from those presented in some of the world's leading religious belief systems such as Christianity, Judaism, and Islam.

The next morning, the conference was opened by an entertaining presentation from author Darrel Ray, whose book, *Sex and Secularism* coincidentally has a title matching the conference theme. During his talk, Darrel presented the results of a sex survey of secular people. Among other

edited in post production.

The 2012 humanist conference was indeed a resounding success and a notable achievement in collaboration by Humanist Canada, the IHEU and the Association Humaniste de Québec. The Canadian, Ontario and Montreal Center for Inquiries were also represented at the conference and CFI Canada assisted by doing some promotion through its member network. It is great to see humanists working together!

If you missed this conference you can catch the presentations on YouTube but this won't capture the whole conference experience. There is nothing like being there in person. The 2012 conference has contributed to a better understanding of human sexuality, GLBT issues and the mistreatment of women. Stay tuned for details on the next Humanist Conference in Canada and the issues it will address!



Humanism in the Arts Award recipient  
Robert J. Sawyer with Humanist Canada  
Vice-President Laura-Lee Balkwill.

*Simon Parcher is President of Humanist Perspectives and President of Humanist Canada.*

## It's time to gather the facts and fight back

**Allan Gregg**

**M**any – from Noam Chomsky, to Neil Postman to Al Gore – have ... laid the blame on the media. Either through sloth, sensationalism or the very pacifying nature of the medium itself, a culture saturated in trivia has become anesthetised to the larger needs of the world in which we live.

Indeed, as Chris Hedges asks in his brilliant screed, *The Empire of Illusion*, when we come to believe that we are all only one audition away from celebrity, why concern yourselves with picayune problems like the homeless, let alone some arcane concept like the assault on reason?

But it doesn't have to be this way. History shows us that, over time, science's authority always undermines dogma's legitimacy and the persuasive power of reason will always trump ideology's emotion.

While the circumstance in Canada 2012 is obviously nowhere near as dystopian as what Orwell depicts in 1984, I really do think that there are some unsettling parallels going on here that we ignore at our peril. I also think it's time to gather the facts ... and fight back.

*From a talk at Carleton University, Ottawa by Allan Gregg who is one of Canada's most recognized and respected senior research professionals and social commentators.*

*From 1979 through 1993 Gregg was known as the official pollster of the Progressive Conservative Party and participated in over 50 central election campaigns on three continents.*