

# Finding Our Way Back to the Garden

**Joseph Graham**

**D**uring the passionate periods of Quebec nationalism and its forced francization of the culture, a common sentiment expressed among Anglophones was that if we all left the province, a large portion of the French-speaking population would have to learn English simply to maintain communications with the rest of the world. In a similar vein, as humanism spreads, we might need to learn religion just to properly understand ourselves, our past and our religious neighbours. In throwing out monotheism, we risk our ability to communicate. Some years ago, heading a group trying to salvage the Mount Sinai Hospital building in the Laurentians, an abandoned chest hospital built and maintained by the Jewish community, I received a query from a local journalist who asked, among other things, if I could explain the significance of the name Mount Sinai. Puzzled, I responded that it came from... Mount Sinai. Then I understood the question and so I asked if she knew the biblical story that describes Moses receiving the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai. She responded that she had had little religious education and

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didn't know the story. Two realizations came to me in that instant. One was that we had succeeded to some degree in the goal of secularizing our educational system, and second, that a new generation was growing up that had no common touchstones through religious history, no common story to tie us together. Like the Tower of Babel, I realized, we risked confounding the language into incomprehensibility.

Western Civilization, or Christendom, was cast when the ancient Semitic

peoples met the other cultures situated around the Mediterranean Sea. Those we know as the Phoenicians were a Semitic people that included religious influences absorbed from many parts of their mercantile empire, including Egypt, Persia and India. The Phoenicians had a highly organized society, trading down the west coast of Africa and as far as India. Did they travel around the Cape? From their Middle Eastern principalities, they built a major trading city at Carthage on the Mediterranean coast in North Africa and established themselves on the Iberian Peninsula as well as some islands in the Mediterranean. Phoenician is the Greek word

for Canaanite, and the Greek and Roman alphabets were adapted from the Phoenician or Canaanite script. The Canaanites were not a homogenous people so much as partners in trade. Their religious and cultural beliefs came from ancient Akkad and Sumer, the Mesopotamia of the Bible and the 'cradle of civilization,' as well as from ancient Egypt, plus the more recent influences from the East, Persia and even India. Their religious beliefs varied along some common themes, few of which were monotheistic.

The Romans borrowed their marine technology from the Canaanites and, as Roman fortunes rose in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries BCE, they warred with the Canaanites, finally crushing Carthage in 146 BCE, pulverizing the great city into dust and displacing its people. Their objective was to make sure that Carthage would never rise again.

As often happens, though, the ideas and religious philosophy of the defeated Canaanites grew into a rebellion, a movement that we know as Christianity. Over the next centuries, Semitic religious thinking came to dominate Mediterranean society. We tend to think of the pre-Christian people as the Hebrews, and the Hebrew ideas emanating from Judea formed the focus of the rebellion, but there were also these large colonies of Canaanites spread along the old trading paths who would have recognized a lot of the Hebrew ideas as their own. Judea was, after all, only one of the princedoms, but as its ideas gained traction in the Greek and Roman world, they would have also found receptive ears among culturally similar Canaanite minorities.

Over the next centuries, varieties of Christianity and Judaism spread and, by the third century, when Constantine reconquered the East and set up his capital at Constantinople, an

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interpretation of Hebrew monotheism dominated religious thinking. To this day, our mental construct is a Judean mind looking out at a Greek and Roman world. Our common assumptions come from a Semitic tradition. We are hard-wired monotheists. We learned Greek and Roman mythology and history from this point of view. We are not the Greek or Roman polytheist but the Judean. When we con-

verse, our touchstones and shorthand depend upon our Judeo-Christian cultural traditions. At the end of the first paragraph above, I made a reference to the Tower of Babel, something that still has meaning to many of us, but the awareness of Mount Sinai and Moses receiving the Ten Commandments was already gone from this journalist's generation.

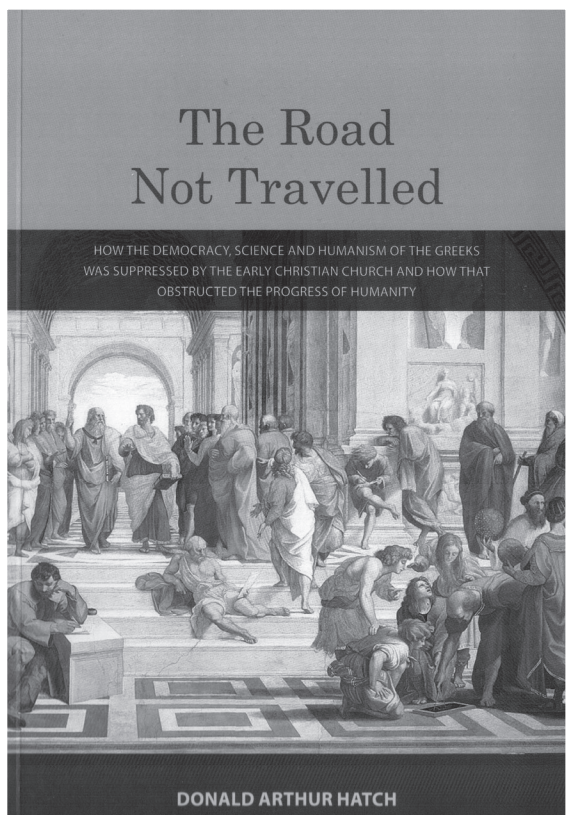
We named our son Jonah for the successful prophet who was swallowed by a whale in the course of his mission but was upset with God because he felt his credibility was diminished when God did not throw fire and brimstone upon the people. God had to remind the prophet that he had succeeded in changing the ways of the people and that therefore he had saved them from God's wrath. Living in England today, my son is hard-pressed to find anyone who knows the story. Some years ago, in a letter published on the CBC website, he wrote a defence of those modern prophets who predicted the Y2K problem and were being pilloried because the problem never materialized. Most people had heeded the warnings and done remediation. I laughed because here was a modern computer expert named Jonah defending successful prophets, but most people didn't get the joke. When religion dominated our society, many more people would have seen the humour. What shorthand can replace these references and allow us to find our way back to the time when God evicted us from the

Garden? Without this trail of religious crumbs to follow back through the forest of time, our arguments will stop making sense and, instead of clear thinking, we will find we have spawned a thousand new paths to our modern gods, sinking in cultural confusion as though we have experienced a new Tower of Babel and have been cursed anew to speak different languages, no longer understanding each other. As we dismiss our religious traditions, we lose the cultural shorthand that goes with them and an underpinning of our communications that has allowed us to exchange ideas, replacing them with rapidly changing pop-culture references decipherable only to the cohort tuned into that particular social media channel.

From a humanist perspective, we must focus on the fundamentals, but we must also accept that those fundamentals might well include thousands of years of shared cultural and religious beliefs and assumptions that have allowed us to discuss, debate and dismiss ideas such as monotheism. In order to really make a proper

change, we may have to designate members of our humanist population to retrace our cultural and religious evolution and help us find our way back to the Garden, just as surely as the Nationalists in Quebec have to maintain knowledge of English for their communications with their neighbours. In the long process of unravelling our history and finding our way back to the imagined paradise of the Garden of Eden, we can slowly undo the damage that our belief in the god who evicted us inflicted on us and on the world. Only then can we properly set out again, all together and all with a common language of thought and ideas, in a new, humanist direction. It is not a project for the faint of spirit, it is the Humanist challenge. •

*Joseph Graham is an historian and autodidact who has spent a good part of his 66 years trying to answer questions of spirituality. His drive is to understand history and its formative elements, but, having grown up a Catholic, he believes he can only seek to attain a secular Promised Land of thought.*



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