

I believe because...

One of the problems that humanists have with faith, as Plato Mamo points out in his article “On Faith,” is that believers will accept a religious narrative without the possibility of objective certainty. Dan Mayo describes the struggle to get prayer out of various city councils in Canada, where, despite being largely secular, there are still attempts to insinuate religion into temporal affairs. Fortunately for Canada, when legal challenges reached the highest level, the “Supremes” stood foursquare for keeping religion out of secular matters.

Not every country is so lucky – in many countries religion intrudes to a greater or lesser extent into matters of state and of daily life. Emmanuel Ezeagwu describes how education and a lot of self-directed reading liberated him from the strictures of the religiosity in which Nigerian society is mired. But Michael Barrett’s article on religious naturalism reminds us that many people, even those who have had the benefit of a scientific education or are otherwise scientifically literate, long for some cosmological meaning to their lives. Reli-

gious naturalism – a sense of experiencing the world with a deeply felt commitment to nature – may be sufficient for some, but others need to believe in some kind of a higher power.

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But humanity’s ability to believe without evidence or to persist in believing in the face of contrary evidence is not limited to deities. Those running our society have a quasi-religious belief in the market economy and, despite the mounting evidence to the contrary, continue to believe that there can be infinite growth on a finite planet. As John Meyer writes in his article, those benefiting from growth are

unwilling to acknowledge the limitations that Malthus argued nature would impose on humanity. Many liberal-minded people accept “on faith” that our Enlightenment-derived values, including the idea that all people are equal, are universal and would be embraced by all people, given a choice. But our Enlightenment values are in many ways an aberration for the human species – possibly even contrary to evolutionary forces. For one’s genes to prevail, it may not be helpful to be objective when it comes to

one's child, clan, or tribe. Tribalism and nepotism have been the norm for our species, and continue to be the norm in many parts of the world. Yet many of the policies of Western countries in this era of mass global migration from the developing world seem to be based more upon wishful thinking of human behaviour than on critical analysis of the potential for conflict and how to avoid it when groups of people with very different religions, cultures, and societies come together.

Andrew Colgan argues that higher education should produce graduates who are both "gentlemen and scholars," that is scholars who have mastered a technical trade or some specialized field of knowledge, but also "gentlemen" with a broad wisdom-fostering general education and a capacity for critical thinking. Yet it seems that our universities are in some ways doing anything but promoting critical thinking, what with creating "safe spaces" for various particularisms and carrying courses that require any potentially controversial statement or discussion to be preceded by a "trigger warning." Since when is it the purpose of universities to protect the enquiring minds of students from anything that might challenge or offend them? The various "studies" programs (women's, black, native, chicano, queer, fat, and more) are often more about indoctrination and creating activists than about promoting objective scholarship and critical thinking skills. Are these minds – and those of university students in general – being prepared to deal with what promises to be a challenging century in terms of population (7.4 billion now, projected to be over 11 billion by 2100 – assuming Malthusian

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reality does not keep the number down), dwindling resources, conflicts arising from scarcity, resurgent Islamic jihadism, and climate change, among other problems?

As proponents of critical thinking, we humanists do not accept deities on faith. But the coming decades will no doubt provide plenty of opportunities for us to examine what we may unwittingly be taking "on faith" and what or whom we may be giving a free pass when it comes to subjecting it or them to critical analysis.

– Madeline Weld

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Letters

I write as a retired Nova Scotia Provincial Court Judge to correct a misleading impression about civil marriage in Nova Scotia contained in Dr. Robertson's interesting article.

Although Nova Scotia indeed has no officials entitled "marriage commissioners," civil marriage is alive and well in the province, being handled by all levels of Judges, as well as by Staff and Administrative Justices of the Peace ("JPs"). A fee of \$97.60 is prescribed under the regulations for marriages conducted in court offices or judges' chambers, but many JPs also conduct

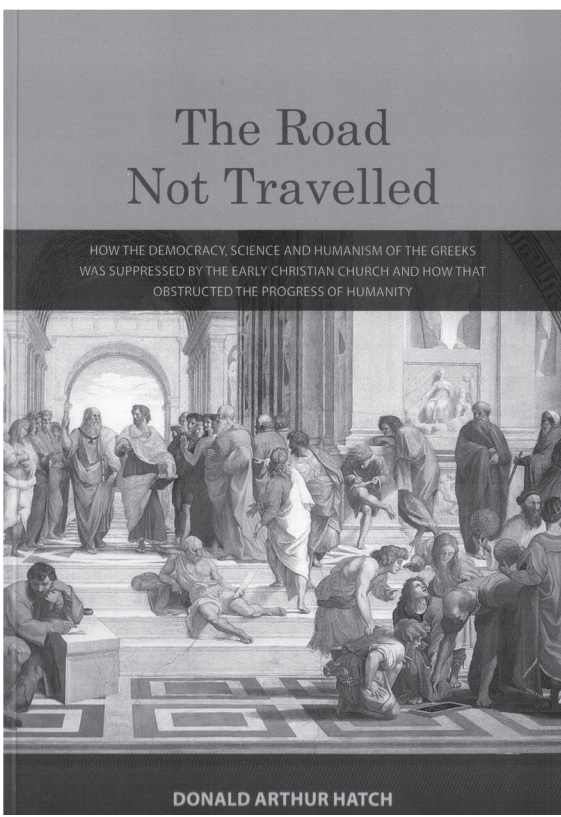
weddings off the premises in off hours and are a popular choice for couples who want to have a creative ceremony outside traditional venues. I have seen lovely weddings done in public parks, people's backyards, on our wonderful beaches, as well as at inns and resorts.

As JPs are free to set their own fees (and retain them) for off-site weddings, they develop their own ceremonies which they can adapt to suit each couple's circumstances and wishes. They are restricted only by the legal requirements in the relevant legislation that each party

stipulate that he/she does not know of any legal impediment to the marriage and declares in the presence of witnesses that he/she takes the other as "lawful wedded husband/wife," and the requirement that the JP pronounce the couple as married by the power vested in the JP under the Solemnization of Marriage Act.

With this option available in the province, I am sure that any committed humanists who wish to be married can find a JP to work with them to develop their own unique ceremony.

— Judge Anne Crawford (*retired*)
Mahone Bay, NS



Donald Hatch

has packed each page with knowledge and with thoughtful comments about our past and about the emergence of a hopeful future as we proceed from the path of religious superstition and supernaturalism into a more enlightened time.

— Goldwin Emerson, Ph.D.

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