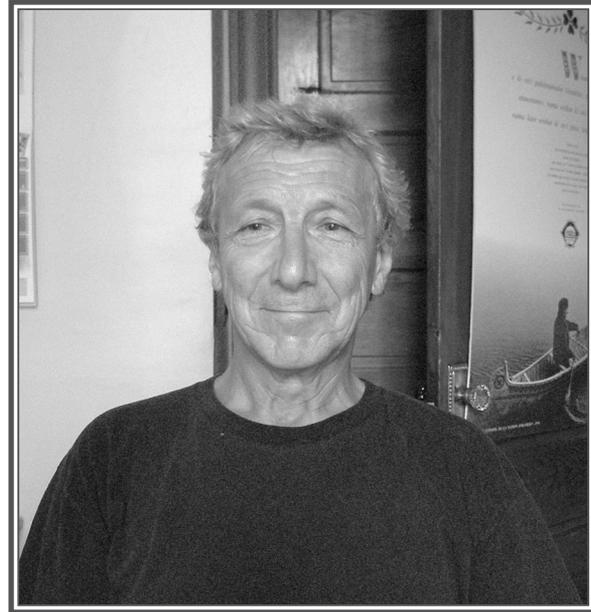


Introduction & Invitation



Since this is my first issue as editor, I'd like to take the opportunity to introduce myself with reference specifically to my personal philosophy, my humanism and secularism and to my editorial vision.

From an early age, I have found myself grappling with the unanswerable question: "Why is there not nothing?" Clearly, my human reason can't yield an answer to this most fundamental of questions. At the heart of being, there remains an essential mystery. The most significant limitation of my reason, then, is that it does not provide me with a response to the most essential of questions.

As a teacher of literature, I have a fondness for metaphor and allegory and I recognize, respect and enjoy the ability of poetic language to resonate profoundly with essential ele-

ments of the human psyche in very satisfying ways. If some people choose to refer to the myths, legends and foundational narratives of ancient peoples as they grapple with the unanswerable questions at the heart of being, so be it. If they choose to invest these paradigms with faith, that is their business, their absolute right, nor am I in any position to resent or indict them for it.

You will not find in these editorial lines either unconditional praise of reason, nor the bashing of people of faith.

Having said that, let me establish clearly that I do not believe in a God. Nor do I believe in an after-life. I am fully responsible for what I do and the repercussions of what I do, here and now.

The principles by which I try to conduct myself, and often fail, are founded on two

basic matters of observable fact. The first is that I am an earthling, one member of one of the innumerable, ephemeral life forms that share a tiny satellite of an insignificant star in the far corner of a galaxy, itself lost in the unimaginable vastness of space. As an earthling, the source and sustenance of my life is the source and sustenance of all earthly life: water, soil, air and sunlight. I am aware of the immense complexities this simple assertion overlies. But it is nonetheless true. The other thing I consider a matter of observable fact is that in every moment, in each of my encounters, I am creating reality. If I bring to the encounter anger, bitterness, resentment, jealousy, aggressiveness, that is the reality I create. If I bring patience, understanding, compassion, earth consciousness, love, then I create that. Everything I do matters.

Enough of my person-

al philosophy and ethics, to which I may return in future issues.

Of possibly greater interest here, is that I hold certain socio-political positions that rest on my understanding of humanism. Chief among them is that no religious faith belongs in the public place. In this post-renaissance, post-enlightenment world, in democracies established on the principles of humanism, no religious faith should be allowed to influence public policy in any way, nor should a penny of public money be spent on religious institutions or religious education. My reason, learning, and experience, such as they are, make clear to me that fundamental human rights are universal. Over time, they were defined, codified and voted into charter laws to protect the rights of individuals against abuses at the hands of collectivities. As humanists we must fight at every turn all attempts to define human rights with reference to groups. Religions and religious groups have no Human Rights. Individuals are guaranteed the right to believe or not, as they see fit, and to associate in groups within the limits of the law, that is, insofar as such groups are not seditious or otherwise criminal.

In addition, I hold as a principle that whenever religious practice or custom comes into conflict with ordinances, by-laws, laws or charter rights that have been voted by duly

elected representatives, invariably the ordinance, bylaw, law or charter right must prevail. And, within the bounds of the democratic process, we must vigorously counter efforts to move our elected representatives to vote laws, frame exemptions or invoke overrides that would circumvent this principle.

While it is true that ours is a multicultural society, it is a society that is founded on, organized and governed according to principles with a noble and much valued history, principles of individual rights, freedoms and responsibilities, governed by the democratic rule of law.

As was very effectively pointed out in these pages in a recent article by David Rand (HP 168), we must be very wary of the principle of “open secularism”, an idea that flows

***Those who can make
you believe absurdities
can make you commit
atrocities.***

Voltaire

out of multiculturalism and promotes the apparently fair and understanding position of being equally open to all religions. On the one hand, such a position tends to lead to domination by the majority religion, and there is nothing less open to any religion than another

religion. So, such openness runs the risk of promoting the opposite of what it set out to achieve. In addition, it opens the way to endless legal and societal conflicts where religious beliefs, practices and customs come into conflict with existing charter rights and laws. True secularism, which I assume to be the goal of all humanists and most thinking human beings, though many may fear to say so out loud, can and must only mean the complete separation of religion from the public sector. As we have noted above, the right to religious belief and association, the right to not believe or to change beliefs, these are guaranteed in law. These are protected individual rights and that is the end of it.

In keeping with this, I hold that no visible religious symbol should appear on or in any government building, nor should any person paid from the public purse, who, in any way deals with the public, wear any religious symbol or dress. The government, in all its manifestations must be, and must be seen to be, entirely non-religious, so that every citizen can expect equal consideration and fair treatment under the law.

For example, I find it darkly ironic and absolutely absurd that the RCMP, mere decades after having enforced the attempted cultural genocide that was the policy of residential schools for First Nations children, decided to make an exception to the Force's dress

code, out of cultural respect, to allow members of a religious sect from India, present here for no more than two generations, to wear their traditional head gear with their uniforms.

However, I am not an absolutist. And while I believe that fruitful dialogue can only exist when interlocutors hold strong, well founded opinions and present them coherently, in no way do I confuse those opinions with absolute truth. I also believe in the democratic process and know full well that a complete shift to secularism will be a long process and will move forward in small increments, provided enough citizens are swayed by convincing arguments and feel supported in the expression of secularist opinion. I feel it incumbent on humanists to ensure that the conversation carries forward and increasing light is shed on the question. To that end, these pages are open to you.

I hope this gives you some idea of what I stand for. But, again, I am only one voice in the conversation that is this magazine. It is my wish that this conversation continue to be broad-ranging, informed, interesting, often current and always coherent, as it has been for decades now.

There is a sign on my office door, at John Abbott College, that reads: "Working for the triumph of doubt over certainty". And, enigmatically,

I sometimes assert to my students: "The only person you can be sure is wrong is the person who is absolutely certain."

Under my watch, look for thoughtful opinions and a quest for better questions. If

*I hate a fellow whom
pride, or cowardice, or
laziness drives into a
corner, and who does
nothing when he is there
but sit and growl; let him
come out as I do and
bark.*

Samuel Johnson

you're looking for absolute truth, you'll have to knock at another door. And if you think you already know the truth, well, as my old Atikamekw grandmother used to say: "You can't wake up a man who's pretending to sleep".

Things coming up:

Every region in the country has a Humanist Association or similar organization. It would be good to include news from the various regions in every issue. Be in touch.

This issue contains articles that have resonance all across the country, Human Rights Commissions and Tribunals are the subject of debate in every jurisdiction in this coun-

try. If you are in a position to catch us up on what is going on where you live, please do. Send us a letter or an article.

Every School Board in every Province and Territory offers courses in ethics and religion. The way we teach our young people about ethics is a fundamental question for all humanists. What is being done where you live?

As the most important trading partners of the USA, what goes on there is of some importance to us. I have always sensed there was tension between the humanist principles on which the USA is constituted and its economic system. "Dismantling the Temple" raises the veil on this question.

While I do not particularly favour the idea of a specific theme for each issue, I would like to see certain themes featured and developed over a number of issues, in the form of a dialogue, of articles and letters.

There are any number of questions of interest to humanists and soon-to-be humanists. It will be exciting to explore them with you. What is on your mind?

—Yves Saint-Pierre

