When Critical Thinking Gets Under Our Skin

Henry Beissel entitled his editorial in the Spring 2013 issue of Humanist Perspectives (#184) as “Long Live Critical Thinking.” I couldn’t agree more and, like many readers of this magazine I am sure, consciously strive to live by that motto. It seems that critical thinking doesn’t come all that easily to us humans. Cognitive research tells us that we tend to engage in “confirmation bias,” the tendency to give preference to information that confirms what we already believe and to ignore or reject evidence that contradicts our dearly held beliefs. Even those of us who consciously espouse critical thinking may struggle with being objective when we feel that our own ox is being gored.

Societies are much like people when it comes to critical thinking. Societies have “beliefs,” religious and cultural, that they do not willingly subject to critical analysis. As any tyrant or inquisitor could tell you, critical thinkers, especially vocal ones, can be such a nuisance to those in power that they must be imprisoned or killed. Humanists have spent a great deal of effort in promoting critical thinking about religion and its influence in society. But our society is also strongly influenced by some secular beliefs and challenging them can also be anathema.

...our society is also strongly influenced by some secular beliefs and challenging them can also be anathema...

The postmodern secular beliefs that guide Canadian society and Western societies in general are influenced by a sense of guilt for the bloody history of the twentieth century in particular, including the Holocaust, the colonization of other countries or the displacement of indigenous peoples, our relative affluence and what is considered our overconsumption, and our production of pollution and greenhouse gases. In addition to the sacred capitalist doctrine of continuous economic growth, postmodern Western societies also seem to be driven by the socialist need to right historic wrongs. We have debated whether violence and aggression are intrinsic in human behaviour or an artefact of civilization and whether humans have certain innate tendencies or whether they are a “blank slate” upon which cultural values can be impressed. A fairly influential current of thought espouses the idea of innately peaceful humans who are blank slates at birth, implicating Western civilization as an aberrantly aggressive society and attributing to indigenous people an innate wisdom. Large-scale immigration from developing countries is promoted not only by the capitalist beneficiaries of growth (developers, bankers, businesses that want cheap labour) but also by socialists of the open borders mentality, who think that “no one is illegal.” The policy of multiculturalism, official in Canada, supposedly makes our societies more open and welcoming. What has become known as political correctness presumably was intended to keep the bigots at bay, making it socially unacceptable to put down those who are different in any way from the majority group, but has evolved into an outright threat to freedom of speech.

Canadian society as a whole has not
subjected its postmodern guiding principles to much critical analysis. And it might be argued that even Humanists have in general not been quite as diligent in subjecting some of our secular dogmas to critical analysis as they have been with religious dogmas. Very likely, humanist opinion on our “secular dogmas” is much more divided than on religious dogmas. In this issue, three articles deal in some way with our secular dogmas. Tim Murray looks at the ecological crisis and forthrightly describes the depredations of Western colonizers, but asks whether indigenous people really have a special environmental wisdom or merely less powerful technology. The evidence provided by science, he argues, must guide our actions as we seek an “ecological rescue.” In my article, I challenge Canada’s policy of multiculturalism and argue that not only is it superfluous to the equality and justice that we value but downright detrimental. Lorna Salzman provides a case history from American academia in which a researcher in cultural anthropology, Napoleon Chagnon, whose findings didn’t coincide the prevailing ideology of “the noble savage,” was savaged by his peers.

It is as important for us to challenge secular dogmas as it is to challenge religious dogmas. Consider the case of Chris diCarlo, who lost his teaching position at Wilfred Laurier University in Waterloo when an aboriginal woman challenged his statement during a lecture that all evidence pointed to a common human origin from Africa because “my people don’t believe” that. DiCarlo suggested that at some future point, they both bring the evidence supporting their point of view for a debate. The woman never returned to class but she and others complained to the university, and, in the end, diCarlo lost the tenured job for which he was shortlisted. Like Napoleon Chagnon whose ordeal Lorna Salzman chronicles, Chris diCarlo was a victim of political correctness in academia.

In this issue we also honour and commemorate a man who challenged religious dogmas head-on and was the driving force in changing Canada’s abortion laws. Dr Henry Morgentaler, who died on May 29 of this year at the age of 90, never wavered in his cause after he decided that Canadian laws on abortion were archaic and cruel. But what Morgentaler considered to be an act of compassion, others, especially those of a religious bent, considered murder. Within his own country, Morgentaler was quite possibly the most controversial Canadian ever.

In separate articles, Simon Parcher and I pay tribute to Dr Morgentaler. Morgan Duchesney continues his analysis of the US banking crisis and does not spare Canadian banks from criticism. Donald Hatch discusses the evolution of Islam and asks whether it can pull itself out of stagnation. James Bacque wants the Writers’ Union of Canada to poll writers about harassment by government authorities and also writes an open letter to Justin Trudeau about the Frontiers Foundation. John Shook responds to David Rand in a discussion on “atheophobia.”

This issue will, I hope, provide much food for critical thought.

– Madeline Weld