

# Awl Weave Ghat

The Newsletter of the *American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disorders'* (AAIDD) Humanist Action Group – December 2008, v.2 combined issue 3&4

This newsletter expresses the opinion of members of this subgroup and not necessarily of AAIDD

*All data presented are opinions and alternative opinions may be printed in later issues. Send feedback and submissions to [jrmullin@verizon.net](mailto:jrmullin@verizon.net)*

## *Notes from the editor*

Well, I hope we all survived the non-existent “War on Christmas”. It seemed a little milder this year although Bill O’Reilly and others were apparently angry at the state government of Washington for allowing a brief statement of secular beliefs next to a nativity. The plaque stated simply:

“At this season of the Winter Solstice, may reason prevail. There are no gods, no devils, no angels, no heaven or hell. There is only our natural world. Religion is but myth and superstition that hardens hearts and enslaves minds.”

For some reason most of the news omitted the first sentence which was probably the more important part of the message. Whatever you think of Christmas, it is celebrated when it is because there were other religion’s holidays at the solstice, two days before Christmas. The solstice was a particularly great time to celebrate in the past because it meant you were half way through the cold season and half way to when you could plant fresh vegetables again. If you read the New Testament closely, there are references to shepherds and lambs in the fields when angels announce the birth. This strongly suggests that Jesus’ birth was after the late spring, when the lambs are born and before the winter when it gets too cold for shepherd to go out at night. (Even though they are much closer to the equator, they are high enough to get really cold at certain times!) This suggests an autumn or late summer birth and this is recognized by a number of Christian scholars. Anyway, I have to look on the plaque as a statement of belief and cause for celebration rather than an attack on Christmas.

The British Humanists started a campaign around Christmas with bus signs giving simple Humanist messages like: *There’s probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life.*”

Now, the timing of that makes even me wonder if this was an attempted skirmish in the war much as I think the campaign is a great idea and England is largely secular at this time.

Happy Holidays

The essay in this issue is so long I’m making this a combined issue. As always I eager look forward to positive or negative criticism at [jrmullin@verizon.net](mailto:jrmullin@verizon.net).

## **How can a Humanist ever respect the lives of people with intellectual disabilities?**

This is an interesting question and it will take a couple of issues to fully explore. It is a question that threatens many people and must be particularly threatening to people with intellectual disabilities especially if they have a trusted relative or friend who is a humanist. As always, I welcome feedback and comment on my response.

As I understand it, there are two popular arguments for thinking a humanist must demean disabled people. The first is that this question is a moral response to a problem and without belief in God there can be no morality. Without morality a humanist would therefore see any person with a handicap as less than human and more easily disposed of than a normal person should be. The second argument is that a Humanist would more likely support eugenics as did Darwin, Hitler and Stalin, some powerful atheists of the past. In promoting eugenics, intellectually disabled people would be best eliminated from the population. This argument reemerged lately because of a section of the recent movie *Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed*, featuring Ben Stein which promoted that view. Both of these topics are very debatable if not outright incorrect and we will discuss them further now.

The first of these arguments, that God is necessary for moral guidance, is interesting. It is also very sad to the non-religious person. The humanist sees this argument as saying that without a god, all humans are just selfish, cruel, and domineering creatures. Since most humanists do not believe in a god, this means that many religious people assign humanity to a moral status just about that of weasels. This, of course, is not what most proponents of this argument wish to say or even believe. Seeing religious peers who live a good, just, happy, and moral life, they attribute their life success to their belief in god. Since they rarely see the people who live unsuccessful and (publicly) immoral lives at church even if they belong to their church, it is a simple jump to conclude that nonreligious people form the people with no morality.

Morality can be a relative set of laws; this suggests both that context must be taken into account and that an absolute set may be useful. The contextual argument is that right and wrong can change under different, albeit radically different, conditions. For example, if my family is starving is it that wrong to steal some food for them from someone who has an excess and won't share? Is it wrong to kill one person if a thousand would be put to death if this particular person continued to live? Certainly in these examples, it would not be considered immoral to many, if not most, people to respectively steal or kill. I should point out that to some people these would still be considered immoral acts in spite of their benefit which brings up another question: how does one determine morality if it is not based on a divinely inspired set of rules?

The utility of absolute moral laws is their ability to be easily taught. Most theorists feel that morality develops gradually as one passes from infancy into adulthood. It would be useful for a child to know that they shouldn't kill their schoolmate before they reach an age at which that realization comes to them naturally. Most parents, however, seem to think it sufficient that their children obey their idea of moral rules while they mature even if they also teach them a set of absolute moral rules. It is much more likely that a child's morality more accurately represents what they see their parents doing rather than what they have been taught. This divergence is most easily represented in the classic parental exclamation, "Do what I say, not what I do!"

Morality can be developed intellectually. The existence of many successful societies before the popularity of the Bible shows this. There are a number of ideas around on what comprises the basis of morality. Some of the basis is apparently genetic or developmentally useful like respect for parents and other relationships among the family including avoiding incestual relationships. Others protect our lives like the reluctance to commit suicide. Some, like courtship, insure our genetic survival (although I have to point out that rape is a common behavior among animals to insure their genetic survival). Others, like cooperative behaviors, enhance the community. Some genetic behaviors like "fight or flight" are useful for survival in many circumstances but compete with other more social tendencies in cooperative activities. This suggests that a good basis for morality is what we already do. However we can move above that and use reasoning to develop further principles. These principles are relative to the context they are in. One need only look at the two recent *Humanist Manifestos* to see what aspects of culture that were considered normal in some cultures raised concern in ours.

The question arises as to which source of rules we should use if we use absolute rules. Biblical rules, as a popular example, are of questionable utility and incomplete. The Ten Commandments look like principles to follow and seem generally safe until you look close at them. Take the one on killing: in the original language it only says not to kill your tribesmen or neighbors. In another commandment, no matter how horrible and cruel your parents might have been, you must honor them. Later on, in Leviticus, it says the penalty for disobedience to parents is death. There are a number of these rules, around 200 if you count *Leviticus*. Many, like parental disobedience, may lead to your death if you disobey them. Then you look at other stories in the Bible and the nation of Israel is killing whole tribes at the whim of god, significant people are having sex with their daughters, and are able to buy and sell slaves. Slaves bring up the issue of what the Ten Commandments don't cover. They don't cover things like slavery, child abuse, or sexual equality and basic human rights and are generally male-oriented. As an example, the rules (in the original language) are that a married man can have sex with an unmarried woman but not a married one and, additionally, women cannot have the reciprocal arrangements

One interesting weakness about biblical rules is that if biblical rules are challenged, people manage to find a philosophical argument for them. Go up to a religious friend and say, "That

commandment on killing doesn't make sense to me". You are likely to get a response to the effect that murder is a permanent and usually non-constructive solution and you wouldn't want it done casually to you. All of a sudden there are rational arguments for this commandment. Why not just develop rational arguments in the first place?

This discussion will be continued in the next issue. Until then, for additional reading you may want to see <http://www.vexen.co.uk/religion/cm.html> which is much harsher and one-sided than I have been but is an interesting discussion of Christian bible-based morality

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