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Reason over dogma

'Religion,' says Niagara humanist leader Horst Klaus, 'is the thing that divides the world'

By GRANT LaFLECHE
Standard Staff

There is no God. When you die, you neither ascend to sit on clouds in heaven nor fall into the pit to be roasted for eternity.

There is no invisible hand guiding the fate of mankind, no supernatural figure that answers even your most fervent prayers.

There are no angels or demons. No miracles.

There is only the world that is before us and the universe beyond that. Only humans, living as humans do. It is totally up to us how we live, how we treat each other and how we face the future.

To many, this will seem to be an unspeakably bleak world view. For those who lean on the Bible, the Qur'an, the Torah and the other great religious texts of history, such a view is blasphemous at best and downright evil at worst.

But to Horst Klaus, it is anything but. Humans living free of faith are exactly that — free.

Religion is, as Klaus describes it, "a bunch of baloney."

"I don't think it has brought, on balance, anything positive to anyone," he says at his bungalow on Oakdale Avenue in St. Catharines. "Religion is the thing that divides the world."

The organizer of the Niagara Secular Humanists says a lifetime of experience taught him religion was among the most dubious of human creations. Klaus argues that people have the right to believe whatever they wish. That's democracy, after all.

But religion belongs in the home or the church. It's not for public institutions that, by their very nature, are supposed to be secular.

Science and reason are what raise us up, he says.

Klaus says he has learned through hard experience the negative impact of religion.

Born in Germany in 1931, he grew up during the height of Nazi power.

"You know, in school we were taught the whole Nationalist Socialist thing," he says. "We were told, quite clearly, that the Jews were to be hated. We were told they hated Christians, that they killed Christ and they should be deported or sent to labour camps."

That Jews were to be reviled wasn't even a question for a pre-teen growing up Nazi Germany, which had taken long-held Christian bigotry toward Jews to terrifying levels.

"It was as if you were raised a Catholic or a Muslim. You just believed it," he says.

Klaus, who moved to Canada in 1953, picks up a magazine from a coffee table and points to the cover photo. It's a black and white photo of Hitler on parade, shaking hands with two smiling Catholic priests.

"Even now, I have to be careful what I say to certain people because they do get very angry and take it very personally."

Horst Klaus

Religious bigotry, he says, was a powerful force that helped move the Nazi agenda forward.

The first shock to Klaus's young indoctrinated mind came at the end of the war when the Nazi death camps were exposed and shut down.

Klaus says he and many other Germans thought Jews were being sent to labour camps. The idea they were being sent to extermination camps had never occurred to him.

"They even put a motto on the gate at Auschwitz that said, 'Arbeit macht frei,' which means 'Work will set you free.'"

The horror of the Nazi extermination camps left the 14-year-old Klaus asking the obvious theological question: If there is supposed to be a God who cares for all people equally, why would he allow evil on this scale to exist?

That question would nag Klaus, still a Christian then, for years.

Growing up, Klaus developed a passion for astronomy, and its findings further called into question his Luther-



Horst Klaus, head of the Niagara Secular Humanists, says science and reason will solve the world's problems, not religion.

STAFF PHOTO BY DENIS CAHILL

an faith.

"The Earth is something like four billion years old," he says. "We know from astronomy the universe is at least 13½ to 14 billion years old. We know that by the light we see, and it is possible we may find the universe is even older than that."

"Why would God wait 10 billion years to create the Earth? If, as Christians believe, God created everything, then you have to ask, what created God?"

But the demise of Klaus's faith in faith came during his travels around the world in the 1970s.

He travelled three times around the globe selling electronic equipment and power supplies, stopping in Asia, Europe, Africa and the Middle East.

"I discovered that once you get through it all, people are just people. They're the same all over. It doesn't matter if you are Jewish or Muslim or Christian or Buddhist," he says. "People are people."

In Klaus's view, what separated people and what often drove them to kill each other was religion.

He saw it everywhere he went. In Northern Ireland, where Protestants and Catholics were all too content with killing each other. In the Middle East, where not only was there a seemingly unending conflict between Jews and Muslims, but different Muslim sects were bent on destroying each other over doctrinal differences.

Klaus became convinced that science and reason were the way out. Humanism — the idea that it's human beings, not the divine, who decide how people live — was superior to religion in every respect.

Religious communities often reject humanism, particularly the claim that humans can live by moral or ethical codes without the rules being sent down from on high.

"That's nonsense," says the 75-year-old, who notes he is perhaps a bit more vocal and aggressive in his ideas than other local humanists. "Take the Ten Commandments, for instance. 'Thou shalt not steal.' Well, I don't need the

Bible to tell me that. I'm not going to steal from someone because I don't want to be stolen from. Same with 'Thou shalt not kill.' You don't need the Bible for that."

"But if you take something like 'Thou shalt not have any other gods before me,' well, that seems like religious dictatorship to me."

The problem, Klaus says, is that each religion claims that it, at the exclusion of all other faiths, is the repository of truth. That, he says, is an impossibly arrogant claim.

"If you are Muslim saying that only the Qur'an is true, what about all the Christians? What's wrong with them? Or the Jews or Buddhists? Are they all bad people?" he says.

Science, through astronomy, biology, chemistry, physics and other disciplines, has radically changed the way we view the world.

The theory of evolution, the big bang theory and modern physics have shown the universe to be vastly older, more complex and larger than any religious creation story ever suggested, he says.

Science might have given us a more reasonable view of the universe, but it also gave us a much more uncertain and lonelier one.

Klaus says many people are uncomfortable with the notion, fundamental to all science, that knowledge is only provisional.

Even long-held, well-supported theories can be overturned in an eye-blink in the wake of more complete theories or new evidence.

Religion, by contrast, is about absolutes. The rules are clear, as is how everything is going to end. That might be more comforting, but not necessarily rational.

"So religious people will say, 'Ah hah! You are always changing.' I say we are just beginning to learn. If you look at what we knew even 100 years ago compared to now, we knew very little," he says. "What we will learn in the future is going to be very exciting."

Indeed, it is scientific reliance on evidence that Klaus finds inspiring. All su-

pernatural concepts, including God, cannot be proven by science. There simply isn't any evidence.

And Klaus says that in a world where we now have to cope with truly global problems such as climate change, science and reason are going to produce the solutions, not religion.

"It is difficult to talk about something like that (climate change) with someone who thinks it's all coming to an end anyway," Klaus says. "I find someone who is looking forward to the apocalypse shouting 'The ending is coming' to be very disturbing."

Becoming a humanist wasn't easy, and it cost Klaus, who moved to St. Catharines 18 years ago. He says many in his family, including his sons and ex-wife, are very religious and no longer talk to him because of his stance.

"Even now, I have to be careful what I say to certain people because they do get

very angry and take it very personally."

When the veil of religion is stripped away, Klaus says, the inescapable conclusion is that everyone on the planet is in the same mess together. And it's only by our own intelligence, wits and reason that we'll solve the problems of our times.

That is not a bleak point of view to Klaus. It's profoundly positive and liberating.

And he believes it's a point of view that is spreading.

"If you look at the data from 1971, the census data, only one per cent of Canadians would admit to being non-religious," he says. "Today it is 16 per cent."

"I think in 50 to 100 years you will see more people thinking this way. But it won't happen overnight. Changing how you think isn't easy."

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Niagara Secular Humanists

Formed two years ago to bring together humanists in the region, the organization has about 100 members on a mailing list and monthly meetings draw between 15 and 30 people.

The group's creed says members respect every faith, but will argue against religious dogma penetrating

politics or public education.

They believe in "sexual equality, in same-sex marriages, freedom of choice and equal rights for all people."

The group can be contacted by e-mailing Horst Klaus at hklaus@sympatico.ca or by mail at P.O. Box 27023, Lakeport, PO, St. Catharines, Ont., L2N 7P8.

What is a secular humanist?

Humanism, as a philosophy, encompasses several different schools of thought, but generally focuses upon the idea that humans decide how they live their lives without dependence upon religious codes.

Rationality and science are the best tools to understand the universe, humanists say.

On the wall of Horst Klaus's living room is a certificate given to him by a humanist society in Guelph and it outlines the core thinking behind the humanist movement:

"It is well known that the presence of

skeptics makes the occurrence of miracles impossible. In every case so far brought to light, claims of religious or paranormal miracles have faded into nothingness when confronted by skeptical inquiries. They dissipate like fog, revealing ignorance, delusion or fraud.

"Religion has made the claim that belief is essential for life, and that religion of one kind or another is necessary to explain the universe. The power of human thought and the worth of human beings in and of themselves demonstrated these claims to be simply lies."