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The Failed War on Terror

**ALSO: Legacy Injustice • Celebrating Murder • Taking Offence
Existentialism and Humanism • The Rise and Fall of Christianity
• The Irony of Archbishop Neary • Trash TV
Land of Hype and not much Glory • What is Good?
Explaining Humans • Poetry, Art and Letters**



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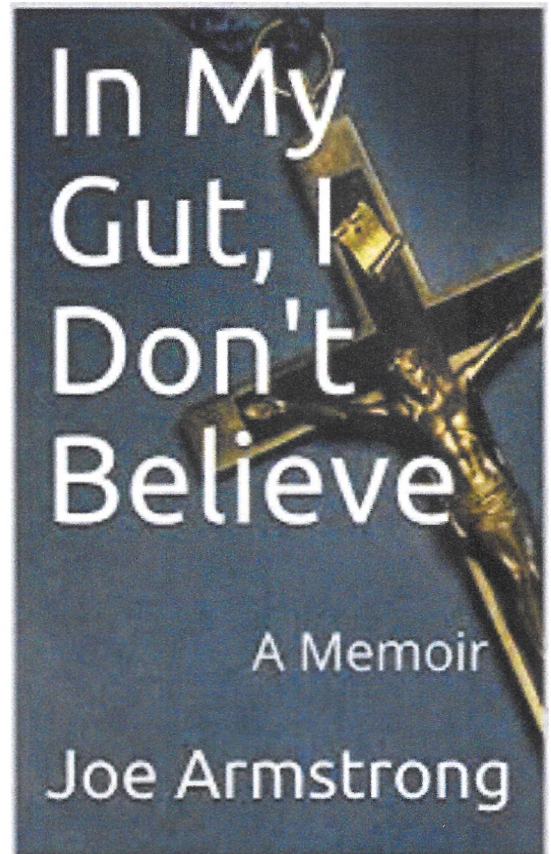
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"Humanism is the only - I would go so far as saying the final- resistance we have against the inhuman practices and injustices that disfigure human history".

— Edward W. Said

ARTICLES AND DISCLAIMER

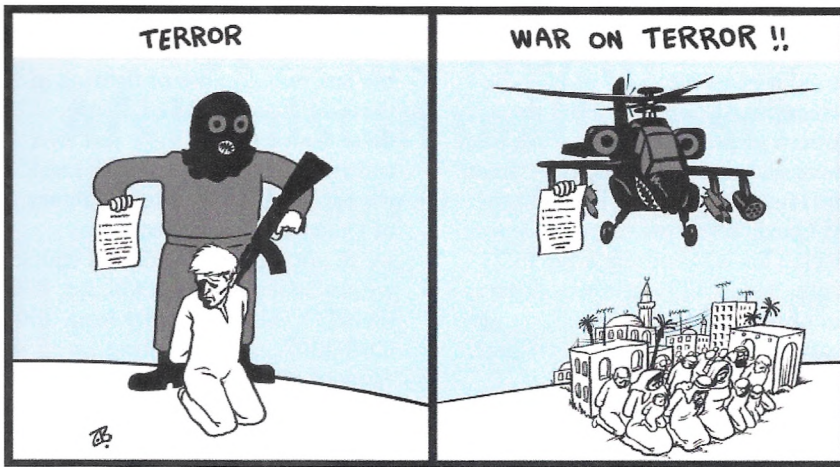
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The Failed War on Terror

The so-called War on Terror proved to be a War of Terror for several million people

Brian McClinton

THE fall of Afghanistan to the Taliban, almost 20 years after George W Bush's declaration on 20th September 2001 of the 'war on terror', is the final nail in its coffin. It was the longest ongoing armed conflict in the history of the United States, lasting longer than America's participation in both world wars and surpassing even the period that the US military was actively engaged in combat operations during the Vietnam War.

In Afghanistan the coalition led by America lost 3,500 lives and the Afghan police and military lost 69,000. According to the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), nearly 111,000 civilians have been killed or injured since it began systematically recording civilian casualties in 2009. According to the UN, over the past five years 40% of civilian casualties from airstrikes have been children.

In Iraq the US-led coalition lost 4,804 lives, while the total number of Iraqi deaths has been variously estimated as between 500,000 and 1 million. We also know that the Coalition forces often used torture and other forms of 'terror' on detainees. They also caused massive human displacement. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimated in 2006 that 1.8 million Iraqis had been displaced to neighbouring countries, and 1.6

million were displaced internally, with nearly 100,000 Iraqis fleeing to Syria and Jordan each month.

We could certainly say that, while tens of thousands of so-called terrorists have been killed in both Iraq and Afghanistan, the so-called 'war on terror' proved to be a war of terror for several million people.

The human cost is more than these bare statistics. In Afghanistan alone, the land is contaminated with unexploded ordnance, which kills and injures tens of thousands of Afghans, especially children, as they travel and go about their daily lives. The Afghan Ministry of Public Health has also reported that fully two-thirds of Afghans suffer from mental health problems. The war has exacerbated the effects of poverty, malnutrition, poor sanitation, lack of access to health care, and environmental degradation on Afghans' health.

So the first question is: did the end justify the means? In international humanitarian law, *jus in bello* is a principle which refers to 'right conduct in war'. It includes: non-combatant immunity; proportionality; military necessity; fair treatment of prisoners; and use of 'evil' methods such as rape or biological weapons. There is no doubt that the US and UK breached many of these principles in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Yet what exactly was 'the end' anyway? The principle of *jus ad bellum* refers to the right to go to war. It includes just cause, competent authority, probability of success, last resort, proportionality, and self-defence. Were these wars in Afghanistan and Iraq just in these terms?

To be able to answer this question requires us to understand 'terror' in this context. Does it mean actions by 'terrorists'? Yes, thousands of so-called 'terrorists' were killed, including eventually the founder of Al-Qaeda Osama bin Laden (though in Pakistan not Afghanistan) and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of IS. But how many were actually created by this war? There are now many more Salafi-Jihadi terrorist organisations than there were on 9/11.

In 2005 George W Bush stated that "by fighting these terrorists in Iraq, Americans in uniform are defeating a direct threat to the American people". But the National Intelligence Estimate is that "the Iraq war has become a 'cause celebre' for jihadists... and is shaping a new generation of terrorist leaders and operatives". One US study shows that the war generated a stunning seven-fold increase in the yearly rate of jihadist attacks, amounting to hundreds of additional terrorist attacks and thousands of civilian lives lost throughout the world.

Al-Qaeda has survived arguably the greatest onslaught in history directed against a 'terrorist' group. A new generation of recruits currently fights in a conflict that began before many of them were born. On the eve of the 9/11 attacks, bin Laden predicted that his martyrdom when it came "will create more Osama bin Ladens". He was correct. So if these were wars on 'terrorists' they failed because they had no real prospect of success and have instead been entirely counterproductive.

They had no prospect of success for other reasons. 'Terror' is not a characteristic of groups. It is a method, and is as old as civilisation. If we define terrorism as the use of violence to induce terror for political ends, then it is a war that can never be won while wars and other military conflicts exist because they all include elements of it. →

It is especially true of organisations which exist in countries ruled by external powers. Terror becomes a key weapon of resistance when the ruling authority has military superiority. Independence movements throughout history have sought to remove foreign invaders by the use of terror tactics, and the Taliban in Afghanistan have clearly received support from the general population because they have fought to remove 'foreigners' from their country.

The attack on the Twin Towers 20 years ago was an awful atrocity, and Americans had every right to feel angry. They were also perfectly entitled to try to apprehend the planners and perpetrators. But this is a long way off going to war in Afghanistan and Iraq, and causing wanton death and destruction on a grand scale.

If the 9/11 attack was organised in that country (none of the hijackers were Afghan but 15 of the 19 were Saudis), then a covert 'police' action should have been attempted to capture or, if necessary, kill the suspects. After all, IRA Bombers from Dundalk were not met with British bombs in Dublin. But to launch full-scale wars of aggression and occupation against two independent, historically proud countries in which possibly a million or more have died is a gross overreaction and the US and UK have paid the price in a loss of any moral influence they may have had.

As the Taliban tightens its hold on Afghanistan, let us not forget that the so-called war on terror began in that country but was extended to Iraq, so the 'war' had a two-pronged focus. It is here where the justifications for the invasions are clearly seen as fraudulent.

As former Secretary General Kofi Annan said, the invasion of Iraq violated international law because it was conducted against a sovereign state and a full member of the UN that represented no threat to the US or UK. It set a serious precedent in world affairs in its undermining of the United Nations. It also gave democracy a bad name. Thus the crusade of Bush and Blair boosted terrorism, caused more suffering, fuelled religious hatred and undermined international law.

The central pretext urged by Bush and Blair for the Iraq invasion was to rid it of its weapons of mass destruction. Also, Bush misled the American people into believing that there was direct complicity between the Hussein regime in Iraq and the Al-Qaeda terrorists responsible for 9/11. This was entirely false. In truth, Saddam Hussein was distrustful of al-Qaeda and viewed Islamic extremists as a threat to his regime. And if Iraq really had such weapons, it would have been dangerous to attack the country. Instead, there was confidence that Iraq was 'doable', i.e. it could be easily defeated militarily precisely because it had no such weapons... Yet it did have large supplies of oil.

US and coalition troops used weapons of mass destruction on a devastating scale in 'searching' for non-existent Iraqi weapons of mass destruction

In the UK, intelligence was 'sexed up', while in America the administration fabricated stories about Iraq's WMD. In 2004, Charles Duelfer, leader of the Iraq Survey Group, reported that Saddam Hussein had destroyed most of his chemical and biological weapons after 1991 and that his nuclear programme had 'progressively decayed'. US and coalition troops used weapons of mass destruction on a devastating scale in 'searching' for non-existent Iraqi weapons of mass destruction.

Why then did America, blindly supported by the UK and others, fight a war on terror by invading two sovereign states? Two factors are particularly relevant. The first is revenge and the second is money. When a bully is hit, he (it is usually a 'he') retaliates in spades. His anger means that he knows no limit to the 'punishment' he metes out, and he is not worried who suffers. In terms of power politics, America has been a bully in the world stage since the Second World War. It has intervened with deadly effect in more countries than any other state.

Being a military industrial complex, America's arms industries benefit

from war. Trillions of dollars have flown through its war budgets in the last two decades of fighting in these countries. And, of course, there is also the oil. Take just two comments. In 2008, Chuck Hagel, the former United States Secretary of Defense, stated: "People say we're not fighting for oil. Of course we are". General John Abizaid, CENTCOM commander from 2003 until 2007, said of the Iraq war: "first of all I think it's really important to understand the dynamics that are going on in the Middle East, and of course it's about oil, it's very much about oil and we can't really deny that".

It is tragedy for Afghanistan that the Taliban are back in power. Last time, from 1996 to 2001, they effectively turned the country back to the 7th century. They were notorious for their misogyny, sexism, and violence against women, who were forced to wear the burqa at all times in public, on the grounds that the face of a woman is a source of corruption for men. Women were not allowed to work, they were not allowed to be educated after the age of eight, and until then were permitted only to study the *Qur'an*. Despite Taliban assurances, commentators are sceptical that there will any change from the past.

There is injustice and cruelty everywhere in this world, especially in countries where fundamentalist religion rules, but liberal democracies cannot save them all. The US cannot continue to act as the world's policemen, especially when it performs the role so badly and persists in putting its own interests first. The UK cannot continue as America's lapdog and then complain when it abandons its commitment. Ultimately, the Afghan people have to do the job themselves. Surely they have savoured progress long enough to demand it from their rulers?

Of course, the West should help in every way it can, short of violence. But 'humanitarian military intervention' has been abused and besmirched by the behaviour of both the United States and Britain in these two unfortunate countries. The only conclusion is that the 'war on terror' has proved to be a total sham and a complete disaster. □

Was the War in Afghanistan really lost?

Craig Shrives

IN all, I served just under two years in Afghanistan. I saw the usual pockets of the country, but it was my time plonked in front of an American PC in Kabul that was the most interesting. For about a year, I was one of two European intelligence officers working among a 100-strong team of US strategic analysts. My ticket into that US office was given to me by General Mike Flynn, who cleansed me of my foreignness simply by crossing the air (I'm assuming some paperwork followed, but I never saw it). My new office provided decision-support for Flynn's boss, General Stanley McChrystal, the guy running the whole shebang, and I had access to the whole 'cupboard'.

Here's my opener. Nothing of strategic significance since the withdrawal from Afghanistan will have caught the Americans by surprise. It would all have been planned. Know this: From the very outset, the mission in Afghanistan was to deny the likes of Al Qaida and ISIS an environment to consolidate and launch attacks onto our homelands (before their ousting in late 2001, the Taliban accommodated such groups, who had their sights on overseas targets). Don't believe that this is a retrospective mission statement invented to shoehorn in some semblance of credibility for failing to implement a regime change. This mission was written in bold letters in every single formation-level operational order written throughout the 20-year war.

Now, if you think the Americans' only plan to achieve that mission was to set up a democratic government with a security force that could keep the Taliban at bay forever, then you are underestimating the thinking power of literally thousands of specialists, comprising hundreds of front-line analysts and the massive, well-funded intelligence architecture that provides their reach-back support. I am talking about the analytical power of thou-

Failing to understand the ability of the thinking machine that informed America's strategy is a poor starting point for analysing the strategy

sands of graduates from America's top universities who either hail from or have specialised in Afghanistan or its neighbours. I am talking about a ferociously disciplined machine producing tuned, peer-reviewed intelligence that is systematically pressure-tested with devil's advocacy and endless scenario gaming. Here's my point. Failing to understand the ability of the thinking machine that informed America's strategy on Afghanistan is a poor starting point for analysing the strategy. We'll return to this.

Throughout the war, the Taliban's pressure came not from its military prowess but its control of the narrative. Compared to NATO, the Taliban were losing fighters at a rate of 10:1, but they knew that Napoleon's 'four hostile newspapers are more to be feared than a thousand bayonets' was as true today as it ever was. What's more, they knew how to reach Afghans; they knew the right words, 'infidel', 'invader', 'collaborator', 'corruption'; and they knew how to shut down dissent cheaply and efficiently. And while their martyrdoms went unreported, NATO's deaths steadily turned its newspapers hostile. The Taliban totally controlled the narrative.

But, here's what the Americans knew. The Americans knew that neither Pakistan nor Iran would ever allow Afghanistan to stabilise. They knew that Iran would continue to provide "no finger prints" military support to the Taliban to ensure no US-aligned government on its right flank. They knew that Pakistan would continue to duplicitously harbour and influence Taliban leaders while endlessly churn-

ing out new soldiers from its madrassas, largely to ensure an Afghan government that wouldn't question Pakistan's Pashtun-dividing western border. They also knew they were losing the narrative. They knew they were up against it. They knew they needed options, and so their planning assumptions were scrutinised routinely. "What does a win look like?" was a standard question.

As it didn't happen in my time, I can't confirm that America concluded that the Taliban were their best bet to achieve the mission, but I can guarantee you that that scenario will have been thrashed out for years before the withdrawal.

You won't have heard about it, but twenty years of losing militarily weathered the Taliban, and the Americans knew it. They will also have factored in the Taliban's weariness at pandering to Pakistan, their yearning for international recognition, the increasing maturity of the Taliban's leaders, and the Afghan young adults' – particularly females' – changed expectations and digital savviness. Also, assessment papers about the Taliban's unique ability to shut down the opium trading as well as their ability to control their own fractious groups and other non-Taliban groups will have been woven into the decision-support process.

These ideas and far more will have been crunched and challenged and refined and crunched and challenged and refined for years before the withdrawal. And, the timing of the withdrawal announcement – and so the length of the war – will have been calculated to ensure the right level of pressure on the Taliban to ensure sufficient leverage at the negotiations.

So, to everyone who thinks the war is lost, to everyone who thinks the sacrifice and costs were for nothing, and to the bereaved especially, I offer my assessment: This latest round of Afghanistan's Great Game has not been lost. As it was designed to do from the outset, this war is likely to deny a future gathering ground for those who would do us harm, as it has done for the last 20 years. This round of the Great Game is only now entering its messy end-play. □

When did Taking Offence Become a National Pastime?

Eamon Murphy

AT the All Ireland Humanist Summer School in Carlingford in 2018 – back when it was possible to meet face to face for such things – Anthony Keating of Edge Hill University gave a presentation on Censorship and the Catholic Church. He related the well known story about John Charles McQuaid, Archbishop of Dublin from 1940 to 1972, who at one point was apparently so obsessed with the idea that women’s private areas were visible in underwear ads, that he told Irish newspapers he would regularly take out a magnifying glass to make sure.

McQuaid is deceased almost half a century, but he has been replaced by multitudes more who seem keen to go out of their way to take offence, as many readers who dabble in social media will already be well aware.

A quick trawl through my Twitter timeline as I write presents me with people taking offence about everything from serious matters such as the mask-related policies of certain businesses to the idea of white people selling Mexican food.

My feed was alive a few weeks ago with people declaring they had cancelled their subscription to the *Irish Times* over the publication of a letter that didn’t take the specific angle and tone they apparently demand on transsexuality. Never mind that the publishing of a letter by a newspaper does not constitute an editorial line but is simply a contribution to a discussion.

Over the past couple of years social media has shown me people displaying their exaggerated indignation at everything from fashion designs that take inspiration from the Japanese kimono (“cultural appropriation”, apparently) to the colours used on certain designs of shoes, as they carried a “racist tinge”. All quite unbelievable, and most, thankfully, happening in Britain and the US.

Some of the best I’ve seen, though, have been right here at home. In 2019, on the 100th anniversary of the first sitting of the Dáil, photos were hung around the gates of Leinster House of the 27 TDs who attended. Cue multiple complaints online that only men were represented. When it was pointed out that no women attended that first sitting, I saw plenty of tweets suggesting that wasn’t a good enough reason for the absence of heroes such as Countess Markievicz, who should be there in the interest of “diversity”!

**Some things aren’t
about diversity;
they’re just about a
rugby tournament. Or
football**

And it’s not just individuals who seem to be falling over each other to take offence but civil society organisations are now getting in on the act. I recall a particularly egregious example a couple of years ago, ahead of the Six Nations rugby tournament, when Guinness erected a number of billboards featuring the slogan ‘You Don’t Pick a Side. Your Grandparents Have Done That Already’. A fairly innocuous and unremarkable declaration, you’d have thought; ploughing the furrow already dug by GAA-type slogans suggesting ‘you don’t choose your club, you inherit it’ and so on.

One would think there is no harm in tapping into the idea that one of the most appealing aspects of tournaments such as the Six Nations and the All Ireland championships – with more than a century of history each – is the fact that players and fans are generally tied to the places they come from, rather than conveniently choosing to support the most successful team, as is so often

the case for Irish soccer fans choosing a Premier League team. Not a bit of it, though!

Cue numerous immigrant-representative organisations and other over-woke hypersensitive individuals complaining that such slogans don’t take account of recent immigration or celebrate the increasing diversity of our society.

Now don’t get me wrong; I think that diversity is to be welcomed and celebrated. But some things aren’t about diversity; they’re just about a rugby tournament. Or football. Or the accurate telling of a part of Irish history at the time of its centenary. Or whatever. It is factually correct to assert, as Guinness did, that grandparents can pick a country for you.

It is also surely uncontroversial to suggest that one of the best things about supporting a sports team can be knowing that you are continuing a tradition that might go back a few generations. It’s why, despite being from Carlow, I still go to Cork hurling matches more than three decades after my now-deceased grandfather began taking me.

But with performative offence-taking now the norm, apparently even these concepts are controversial. Naturally Guinness apologised and took the billboards down.

Maybe there was a point in the past where most people making such complaints were doing so in good faith and with a genuine concern about racism, or sexism, or whatever ‘ism’ rankled them. Now it feels like so much of it is performative: a fallacious race to be offended by whatever can be found.

Unfortunately, it seems the more trivial the nature of the complaint, the better. That way everyone watching will know just how much you care. □

Notes on The Ethics of Religion

Bob Rees

ALMOST half the people in the world think that it is necessary to believe in God and to have a religion before you can be a moral person. This was highlighted as recently as 2019, when a survey of 38,426 people in 34 countries spanning six continents found that 45% of them effectively supported Dostoyevsky's outrageous claim that "*Without God, all things are permitted*".

However, the survey (PEW: *The Global God Divide*, published 20/7/2020) found wide differences between countries, those in the West with a higher GDP/capita being more likely to reject the claim (correlation coefficient -0.86), while those like The Philippines and Indonesia, whose relatively poorly educated, right-leaning populations tended to accept that God is necessary for morality to exist. Nevertheless, the report implies that 45% of the world population, three and a half billion people, are happy to accept that God has appointed an intermediary – a Cleric or a prophet or a text – to communicate His will to us, and obedience to this divine will supposedly bring everlasting reward, whereas disobedience destines us to Hell. It is all nonsense, of course.

Morality was there as a necessity to facilitate communal living in primitive tribes long before religions were invented. Nor has morality gained anything from subsequent religious traditions, revelations and injunctions. The actual sources of morality variously include sympathetic social interactions, reason, conscience, culture and even government, all of which are quite irrelevant to the pointless religious definition of 'good' simply as '*that of which God approves*'.

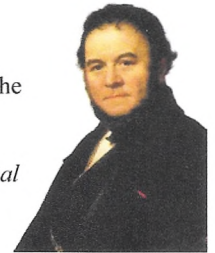
A religious belief isn't necessarily moral just because it's supernatural, and in fact, evidence from various sources suggests that religious people are actually less 'ethical', in the sense of honest, charitable, civic and compassionate, than non-believers. Numerous laboratory and field studies confirm that no matter how 'morality' is defined, religious people do NOT behave any more morally than atheists, despite their virtuous claims to moral superiority. However, according to my dictionary of synonyms, atheists are popularly regarded as no better than '*heretics*', '*pagans*', '*infidels*', '*heathens*' or '*nihilists*'.

The religious propagandists have done their job well, to the extent that people in general, and Americans in particular (who generally profess to be Christians and who should know better), are less trusting of Atheists than of any other group across the whole of U.S. society, including rapists and murderers.

In Euthyphro's dilemma, Socrates asks whether goodness is loved by the gods because it is good, in which case goodness is independent of the gods, or is it good merely because it is loved by the gods, in which case

All religions are founded on the fear of the many and the cleverness of the few.

Stendhal



goodness is purely arbitrary. It's a pointless discussion which demonstrates nothing. However, it is informative to investigate the apparent sources of certain religious concepts of ethics, because they turn out to be not very ethical at all. As Stendhal (1783-1842) suggested, "*All Religions are founded on the fear of the many and the cleverness of the few*". Accordingly, Christian ethics appears to be founded upon the following:

1. THE BIBLE

THE Old Testament especially displays a notably callous attitude towards children, handicapped people, divorced people, old women and animals. At one stage, the Christian church even opposed cleanliness, whilst promoting a hatred of unbelievers and of knowledge. It taught that we are fallen creatures riddled by sin and self-hatred ... we should fear and distrust our own intellects, and beware of pride, of happiness in general, of courage, of freedom, and, as we have seen, of unbelievers, whom we should aggressively persecute.

Leviticus famously contains 613 commandments but they are incomplete. For example, verse 25:44, which allows us to buy slaves from neighbouring countries, fails to explain how Northern Ireland stands, vis-à-vis the Republic in this respect. Similarly Exodus 21:7 gives absolutely no guide as to a fair price to expect for the daughters whom it encourages us to sell into slavery.

2. SUPPRESSING THE MASSES

RELIGION has been, and still is, a means whereby unjust political authority keeps its subjects docile. Obedient behaviour was guaranteed in those societies where they envisaged God as an all-seeing supernatural policeman/judge in the sky, who enforced his will with everlasting rewards or perpetual torture. This explains today's widespread acceptance of the supposed connection between religious belief and morality.

Most of this morality seems to be aimed at keeping the common people subdued and docile, despite humiliating treatment by the ruling classes: "*Blessed are the poor, Blessed are the meek, Accept your station in life without question..... Render unto Caesar Your reward will come in the next world*". The king's security was dependent on his priests' ability to →

persuade the uneducated masses of the truth of these scandalous lies. Christian churches continue to stress the concept of Jesus as a Lord or a King, with inherent power and authority over ordinary people, from whom service and obedience are due.

3. MAMMON

MANY religions seem to be unhealthily obsessed with money. Virtuous Christians wiped out the Aztecs, the Incas and the Mayans in order to steal their gold, in the name of God. They all-but eradicated native Americans and Canadians as they stole their land. All solemnly done throughout the world in the name of God by priests carrying crooks. *“When the missionaries came to Africa they had the Bible and we had the land. They said ‘Let us pray’. We closed our eyes. When we opened them, we had the Bible and they had the land”*. (Jomo Kenyatta and Desmond Tutu). Consider the vast wealth of the Catholic Church just in terms of its lands and buildings, and even ignoring its financial and artistic treasures ... It is measured in tens of trillions of Euros. All religions, even the American televangelists and similar chancers, somehow enjoy charitable status, tax-wise.

4. PROTECTIONISM

BOTH Islamic and Christian clerics are concerned with the relative strength of their respective memberships. They are especially fearful of losing members of their flocks to the ‘other’ side or to atheism. Certain sects within Islam in particular have even decreed that apostasy is punishable by the death penalty, while Christians consider it sinful to question any bit of the dogma. All sides see their continued control of education as crucial to their continued privileged status.

5. SADISM

MANY religious actors seem more motivated by bitterness than by the love and justice that they proclaim – The Inquisition, Witch hunts, the Taliban, Daesh etc. Robert Ingersoll put it to the Christian Clerics thus: *“You have imprisoned the human mind; you have been the enemy of liberty; you have burned us at the stake – wasted us upon slow fires – torn our flesh with iron; you have covered us with chains – treated us as outcasts; you have filled the world with fear; you have taken our wives and children from our arms; you have confiscated our property, you have denied us the right to testify in courts of justice; you have branded us with infamy; you have torn out our tongues; you have refused us burial. In the name of your religion, you have robbed us of every right; and after having inflicted on us every evil that can be inflicted in the world, you have fallen on your knees and with clasped hands you have implored your God to torment us forever”*.

Christianity wasn’t always about strummed guitars and blessings ... Moral guidelines and rules are seen to vary between different religions and between different individuals and groupings, having been made up by different peoples at different times in varying circumstances. The modern world requires a degree of moral relativism, implying that there is no absolute right or

wrong, because everything always depends... though some conduct is always wrong, such as female genital mutilation, paedophilia and human sacrifice, for example, no matter how fervently the priest preaches otherwise. Different religions teach different ethical beliefs e.g about birth control, polygamy, or women’s rights in areas that they know nothing about, but aware that they are causing great unhappiness and upset among their followers, especially when the teachers themselves are often seen to be badly morally flawed.

H.L. Mencken defined Puritanism as “the haunting fear that someone somewhere might be happy”. Most Humanists would favour the opposite utilitarian concept that an action is right if it fosters the greatest happiness in the greatest number of people. But Humanists try to judge each case on its merits, being guided to some extent by whatever we ‘feel’ is right or wrong subjectively, and this requires a denial of rigid moral rules. In this respect, Humanists may be described as moral subjectivists, even though we try to maintain an objective stance.

Secular morality is clearly a slippery and often self-contradictory subject. However, a lot of religious morality doesn’t even pretend to be moral, it’s just about promoting some cleric’s idea of God’s supposed Will whilst protecting the sect’s long-term security. □

IRISH FREETHINKERS AND HUMANISTS

Thursday 9th September:

Dignity in Dying:

A Talk by Caroline Villar

Holiday Inn Express,

University Street,

Belfast, 8pm.

All Welcome

“On hearing ill rumour that Londoners may soon be urged into their lodgings by Her Majesty’s men,

I looked upon the street to see a gaggle of striplings making fair merry, and no doubt spreading the plague well about. Not a care had these rogues for the health of their elders!”

**Samuel Pepys Diaries
London 1664**

The Doctrine of Discovery

Noel Byrne

UNMARKED graves of indigenous peoples are currently being discovered at different locations in Canada. These graves are being found close to various residential schools and homes run by religious orders. For over one hundred years the Canadian authorities had forcibly separated thousands of indigenous children from their families and made them attend residential schools. The purpose of the schools was to enculturate the indigenous population to the white man's culture, religion and language and assimilate the children into white Canadian society and sever their connection to their indigenous roots.

From the late 1800s until 1996, Canada forcibly removed around 150,000 indigenous children from their homes and kept them in these institutions run by church staff. In the institutions their long hair was cut and they were forbidden from speaking their own language or practising their culture. Many were physically and sexually abused. A Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission set up to investigate the impact of the residential school system said in 2015 that children were malnourished, beaten and abused as part of a system that it called 'cultural genocide'. Of the 139 state schools and institutions involved, 75% were run by Catholic orders and the remainder by Presbyterian, Anglican and United Church of Canada staff.

This subjection and subjugation of indigenous peoples, both physically and mentally, is consequent on the 'Doctrine of Discovery' which established a spiritual, political, and legal justification for colonisation, suppression of indigenous peoples and the seizure of land not inhabited by Christians. This Doctrine emanated from a series of Papal bulls issued in the fifteenth century. The doctrine then became part of international law which allowed explorers to claim vacant land (*terra nullius*) in the name of their sovereign. Vacant land was defined as that which was not populated by Christians.

The single sentence below from the Papal Bull *Inter Caetera*, and translated from Latin, gives the general idea of the content and purpose of these Papal Bulls which were addressed to the Portuguese and Spanish Monarchs:

"We grant you full and free power, through the Apostolic authority of this edict, to invade, conquer, fight, subjugate, the Saracens and pagans, and other infidels and other enemies of Christ, and wherever established, their Kingdoms, Duchies, Royal Palaces, Principalities and other dominions, lands, places, estates, camps and any other possessions, mobile and immobile goods found in all these places, and held in whatever name, and held and possessed by the same Saracens, Pagans, infidels, and the enemies of Christ, also realms, duchies, royal palaces, principalities, and other dominions, lands, places, estates, camps, possessions of the king or prince or of the kings

or princes, and to lead their persons in perpetual servitude, and to apply and appropriate realms, duchies, royal palaces, principalities and other dominions, possessions and goods of this kind to you for your use and your successors".

In 1452 the Papal Bull *Dum Diversas* was issued by Pope Nicholas V. The same Nicholas V issued another bull *Romanus Pontifex* in 1455 and Pope Alexander VI issued a further bull *Inter Caetera* in 1493.

The Bulls were issued originally to the Portuguese and Spanish monarchs in relation to Africa and the Americas. The Treaties of Tordesillas (1494) and Zaragoza (1529) were later signed between Portugal and Spain, further extending the areas previously allotted by the Papal Bulls to cover the entire globe. However, the French, Dutch and other European colonisers then used these precedents to justify their colonisation of as much of the world as they could each conquer.

Shortly after the Papal Bull *Inter Caetera* of 1493, Henry VII of England in 1496 granted letters patent to Giovanni Caboto (John Cabot), giving him authority to conquer for England any lands he may discover as long as these were not known to any Christians. Following on this grant, the British later used a tactic they called *Terra Nullius* to justify their colonisation of India and other Asian countries as well as Australia and New Zealand.

Terra Nullius is the Latin term for 'Nobody's Land'. The fact that these lands were already occupied prior to their discovery by the European colonists meant nothing to the Europeans. The indigenous peoples were considered inferior and barbarian. Colonisation continued to such an extent that in 1913 the British Empire alone covered 23% of the world's population.

The Regalian doctrine followed on from this. It is the doctrine that all mineral wealth was the prerogative of the crown or the feudatory lord. The concession system, in which the state or the private owner has the right to grant concessions or leases to mine operators at discretion and subject to certain general restrictions, had its origin in this doctrine. Almost all mining countries of the world follow this system.

Since those times indigenous peoples around the world have suffered from the disastrous impact of European colonisation which had begun with the Papal bulls of the fifteenth century. Both genocide and ethnocide have been carried out against many indigenous peoples based on these Papal Bulls.

The slave trade was one of the consequences of this doctrine. Matthew White in his volume *Atrocitology* puts the death toll from the Atlantic slave trade at 16 million. →

The genocide of so many indigenous peoples in North and South America as well as in Australia and the Pacific Islands is also a consequence of this doctrine. The figures White gives in *Atrocitology* for the genocide of the Native American Indians is 15 million. He writes that 240,000 Australian Aborigines vanished between 1788 and 1920. These are just some of the deaths caused by this dreadful Doctrine. There is also the political repercussions as well as the wars and uprisings that were necessary to free so many peoples and countries from colonial oppression and which are still ongoing to this day.

The Doctrine of Discovery includes all doctrines, policies and practices which are based on advocating superiority of peoples or individuals on the basis of national origin, or racial, religious, ethnic or cultural differences. It is a doctrine about stealing land and suppressing both indigenous peoples and their cultures. In the 20th century Spain, Portugal, France, Germany, Holland, Italy, Denmark and Britain were among the European countries that still controlled occupied territories. Some European countries even today control foreign territories.

This doctrine is not just a relic of history; it is still used in international law and is still applied by the United States, New Zealand, Canada, Australia, and other nations to limit the human, sovereign and property rights of Indigenous peoples.

The principal case and precedent relied on in cases concerning 'discovery' in many jurisdictions, including Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the US, is the US Supreme Court case of *Johnson V McIntosh* of 1823. In this case the court stated that "Indian Nations were not considered to be the full owners of their lands after the Europeans arrived and claimed a property interest in Indian lands". The court repeatedly stated that "the loss of rights suffered by Indian Nations were based on the justifications of christianity and civilisation". It also stated that "the character and religion of its inhabitants afforded an apology for considering them as a people over whom the superior genius of Europe might claim an ascendancy. Ample compensation was made by bestowing on them civilisation and Christianity".

In 2010 China and in 2007 Russia invoked this Doctrine when they planted their flags on the floors of the South China Sea and the Arctic Ocean to claim sovereignty over these areas and the assets under the sea beds. Both Canada and Denmark have each planted flags on an island off the west coast of Greenland, claiming authority over the island. Discovery is a part of contemporary international law, and it creates an inchoate title to a territory that must be perfected by its effective occupation.

The United Nations, through its *Permanent Forum on Indigenous Peoples* has attempted to overcome the dreadful consequences of the Doctrine of Discovery. On 13th September 2007 the General Assembly adopted the 'United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples'.

At paragraph 4 of the preamble it states: "all doctrines, policies and practices based on advocating superiority of peoples or individuals on the basis of national origin or racial, religious, ethnic or cultural differences are racist, scientifically false, legally invalid, morally condemnable and socially unjust."

The preamble to the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination states it is "convinced that any doctrine of superiority based on racial differentiation is scientifically false, morally condemnable, socially unjust and dangerous, and that there is no justification for racial discrimination, in theory or in practice, anywhere."

As this doctrine is the primary legal precedent that still controls native affairs and rights in international law and which was formulated in the fifteenth century, is it not time to have this dysfunctional and offensive doctrine abrogated?

The Catholic Church, to its shame, has still not rescinded these Papal Bulls. Once again it is found to be grossly at fault for some of history's dark past and is still negatively influencing racial and ethnic policy and law by not rescinding and making a statement that these bulls which have had such an unjust and iniquitous effect on human history were completely wrong, unjust and unpardonable.

The Doctrine of Discovery includes all doctrines, policies and practices which are based on advocating superiority of peoples or individuals on the basis of national origin, or racial, religious, ethnic or cultural differences

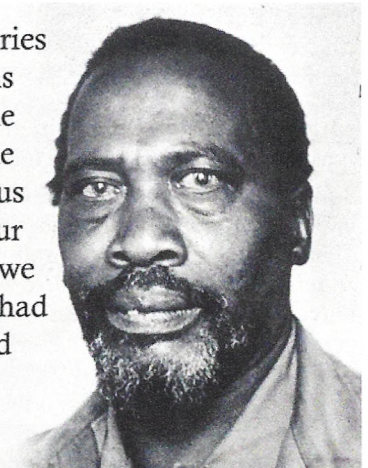
In response to the work done by the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Peoples at the UN, the Holy See has simply made statements distancing the modern church from those Papal Bulls of the 1400s. The Vatican concludes: "The fact that juridical systems may employ the 'Doctrine of Discovery' as a juridical precedent is therefore

now a characteristic of the laws of those states and is independent of the fact that for the Church the document has had no value whatsoever for centuries".

Why has the Pope not apologised for the tragedy and harm that these bulls caused for centuries and are still causing today? □

When the missionaries arrived, the Africans had the land and the missionaries had the Bible. They taught us how to pray with our eyes closed. When we opened them, they had the land and we had the Bible.

- Jomo Kenyatta



Humanist Masterpieces No 44

Sartre's *Existentialism is a Humanism* (1946)

Brian McClinton

AFTER the Second World War a new type of Humanism surfaced in Europe, especially in France. The seminal text was a published lecture by the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-80) in 1946, entitled *Existentialism is a Humanism* (sometimes called *Existentialism and Humanism*). What was existentialism and why was it a type of Humanism?

Its immediate forerunner was the philosophy of phenomenology developed by the Moravian philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), with its call for the direct study of human experience. But it can be traced back at least to the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813-55), who is generally considered as the first existential philosopher. He rejected the abstract rationalism of thinkers such as Hegel and maintained that thinking begins with the acting, feeling individual, who is solely responsible for giving meaning to life and for living it passionately and sincerely.

This led to the accusation that such a philosophy was quietistic, pessimistic, individualistic, anarchic and even amoral. Christians argued that if there was no God and no objective understanding of the universe and our place in it, then anything was permissible. It was to counter these charges that Sartre wrote his lecture.

The term 'existentialism' was coined by the French philosopher Gabriel Marcel in the early 1940s. He called Sartre an existentialist and, although at first Sartre rejected the label, he later changed his mind. In the lecture he asserts that there are no such things as objective moral laws. Moral judgments are therefore a matter of personal choice and commitment. Moreover, "there is no human nature, as there is no God to conceive it".

As he had made clear in his other writings, notably in his first novel *La Nausée* (1938), we are 'trapped

in existence', living in an absurd, meaningless world. But we are also free agents in this hostile, indifferent universe. The phrase 'existence precedes essence' became a maxim of existentialism. The point is that there is nothing to dictate a person's character, goals in life, and so on. Only the individual can define his or her essence. According to Sartre, "Man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world – and defines himself afterwards". To be more precise, "Man is nothing else but what he purposes, he exists only in so far as he realises himself, he is therefore nothing else but the sum of his actions, nothing else but what his life is".

He is condemned to be 'free', and to face the consequences of his choices

Of course, if there are no objective moral laws and humans define themselves, then each individual is responsible, both for adhering to his own moral principles, and for deciding what those principles should be. In doing so, each individual suffers 'existential anguish' because he realises he is ultimately 'on his own' and must freely make his own decisions. He is condemned to be 'free', and to face the consequences of his choices. To flee from and disown this inevitable freedom and responsibility and adopt false values is an act of inauthenticity or 'bad faith'. To face up to the burden of freedom is to realise that in fashioning ourselves, we are fashioning humanity.

Now, in a general sense this is the Humanist position. It begins from the same assumptions that there is no God and that humankind is essentially alone. Sartre rejects the notion of a Freudian unconscious because every human subject is implicitly aware of itself and must therefore retain conscious control

over its activities. And since there can be no hidden desires, we cannot dodge our moral responsibilities by appealing to psychological determinism. To say that we are compelled by our situation, our nature, or our role in life to act in a certain way is self-deception, or 'bad faith'.

The idea that we are 'condemned to be free' and create our own actions and invent our own identities is once again essentially Humanist and echoes that famous Renaissance treatise of 1486, *De Homini dignitate oratio* ('Oration on the Dignity of Man') by Pico della Mirandola, with the difference that for the 15th century Italian God had given man this freedom:

"Thus spake the Lord... you will determine your nature according to your own free will to which I have entrusted you. I have put you into the world so that from there you can better see all that is in the world...you can carve yourself into the shape you choose".

Pico is merely stating what Sartre calls 'the first principle of existentialism': that "man is nothing else but what he makes of himself" (*Existentialism is a Humanism*). Pico is also agreeing with those who say it is not necessary to be an atheist to be an existentialist. Thus the Christian existentialist argues that god gave man the free will to carve himself into the shape he chooses, whereas, as we have said, for Sartre human nature is non-existent, because there is no God to create it.

Sartre writes:

"We have now, I think, dealt with a certain number of the reproaches against existentialism. You have seen that it cannot be regarded as a philosophy of quietism since it defines man by his action; nor as a pessimistic description of man, for no doctrine is more optimistic; the destiny of man is placed within himself. Nor is it an attempt to discourage man from action since it tells him that there is no hope —>

except in his action, and that the one thing which permits him to have life is the deed. Upon this level, therefore, what we are considering is an ethic of action and self-commitment. However, we are still reproached, upon these few data, for confining man within his individual subjectivity” (ibid).

Is morality, then, purely subjective? Is everything permitted without God? And how do we choose between helping a relative or friend and helping the whole community?

Here Sartre claims that we cannot obtain any truth about ourselves except through the mediation of another: “The other is indispensable to my existence, and equally so to any knowledge I can have of myself” (ibid). Thus we find ourselves in a world which is that of ‘intersubjectivity’ and in this world we have to decide what we are and what others are.

Later, he says that when we recognise that man is a being whose existence precedes his essence, and that he is a free being who cannot, in any circumstances, but will his freedom, at the same time we realise that we cannot not will the freedom of others. Although he does not say so, Sartre is moving in the direction of the arch-liberal principle of believing in allowing individuals that measure of freedom which is compatible with a like amount of freedom for others.

In the essay Sartre also insists that his existentialism is a form of secular humanism because: “we remind man that there is no legislator but himself; that he himself, thus abandoned, must decide for himself; also because we show that it is not by turning back upon himself, but always by seeking, beyond himself, an aim which is one of liberation or of some particular realisation, that man can realise himself as truly human” (ibid).

Again, as is the case with Humanism itself, he is concerned to emphasise that existentialism is not merely atheism, though rejection of a God is the starting point of our liberation. His concluding note of optimism in *Existentialism is a Humanism* is worth serious consideration by all secularists:

“Existentialism is not atheist in the sense that it would exhaust itself in demonstrations of the non-existence of God. It declares, rather, that even if God existed that would make no difference from its point of view. Not that we believe God does exist, but we think that the real problem is not that of His existence; what man needs is to find himself again and to understand that nothing can save him from himself, not even a valid proof of the existence of God. In this sense existentialism is optimistic. It is a doctrine of action, and it is only by self-deception, by confounding their own despair with ours that Christians can describe us as without hope”.

As well as trying to demonstrate existentialism’s similarity to humanism, Sartre (below) also tried to reconcile it with Marxism, notably in *The Search for a Method* (1957)



and *The Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960). It might seem strange that, having rejected the kind of psychological or biological determinism we find in Freud or Skinner, he should embrace the economic determinism of Marx, but Sartre, following Marx, argues that freedom in practice is limited by economic scarcity. Only when scarcity is overcome can man be truly free, for scarcity deprives people of the ability to make choices and diminishes their humanity.

Communism will restore the freedom of the individual and his ability to recognise the freedom of others. How it would achieve this admirable goal is not at all clear, especially as existing communist societies were guilty of denial of freedom and flagrant human rights abuses. The shift from existentialism

to Marxism becomes a gigantic leap of faith in which the worth of the individual – the position from which Humanism starts – is assumed to be guaranteed by a collective social structure.

Sartre also offers justifications for violence. For example, as bad faith lurks so close to the surface of the individual, anyone who reneges on the ‘group-in-fusion’ loses his rights. Again, violence is inevitable in a world of scarcity in relation to human wants:

“The ethical reveals itself as a destructive imperative: evil must be destroyed ... violence claims always to be counter violence, that is, retaliation for the violence of the Other” (*Critique: Introduction*).

Like much of his philosophy, Sartre’s defence of violence is not at all convincing, being obscure and contradictory. This is not the same as saying that he is generally wrong. On the contrary, many of his insights are surely correct, particularly his focus on individual freedom and responsibility, which remains the central moral dilemma.

Sartre consistently threw his support behind causes he believed in. He was an admirer of the Soviet Union until 1956 and the entry of Russian tanks into Budapest. In *Les Temps Modernes*, the magazine he helped to found, he condemned both the Soviet intervention and the submission of the French Communist Party to the dictates of Moscow.

He supported Algerian independence and opposed America in Vietnam. In 1964 he was offered the Nobel Prize for Literature but refused it on the grounds that such honours would interfere with a writer’s responsibilities to his readers. When Soviet tanks and troops put a stop to the Prague Spring in 1968, it led “Sartre and Beauvoir definitely to reject the Soviet model – only to praise people like Mao Tse-tung and Pol Pot instead instead” (Sarah Bakewell: *At the Existential Café* (Chatto and Windus, 2016, p293).

Despite such errors of political judgment, Sartre in his lecture provides invaluable insights into the nature of Humanism and its existentialist foundations. □



TIMES ARE CHANGING

THE Methodist Church in Great Britain has moved with the times and overwhelmingly redefined marriage to include homosexuality, to conduct same sex weddings, and even approve of cohabitation as an alternative to marriage. Unfortunately the same church in good old Northern Ireland is very upset about this change, according to Rev R Parke, from the church's morals committee, using that old discredited argument that it's against Biblical teaching on marriage. For goodness sake, even the 'save Ulster from sodomy' DUP are shifting their position.

The Methodists here don't ask God to do something about bone cancer in small children or eradicate mosquitoes, which cause such untold suffering in the Third World. No. Same sex marriage is the big problem, though there don't seem to be issues about unusual relationships in the 'Good Book'. According to the Bible, Solomon had five hundred wives, which is no problem to the church because you don't criticise Biblical heroes.

If I were to accept the divine orders from the Bible then I would support slavery as in *Leviticus* 25: 44-46, where it says: "If the owner dies, the male children should inherit the slaves previously owned by their father". I would also support the execution of a wife who was found not to be a virgin on her wedding night as in *Deuteronomy* 22:13-21. According to the Bible, what is the punishment for taking the Lord's name in vain? – Death: *Leviticus* 24:16. What is the punishment for working on the Sabbath – Death: *Exodus* 31:15. What is the punishment for adultery – Death: *Leviticus* 20:10.

I often wonder if these people actually read the Bible. It is not very long ago that a marriage between a Catholic and a Protestant was considered treachery in Northern Ireland and between black and white in apartheid South Africa an abomination.

Homosexuals play an important role in our society. We have had a homosexual British Prime Minister, Edward Heath. We have had a gay Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. We have openly gay members of the present and previous cabinets. We have openly gay International Rugby players like Gareth Thomas. Alan Turing, one of Britain's most famous scientists, who broke the German enigma code and helped win the Second World War, was homosexual. I could go on and on. Gay marriage is a human rights and equality issue.

**Andy Barr,
Bangor**

NATURAL INTEGRATION IN SCHOOLS

THE article *Who Represents the 27%?* in the July-August 2021 edition of the *Irish Freethinkers and Humanist* magazine states: "93% of children (in Northern Ireland) are still educated in religiously segregated schools" – on the face of it, a truly depressing figure.

However, within this 93% non-integrated schools sector, a study shows a number of these schools, both Primary and Secondary, have a greater religious mix than many officially designated integrated schools. This is due to increasing numbers of parents ignoring their own faith when choosing their children's schools.

Examples are given, albeit in 2015, in an article in the *Irish News* by the Education Correspondent Simon Doyle. In the article *Top schools enjoying greater religious mix*, he refers to a study which indicates that in some non-integrated state-controlled (Protestant) grammar schools – Belfast Royal Academy, Strabane Academy, Rainey Endowed Magherafelt, and Methodist College Belfast – about 25% of pupils are Catholic. And actually, according to Alan Frame, the author of the official history of Methodist College, *Floreat Collegium*, 'Methody' in 2018 had more Catholic pupils than Protestant.

Unfortunately, this religious mix is not reflected in the Catholic secondary sector. Simon Doyle points out that Catholic grammar schools continue to have only a very small number of Protestant pupils.

More encouraging is the increasing religious mix in the non-integrated Protestant and Catholic primary schools such as, in Belfast, St. Brides, Botanic, Stranmillis; and in many rural schools: St. Anne's PS (Donaghadee), Sion Mills PS (Strabane), and Ballykelly PS.

This trend towards 'natural integration' is sure to continue as more of the population are regarding themselves as having no religion. Maybe then the archaic terms *Catholic School* and *Protestant School* will disappear and be replaced with, simply, - *School*.

**Ken Murray,
Belfast**





After Θ God

Joe Armstrong

explores the religious mindset – once held by its author – and examines transitioning from belief to unbelief, a journey that involved rethinking everything



Chapter 23

THE Superior had encouraged me to take temporary vows for three years but now we discussed the possibility of my postponing first profession given my father's terminal illness, my visits to his bedside, my attempts to find David, and the many contacts with my family – countering the normal seclusion and solitude of novitiate. On balance, we agreed it was better to proceed with first profession, taking an initial commitment of promises for one year.

Soon afterwards, the Superior, my mother, Uncle John – who had returned from South Africa because of my father's illness – and I, were sitting in a family room in Mercers Hospital.

'Will this affect Joseph's profession?' my mother asked Father Hannan.

I had never known whether my mother was pleased or displeased by my entering the Marists. Years later, she told me 'people' expected me to leave and look after her when my father died. I feared being sucked back under her influence, manipulation and control.

'That's Joseph's decision,' the Superior replied.

Relief, freedom and dignity filled me by his firm response to her, respecting my choice.

The final silent retreat began, to conclude with our first profession on Saturday 12 September 1981. On the Tuesday of the retreat, as I sat in the chapel just before Evening Prayer, the Superior came up to me.

'We need to go to the hospital.'

He drove me in. After a few hours, the nurse told me Dad had stabilised and Father Hannan drove me back to Milltown.

Next day, Wednesday 9 September, Evening Prayer had already begun so it caused more of a stir when Father Denis Green called me from chapel. I was worn out and sensed that this was it, determined that I wouldn't come back to Milltown until Dad had died.

My mother, sister, brother and Uncle John were already there. Only David was absent. Other relatives, and patients well enough to leave their beds, joined us around my father's death bed. Denis administered the Last Rites. The hospital chaplain handed Uncle John the Blessed Sacrament, who held the host over my father's head.

No doubt as part of the natural physiology of his death throes but nevertheless for the first time since taking his massive stroke, my father opened his eyes. His pupils were no longer pinpricks as they had been since his stroke. Now the pupils were wide, brown and beautiful. I mumbled prayers and we all prayed the rosary aloud.

It seemed he had breathed his last and a nurse ushered us aside to check his pulse.

'He is alive,' she pronounced, and in a comic moment amidst sorrow, we all traipsed back around his bed again for yet more rosaries.

Uncle John held a crucifix above Dad's head. Its corpus broke off, falling on my father's broken body, my uncle left holding the figureless cross – to believers, a symbol of the Resurrection. Dad died. I felt numb and did not cry; and, watching a relative cry, I wondered why, since it was so obvious that he was dying. I had shed most of my tears the day he took the massive stroke.

My father, a member of the Third Order of Saint Francis, was laid out in the Franciscan habit. His removal and requiem mass were in Church Street. Entering the Franciscan chapel, walking behind his coffin, now my tears flowed freely, triggered by the full-voiced singing of the choir above me. I was overwhelmed by the music, the moment, and the gathering of so many who had come to support us. Perhaps forty Marist Fathers and Franciscan priests, each clad in alb and stole, concelebrated my father's requiem mass.

As the cortege entered Mount Jerome cemetery, from the backseat of the mourning car I saw a friend walking outside close to me. She was someone whom I felt I might have had a future with outside the Marists. But such was the support I felt from my fellow Marists, that I thought I could never leave them now. I had found where I belonged. I would repay their love with my life.

The next day, 12 September 1981, I made my first profession. The Superior called each of the remaining seventeen of the original twenty novices by name.

In turn, each novice knelt on the sanctuary making his first profession. I promised to live for one year the vows of chastity, poverty and obedience, according to the rule of the Society of Mary.

'I ask you, Reverend Father, to receive these promises of mine as a sign of my desire to commit myself wholly to the Lord and to His Church in the life of this religious community.'

And then I said the prayer considered most intimate to Marists: 'Strengthen, O God, the work of your hand. Mary, most loving Mother, I am yours; by your powerful intercession secure my everlasting welfare. Amen.'

Near the end of the ceremony, I heard the Provincial announce: 'Yesterday, one of the newly professed buried his father.'

This public recognition of my bereavement was appropriate. But I was numb. It took me a moment to process that he was talking about me.

Prompted by the *After God* column in *The Irish Freethinker and Humanist*, Joe Armstrong's memoir *In My Gut, I Don't Believe* is available in paperback (£11.36/€13.30) and Kindle eBook (£6.99/€7.77) editions on all Amazon sites and Book Depository (€11.13 paperback to Ireland). ISBN:9780954661014.

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The Rise and Fall of Christianity

Daltún Ó Ceallaigh

CHRISTIANITY is based on the existence, teachings and possible assertions of a person named Yeshua from Galilee who was born about 2025 years ago. His name was later Hellenised and Romanised, ending up as we know it today in English in the form of Jesus. Some historians dispute the existence of such an individual, while some others suggest that he was in fact two persons rolled up into one in posthumous recollection. However, while historical certainty about him is not possible, most secular and religious historians do tend to accept that, on balance, he was an historical figure and not entirely a myth.

So, if one accepts the existence of Jesus, the questions are what kind of life did he have, what did he teach and did he claim or imply that he was the son of a god?

The outline of his life is that he was the offspring of a carpenter called Joseph whose wife was named Mary. He had siblings and may have been trained as a carpenter himself. In early adulthood, it appears that he became a peripatetic religious preacher, basing himself on the Judaical tradition. It is apparent that he eventually managed to get on the wrong side of the Jewish establishment and also came to be viewed by the Romans as a disruptive social influence. As a result, he was subjected to a cruel execution by crucifixion.

The Gospels are the primary source for examining the life of Jesus. However, they are a hotchpotch of writings by some not very educated devotees, several of whom lived well after the events concerned. Apart from reporting some of the biographical details referred to above, they outline a theology and ethics enunciated by Jesus and also claim that Jesus portrayed himself as and was in reality the son of a god, and, further, performed miracles.

The first question that comes to mind is: did he in fact so depict himself or was that idea subsequently attributed to him or a misinterpretation of what he said. In other words, did he make pronouncements of divinity or was he glorified by his followers afterwards? If he was simply just another preacher, then he was not all that unusual. On the other hand, if he gave it to believe that he was a god or part of a divinity, then he was clearly either a charlatan or mentally unbalanced with delusions of grandeur. In either of the latter respects, he would not be unique.

The Gospels may have been attempts at a genuine account of the life of Jesus, but they are ultimately no more to be relied on than the Greek myths

As for the miracles, they could either be imagined or misconstrued from actual events. For example, Lazarus might have been in a cataleptic state and came out of it in the presence of Jesus. More generally, one should appreciate that the Gospels were not the work of historians and were composed at times when the boundaries between dream and reality, wish and fact, myth and scholarship did not prevail. The Gospels may have been attempts at a genuine account of the life of Jesus, but they are ultimately no more to be relied on than the Greek myths.

The key doctrines put forward by Christianity concerning earth-bound phenomena are those of virgin birth, divine incarnation and bodily resurrection. Theologically, there is the notion of a godly trinity as well as versions of what Christians call heaven and hell, and so on. In these and its ethical teachings, there is

nothing basically new in Christianity; it is in fact repackaged paganism.

How then did this Palestinian cult, as distinct from the already widespread Stoicism or Zarathustrianism of the time come into prominence in Europe, initially in West Asia and later throughout much of the world?

The breakthrough was in the 4th century CE when the Roman Emperor Constantine ‘converted’ to Christianity and it shortly after became the State religion. There is some doubt, however, as to whether Constantine was a true convert or an opportunist. Certain suggestions about his life after ‘conversion’ do not tally with being an enthusiastic adherent of the true faith. There are allegations that he continued to harbour Mithraic beliefs and perhaps indulged in related acts of worship. If true, why then should he do what he did in relation to Christianity?

Perhaps, because Christianity had its obvious attractions for a Roman Emperor. One has only to think of injunctions such as “render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s” and “turn the other cheek”, at least when taken simplistically, to discern how that suited the imperial project very well. Religions generally serve the purpose of fostering compliance of the ruled in the face of the ruler. And Christianity, already making inroads among the masses in the empire, might have been viewed as decidedly useful towards that end.

The task was then to seek the dominance and dissemination of Christianity. There was to be no turning of the other cheek in that regard. Suppression within the empire of non-Christian religions and philosophies, and one of the greatest waves of intellectual destruction in the history of humanity proceeded. Not only art work, but books and documents were consigned to —>

the flames. It has been estimated that up to 90% of classical learning, from Greece and Rome in particular, thus perished, never to be recovered. Not inappropriately, the period ushered in by Christianity has been titled the Dark Ages. Beyond the boundaries of the empire, both during and after its reign, Christianity was advanced with the bible in one hand and the sword in the other.

Christianity was not to begin its long retreat until what are called the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, joined by the Scientific Revolution and, next the insights of evolution and, soon afterwards, the steadily unfolding comprehension of the cosmos. But well into the 20th century Christianity still endured, not only as an ally of conservatism, but as an accomplice of imperialism.

Although, Christianity was supposed to be the saviour of the human race, for all its associated political and military power, it never achieved more than a small, albeit not insignificant, presence on the globe. Today, out of

approximately 7.5 billion people on the planet, 2 billion describe themselves as Christian, although that is probably far from an accurate measure of authentic belief and practice. Of interest to Ireland is the fact that about one billion world-wide designate themselves as Roman Catholic, in other words less than one-seventh of humanity. There is a lot of conversion to be done.

Christianity proclaimed that the truth shall set you free and, ironically, that is precisely what is happening

In Western Europe in particular, Christianity is in sharp decline and secular humanism, explicitly or implicitly, is growing gradually and, in some countries, is already predominant. In Ireland, a pertinent statistic was obtained from the referendum that opened the

way to abortion on demand within a certain time limit. No issue could be more fundamental for a devout Catholic and yet only one-third of voters could be found to oppose liberalisation.

All this is not surprising. I have written elsewhere about the three essential conditions for the decline of religion: deepening education, basic economic security and the growth of a scientific mentality.

Otherwise, Christianity especially is experiencing a revolt, against sexual repression in particular and a *weltanschauung* of guilt and misery. The totalitarian in the sky and his (not her, of course) vicarious totalitarians on earth are being overthrown.

The boomerang is coming back: Christianity proclaimed that the truth shall set you free and, ironically, that is precisely what is happening. □

A WORD IN EDGEWAYS

WHEN I was growing up in the 1950s everyone in Ireland was either a Catholic or a Protestant. This label defined not only the church you went to on Sunday and the school you attended but also who your friends were.

My family were Protestant and we were fortunate enough to live in a house in its own grounds on a main road. We had a grass tennis court in our garden and I spent my summer holidays playing tennis with my brother.

When I left school and got a job I started going to the local pub where I met Tim who became a close friend. In fact I went on to be best man at his wedding – but that's another story. I discovered that Tim lived four houses from me but I had never come across him as his family were Catholic.

They also had a tennis court in their garden and he spent his summer holidays playing tennis with his brother. How we wished we could have played tennis together but we had been kept apart in the strange religious divide that defined the Ireland of that time.

In my teenage years I began asking serious questions about the things I was meant to believe as a Christian. I found so much of it simply unbelievable. While I remained living at home I continued to go to church as it was expected of me. But as soon as I left home I very much put all things religious behind me.

I had always thought that it was strange how society seemed to expect everyone to have a religion – even if they weren't really religious. The religious label you were born with generally determined where you went to school,

where you got married and how you brought up your children.

I was lucky to discover Humanism in my early fifties. At last, for me, here was something that made sense: a worldview rather than a religion, an outlook on life based on rational thinking and compassion rather than belief in a supernatural power. I enthusiastically embraced Humanism and it has been an important part of my life for the past two decades.

I now look back on my early years – that binary Ireland of Catholics and Protestants – and it seems like another country. Old fashioned religion with hard and fast certainties seems to have largely disappeared along with the grass tennis courts that Tim and I used to play on with our brothers.

Brian Whiteside



Prospero's Diary

LAND OF HYPE AND NOT MUCH GLORY

IT'S hardly surprising that the English football team didn't win the Euros, for how could they live up to the hype that poured on them leading up to the final? It was relentless, dominating every British news bulletin for almost the entire competition, and the air of expectation was so overwhelming that in the end they wilted. Don't blame the penalty takers who missed; blame not only the media but also the whole climate of narrow nationalism that has engulfed English society and ultimately drowned the players in a tsunami of expectant publicity.

The conductor Simon Rattle is put off by this parochialism. In an interview in the *Radio Times* in July he admitted that he avoided conducting the *Last Night of the Proms* throughout his career because of his discomfort at what he calls the 'jingoistic elements' of the event. He believes that this feature has increased since the Falklands War in 1982. Recall that last year there was a failed attempt to stop the singing of *Land of Hope and Glory* and *Rule, Britannia!* How dare anyone try to end a revered tradition! Listeners to *Classic FM* will confirm that tunes like the above as well as *Jerusalem*, *Crown Imperial* and the *Dam Busters March* are now featuring more regularly than ever in the presenters' playlists.

As for the Olympic Games, while it is true that the BBC no longer owned the exclusive rights and was restricted to just two live streams, there was nevertheless a concentration on the exploits of Team GB. This is merely a heightened example of the British media's perpetual concentration on sports in which British, mainly English, people participate. Don't they know that sport and sporting prowess are universal and that we want to hear of great achievements irrespective of where they occur?

THE IRONY OF ARCHBISHOP NEARY

MICHAEL Neary, Archbishop of Tuam, has accused the Irish media of "being managed to serve distorted and sometimes questionable ends, which are calculated to deprive us of our critical faculties" (*Irish Times*, 26th July). At Mass in Westport he told his congregation: "It is not uncommon to find the coverage of religion per se and religious affairs generally viewed through a political prism and treated in political terms". He continued: "Forces are endeavouring to reshape our values, fears and dreams in ways that are quite literally opposed to the joy of the Gospel".

The Archbishop needs to go back to school and study the influence of the Catholic Church on Irish society. Then he might look in the mirror and discover that he is pinpointing its own failings. The Catholic Church has been a major instrument of brainwashing and has been trying to deprive the Irish of their critical faculties for centuries. It has followed the advice of the Jesuit founder Ignatius

Loyola: "Give me a child till he is seven years old and I will show you the man". We could cite its input into the 1937 Constitution, its influence on state censorship of literature and films, and its successful past lobbying against contraception, divorce, abortion and gay rights.

We could also point to its continued influence on education, in particular its enforcement of Catholic faith formation classes on non-Catholics, and its control of public hospitals where it enforces archaic Catholic medical ethics. As for referring to the Gospel, Neary should take note of the words of Jesus: "And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye"? (*Matthew 7:3*).

UNILEVER'S ICE CREAM CLOUT

BEN and Jerry's recently announced that it would no longer supply ice cream to Israeli settlers in the Palestinian territories in the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem – about 700,000 people in total. This boycott recently dominated the news agenda in Israel and led to accusations by Israeli politicians of 'ice cream terrorism'. On the contrary, it is a small step by Unilever, which owns Ben and Jerry's, in opposition to an illegal occupation. As by far the world's largest ice cream maker, producing additional brands like Magnum, Walls, Cornetto and HB, perhaps it will use its dessert power to highlight other injustices around the globe.

GOATS AND BEARDS: THE ART OF THE LIMERICK

POLITICS and religion are often the butt of humour, and that is a good thing because it sharpens our critical faculties. Boris Johnson, while a Conservative backbencher, won a £1000 *Spectator* prize for the best limerick in a 2016 *President Erdogan Offensive Poetry* challenge, occasioned by the Turkish leader's crackdown on free speech. A German court had granted an injunction to prevent comedian Jan Böhmermann repeating an offensive skit about the Turkish president. Johnson's entry in the *Spectator* was:

*There was a young fellow from Ankara,
Who was a terrific wankerer.
Till he sowed his wild oats,
With the help of a goat,
But he didn't even stop to thankera.*

Here's an irreligious one, based on a famous Edward Lear limerick, from a recent article in *New Statesman*:

*There was an old man with a beard
Who said: "I demand to be feared!
Address me as God,
And love me, you sod!"
And man did just that, which is weird.*

Prospero



ART

Trio

Colin Corkey



AS one who has had a life-long love of clay as a sculptural material, I am acutely aware of the intrinsic inspirational properties as it's being worked. Whenever an artist sets out to produce a painting or sculpture he or she is generally working to a prescribed brief, or at least has some notion or idea of what the outcome should be. Alternatively, ideas can emanate from the actual process which presents subject matter previously unforeseen.

The work featured here simply evolved during the building process, by rolling out slabs of clay, joining, cutting and reassembling in varied positions so that the structure continuously took on a fresh appearance until I was eventually satisfied with the overall image. Constructed in crank stoneware clay with a white stoneware slip applied to the surface, this group of three measures 42 cms. in height and was fired to 1300 degrees centigrade.

Some years ago I had the good fortune to spend an afternoon with the celebrated English sculptor Sandy

Brown who lives and works from her studio in North Devon. I've always admired her enormous outdoor ceramic installations – some even as high as 6 metres – and I was keen to learn something of the genesis of these intriguing forms. She revealed to me that her starting point would often entail a simple playful handling of small portions of clay, bending, shaping and pinching them, without reference to any outside influence and devoid of any descriptive or illustrative purpose. Once she had created a little 'maquette' type structure that met her satisfaction, this would then act as a starting point by translating it into one of her immense sculptures.

During the course of the afternoon Sandy made a phone call to arrange the purchase of a forklift truck in order that her huge vulnerable work could be manoeuvred with relative safety.

As yet none of my sculptures have required a forklift for shifting purposes.

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Classical Collection

A series which traces the history of classical music through some key works

1. Sacred Music before the 18th Century

It might seem strange that a non-believer can appreciate sacred music, but the secret is to go with the flow of the sound and ignore the meaning of the words. If they are in English and in your face, they begin to jar. So you won't find Handel's *Messiah* in this list. Lines like "I know that my redeemer liveth" get in the way of an appreciation of the music's spirituality, which may be defined as awe and wonder at the beauty, mystery and tragedy of life. It's ok for most people if the words are in Latin.

Chronologically, we begin with music by Abbess **Hildegard of Bingen** (1098-1179). Courted by popes and emperors, she was one of the most remarkable creative personalities of the Middle Ages, writing books on science and medicine, a morality play and a haunting anthology of poems and music. Many of her songs are to the Virgin Mary and their eroticism hints at lesbian love. Sample her works in recordings by the **Gothic Voices** (*Feather on the Breath of God*, on the Hyperion label) and **Sequentia** (Canticles of Ecstasy, on Harmonia Mundi).

Moving on to the 16th century, **Thomas Tallis** (1505-85) and **William Byrd** (1543-1623) were two English organists and composers. Tallis's 40-part motet *Spem in Alium* is an astonishing polyphony rising to a massive climax. Famous recordings include those by the **Tallis Scholars** (Gimell) and **Magnificat** (Linn). The summit of Byrd's achievement are his *Masses for Three, Four and Five Voices*. Among the recordings are by **The Cardinal's Musick** (ASV) and the **Tallis Scholars** (Gimell).

The Italian composer **Giovanni Palestrina** (c1525-1594) was one of the finest masters of classical polyphonic writing. His best-known work is the *Missa Papa Marcelli*, composed on the death of Pope Marcellus II, who was pope for less than a month in 1555. There are fine recordings by **Pro Cantione Antiqua** (ASV), the **Westminster Abbey Choir** (Archiv) and the **Tallis Scholars** (Gimell).

Another Italian composer of this period was **Claudio Monteverdi** (1567-1643). A child prodigy, his first work was published at the age of 15. His posts included choirmaster at St Mark's in Venice, where he died. He wrote operas and madrigals as well as religious works and has therefore sometimes been called the creator of modern music. His *Vespers of the Blessed Virgin* were composed in 1610 and feature combinations of voices with orchestral accompaniment. John Eliot Gardiner and the **Monteverdi Choir** have made two recordings, the second of which is a compelling live performance made in 1989 in the Basilica of St Mark's (DG). Other alternatives in their own way are just as good, including Andrew Parrott with the **Taverner Choir** (Virgin), Robert King and the **King's Consort** (Hyperion) and Harry Christophers with the **Sixteen** (Hyperion).

A third Italian of the period was **Gregorio Allegri** (1582-1652). He was born and died in Rome and became a singer in the papal choir. His reputation derives from the

Miserere, a setting of psalm 51 composed about 1638 which has become one of the all-time favourite classical pieces, partly due to the 1964 Decca recording by the **King's College Choir** directed by David Wilcocks. Unfortunately, it is sung in English, so one of the versions by the **Tallis Scholars** might be preferable. The superb 1980 recording (Gimell) also includes the *Missa Papa Marcelli* mentioned earlier.

Other early sacred composers worth exploring include Josquin des Prez (c1455-1521). Try: *The Golden Renaissance* – **Stile Antico** (Decca); *Josquin* – **The Tallis Scholars** (Gimell).

There are many general collections of early sacred music. CDs of gregorian chant abound including: one by that title, sung by the **Choral Scholars of the Hofbuechappelle, Vienna**, on Decca and *Canto Gregoriano* by the **Monks of the Benedictine monastery of Santo Domingo de Silos** on EMI. There is also: *Renaissance: Music for Inner Peace* – **The Sixteen** (Coro); *The Phoenix Rising* – **Stile Antico** (Harmonia Mundi); *The Abbey* – **The Monks & Choirboys of Downside Abbey** (Virgin) *The Yearning Spirit* – **The Tallis Scholars** (Gimell). □

Poetry Corner



DID THE GOVERNMENT TAKE AN OPPORTUNITY TO PROTECT US FROM COVID-19?

LEAVING us all in the hands of our heroes
Who themselves face life and death risk
March 16th 2020 Imperial College Advisory Team to the
government published a report
Predicting that a virus could kill 510,000 at least
The government's approach
Could have filled intensive care units
Day to day life as we know it would have ceased
On March 23rd 2020 The Prime Minister announced
A national lockdown
Hysteria hit the country fast
So many elderly were confused
Wondering how many weeks will this last?
On March 26th 2020 Richard Horton on BBC's Question Time
Never spared his words
He laid it on the line
Reports from the Lancet Journal described it as a scandal
Some say after so many deaths
It is all too hot to handle
Looking back to 2016 Exercise CYGNUS was a 3 day training
course
On how to deal with a pandemic
UK were aware of the facts
But ignored them all and did not act
Looking back 2016/17 the National Risk Register
Of Civil Emergencies published by the Cabinet Office
Warned of a 'flu' like pandemic on the way
With 50% of the UK population
Affected by symptoms Leading to the possibility of 750,000
deaths
Worst still there would be high levels of unemployed
Not to mention the amount of grieving relatives of families
who had died
Some say the government is beginning to get it right
Let's hope it lasts
1990 when targets were brought in first
Was said to be reducing waiting times
Instead of that the NHS has got worse

Dr R M Rogers



Explaining Humans:

What Science Can Teach us about Life, Love and Relationships

Camilla Pang • Penguin • Paperback • 2021

Alan Tuffery

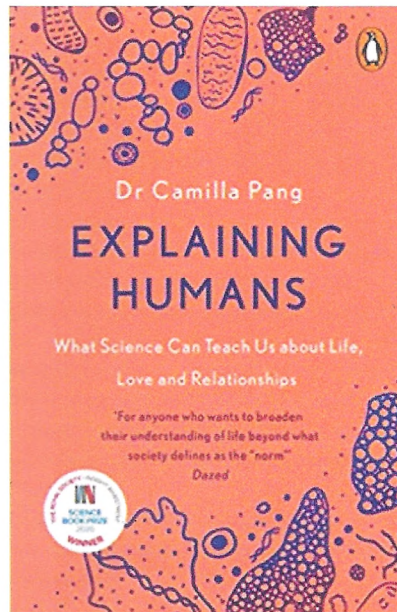
DR Camilla Pang is ‘neurodivergent’ and has Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD). ASD causes acute chronic anxiety so that dealing with the unexpected, such as loud bangs or late trains, can lead to a ‘meltdown’. On the other hand, ASD gives the superpower of being able to grasp patterns very quickly, but at the cost of extreme literalness. For example, when a friend of her mother rings: “Is your mother there?”, she says “Yes” and hangs up. ASD also means that nuances of speech or behaviour are completely unnoticed which can lead to her being unacceptably direct on occasion.

ADHD is also an Autism Spectrum condition and causes difficulties with concentration, so that it is almost impossible to maintain a sustained focus on anything. It can sometimes take her five hours to leave the house. And even then it is quite likely that she has forgotten her keys.

Between them, these conditions add up to a demand for stimulation and a diminished ability to process overwhelming amounts of input — hence the meltdowns.

When she was eight she asked her mother whether there was a ‘manual for humans’. There wasn’t — but there is now and this book is it.

Camilla Pang writes lucidly about the horrors she has faced and continues to face as she learns how to deal with people. This book is the story of how she worked humans out for herself using experiment and the use of scientific ideas to model human behaviour and to manage human behaviour and her own responses — at least to the



extent of only upsetting two people in a day.

A couple of examples will suffice. She has abandoned a box decision-making system as not being flexible enough; if anything goes wrong, it’s outside the box. Instead, she uses a tree model which is branching and hence much more flexible and includes many more possibilities, so that she is much less unlikely to be disturbed by something unforeseen and so go into meltdown.

A particularly intriguing model is her use of proteins to model different human types and how they interact (she is a post-doctoral research worker in protein structure and folding). So the ‘kinases’ are the life of the party and get other people going, whereas the ‘receptors’ are socially at ease and responsive to others’ needs.

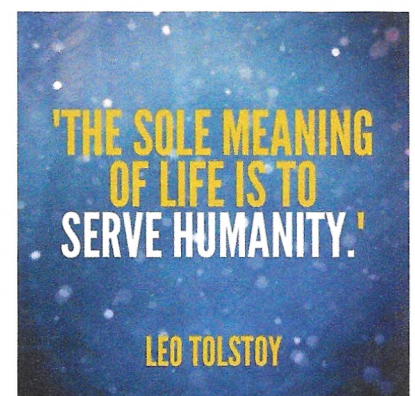
Camilla Pang has found a way that works for her by ingenious use of models based scientific theories. Her core message is experiment and don’t be afraid to fail — after all,

that’s how science works. Secondly, don’t be defensive about who you are, even if you are not one of the crowd.

The book is lucidly written but it must be said that some of the basic science is not well described and the Myer Briggs Indicator of personality types has never been accepted and is no more than pseudoscience. These deficiencies are minor irritants and do not detract from the usefulness of Pang’s modelling approach (rather, they may exemplify the lack of science graduates in editorial departments).

The book is valuable for giving insights into the world of the ‘neurodivergent’ and guidance for us all, ‘neurotypical’ and ‘neurodivergent’ alike, to manage our lives and our interactions with others. Humanists will recognise many of the large ideas she reaches, perhaps especially the value of diversity.

Happily we are not all the same and we can all be a bit more tolerant — and we never know when we might need those superpowers. Indeed, it is arguable that many of the greatest achievers, not only in science but in other areas of human endeavour, share some of Camilla Pang’s superpowers. □





What is Good?

A.C. Grayling

Phoenix/Orion Publishing, €12.50

Charles Shier

WHAT constitutes a good life, a life well lived? This question has occupied the minds of people throughout the ages, and continues to do so in the modern, more secular era. In this book, published initially in 2003, the philosopher and author Anthony Grayling examines the philosophies, codes and beliefs that people in the Western world have adopted over several millennia to guide their behaviour. He explores what humankind has considered to be of value in leading a good and fulfilling life.

This is not a highbrow academic book, but one very much aimed at the general reader. It seeks to introduce us to the main schools of thought that have governed the question of 'good' during the development of Western civilisation. It follows a broadly chronological approach: beginning with six centuries of ancient, classical thought (400 BCE – 200 CE); followed by twelve centuries of Christian hegemony (200 – 1400 CE); and then six centuries of struggle between the individuality of ancient ethics, that were rediscovered, revived and elaborated, and the conformity of beliefs promoted by organised religions.

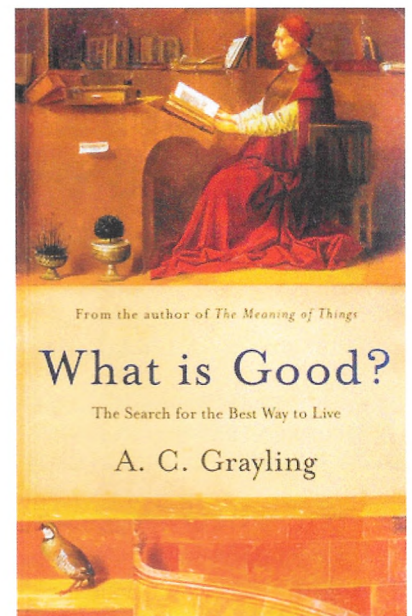
In assessing the classical conception of the good life, Grayling begins in the Greek States in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE, which produced the seminal ideas that would later impact on the development of our modern Western world. He reviews the contributions made by Thales, Socrates and his pupil Plato and by Aristotle. He examines the different philosophical schools – Stoicism, Cynicism and Epicureanism – that existed in the period between Aristotle and Christianity's conquest of the region; and also the role that Romans such as Seneca, Marcus Aurelius and Cicero played in recording, disseminating and popularising the earlier thinking.

Stoicism and the other schools of thought were eclipsed mainly by Christianity. In assessing the success of what he terms the 'Religions of the Book' – Christianity, Judaism and Islam – Grayling proposes that it may simply have been that the philosophies were too difficult, too dry, too austere or too rational for the vast majority of the populace. Religion was much easier to understand, with its clean set of rules, rituals, observances and hope of life after death. However, religion is centred on faith and, as observed by the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, faith is a commitment made in direct opposition to reason.

Christianity's dominance in Europe held sway until the Renaissance, which Grayling terms 'The Second Enlightenment', when it began to be challenged by the rediscovery and appreciation of the ancient literature and by the rise of the humanities. The author charts the development of humanistic ideas through the subsequent Reformation, scientific revolution and Third (eighteenth century) Enlightenment, culminating in the major clash between science and religion following the publication of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* in the mid-nineteenth century.

He observes that most writers and thinkers during the Renaissance period attempted to work from within the religious tradition but, by the time of the eighteenth century Enlightenment, the effort to accommodate religion was effectively abandoned.

I got the impression that Grayling was not overly enamoured by progress during the twentieth century, with its litany of moral horrors including large scale wars, mass exterminations and man-induced famines. He also noted that most modern academics working in philosophy and ethics tended to plough



a rather narrow field, rather than having a broad appreciation of moral and ethical concerns that contributed to the public debate. However, he viewed the second half of the century as more optimistic, following the UN Declaration of Human Rights, with the development of discourses on areas of special concern, especially in the field of medical ethics.

The author also raised a note of caution about the danger of allowing the major religions to jostle up against each other in the public domain. He was writing in the immediate post-9/11 era, but pre-ISIS, pre-Boko Haram, pre-*Charlie Hebdo* and numerous terrorist attacks in the Western world. He stresses that governments must do everything in their power to ensure that the public domain remains wholly secular, with religion confined to the personal sphere.

The book was discussed recently by the North Dublin Humanist Community Book Club. There was widespread agreement around the Zoom table that the book deserves a space on every humanist's bookshelf: partly for its structured approach to the evolution of what is thought to constitute a good life; partly for its rich vein of reference material; but mostly because it is an eminently readable and thoroughly enjoyable account of the long struggle between two conceptions of the good – the autonomy of humanism and the heteronomy of religion. □



Trash TV

Brian McClinton

LET'S talk about sex. After all, it is pretty ubiquitous, especially on the small screen. The soaps, for example, have been heavily spiced up in recent years. Take ITV's *Emmerdale*. Once a soporific saga of laid-back country folk, it is now a steaming hotbed of desire, including even a case of paedophilia. To juice things up even further, there is the occasional psychopathic murder. That's not unusual: a surfeit of sex in soaps is often 'beefed up' with an excess of killings. *Emmerdale* village must rank as both the most deadly and the most horny hamlet on planet earth.

On Channel 4 there is a dating series called *Naked Attraction* in which individuals choose from four candidates whose naked bodies are gradually revealed to them from the feet up. Then they get naked themselves and make a final choice based entirely on physical appearance. Do they like big boobs? Do they fancy a pierced penis? According to some reports, the show will soon take things to another level with *Naked Attraction Hotel*, where contestants have the chance to date not just one singleton but multiple others after leaving the studio. 'Hotel' is surely putting too polite a name on it.

Netflix's new miniseries *Sexy Beasts* is supposedly based on the opposite premise that superficial looks should not be important when arranging a date. So the participants are masked in striking prosthetic makeup – dolphin, dinosaur, demon, frog, wolf, etc. Actually, the latex faces are the least boring feature, for there is no real meeting of minds in the short time allowed, though the contestants often convince themselves that there is. What is more, when the grotesque masks are removed, it turns out that the people are generally attractive and wouldn't look out of place in any other dating show. So the mask of depth is no more than latex deep.

Even more superficial is ITV2's *Love Island* (pictured), which has just finished its seventh series. Here tanned, well-oiled and white-toothed young men and women gather in a luxury Mallorcan villa where they couple and recouple with each other, share beds and play silly games. After two long months of yelling and screaming, interspersed with dire dialogue comparing the 'spooning', 'cuddling' and 'kissing' with their partners while bitching about the faithlessness of anyone who recouples, viewers vote for their favourite pair, who receive £50,000, not to mention sponsorship contracts. Occasionally, someone raises a 'serious' question. "Who invented shoes?" or: "How many planets are there?"

After watching bits of this unbelievably shallow shit-show, it is possible to understand why the English voted for Brexit and Boris Johnson. Its inanity and phoniness have inevitably invited much media trolling, and two previous contestants as well as its host committed suicide. Anyone who enters such an insipid contest in order to achieve 'fame' is certainly taking their life in their hands, but in truth the celebrity which they seek is a



worthless bauble compared to the enduring rewards of real effort and real achievement such as at the Olympics or in vaccines for viruses. Yet it is bemusing that so many viewers and TV critics seem to like it. The media grants it a massive publicity that it simply does not deserve.

At the risk of sounding sexist, take this quartet of female reviewers. Elise Bell in *The Independent* has numerous posts on it, including: "After a year and a half of chaos purgatory, *Love Island* has returned, and so, blinking into the sun, we step towards its warm embrace". Susanah Goldsbrough in the *Daily Telegraph* declares: "Enlightened it is not but addictive it remains". Lucy Mangan in the *Guardian* is similarly hooked and loses the run of herself, confessing: "I hate myself but I can't stop. Please, somebody, help!" Carol Midgley in *The Times* writes: "If you're bored, you know what this means, don't you? You're old". Guilty as charged, m'lady, and for this relief much thanks.

This widespread infatuation with trash TV clearly explains the popularity of Netflix's *Sex/Life*, an eight-part miniseries about a housewife who has sex on the brain (and lots of other places). Billie (Sarah Shahi) is a suburban mother who is bored with her investment banker husband Cooper (Mike Vogel), who would rather watch American football than satisfy her insatiable appetite. Her mind keeps harking back to her wild affair with record company boss Brad (Adam Demos), whose many assets include a monster member that stuns Cooper when he sees it while stalking him in the gym. Like this inflated phallus, the copious copulations are so obviously synthetic that you might not endure this dreadful dollop of soft porn to its series climax. I certainly didn't.

The old cliché is that men have a one-track mind, but the message of these shows seems to be that it is now women's turn to be sexual addicts. It is quite ok for them to salivate over Zac Efron's buttocks or Brad Pitt's mug but apparently no longer ok for men to drool over Jan Selter's bum or Beyoncé's boobs. When we can openly do both, then we will have reached true equality. Yet, in view of all this mindless obsession with sex, we would do well to heed the wisdom of Francis Bacon in his essay *Of Love*: friendly love perfects humankind, but wanton love corrupts and debases it. □