

Irish Freethinker

and Humanist

irishfreethinkers.com

March-April 2022

No 193

£3



Christianity not Mysterious :
OR, A
TREATISE
Shewing,
That there is nothing in the
GOSPEL
Contrary to
REASON,
Not ABOVE it:
And that no Christian Doctrine
can be properly call'd
A MYSTERY.

We need not desire a better Evidence that any Man is in the wrong, than to hear him dispute against Reason, and finally acknowledge that Reason is against him. ABP Toland.

London, Printed in the Year 1696

John Toland 1670-1722

Ireland's Forgotten Freethinker

Also: A Wealth Tax • Chaos Theory • Ulysses at 100 • Belfast
The Covide Divide • Secular Morality



IFH
IRISH FREETHINKERS
AND HUMANISTS

Freethinker: a person who forms his or her own opinions about important subjects (e.g. religion or politics) on the basis of logic, reason, and empirical evidence rather than authority, tradition, revelation, some particular dogma, or simply accepting what others say.

Website:

irishfreethinkers.com



Find us on
Facebook

No attachments, please. Send material unformatted in the body of an email.

Deadline for next issue: 12th April

Irish Freethinker and Humanist

ISSN: 2399-7621

A magazine of ideas.

Bimonthly by mail. £30/€30 per annum.

Cheques, postal orders, payable to:
Irish Freethinkers and Humanists, via

Brian McClinton, Treasurer,

25 Riverside Drive, Lisburn, BT27 4HE

02892677264 07962122038

brianmclinton@btinternet.com

See Page 24 for more details.

CONTENTS

Morality, Philosophy, Science,
Politics, Culture, Lifestyle, etc

Chaos Theory 3

Nick Emmett

Joe the Human 4

Joe Armstrong

Our Response to Grief and Loss 5

Alan Tuffery

The Covid Divide 6

Lothar Luken

Secular Morality 7

Alan Tuffery

Time for a Wealth Tax 9

Michael Morrissey

Meditations on Time 10

Noel Byrne

Israel's Apartheid State 11

Editor

John Toland: Freethinker 12

Brian McClinton

Self-Determination 14

Daltún Ó Ceallaigh

After God 15

Joe Armstrong

Lara and Fintan 16

Owen Morton

Ulysses at 100 18

Brian McClinton

Oscar-Nominated Films 19

Belfast 20

Roger Kelly

Poised 21

Colin Corkey

Humanist Tunes 22

Eamon Murphy

Humanist Meetings in Ireland 24

Chaos Theory

Nick Emmett

NIELS Bohr and Albert Einstein were great friends who argued for a number of years about quantum mechanics. These public debates are remembered because of their importance to the philosophy of science. Do entities exist if they aren't observed (Bohr) or do they have independent reality (Einstein)?

A new book *The Age of AI* describes how researchers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) used a machine-learning Eon AI to have a computer create an anti-virus. It stopped viruses and bacteria, but how was beyond their understanding. The book's authors, politician Henry Kissinger and ex head of Google Eric Schmidt, believe future AI can be dangerous for humanity. We don't know if it will change humanity for the worse.

The BBC radio programme *The Forum* recently assembled a panel of some of the cleverest people in Silicon Valley to discuss the future of technology. One man said that when Humans have fully developed AI we will be like gods.

Did he consider the Chaos Theory as it applies to normal life? In this case we don't have control in relation to chance. The person was speaking in a state which has earthquakes. How does he think we can be like Gods when we are playthings of chance?

The Covid virus terrifies people. It has killed millions throughout the world. It seems reasonable to suggest that the human race is terrified of these small invisible objects. This is a perfect example of the Chaos Theory. The coronavirus began with a small event in China – most likely mutations that allowed the virus to move from an animal to a human. The effect? The whole human race

panics. So we are part of nature, part of the evolution process, and not in control in the way we imagine.

Robert Harris's book *The Fear Index* is a wonderful description of how computers make us passive. An American computer genius, working in the accelerator installation in Geneva, produces so many odd experimental effects that he is sacked. He starts a Hedge Fund with an English finance expert.

The American installs very special computer programmes in the firm, including a self-learning aspect based on the evolution process, to adjust, survive, and win above all. The machines earn the two men billions of Euros, yet the American is not interested in money but in computers' artificial intelligence.

The danger is that computers will never be able to think but that they make humans passive

The computers try to have the American killed, as they want to comply with the self-learning aspects which the American has installed. It finally is creating chaos in the world because of its type of AI. The danger is that computers will never be able to think but that they make humans passive.

One day I was walking along the main street in Maynooth, a small university town in Ireland. A group of ten students, boys and girls, were sitting and standing around a bench. All ten were talking on their smart phones. I thought this very sad because they should have been talking to each other.

There is a science story called *The Machine Stops*, written by E.M. Forster

in 1909. It is set in the future when humans live beneath the Earth. They have never visited the surface. They think it impossible to live there.

The machine runs the vast underground habitations. People rarely ever leave their apartments. Babies are taken from mothers when they are born. The machine gives people food, music, and radio which is a form of social connection.

A mother gets a message from her son. He wants to see her. She has not seen him for many years. She is terrified at the thought of leaving her apartment, but she gets a ticket for an airship. In the airship people avoid looking at each other, like some people with smart phones today.

Her son tells her he went to the highest railway station, and he returns there with a hammer and breaks into an old ventilation shaft. He climbs ladders upwards and eventually reaches the surface. He has no trouble breathing, and he sees humans in the distance. Then long white snake-like things come out of the underground, catch him, and drag him back down.

His mother is terrified by his tale. She said the Machine will put you on the surface to die. "What you did is against the machine laws". She believes the machine is a god. She travels back to her apartment.

The machine begins to break down. The wrong music is delivered, and the wrong food. One day all the lights in the apartments break down. The dark corridors fill with terrified people, and they all die. So, shall we mate with algorithms, become their partners, or maybe have machines inserted in our brains?

Einstein and Bohr were two gentle, civilised geniuses who attempted to prove the most difficult philosophical question of what exists, and who wanted to help humanity.

Will there be such people in the future? Or will we hand over ourselves to machines? □



Joe the Human (-ist?)

Joe Armstrong

IS Humanism as big a lie as religion? 'Doubt everything. Find your own light,' said Gautama Buddha. Doubting and disillusioned with Humanism, I spoke to Babu Gogineni.

A former executive director of what is now Humanists International, I was impressed by a TED talk he gave called *Championing the Light of Reason*. He has a following of tens of thousands on Facebook and YouTube. He is a significant player internationally in Humanist thought and practice.

Inspired by some of his words and deeds, I wondered if he might assuage my doubts about Humanism. We spoke after the Sue Gray 'update', the short but damning initial report on the scandal of alleged parties in 10 Downing Street during lockdown. Babu described British politics as 'so much of empty noise, lots of pretentiousness, fake appeal to principles that they don't necessarily subscribe to'.

But I wondered if the same applied to Humanism. Babu spoke openly about a profound row within Humanism. The International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU), since renamed Humanists International, went through, in his words, 'political turbulence in the organisation with various streams of thought clashing'. He says many supporters of IHEU were worried by the post-modernist influence of other Humanists.

'It is a clash of understanding of what humanism means,' said Babu. Many Humanists, he alleged were: 'I would even say, outrageously open postmodernists, unwilling to reconcile it to the idea of a naturalistic understanding of the universe.' Babu continued: 'If I were to be very frank, which I will be, post mod-

ernism is this medium-term lived disease that came into all universities around the world, where academics took great pleasure in denying that there was something universal about our ideas, about our rights.

Thus the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is really a product of Western dominance and imperialism and so on. The idea that you can have an objective view of reality was questioned in lots of eloquent nonsense.'

Babu said that by the IHEU's 40th anniversary in 1992, 'already one could see the tensions building up' about Humanist ideas. At its 50th anniversary in 2002, when Babu was the director of IHEU, he co-chaired the concluding session of its world congress. He recalled a question being asked if religion could be the basis of legislation for a Humanist. He was astonished that leading Humanists agreed that it could be and Babu said: 'If that is the case, would these people stand up so we can stone them to death.'

He believes there were 'a lot of empty discussions and debates' among some Humanists which seemed 'to people like me living in India and other humanists that the IHEU was engaged with things not so very important, either to humanism or to the world'.

I told him that I had seen a succession of serious rows between Humanists for more than a decade. Babu responded: 'It is true that a lot of humanists are arguing a lot of the time.'

He acknowledges that differences are 'really significant for many humanist minds' and some 'cannot stay in the same house with two other Humanists', they cannot find what they have in common.

Babu admits: 'I was quite a quarrelsome person, and it would be difficult for someone to win a fight or an argument with me. That is how, honestly, the IHEU survived during those times, the first five years of my stay in IHEU was conflict to conflict to conflict.'

However, he says that by the time he left the UK after his ten years at the IHEU, Humanists were 'if not even cooperating, they were broadly at peace'.

On Prof Dawkins being stripped of an award by a Humanist organisation for a tweet, Babu said: 'I would say it was an overreaction. It wasn't justified and it wasn't proportionate.' Had Babu been the leader of the organisation, he would have ignored the tweet.

'Humanism,' he says, 'is an ongoing project of clarifying our ideas'

'Humanism,' he says, 'is an ongoing project of clarifying our ideas. The spread of human-centred ideas, to my mind, should be the primary driver of humanism in society.'

'The one thing that humanists alone can do is the advocacy of reason, the advancement of freethinking, the defence of science, and the disinterested battle for human rights and universal human values.'

While they have a role to play, Babu would not put Humanist ceremonies as a top priority: 'The world is suffering so much for the denial of rights and the lack of science and proper knowledge. So, the smartest of us all should be marshalled into that activity.'

Babu sees the Humanist movement as bigger than any Humanist organisation. 'Humanists International should not and has never had a view on how many Humanist organisations should be in one country. Can there be a monopoly? Of course not.'

Joe Armstrong is the author of *In My Gut, I Don't Believe*.

Our Response to Grief and Loss

Alan Tuffery

In memoriam GB

(the one standing for the many)

WHEN a friend of several decades died recently, I was surprised by the intensity of my reaction. I was exhausted and confused. This is my attempt to find my way to an understanding of my response and perhaps of our general response to grief.

At the funeral I listened to the remarks made about G by people who knew him in different contexts. I found my own memories being stirred, renewed and compared with the memories of others. Was this the man I knew? How does their experience compare with mine?

Stirring is an apt word. I felt that deep memories, not individually recalled and examined for many years, were all mixed up together into a whirl of memories. Here and there I could discern snippets of events: stories of sunny days playing (very competitive) games with our young families and many convivial afternoons and evenings. The memories crowded in on one another.

Every memory has associated emotions. Every part of a memory — sight, sound, touch, emotion — is associated and linked to all our other experiences. It is this unique collection of experiences that makes up our ‘selves’.

When someone close dies, all these memories and emotions are ‘contacted’, as it were, with the new context of loss. Perhaps this was the cause of my initial exhaustion; the whirl of emotions defied my ability to parse them. The images of a shared past — joys and a few small regrets — were in a jumble of memories from four decades and more blended with those of the last decade. All those memories are part of the person I knew — and indeed, part of myself. Somehow the thirty year old is part of the seventy year old.

Perhaps this is the basis of the feeling of loss and pain that follows a death; and the closer and longer the relationship, the greater the confusion is likely to be because there is much more to process. The person with whom you shared a home, children and all life’s adventures for decades will be missed at every touch and turn of daily life. The familiar physical presence, voice and sharing will be gone. There will be moments when one has forgotten that they are no longer there. There may even be moments when we are convinced we have seen them, heard their voice, or felt their touch. Such moments can be devastating. We need time and a degree of tranquillity to deal with the upwelling of memories and emotions. Somehow we have to find a way to place all

the memories into the new context, not forgetting, but recognising the change and retaining the joys and treasures. This may remain incomplete for many years. As Patricia Gillilan puts it in her poem ‘Five Years’ from her collection, *The All-Steel Traveller*:

*Recall after recall comes, single moments
free from the motives, the confusions
of circumstance that forced us
to waste ourselves and our
time; they pour through my memory,
still do not make a pattern.*

To illustrate, a friend, at the celebration of the life of her husband who had died very suddenly, was given a metre-high candle with the words, ‘When you need to think about him, just light the candle and sit quietly. It’s OK to do that.’ Some years later I asked, ‘How did the candle work for you?’ She replied, ‘Very well. But I had to get another candle.’



Grief/bereavement support is available from The Irish Hospice Foundation 1800 80 70 77, 10am to 1pm, Monday to Friday.

Nothing Gold Can Stay

*Nature’s first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold.
Her early leaf’s a flower;
But only so an hour.
Then leaf subsides to leaf.
So Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down to day.
Nothing gold can stay*

Robert Frost

Farewell

*Farewell to thee! but not farewell
To all my fondest thoughts of thee:
Within my heart they still shall dwell;
And they shall cheer and comfort me*

Anne Brontë

The Covid Divide:

A View from the other side

Lothar Luken

EDITOR'S FOREWORD

FREETHINKERS are only too conscious of the importance of free speech. We know that for centuries religious organisations and governments sought to censor opinions of which they disapproved – opinions which usually challenged their power and influence – and frequently employed cruel and inhuman punishments on those who expressed them. The struggle for secularism, the rights of women, non-whites and gays have all depended greatly on the freedom to champion their cause in the public sphere. Free speech was an indispensable weapon for the powerless in vocally challenging the privileged and the powerful.

In recent years, however, a cancel culture has developed in which opponents of an opinion have sought to censor it. A case in point was the decision of Canadian rock stars Neil Young and Joni Mitchell to withdraw their music from the streaming giant *Spotify* in protest at what they allege is Joe Rogan's anti-vax content in his podcasts. In the two most provocative broadcasts doctors Robert Malone and Peter McCullough, though vaccinated, stated that they opposed a vaccine mandate, though both agreed with Rogan that vaccination is clearly advisable for anyone at high risk. Are they therefore really anti-vax? In the spirit of free inquiry here is Lothar's argument, written in the middle of December before this controversy broke.

A WORRYING split is widening in our society: here the vaccinated who welcome most of our far-reaching anti-Corona measures; there the unvaxed and unconvinced who are taking a road less travelled. It's a vexed question and, in a democracy, would normally be subject to public debate. Not this one! When, in mainstream print or on radio/TV, did you last get arguments from the minority? Whether these unprecedented restrictions of our freedoms of information, speech and health care choices are necessary or counterproductive or dictatorial is open to debate. Or is it?

Critics feel doused by a relentless tsunami of government propaganda that has drowned out all dissenters. But it has gone further: they've been ridiculed, vilified and subjected to hate speech that would not have been tolerated for any other minority. One can't blame a public who's been conditioned to think of refuseniks as tin-hats, anti-vaxers, flat-earthers, anti-science, stupid and selfish. People are not told about the thousands of GPs, virologists, immunologists, statisticians etc who come to dissent conclusions in their peer reviewed research and public declarations. Perverse irony: those making efforts to find out about the missing side of the debate are ridiculed for searching the internet – by those who have silenced all dissent on the official media.

It's getting tough when your viewpoint is censored out, and you're barred from bars and restaurants, cinemas and gyms – or even fired from your job. And now, the last straw for

many, mandatory vaccination. (You get funny recent video from most top German politicians assuring us this will never happen, it's unthinkable – well, now it's on the cards... although 2/3 are vaxed...).

The vast majority of sceptics accept there is a respiratory virus, it's from a lab in China (part-financed thru Dr Fauci), it's dangerous, and in extreme cases lethal.

So how to deal with this? First line of defence is our natural immune system. Second is a medicine to treat actual cases – not asymptomatic healthy people who test positive. Thirdly, isolate the most vulnerable – those with severe health issues, old people and especially those in nursing homes. Fourthly, develop herd immunity. Fifthly, develop a vaccine if necessary.

Well, you know what happened... And here we get to the economics of it all – and politics. The whole show was immediately taken over by Big Pharma and it's WHO who then 'guide' political decision-making. A bizarre part is played by the Left – those who'd always told us not to trust governments and their states, who'd shown that science is often not 'neutral' but profit-driven. They decried the evil machinations of hugely profitable pharmaceutical companies and their regular billion \$\$ compensations and fines for the lethal effects of their products, their revolving door routine of executives and scientists with the regulatory bodies and the WHO, their insisting on patents while poor people perish and so on....

Yet now those radical Leftists demand even stricter restrictions from the state, urge us to blindly follow 'the science' and to applaud those self-sacrificing humanitarians running Big Pharma (who have of course insisted on being indemnified for anything going wrong with their shots! So the EU are discussing a special fund to compensate the 1000s of severe vax victims – ah, first time we've heard of them.... Yes, science can get it wrong... and needs scientists like those who doubted the wisdom of using DDT, CFCs, nuclear power and weapons, leaded petrol, asbestos, micro beads *et al*, all products of industry-serving science. So, *cui bono* this withholding well-proven but out-of-patent medicines? Selling oceans of useless antibacterial hand 'sanitisers'? Foisting on us a genetic therapy that only could be called 'vaccine' after the definition was tweaked?

When Pfizer's vaccine came out people had to weigh the benefits and risks of taking a shot of stuff that could not have been tested for long-term side effects, that therefore was only on a 'provisional license' but would eradicate Covid, give us herd immunity once 70% or 80% were vaxed and then we could forget about it. It did none of this – and there goes the false analogy with ordinary childhood vaccines many of which *do* confer *lifelong* immunity. And there goes the claim that it was quite safe because they knew so much about the stuff – while they hadn't even found out that it only works for four months. We now know: it'll save us from the most severe effects, we'll stay infectious, we need 'booster' shots (increasingly called third shots, with regular top-ups already suggested) and we get lots of 'break-through infections' (an Orwellian euphemism for vaccine failure). Being wary of this false advertising doesn't make you 'anti vax' – and some are just waiting for conventional non-genetic vaccines to be licensed. Better safe than sorry!

All the while there is zero official advice on boosting our immune system. The health-conscious of course do →

exercise and use stuff like Vit.D and zinc supplements whose efficacy is well established by lots of studies. Yes, scientific ones, but you'd have to google them on the evil internet. There you'll also find that Ivermectin is not just a horse wormer, hahaha, but has long been used to tackle human parasites, especially in Africa (where the incidence of Covid is so 'surprisingly' low). You'd even learn of a US court decision forcing a hospital to let a doctor apply Ivermectin to a deathbed Corona victim – who duly got up fit after a few days. You learn how hospitals over-report deaths as Covid related because they then get a special premium and under-report deaths from the vaccines because they'd have to fill in a 6-page form – this is how we get our statistics. There are testimonies of GPs who saved patients with available medicines, and pathology professors who did post mortems on 'Covid' corpses who turned out to have died of other causes.

Evidence and studies are piling up, uncovering alarming flaws and failures. A Claire Byrne or a Dr Holohan, however, won't tell you that. Their vocation these days is to spread fear and panic – and contempt for critics. They may even do this in good faith as in: we have to exaggerate and tell white lies to get the dumb plebs to behave properly. So they must be writhing in anger about 'Golf Gate', Boris Johnson's Christmas parties, and that revealing clip of EU top brass giving a statement all masked – and, as they're done, the still running camera catches them immediately tearing off their masks (as *not* seen on RTE). Looks like our mighty rulers don't believe their own scaremongering and happily enjoy doing what they forbid us to enjoy. They debate whether they'll let us dine for 90 or 105mins, at a distance of 1 or 2 meters. They cancel singing at mass. They banned me from the healthiest thing I'm doing for my physical and mental health – swimming in the sea – because I live not quite within 5km of the coast. (Guess how I heeded that idiocy).

When applying logic and what used to be common medical wisdom, there's also absolutely no point in vaccinating healthy young people whose immune system has demonstrably dealt with their Corona infection – esp. now, when we know they're better protected than the twice, thrice etc vaccinated who also can still pass on the virus and die from it...And there's more – but I think I've shared enough here to show: critics have real facts, arguments and science behind them and that reasonable alternatives to our crisis response are possible, plausible and surely not insane. Why are they not engaged with but censored away?

And just consider how you'd feel when all your searching and thinking and discussing is haughtily dismissed by folks who just listen to RTE – where no-one is given a chance to criticise the official narrative; when you're denied a normal life because of what you know – and now even threatened with mandatory shots of an experimental genetic substance whose efficacy is very limited, whose side-effects are made light of and whose long-term effects are unknown; when on top of it all you're treated as an anti-social pariah – while you are horrified that they vax pregnant women and little children; when you feel you're living in a doomed materialistic society which is drowning in vanity and consumerism, drug abuse and IT garbage and where the state is getting more and more intrusive with surveillance, social control and 5G (with China and Israel selling that technology the world over); and when you can't simply ask: leave me alone, let me live my natural healthy life and don't force any pharma RNA into my body. □

Secular Morality

Part 1

Alan Tuffery

INTRODUCTION

This is an exploration of the nature of secular morality. That is, an exploration of a moral outlook which is not based on religion or some supernatural agency. In Part I, I consider the origin of morals and argue, first, that they are essentially human and social and, second, that religions have appropriated morals, rather than generating morals. In Part II, I discuss the replacement of 'shared myths' of religions by the 'shared truth' of our best knowledge of us and our world, that is scientific knowledge. In particular, I argue that the idea of evolution not only places us in our world but offers a means to recognise and take charge of our future.

MORALITY AND RELIGION

In some quarters there has long been an assumption that morality comes from religion — especially Christianity. This widespread and largely unquestioned assumption is the basis of the argument that religion is essential for the cohesion of society. Indeed, some believe that there can no morality without religion. Such notions are used to bolster the position of religion in societies. For example, in our own society, it is used to support the dominance of religions in education.

I think those of us who share a secular worldview must contest this idea and work to develop a set of moral principles that are generally acceptable. That acceptability will, in turn, depend on the acceptability of the ideas on which those morals are based and it is those underlying ideas that I want to discuss in Part II.

I will argue that morality can and does exist independently of religions and in some cases predates religions. I will further argue that the *internal* morality derived from humans differs from the imposed, *external* morality of religions and I will examine the consequences for individuals and societies. I do not argue that secular morals are not influenced by Christianity. Since morals are cultural — that is, influenced by the whole society — it could not be otherwise. My argument is that secular morals are not dependent on Christianity or any other religion.

I will pass over the argument that secular morals are superior to those based on religion. The curious can go to AC Grayling's *What Is Good?* which surveys the development of morals from Classical times to the present and has some pointed contrasts between secular and religious morals.

INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL MORALITIES

Grayling describes two contrasting views of what is good. One is "a broadly secular attitude rooted in →

views about human nature and the human condition". The other is "transcendental" and "locates the source of moral value outside the human realm." These two views I call *internal* and *external*, respectively.

Morals derived from religions are examples of external morality. Such moralities are *selfish*, in that they are concerned with individual salvation and eternal reward. External morals are imposed by a ruler, who asserts that they are of supernatural origin and therefore absolute and immutable. These external morals are usually reinforced by a subservient priestly caste, backed by the threat of violence, eternal damnation or both.

From the perspective of the ruling elite, religion is seen as a means of controlling the masses. Seneca, the Roman emperor Nero's favourite philosopher, said, "Religion is regarded by the common people as true, by the wise as false, and by rulers as useful." External morals are prescriptive and absolute: this is what you must do to avoid the anger of the god. These external, religious moralities generally assume that humans are inherently bad. That is, that humans will behave badly, unless restrained by threats of punishment (both in this life and the next).

Secular morality is social and based on the premise that humans are fundamentally good

External morality removes moral responsibility from the individual who does not have to make moral judgments. It is enough to just follow the rules without taking account of the consequences. Those who do not accept the moral code are 'othered'. That is, they are treated as not part of the group and are to be shunned or even slaughtered.

In contrast, *internal* (or secular) morality is based on our best knowledge of humans and the world. The phrase 'best knowledge' makes it obvious that we are not dealing with absolutes. It shares the humility of science in that, as our understanding changes, so the moral code will change to accommodate the new knowledge. Internal morality implicitly accepts our common humanity, it is inclusive, binding all humanity together. This is direct contrast to external morality which is exclusive, pushing ways those who do not share the same beliefs in the supernatural.

The phrase 'best knowledge' immediately raises a question that frightens some: if morals are not absolute, how are we to cope with the uncertainty that brings us? But, as Julian Huxley put it 80 years ago in his essay *Philosophy in a World at War*, "One of the chief tasks before each individual is to make a rational relative adjustment of the apparent absolute of his primitive ethics...to the practical realities of life". He goes on to say: "To become truly adult, we must learn to bear the burden of incertitude." I find these statements both empowering and stimulating.

Secular morality is social and based on the premise that humans are fundamentally good. At the same time, secular morality does not ignore the evidence that humans are also capable of great wickedness. The focus is on individuals' responsibility for their own moral decisions and actions as judged by their consequences. Judgment of the moral acceptability of individuals' behaviour is based largely on the consequences of their actions. This can be hard work, but, fortunately, we are not called upon to make difficult moral decisions all the time. Most of the time our culturally induced moral values will get us through without too much thought. (I will have more to say about this in Part II).

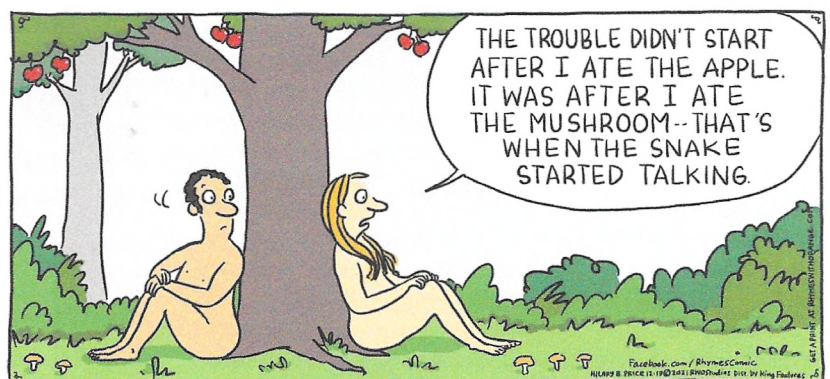
ANTHROPOLOGY AND MORALS

Our best knowledge of humans shows that they are social and share values of altruism and reciprocity. For example, Curry *et al.* (*Current Anthropology* vol. 60, 2019) have shown that 60 cultures share seven broad common values, namely helping kin, helping your group, reciprocating, being brave, deferring to superiors, dividing disputed resources, and respecting prior possession. Similarly, Dahlgaard *et al.* (*Review of General Psychology*, vol. 9, 2005) showed that many of those values are shared by all the major religions, several of which, such as Athenian culture (Plato, Aristotle), predate Christianity.

The present state of knowledge of human evolution gives us a better reason for these shared basic values, than the stories of Bronze Age nomads in the Middle East or the Christian writings of two millennia ago. Humans are profoundly social beings, which places a high selective advantage on co-operation and shared learning. Our prodigiously developed brains and language skills equip us for empathy and shared experience. Throughout our lives our behaviour is approved or disapproved by those around us.

These forces tend to foster convergence on a range of 'acceptable' behaviours. In short, this human — and humanist — morality is based on acceptability within social groups. As Daltún O Ceallaigh crisply put it in the *Irish Freethinker & Humanist* (November-December 2021), 'basic morality is a behavioural imperative, not a divine injunction.'

Yet when we come to consider our actions in the complexity of the wider world, we may need another frame of reference and that is what I will turn to in Part 2. □



Time for a Wealth Tax

Michael Morrissey

IT has been long recognised that the UK is shaped by its unequal distributions of income and wealth. Between 1961 and 2017, the Gini Coefficient rose from .26 to .34 (more unequal) and the 90/10 ratio from 3.2 to 4 (i.e. the income of the top ten per cent rose to four times that of the bottom), while the income share of the top one per cent more than doubled to eight per cent.

The distribution of wealth is similarly uneven. The *World Inequality Database* reveals that the net personal wealth of the UK top ten per cent rose from 52 per cent of national income in 1995 to 57 in 2020 (the top one per cent held 21%). Over the same period, that of the bottom twenty per cent fell from 6.3 to 4.6 per cent. Thomas Piketty (*Capital in the 21st Century*, 2014) argues that wealth inequalities have risen in the 21st century since wealth has risen faster than national income and those already wealthy have had most opportunity to make gains.

One of the curious features of the past two decades is how these patterns have been relatively untouched by crises. The wealthy recovered fastest from the 2008 Financial Crash, particularly since austerity programmes were essentially designed to protect lenders. During the Pandemic, (in which some estimates suggest 17 million people have died globally) the number of billionaires and the number of food banks simultaneously increased. For some, savings increased while they also enjoyed rising house prices. On average in the UK the richest 10 per cent gained £50,000 compared to less than £150 for the bottom third— those living in rented accommodation completely missed out on house price inflation.

At a global level, Oxfam (*Inequality Kills*, 2022) reveals that the wealth of the 10 richest men has doubled during Covid while 99 per cent of humanity has become worse off and the wealth of the world's 2775 billionaires increased faster during the Pandemic than in the previous 14 years combined. Every four seconds inequality contributes to a death. 20 people are generating 8,000 times more carbon than a billion of the world's poorest people, a quarter of a million of whom may die annually by 2030 from the effects of climate change. If Black Americans had the same life expectancy as White People, there would be 3.4 million more alive.

It is also curious that such levels of inequality are regarded as perfectly acceptable. For example, it is claimed that inequality is moderated by taxation – yes, but only marginally and it can hardly be effective if inequality continues to increase. Or it is the ‘natural’ result of a competitive economy, but economic growth was faster when economies were more equal. Or that significant wealth accumulates via initiative, hard work and intelligence. Yet, as Mazzucato (*The Entrepreneurial State*, 2015) argues, even the high-tech billionaires utilised state-funded or state-developed technologies plus favourable tax and regulatory regimes to succeed and then did everything in their power to avoid paying tax.

Unequal societies affect not just those at the bottom of the scale but generally suffer from lower life expectancy, higher crime and higher prison population rates to mention but a few (see Wilkinson & Pickett, *The Spirit Level*, 2010). In a later work (*The Inner*

Level, 2018), they carry the argument further claiming that everyone's mental health suffers in unequal societies, even those on top.

2022 promises to be a year of even greater pressures on those with low incomes – inflation is running at five per cent, energy prices are set to further explode and changes to National Insurance (as well as the biggest cut ever to welfare benefits) will disproportionately affect the poor. Whatever has been tried via existing taxation or the benefit system has failed miserably to stem the growth of inequality. Arguably, poverty has changed shape – the majority of the poor now live in households with at least one working member.

In this situation, it is unsurprising that attention is increasingly being paid to a wealth tax. The idea always prompts a host of objections: it would either stifle enterprise, or raise insufficient funds (its target population being small), or that some people are capital rich in the form of housing but cash poor, or that wealth being mobile, the wealthy would simply shift assets out of the country.

Stopping tax evasion and the concealment of wealth is simply a matter of political will and cooperation – a Global Tax Register, stricter regulatory powers and adequately financed tax agencies. The cash poor could borrow on their assets and government might even offer them low interest loans. The potential sums are actually quite significant. The University of Greenwich has modelled a prototype wealth tax (Tippet, *The Guardian*, 20/09/2021). “Household wealth between £3.4m and £5.7 million would be taxed at 1%; between £5.7m and £18m at 5%; and 10% above £18bn”. It is calculated that this would raise an additional £70-£130 billion a year for public services.

Piketty calls for something more robust – a graduated wealth tax starting at five per cent on fortunes of more than two million Euros and 90 per cent on those of two billion Euros. Oxfam argues for a ‘solidarity tax’ on gains made during the Pandemic of up to 99 per cent and an annual 10 per cent wealth tax. Such proposals, coming from the ‘usual suspects’, are usually ignored by government. Suddenly however, the idea has started to gain traction in unusual places. Last year the IMF's half yearly fiscal monitor report suggested that to meet ‘pandemic-related financing needs, policymakers could consider a temporary Covid-19 recovery contribution, levied on high incomes or wealth’ (Elliot, ‘IMF calls for Wealth Tax to help cover costs of Covid pandemic’, *The Guardian*, 7th April 2021).

Last October a group of 30 millionaires wrote an open letter to the British Chancellor saying that the costs of the Pandemic should be met by taxing the wealthy rather than the poor. In the US a group of self-styled ‘patriotic millionaires’ (www.patrioticmillionaires.com), makes similar demands claiming ‘for decades, wealthy elites – and the elected officials they control – have advanced their own self interests with no regard for the negatives consequences such policies predictably wreaked on ordinary Americans). Finally, in a recent report, *Bright Blue*, a conservative think tank, urged the government to shift the burden of taxation from those who work to those who hold wealth (Robinson and Shorthouse, *Rightfully Rewarded*, 2022)

As it stands, the UK tax system is unfair, inefficient and ineffective even in achieving its stated goals. Covid has proved that we need to live in an era of advanced state intervention to create the resilience to deal with this and the crises to come. At the core of this project should be a wealth tax. □

Meditations on Time

Noel Byrne

ST. Augustine said, “What then is time? If no one asks me then I know. If I wish to explain it to someone who asks, I know it not”.

Is it real or just a concept? If it cannot be observed, does it exist? Is it just a perception of change? Our senses tell us that time flows, but does it?

Time is a concept we use to measure change. From our point of view it is just a reference to duration between events. We can move it and change it as necessary. Clocks are put forward and back annually. We have had various calendars over the centuries. Yet we cannot stop change. We have terms and tables to identify time; seconds, minutes, hours, days, months, years, right up to eternity. Our clocks and calendars relate to our time and place in our frame of reference only, and not to other frames of reference. These are man made terms and concepts that we verify with man made clocks and calendars. But if there were no human beings to interpret time through their consciousness, would time exist? Just as feet, inches and metres don't exist in nature, neither do hours, minutes or seconds—they are all our own invention, just like all measurements.

Is time just an illusion, in the sense that it is always the present? There seems to be no past or future. When I think of the past I am in the present. When I think of the future I am in the present. Yesterday is always a memory and the future never comes. Reality is always the present. The past is only in our memories; the future is in our imagination. Both are in our mind and not real. Yet we need a future to give our life meaning and a past from which to learn.

Anything that happens, happens now. And now is not a “time”. To us it is always the present – always now. This present is also a fiction, in that it has no duration, it is instantaneous. If I look at my watch and say it is noon, what I am saying is that it was noon a fraction of a second ago. To perceive time, consciousness must exist. Change and time are separate concepts. There is no way I can directly experience time, you can only logically think of it as a concept and then visualise it, as an image of a moving hand on a clock or a day on a calendar. Both the concept and the visualisation are mental products, i.e. illusions. You can experience change.

For change to happen there must be motion – everything material is in motion. We may occasionally consider ourselves as motionless or still, but that is never the case, we are on a planet which is revolving at 1670 km/h around its axis, the Earth is travelling around the sun at 107,320 km/h, the Solar System is traveling in the Milky way at 828,000km/h and our Galaxy is travelling towards an unseen mass called the Great Attractor at 2,100,000 km/h.

When we look at the stars or the planets we are always looking at the past. Light from the sun takes eight minutes to reach the earth. Were we in a position to be on the sun now, we would see the earth as it was eight minutes ago. A two-way visual communication between the earth and the sun would have a sixteen-minute time gap, and the further out in space we go that gap would increase. If we were on a distant star with sufficiently sophisticated telescopes we would be able to see even further back in Earth's history. Therefore there may be sophisticated beings in places in the universe that are looking at our past, just as we are presently looking at the past of many stars and planets. So if the past still exists, it is possible there may be sufficiently advanced beings, in our future, that will see us as alive long after we are actually dead, as they look back in time towards Earth. Of course, what they would be seeing are images and not reality. Reality only exists in the space-time of the event.

Our nearest star, apart from the sun, is 4.2 light years away and so when we see it in the night sky we are seeing that star as it was 4.2 light years ago. With modern powerful telescopes we can see billions of years into the past. There are stars whose light hasn't had enough time to reach us yet. There are stars we see which may no longer actually exist! There will always be portions of the Universe we cannot see due to the limiting nature of the speed of light.

None of the above implies that time travel is possible. It simply implies it may be possible for beings on distant planets to see our past or for us to see the past on other distant planets. It is a completely hypothetical scenario. Time travel would involve travelling faster than light, which under the current scientific paradigm is impossible.

According to the current scientific paradigm, time and space had a beginning at the “big Bang” 13.8 billion years ago. The fact that science tells us that space and time did not exist prior to the big bang raises more questions than the paradigm answers. Where did the singularity come from if there was no prior space for it to exist in? Can something material, such as a singularity, come from the immaterial? What is space expanding into, and of course, how and why was there a singularity in the first place, and where did it come from? Can a material thing such as a singularity create things such as space and time, as neither space nor time are material? Can something material create concepts?

Time here on earth is generally measured based on a single complete rotation of the Earth on its axis and by the length of time it takes the earth to complete a full orbit of the sun. Within our solar system the length of time it takes each planet to circle the sun varies immensely. Mercury is the closest planet to the sun and it takes fifty-eight days to do a complete rotation on its axis, and eighty-eight days to circle the sun. Neptune the most distant planet in our solar system takes sixteen hours to complete a full rotation on its axis and one hundred and sixty five years to complete a circuit of the sun. These variations are due to the fact that the mass of each planet is different, that each planet is rotating on its axis at different speeds and they are also circling the sun at varying speeds and at different distances from the sun. Thus time as a measurement is completely relative. —>

It was Albert Einstein who proved that time is both local and relative with his two theories of relativity first expounded in 1905 and 1915. The special theory relates to all physical objects in the absence of gravity, and the general theory relates to gravity and its relation to the other forces of nature. Time in Einstein's theory always relates to a frame of reference, which is a coordinate that takes the object as a stationary origin point.

Time and space are related. Some of the conclusions from Einstein's theories are: the faster something goes, the slower time passes for it; the faster something goes the shorter it becomes; clocks agree at rest, but disagree in motion; and the order of events in time is not absolute. At the speed of light time stands still, an object travelling at that speed would gain infinite mass and its length would shrink to zero. The faster you move in space, relative to me, the slower your time moves, as I see it. The theories also show that gravity is not a force but the bending of space-time by mass.

Einstein's theory explains that to describe where you are in the vastness of space you require not only the three spatial dimensions of length, breadth and height, but also the added temporal dimension of time, as it is also a variable. This fourth dimension is referred to as space-time in which all of space and time is enclosed. I can choose where I want to be in space, I can go backwards, forwards or upwards, but I have no control over time because it is but the duration of an event or an action. This is referred to as the block universe theory.

At its simplest, it means that although the universe is expanding, all of space and time are included in it, including what we refer to as past and future. This is because of relativity. The speed of light is constant at 168,000 m/sec. and is not affected by the expansion of the universe. If Einstein were travelling on his ray of light at a constant 168,000 miles per second and I were travelling parallel to Einstein in my space ship at 167,000 miles per second, he would still be travelling at 168,000 miles per second relative to me. Were we to achieve the speed of light the Universe's beginning and end would occupy the same moment, with no before or after – just a now. This is referred to as the 'time dilation' effect.

What we call 'the future', for a different observer moving at a different speed relative to you is 'the present'. You can't deny the existence of that observer's 'present' just because from your point of view that moment is in the future. Your point of view isn't special. His present and your present are equally real; his happens to include parts of your past, present or future, depending on location. Although there are several theories of time in physics, the generally accepted one is the "the Block Universe" theory described above. It sees all of space and time within a block or a cuboid. We have no idea how big the cuboid is or whether it is infinite. We do know that space within it is expanding. Were we to step outside of this four dimensional Universe we would see all of space and time.

Einstein said "the past, present and future are only illusions, even if stubborn ones" and Avicenna as far back as the 11th century said, "time is merely a feature of our memories and expectations." I think I have to concur.

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL



Amnesty Report: Israel is an Apartheid State

AFTER 4 years of research Amnesty International produced a report in February which concluded that Israel operates a system of apartheid against Palestinians going all the way back to the foundation of the state in 1948. It is, says the report, 'a cruel system of domination and a crime against humanity'.

'Apartheid' – an Afrikaans word meaning 'apartness' or 'separation' – was the official policy of the South African state between 1948 and 1994. It was condemned throughout most of the western world. To label Israel as an 'apartheid' state is therefore a serious charge. Yet the report demonstrates that Israeli authorities treat Palestinians as an inferior racial group, whether in Israel, the Occupied Palestinian Territories, or in other countries as refugees.

The report states: "Massive seizures of Palestinian land and property, unlawful killings, forcible transfer, drastic movement restrictions, and the denial of nationality and citizenship to Palestinians are all components of a system which amounts to apartheid under international law."

Amnesty calls on the UN Security Council to "impose targeted sanctions against Israel officials implicated" and demands that the perpetrators of apartheid should be brought to justice through the international criminal court.

The British, American and German governments do not agree with the use of apartheid terminology in this case. The US ambassador to Israel, Thomas Nides, called the report 'absurd'. And the Israel government has branded the report 'anti-semitic'. But it is not. Amnesty reports on human rights violations throughout the world. It previously accused the Myanmar government of apartheid against the Rohingya people. It has also recognised the right of self-determination of the Jewish people and the right of existence of the state of Israel. The charge has been made many times before by many individuals and organisations. It is time that western governments took it seriously. □

John Toland, 1660-1722, Part 1

A national celebration of Ireland's first modern freethinker, who died 300 years ago in March 1722, is long overdue

Brian McClinton

THE small island of Ireland has an international reputation for creative writing that is the envy of the world. Irish novelists, playwrights and poets flood the pages of literature, and many, like Joyce, Wilde, Shaw and Yeats, reached the pantheon of the greats. However, Ireland doesn't rank at all in terms of its thinkers and intellectuals. George Berkeley, the only renowned Irish philosopher, was a bishop whose ideas were actually an escape from reality, promoting the notion that the external, material world doesn't exist and that the things we perceive are simply collections of ideas put into our minds by God.



some sources suggest that he was the bastard son of an Irish priest and a prostitute (see Philip McGuinness etc, *Christianity Not Mysterious*, Lilliput Press, 1997, p262). His addiction to literature and learning led him to be known in his youth in Donegal as 'Eoghain na Leabhar' (Eoin of the Books, Eoin being an alternative to Sean or John). He later jokingly claimed that his baptismal name was 'Janus Junius Eoganesius'. Janus was the two-faced Roman God, Junius Brutus was the founder of the Roman Republic, and Eoganesius refers to his birth area of Inishowen ('Inis Eoghain' in Irish). Next to this pseudonym, near his death in 1722, he signed

How do we explain this dichotomy? It is often argued that the island was inhabited for centuries by 'thoughtless Celts' – irrational dreamers of dreams who preferred myth to reality. Irish culture was said generally to value only fiction as the people favoured made-up stories rather than studying minds that probed the truths of the human condition.

We should, however, bear in mind two important facts. The first is that many of these creative writers were using fiction to probe beneath the surface and tell the truth about life in Ireland. Joyce, an obvious example, was unsparing in his criticisms of Irish religion and its repressive effects. "Ireland", he wrote, "is the old sow that eats her farrow". Of course, many of these writers had to go into exile because they were vilified by the general public or the church and state authorities at the time.

In the second place, there were Irish thinkers who addressed readers directly. One of the most important exiles was John Toland, who died 300 years ago on 11th March 1722 at the age of 52. Toland, who has been called the 'founding father of modern Irish philosophy', made a huge contribution to the development of Freethought in Ireland and was a prolific author and polemicist, but his writings have been sadly neglected in his own country and in Britain. Despite his importance as an independent thinker, his work has been largely published in France, Holland and Germany, leaving him almost unknown in the English speaking world.

He was born in the peninsula of Inishowen, Co Donegal, and brought up in the Catholic faith. His exact birthplace was probably the townland of Ardagh in the parish of Clonmany. Nothing is known of his parents, though

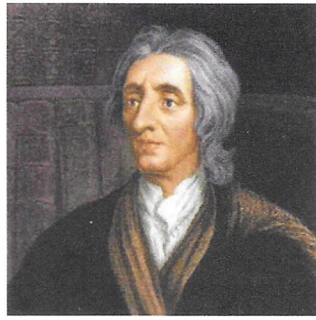
the word 'cosmopoli', a citizen of the world. This, along with his use of Latin, his allusion to ancient Rome, his reference to his Irish roots, and his own secular evolution indicate a man who ultimately transcended all borders and all faiths.

He enrolled as a scholarship student at the Protestant school in Redcastle where, at the age of 15 or 16, he threw off Catholicism, having been "educated, from my cradle, in the grossest superstition and idolatry", as he wrote in the Preface to *Christianity Not Mysterious* (1696). Catholicism he described as "the insupportable yoke of the most pompous and tyrannical policy that ever enslav'd mankind under the name or shew of religion" (his own *Apology for Mr Toland*, 1697). In 1686 he went to study divinity at Glasgow University, where he aligned himself with the Presbyterians and gained notoriety as an anti-papal firebrand. From Glasgow he went to the University of Edinburgh where he obtained an MA in theology in 1690. His knowledge of classical languages by this time was extensive and he spoke most European languages fluently.

Toland then moved to London seeking sponsorship and became friendly with a group of dissenters including Dr Daniel Williams, a leading London nonconformist, through whom he made contact with the Huguenot savant Jean Le Clerc, who had taken refuge in Holland. Toland sent him a copy of *Gospel Truth Stated and Vindicated* by Williams with a covering letter explaining that a controversy had developed over the book. On Toland's suggestion, Le Clerc published an extract, along with his letter, in *Bibliothèque Universelle* of which he was editor.

Williams and his friends were so impressed with Toland's zeal that they collected money in 1692 to send him —>

to study at Leiden. His exposure to the freethinking, tolerant atmosphere of Holland and his encounters with heretical organisations there caused him to reject all forms of 'spiritual authority' from then on. In 1693 Toland returned to England and spent some time at Oxford, using its library facilities ostensibly to write an Irish dictionary. In Oxford he soon became known as "a man of fine parts, great learning, and little religion", as one anonymous correspondent put it. He then went back to London where he became involved with John Locke (above), who published his Reasonableness of Christianity in 1695. It is still not certain whether Locke's book was written in reply to Toland's *Christianity not Mysterious* (which Locke may have seen in manuscript) or whether Toland was responding to Locke's work. Toland's book, though dated 1696, came out around Christmas 1695, so which was written first is not clear.



Yet one thing is not in doubt: Toland's work caused greater hostility than Locke's, even though it embraced the same concept: Christianity is a rational and comprehensible creed. Toland indeed referred to Locke as 'an excellent modern philosopher'. There was, however, one crucial difference in that Locke, wanting to have his cake and eat it, also believed in revelation, whereas Toland rejected it altogether, except purely as a 'means of information'. Locke thought that revelation is a kind of heightened reason which enables us to grasp Christian mysteries, whereas Toland more radically believed that there were no Christian mysteries.

Toland argued that the churches do not allow people to think for themselves, claiming that faith is so complex that only authorised persons may expound it. He defined as 'mysterious' any doctrine that is beyond human comprehension and asked: why would God, who had given us the power of reason, expect anyone to believe a doctrine that we could not understand? Thus his aim in *Christianity not Mysterious* was stated in the subtitle: "A Treatise Shewing that there is Nothing in the Gospel Contrary to Reason, nor Above It".

The so-called 'mysteries', enhanced by the trappings of images, garments, altars, rites and rituals, were therefore deliberate mystifications imposed upon Christianity by competing sects and churches after its inception. As clerics sought to enhance their own power and the Christian Church tried to win over converts, it copied pagan religious mysteries and ceremonies, yet "there is nothing so naturally opposite as ceremony and Christianity".

The first edition of *Christianity Not Mysterious* had been published anonymously. Toland then brought out a second, signed, edition and in the spring of 1697 went to Dublin where perhaps he hoped that publicity from the

book might help him obtain patronage or employment. But he soon found that the book had infuriated the Church of Ireland hierarchy. In the preface Toland stated that "a wise and good Man...knows no Difference between Popish Infallibility, and being oblig'd to acquiesce in the decisions of Fallible Protestants". As a result, the book was declared heretical by the Grand Jury in the Court of the King's Bench in Dublin at the instigation of Peter Browne, then a fellow of Trinity College, Dublin, and later Bishop of Cork, who published a *A Letter in answer to a book entitled Christianity not mysterious*, condemning Toland as 'an inveterate enemy of revealed religion'. Toland, he said, was beyond the pale of toleration. (Toland was later to boast that he had thus made Browne a bishop). In August *Christianity Not Mysterious* was brought before a committee of religion in the Parliament, which ordered it to be publicly burned by the common hangman and the author to be taken into custody. Indeed some members of the Irish House of Commons demanded that Toland should be burned with it.

The sentence on the book was carried out on 11th September when it was burnt in front of the Parliament House gate in the open street, although Toland himself evaded arrest by fleeing to England. The book and the events surrounding it distinguish him as Ireland's first dissident writer whose criticism of the established religious perception of man, creation and the universe brought him into conflict with both Church and State.

"A Treatise Shewing that there is Nothing in the Gospel Contrary to Reason, nor Above It"

Toland's *Christianity Not Mysterious* was a late 17th century victim of a long tradition of censorship by the Christian churches of any writing that challenged orthodoxy, stretching back to works such as

Martin Luther's *95 Theses*, banned in 1521, all of Giordano Bruno's works, banned in 1603, and Galileo's *Dialogues*, banned in 1632.

Nor was it only the Catholic Church that persecuted people for their beliefs: in 1697, the same year as the controversy over Toland's book, the last person hanged for blasphemy in Britain was Thomas Aikenhead (right), a University of Edinburgh student, who was only



20 years old. He was accused of stating that "theology was a rhapsody of ill-invented nonsense, patched up partly of the moral doctrines of philosophers, and partly of poetical fictions and extravagant chimeras", and that Jesus was an imposter whose 'miracles' were in fact magic tricks he had learned in Egypt. The Church of Scotland's General Assembly urged 'vigorous execution' to curb 'the abounding of impiety and profanity in this land'. And of course it was the Church of Ireland that was behind the banning of Toland's book in his own country.

Part 2 will be published in the next edition of the *Irish Freethinker* □

Self-Determination and Sovereignty

Daltún Ó Ceallaigh

IT is generally accepted in the world today that peoples have the right of self-determination. That is to say that no people has the right to dominate another or others, unlike in the imperial era. This then raises the issue of what is a people. A people may be defined in both objective and subjective terms. Objectively, one has to take account of history, language, culture, economics, and territory. Subjectively, there are the considerations of consciousness and solidarity.

A people may be characterised by all of these features being present in common or a particular combination of some of them. For example, in Europe, Hungary is an example of the first situation in its virtual homogeneity, while Switzerland might be taken as an illustration of the second in its diversity. When a people exercises its right to self-determination, this usually results in the establishment of sovereign independence, in other words a nation-state.

In the Atlantic Isles (dubbed by some as the ‘British Isles’), there are two States recognised in international law: one, officially titled the ‘United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland’ and another consisting of 26 Irish counties, the official description of which varies, but legalistically amounting, in effect, to an Irish republic as so far established.

The extent of the United Kingdom on the island of Britain comprises three elements: the nations of Scotland, England, and Wales; the remaining UK element is found on this island and consists of six north-eastern counties, often referred to by the establishments in London and Belfast just as a ‘Province’ (as distinct from the historic province of Ulster).

The principle of national self-determination has been acknowledged in Britain in regard to Scotland as evidenced in the referendum of 2014. However, this showed that self-determination does not always result in support for independence. Nonetheless, there will probably be a second Scottish referendum on the matter in the next few years which, given present indications, may well then result in secession from the UK.

The position in Wales is that there has not yet been a majority in the Welsh parliament calling for a referendum on independence. But attitude surveys in recent years have shown the demand among the populace for independence growing from 10% to 30%. If Scotland in fact leaves the UK, the signs are already there that

this figure will continue to increase and, should it exceed 50% and be reflected in the Welsh parliament, there would probably have to be a referendum on independence for that country as well.

The provision in respect of the north of Ireland is outlined in the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. In that document, it is stated “that it is for the people of Ireland alone ... to exercise their right of self-determination”. The method for doing this is laid down as involving plebiscites in the two jurisdictional areas on the island on the option of a united Ireland. Republicans have assented to this, taking account of demographic and political developments in recent times which indicate the likelihood of that approach actually enabling the fulfilment of the Irish national objective.

It is clearly understood that such self-determination would involve the emergence of a sovereign independent Ireland. Of course, following a positive outcome of the stipulated plebiscites, there would have to be negotiations about the content of such a polity. All sorts of detail have been raised about structures, devolution, language, flags and emblems, anthems, recognition of identity, bills of rights, and so on. These would all have to be addressed meaningfully and republicans have stated that they would not be found wanting under these headings.

The key point about self-determination that needs to be stressed is the sovereignty made possible by it, which signifies that British power in Ireland will at last come to a complete end.

Returning to our initial observations, it is an interesting question as to how exactly one defines the people of Ireland, bearing in mind the objective and subjective factors referred to at the beginning of this article. However, the full realisation of that task is something that will take time and need not detain us unduly in the context of working out the immediate political implications of the Good Friday Agreement. Nonetheless, one can currently envisage the construction of a concept of at least civic Irishness ranging from the Gaelic along a spectrum of identity to the Ulster-Scots.

It is notable that most unionists reflect the attitude towards them emanating from the neighbouring island in that they generally acknowledge some sort of Irishness as part of their self-description. After all, their name for the entity to which they are attached is ‘Northern Ireland’. □

One can currently envisage the construction of a concept of at least civic Irishness ranging from the Gaelic along a spectrum of identity to the Ulster-Scots



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



Ch. 28

IN late July 1982 my mother and I flew to Lourdes, the Marian shrine in France where, some 25 years earlier in her mid-30s, a photograph was taken of her with two women, all three dressed like the Virgin Mary, with cape and veil.

As our plane descended, I had severe earache. At the reception of the hotel, distressed, in pain and barely able to hear, I was dismayed to discover the hotel had assumed we were Mr and Mrs Armstrong and allotted us only one room with a double bed. Despite my Oedipal horror-ignited protestation in broken French, the hotel's only concession was a room with two single beds.

I could not sleep in the same room as my mother. When she finally got into bed, I got up, dressed and went to reception. No, they still did not have another room nor could they transfer me to another hotel and I didn't have enough money to go elsewhere.

I stayed up all night and, as there wasn't a decent chair in the lobby, I spent most of the night sitting on the stairs. This was the last place on the planet I wanted to be. The next day they cleared out a tiny storeroom and moved a narrow bed into it – my quarters until the ghastly pilgrimage ended.

I was appalled by the tacky religious merchandise in Lourdes: the myriad statues of the Blessed Virgin Mary, miraculous medals, bottled 'holy water', rosary beads and devotional scapulars. A middle-aged Dublin woman we befriended regarded the traders as 'bad minded', suspiciously eyeing each pilgrim as a potential trinket thief.

I couldn't identify with the conservative Catholicism of Lourdes, with its tens of thousands of pious pilgrims carrying candles in the open-air torchlight procession singing the Lourdes hymn: 'Immaculate Mary, your praises we sing. You reign now in Heaven with Jesus our King. Ave, Ave, Ave, Maria! Ave, Ave, Ave, Maria!'

Nor their walking the life-size Stations of the Cross muttering, 'We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you, because, by your holy cross, you have redeemed the world.'

Nor the one-minute naked dip in the cold baths, about which French writer Émile Zola, following his visits to Lourdes in 1891 and 1892, wrote: 'The miracle being that anyone emerges from this filthy water alive.'

I regarded the old crutches displayed near the grotto, supposed evidence of miracles past, as manipulative and bogus. Not for a moment did I believe that the Virgin Mary appeared to Bernadette Soubirous in 1858. Undeniable, however, was its undoubted commercial success, with tens of millions visiting the Pyrenees

shrine since then. Religious myth-making transformed this barren mountainside into a perennial cash cow.

'You treated me with contempt in Lourdes,' said my mother after we returned to Ireland.

I don't remember the specifics of my alleged offences but the love which I had once felt for her was gone or buried deep. I found it impossible to talk to her. When I didn't speak, there was tension. When she insisted and I spoke and she didn't like what I said, she'd say, 'If only your father could hear the things you say to me.'

Like my father before me, who had told me there was no point talking to her, I sought refuge in the garden for the remainder of my holidays. I unearthed a jungle of weeds from where my dad used to grow vegetables. I dug, raked and sprayed it, in preparation for planting a lawn on my next visit home.

Conflicted by my feelings for my mother, with relief I returned to the seminary in September 1982. I renewed my religious profession within the Marist Fathers, taking vows for a further two years.

Beginning my second year reading philosophy at the Milltown Institute in October 1982, there were as many as 140 seminarians enrolled, an unimaginable number in the 21st century; when so many religious houses and seminaries have closed and congregations prepare for extinction. In the 1980s, the Milltown Institute was just one of several Dublin colleges for training priests. Others included Clonliffe College, which closed as a seminary in 2000, and All Hallows, which closed in 2016.

The closure of all three – and many more once thriving seminaries around Ireland – bears architectural testimony to the profound cultural changes of my generation. Whole swathes of Irish society have outgrown the myths they once lived by. Yet in State-funded schools, we continue the intellectual and emotional abuse of children by putting religious beliefs into their impressionable, trusting and malleable minds.

Moreover, while denouncing parents who sexually or physically abuse children, many remain unaware of the lifelong consequences of parents abusing children's minds, emotions and sexuality with crazy religious myths.

© Joe Armstrong 2022

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 as a paperback, Kindle and audiobook on Amazon, Book Depository, Audible etc.

When Lara met Bobić and Fintan met John Charles

Owen Morton

TO pigeonhole the human condition as between a left-wing and right-wing persuasion, some might say, is to position *ego* in the mix. Those leaning to the right, for example, are arguably less likely to go on hunger strike in pursuit of a cause, deeming it a melodramatic and rather threatening proposition inimical to one's wellbeing. Approached from the left flank, one is less important and incidental to the burning issues at stake.

A selfless predisposition to the wellbeing of others is a curious one. The fly in the ointment, of course, is religion – a persuasion that, paradoxically, all-too conveniently affords a conscience-salving, averting barrier or smoke-screen. If loving, nay liking, one's neighbour on the part of a sweet-as-honey Bible-belt Christian can make for a bridge too far, God's Word can assuredly be relied on by way of validation and purification.

Inasmuch as religion and human compassion, approached from different angles, permeate the storyline, these thoughts ran through my mind as I drew the strands together having read two recently published 'memoirs' or reflections on the part of *Irish Times*' comrades-in-arms, Lara Marlowe and Fintan O'Toole. Again paradoxically, both books are ego-centred but not ego-driven, and there's the rub.

Former *Time* magazine Middle East war correspondent Lara's *Love in a Time of War* is predominantly about former *Times*' Northern Ireland Correspondent, and later *Independent* war correspondent, the renowned Robert Fisk, and the conflicts he and Ms. Marlowe reported on together, as well as the love they shared.

In *We don't know Ourselves* we find Fintan's account of Ireland's fortunes spanning the second half of the 20th century, scanned and observed through an intellectual, critical, sensitive, sharply focused lens. What follows is by way of overview in tandem, rather than a book review.

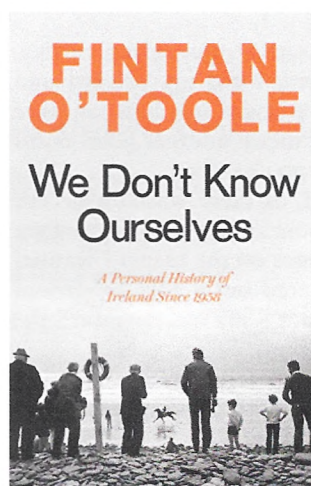
Firstly, however, a preamble

Your storyteller went to a Christian Brothers' academy spanning a formative ten-year period to 1962. If humanism as a definable ethos entered his lexicon and belief system somewhere beyond middle age, in a recent *Freethinker* submission he declares that the shift away from the doctrine of his youth began in earnest at the behest of a benign mentor – one Brother Ernest K. Fitzgerald in the O'Connell Schools. 'Bro. Fitz' ordained, religiously, that

servicing out one's life meaningfully would find little by way of inspiration in regimented 'Mass on a Sunday' and 'fish on a Friday' edicts, in turn handing out a *la carte* dispensation and exoneration to his impressionable charges. Focused on his mission, on reflection, humanitarian rather than atheistic ideals were his objective. Significantly, however, from then on God never presented as a *sine qua non*, and in time became dispensable.

In a parallel of sorts, Humanist Association of Ireland Hon. President, the affable, principled and scholarly David McConnell, of similar age, would be privileged to experience a liberal education in South Dublin's Sandford Park School where, he relates, from a young age the seeds of Humanism were sewn as a matter of course and of discourse. On reflection, surprisingly one imagines, as regards a moral code without divine grace, it's a moot point as to whether David got all that much of a head-start, other aesthetic advantages notwithstanding, to that selectively dispensed in an inner-City Brothers' school the other side of town.

An Irishman's Diary



Fintan O'Toole grew up in the South Dublin working-class suburb of Crumlin. Educated locally by 'the Brothers', he would blossom, on the back of razor-sharp intellectual prowess and inscrutable integrity, via UCD, into the not-to-be-silenced voice of Ireland's conscience. If, in a patterned chronology of events, 20th century Ireland sacred cows come a cropper one after another – de Valera, McQuaid, Haughey, Casey, Cleary, Payne,

Connell, Fianna Fail, 'The Galway Races' tent', Anglo Irish Bank 'pulled-it-out-of-my-arse' disdain, all pilloried mercilessly – "We don't know ourselves" offers hope, as in light at the end of the tunnel presenting in many guises. For example, the author finds untold comfort in the unrestrained expression of solidarity on the part of the electorate with the LGBT community, notwithstanding robust church counter argument. And he draws to a close with poignant if playful words, a sardonic reminder as to who fared best in the Gay Byrne/Annie Murphy TV interface: "not so bad ourselves".

An O'Toole writer's eye for detail and poignancy peaks, perhaps, when he recalls a 1968 encounter as a 10-yr-old, about to serve a special Mass in his local St. Bernadette's Church. As he approached the Humber car, he could see a man in a grey uniform kneeling on the platform and leaning in towards the interior. Then he caught sight of two dainty feet poking out of the side of the passenger compartment:

"The chauffeur was polishing the shoes that encased them with a brush. The man wearing them was the —>

Archbishop of Dublin John Charles McQuaid. I scurried on to church to get ready for the performance of my lifetime: serving a high, solemn Latin Mass for the man who was the voice of God in Dublin. But I could not quite shake off the thought that I had seen something I should not; the guilt of the accidental voyeur.”

Back in the day job, Mr. O’Toole, in his regular *Irish Times* feature (11th January 2022) posits that political sleaze in Ireland is in decline, such that despite prevailing uncertainties, the Irish nation might look forward to the next half century against a setting that lends for more transparent, more accountable governance. If secularism isn’t fingered as the way forward, it is inferred. Religion has had its say and to an impartial observer it has failed the test.

An American/French (with Irish connections) Woman’s Diary

Lara Marlowe

Love in a Time of War

My Years with Robert Fisk



Love in a Time of War is a tale of untold personal courage, lionising ‘the finest journalist I’ve known’, chronicling a love affair from courtship in Damascus, and finally asking ‘where did it all go wrong?’. *Irish Times*’ Paris Correspondent Lara Marlowe’s odyssey displays Dideonesque observation and wordplay and, with Fisk alongside, traverses Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq, Iran, Syria – the epicentre of the Judeo-Christian

tradition.

This axis, of course, embraces the Muslim tradition in equal measure and it’s where, over the centuries, zealots from all three traditions, in unison proclaiming antecedence and allegiance harking back to Old Testament Patriarch Abraham, are seen to have pursued annihilation ambitions *vis-à-vis* one another with grotesque fury and purpose, all in God’s holy name. Similar religious/ethnic conflict would surface in further afield places like Algeria, Serbia, Slovenia, Albania – finding Ms. Marlowe to hand at short notice to focus a spotlight on the plight of ordinary people going about their lives.

That nothing is sacred presents forcibly in the reporting on what would be a turning point in her career. In 1996 an Israeli bombardment of a Fijian UNIFIL compound in the Lebanese village of Qana, where hundreds of non-military personnel had sought shelter, led to the massacre of more than one hundred civilians, more than half of them children. In my schooldays it was spelled differently – Cana, the self-same location the New Testament flags *vis-a-vis* Jesus’ debut in the miracle stakes at the high-profile marriage feast. Hardly believing the horrors she is witnessing in the bombardment, she relates: “Don’t think now. Just record it. My notebook and pen are a lifebuoy in a swamp of agony and death.”

Friction develops in the editorial process wherein a reluctance within *Time Inc.* to criticise Israel manifests itself in watered-down reportage that goes so far as to suggest,

despite UN-backed evidence to the contrary, that certain casualties resulted from crossfire and that ‘disastrous error’ rather than planned bombardment was central to the tragedy. Within six months Lara was gainfully employed by ‘the old lady of Westmoreland St.’ in the role of Paris Correspondent, a position she would return to in 2012 following a three-year stint as Washington Correspondent.

As regards matters of the heart (or is it soul?), the reader might form the opinion Mr. Fisk (or *Bobic*, the Serbian-inspired *sobriquet* the lovers toyed with; in return he’d call her ‘beloved LAARRA’) wanted to have his cake and eat it.

From an insular perspective, Fisk’s and Marlowe’s much evidenced *grá* for Ireland and for her people serves as an endearing added bonus to the native reader – referencing locations spanning residential Dublin suburbs North and South, beauty spots in West Cork and Connemara. Kent-born Fisk (a belated Irish citizen) is buried in Kiltiernan cemetery in Co. Dublin; whilst the rumour machine has it that Lara plans retiring to her Howth bolthole where, in semi-lockdown, the very readable memoir was penned in the months following Fisk’s unexpected and lamented passing.

If secularism isn’t fingered as the way forward, it is inferred. Religion has had its say and to an impartial observer it has failed the test

Conclusion: a Call to Arms!

An (almost) unsung hero in the storyline is the *Irish Times*. In ‘Acknowledgements’ O’Toole sings the praises of named associates past and present, and of “a great range of colleagues at my homeland in the *Irish Times*, one of the worlds most civilised newspapers.”

For her part, in moving from *Time Inc.* to an Irish title, Lara proclaims: “it is a huge relief to work for a serious newspaper which has the courage to print my copy as I write it”. And so it is that our cherished ‘daily’ serves as a beacon of free speech in inauspicious populist times.

What then of the *Irish Humanist and Freethinker* – a brave, low circulation bimonthly journal? In last month’s edition our editor, whom we might readily categorise as a torch bearer reminiscent of radical Northern Dissenting Protestants (of the Society of the United Irishmen), in advocating a united tolerant island of Ireland, opined:

“*The Irish Freethinkers and Humanists, which is the only all-Ireland Humanist group with members on both sides of the border, aims to reach beyond the narrow ground of God and Ulster to achieve a united Ireland that would have to be secular to ensure that no religion had hegemony but instead had to reflect the diversity of culture and belief. Already the Republic is moving in that direction; unity would hasten the process.*”

Is anyone out there listening? And if you are, spread the word? □



Ulysses at 100

Brian McClinton

JAMES Joyce's *Ulysses* was first conceived as a short story for *Dubliners* and then as a sequel to *Portrait of the Artists as a Young Man*. The greater part of it was written during the First World War, and early chapters were serialised in 1918 in the American *Little Review* magazine, but its sexual frankness caused an outrage and it was confiscated by customs officials and a court stopped publication.

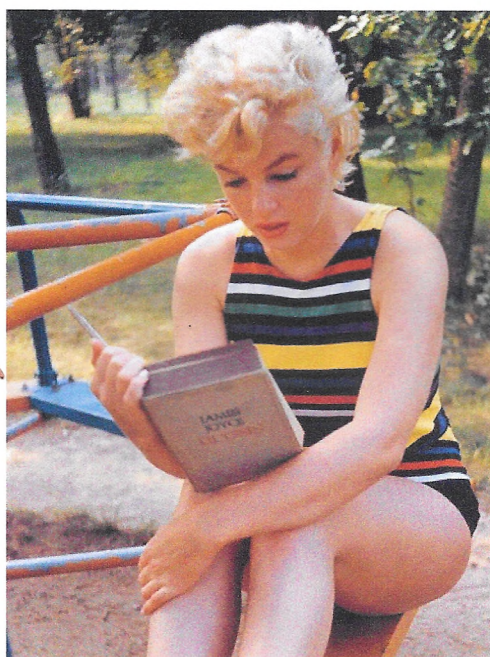
However, the American-born bookseller Sylvia Beach agreed to bring out the finished book in Paris under the imprint of *Shakespeare and Company*, the name of her bookstore, and it was published on 2nd February 1922. As it includes scenes of masturbation and a 50-page soliloquy by Molly Bloom in which she describes her sexual history and desires, it immediately aroused controversy. When an attempt was made to import it into America, 500 copies were seized by New York postal officials and burned. Eventually, in 1933 Judge John Woolsey, in a perceptive analysis, ruled that it was not obscene but a work of literary merit, indeed an amazing tour de force, and a month later in January 1934 Random House published it in the United States. Two years later, in 1936, the novel was legally published in Britain.

It was technically never banned in Ireland but only because it was not imported and offered for sale until the 1960s for fear of such a ban and its attendant costs, a fear that was fully justified considering the long list of Irish authors whose works suffered this fate, including Liam O'Flaherty, Seán O Faoláin, Francis Stuart, Frank O'Connor and Brendan Behan. Initially it was largely ignored or rubbished in public discourse. Shane Leslie attacked it as 'an odyssey of the sewer'. J.P. Mahaffy, former Provost of Trinity College, Dublin, thought that Joyce's works were "a living argument in defence of my contention that it was a mistake to establish a separate university for the aborigines of this island – for the corner boys who spit into the Liffey".

When the novel finally appeared in Ireland, it was ignored by the Censorship Board and could be bought in some bookshops, even if it was not always on display but kept under the counter. Joseph Strick's film of the novel, on the other hand, was banned by the Irish Film Censorship Board in 1968, a ban which wasn't lifted until 2001.

Thus for 33 years Joyce's own country was the only one in Europe where audiences were not allowed to see the sole film of *Ulysses* made in English.

Ulysses records events in the life of its two central characters, Leopold Bloom and Stephen Dedalus, on 16th June 1904 in Dublin, which happened to be the day of Joyce's first date with Nora Barnacle. It is clear that the main male characters are all secular in their outlook. Stephen is the same man a few years after the events of *A Portrait*, and he avers in *Ulysses* that "you behold in me... a horrible example of freethought". The two men with whom he is currently living at the Sandycove Martello Tower are also atheists. The visiting Englishman Haines states that he is not a believer himself and can't stomach the idea of a personal God, while the medical student Buck Mulligan, who quotes atheist poets Shelley and Swinburne, takes pleasure in mocking the Catholic Mass and blasphemously singing 'The Ballad of Joking Jesus'.



Marilyn Monroe reading *Ulysses* in 1955

Yet, above all, it is Leopold Bloom, the son of a Hungarian Jewish father and an Irish Protestant mother, who embodies the modern secular Humanist. He appears to have lost his faith at the age of fourteen and sees religion in Marxist terms as the opium of the masses. Indeed he would prefer an ounce of opium to submitting to Catholicism. In his library is a volume entitled *Thoughts from Spinoza*, and we should note that Spinoza, who was also from a Jewish background, was one of the first modern European freethinkers.

Joyce chose someone from a Jewish background because he wanted the character to be an outsider who could criticise Irish Catholicism more convincingly than an apostate or a Protestant. He was also aware of the anti-semitism rife

in many European countries at the time, and by making Bloom Jewish he could create a connection between his Irish characters and communities the world over. For Bloom his Jewishness is something imposed on him by others rather than a feeling that he has himself, and the same is true of many of the stereotypical characteristics of Irish identity.

As a boy, Joyce's favourite hero was Odysseus (whom the Romans knew as Ulysses) because he did not fulfil the normal heroic image. He was more complicated and had brains as well as brawn. He actually disliked war and tried to avoid military service by feigning madness, and when he eventually returned home he established peace on Ithaca. The novelist was also attracted by his cunning in devising the wooden horse ploy to end the siege of Troy and in disguising himself as a beggar to find out what was going on at home when he returned. But, most of all, Joyce was taken by the trials and pains he faced on his homeward 'odyssey'.

—>

Homer's hero, 'forever wandering', struggles to discover himself and his values in hostile surroundings and reveals his kinder side when, faced with the choice to sacrifice his men's lives or his own, he willingly chooses the latter. But ultimately he is the survivor, the one who uses every trick and ruse in his arsenal to avoid death and who lives to tell the tale. He finds his fulfilment not in immortality nor in battle but in his homecoming. If the *Iliad* glorifies the cult of death, then the *Odyssey* is a recall to life and to peace. And, largely written during World War One, *Ulysses* is a great pacifist novel.

Joyce created Bloom as someone who shares many of the better qualities of Odysseus. His Humanist-Christian ethic is shown when he gives his time and money to Paddy Dignam's widow without drawing attention to himself, visiting Mina Purefoy in the maternity hospital, forgiving his adulterous wife, and fulfilling the role of good Samaritan when Stephen Dedalus is knocked down. He rejects religious and racial hatred and opposes war and bloodshed, affirming that love is the only answer and the only force beyond nationalism. His vision for Ireland encompasses all religions and none. It is the postnationalist Ireland to which Joyce himself would have liked to come home.

By concluding Leopold's odyssey with Molly's 'stream of consciousness', Joyce restores women's place in a society that discounts them as individuals

Why did Joyce end a male-dominated novel with a lengthy interior monologue by a woman? The answer is that *Ulysses* is not only the greatest 20th century Humanist novel but it is also a prescient manifesto of sexual liberation and at the same time a celebration of the senses. It has been said that the main characters Bloom and Dedalus disbelieve in religion but strongly believe in sex. Yet ironically the only leading character in the novel who adheres to a religious faith is the sluttish Molly Bloom, who is the opposite of Odysseus's faithful wife Penelope and also the antithesis of the Catholic Church's image of the pure and chaste mother.

By concluding Leopold's odyssey with Molly's 'stream of consciousness', Joyce restores women's place in a society that discounts them as individuals. In creating a woman who is assertive and revels in sexual pleasure, he demonstrates that women need not be victims of a religion that represses their sexuality and brings so much unhappiness. And in creating a woman with 'manly' qualities married to a man who is in touch with his feminine side, Joyce is challenging gender stereotypes.

It doesn't mean that Molly is fully liberated, for in a patriarchal society she is still guided not entirely by her personal desires but rather by the need to be desired by others. Society can only change if there are more Mollys and more Leopolds, which is why *Ulysses* was well ahead of its time in its Humanism, its pacifism, its postnationalism, its feminism and its toleration and celebration of flawed humanity in all its manifestations. □

Oscar-Nominated Films

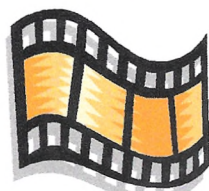
THE Oscars will be announced on 27th March. Kenneth Branagh's *Belfast* is nominated in 7 categories, including best picture, best director, best actor (Ciarán Hinds) in a supporting role, and best actress (Judi Dench) in a supporting role, (see review on next page).

The highest number of nominations – 12 in all – goes to *The Power of the Dog*, a cowboy movie directed by Jane Campion and starring Benedict Cumberbatch as a rancher who conceals his own latent gayness in displays of macho cruelty and fake homophobia. He does, however, get his comeuppance. I have to say that I found the film overlong. It is beautifully photographed, but nothing much transpires during its tedious two hours, and Cumberbatch does not really fit the role of an unrefined, nasty cowboy.

Another protracted couple of hours is *The Lost Daughter*, in which Olivia Colman is nominated for best actress in a leading role. There is no argument about her performance as a middle-aged woman on holiday (in the beautiful Greek island of Spetses). The theme, too, is important: a woman's traditional 'duty' as a mother in conflict with her desire for freedom. Leda, a university professor, lies on the beach reminiscing about her early life in which she found her role as married mother stifling and abandoned it for an academic career. Nowadays nearly half of women are childless at the age of 30. But the treatment of the subject lacks punch and the film drags in real time. Its dramatic peak occurs when a child's doll is stolen!

Don't Look Up has received 4 nominations, including best picture. Directed and co-written by Adam McKay, it is a black comedy on the climate crisis using an allegory of imminent global destruction by a massive comet six months away from impact with the earth. Jennifer Lawrence and Leonardo DiCaprio play scientists struggling to persuade politicians and the people to take the threat seriously. Few are alarmed, certainly not the American president, played by Meryl Streep, who is more concerned about the upcoming midterm elections, and certainly not the American public at large. The scientists are ignored largely from the same deficiency that elected Trump and Johnson. Most of us are not swayed by rational argument and prefer a large dollop of emotion, which the mass media churns out in spades. We are also deeply influenced by celebrity culture (which the film itself ironically personifies). The message is worthy, but it's a satire where the laughs wear thin and it fizzles out tamely.

Lastly, a fine nomination in the International Feature Film category is *The Hand of God*, which is an autobiographical account by director Paolo Sorrentino of his adolescence in Naples in the mid-1980s and the tragedy that befell his parents while he was watching Maradona play for Napoli. Yet the film is not one-dimensional as the tone throughout is tragicomic: funny one minute and tender the next. If you loved *Cinema Paradiso*, you'll enjoy it. EDITOR



Film

Belfast

Roger Kelly

UNDoubtedly one of the main beneficiaries of the successful Oscar-nominated film *Belfast* will be the Northern Ireland Tourist Board. Like *Game of Thrones* and the film *Titanic*, it takes tragic celluloid productions to catapult Belfast and the North of Ireland into the limelight of the world's consciousness. Maybe those who will be drawn to visit the wee city like thousands after other cinematic productions will gain a greater understanding that in the 18th century Belfast was the centre of the European Enlightenment and the birthplace of the United Irishmen.

Also overlooking Mountcollyer Street in North Belfast, where Kenneth Branagh grew up and the street portrayed in the film, is Napoleon's Nose/Cave Hill where Wolf Tone with Henry Joy McCracken and others had met to pledge to unite Catholic, Protestant and dissenter in the common name of Irishmen.

However, *Belfast* is not an historical film but is an evocation of the very real memories of Branagh himself as an eight-year-old boy. It is set during the escalation of the Troubles in August 1969 when sectarian violence was spreading across the interfaces of Belfast. Branagh has been accused of romanticising the streets of his childhood, but anyone who was young in the 1960s (like myself though a bit older than Branagh) can confirm that one's own community did offer a sense of belonging, safety, and companionship, whether Catholic or Protestant.

Buddy, who is the young Branagh in the film, played by Jude Hill, is perplexed why Catholic families are being put out of his street and his family is powerless to do anything about it. The unfolding story



The choice to shoot the film in monochrome does capture the atmosphere of the period

is the struggle of Buddy's family to remain fair-minded, decent people amongst the growing sectarian hatred.

This tension is highlighted when his pa/da (Jamie Dornan), who is away from home most of the time working as a chippy in England, is confronted by the local UDA hood who says: "you think you are better than us". This will ultimately lead to the resolution of the family dilemma of should we stay or should we go.

There are some funny light-hearted moments, as when wee Buddy is keen to get on at Grove Primary school which is named Grove Park in the film, and is constantly trying to sit next to his class sweetheart Catherine, a Catholic who is often top of the class, but sadly for him

when he gets promoted to sit beside her she gets demoted.

Some have questioned the authenticity of a young Catholic girl attending a controlled Protestant primary school in Belfast in 1969. Of course, there is a bit of poetic license and many contradictions in the film, but the bright child's penetrating questioning about the meaning of what's going on as he is growing up largely excuses the exaggerated sentimentality of the film that is the flipside of sectarianism.

Disappointingly, in changing some of the place names and as it was filmed in England, Branagh has diminished the opportunities for taxi drivers in Belfast to make a few bob for guided tours of North Belfast for visiting tourists.

The acting is outstanding from Caitriona Balfe, Jamie Dornan, Ciarán Hinds, and Judie Dench – even if her accent sometimes drifts into a Dublin brogue. The last two are justly Oscar-nominated for supporting roles.

The choice to shoot the film in monochrome does capture the atmosphere of the period in contrast to the beginning and the end which are largely coloured aerial shoots of Belfast as it is in the present day.

Interestingly, Van Morrison has been nominated for an Oscar for the opening song *Down to Joy* and also contributed nine songs to the soundtrack of the film. This might improve his standing with the general public after his incredible mad rant at Robin Swann during the Covid pandemic.

In some ways, his rant was not surprising as Morrison is often found in the company of Paddy Roach and Cedric Wilson, founders of the old Northern Ireland Unionist Party and deniers that Catholics were ever discriminated against in employment especially in the old Harland and Wolf shipyard.

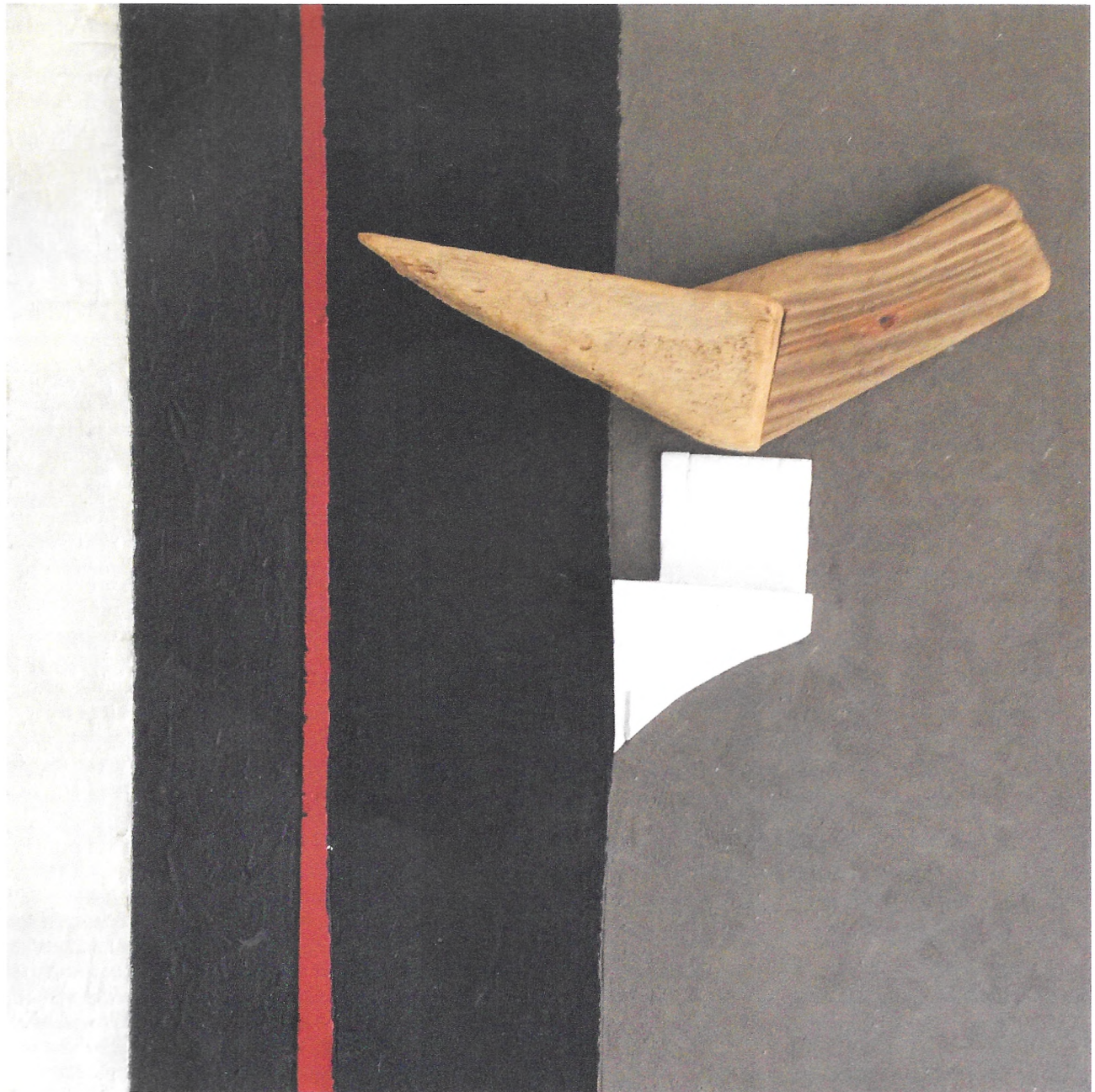
Belfast is a great watch and Branagh is a brilliant filmmaker. It is an enchanting rite-of-passage movie that will bring back a host of memories especially to Belfastians. Go see. □



ART

Poised

Colin Corkey



IT is often the case that a painting in its initial stages of development can lie dormant for some time, which may be weeks or even months. Such was the case with this painting as it lay quietly in the corner of the studio until recently, when one day I dragged it out and wondered for a while what it was about.

As a relatively small abstract work much of my focus was on such things as balance, simplicity and equilibrium, so the problems that needed to be addressed were essentially formal considerations concerning verticals and horizontals, as well as the juxtaposition of textured surfaces, colours and placement.

During the development of the work the deep black surfaces enclosing the narrow red stripe emerged as a salient feature. After the painting was completed a further development occurred in the interplay between three dimensional actuality and three dimensional illusion.

More often than not, the final application of paint on canvas does not draw the curtain on the creative process but instead opens up new unforeseen possibilities.

Measuring 56 cm. square, the painting is composed of cement, china clay, acrylic paint and driftwood on a reinforced plywood base. □

Humanist Tunes

Eamon Murphy

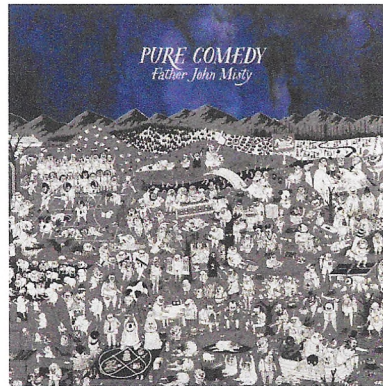


IT'S often said the devil has the best tunes, and it's certainly true that your average rock, blues, pop or soul song is a damn sight more listenable than Christian Rock tunes or church hymns. But what about humanist pop music? Is there even such a thing?

While there's probably no need for *Tower Records* to initiate a new genre area on the shop floor, there are certainly more than a few great pop songs out there that touch on humanist values and ideas, or topics of interest to your average atheist. I decided recently to put together a playlist of such songs on *Spotify*. I hereby commend it to readers.

It's an imperfect list, I'll admit, and I intend to continue to add to it over time. At present it is simply the first two dozen or so tunes that sprung to mind when I sat down and tried to recall songs with a humanist theme or flavour. I've decided on a limit of no more than two songs for any one artist, lest Father John Misty (a favourite songwriter of mine, with more than a harsh word or two to say about organised religion and its adherents), and Tim Minchin (an Australian comedian who has made a very successful career from mocking religious belief) take over completely.

Space doesn't permit me to write in detail about, or even mention, every song on the playlist, so what follows is a selective commentary. The playlist begins with *Imagine* by John Lennon. I won't devote too much of my limited space to why, as I'm sure all readers are very familiar with the tune, and most longtime humanists will have heard it proposed on at least one occasion as 'the' humanist anthem. No religion, greed or hunger...a brotherhood of man? So well-known is the song, it feels almost clichéd, but I'd honestly struggle to think of a better opening track.



Pure Comedy is one of two songs included from the aforementioned Father John Misty. In truth, so philosophical and, at times, anti-religious are his lyrics – particularly on his third album above (also named *Pure Comedy*) – that I was spoiled for choice. “*Oh, their religions are the best / They worship themselves yet they're totally obsessed / With risen zombies, celestial virgins, magic tricks / These unbelievable outfits / And they get terribly upset / When you question their sacred texts / Written by woman-hating epileptics*”.

These are actually among the more sympathetic sentiments as the former Fleet Foxes drummer mocks religious zealotry, ignorance and an unwillingness to use one's full capacity for thought and analysis. Making no bones about how random and cruel the universe can be, he finishes on a line similar to ones I've heard often at humanist gatherings, “*I hate to say it, but each other's all we got*”. So true.

Thoughts of a Dying Atheist by Muse addresses what it says on the tin. Driven by Matt Bellamy's guitar and cries of “and it scares the hell out of me”, it was a favourite song long before I'd even heard of humanism and comes at it from the angle of the lack of certainty that some people with no religious belief feel about death.

Nick Cave's *Into My Arms* would be worthy of inclusion purely as one of most beautiful love ballads ever written, even if the first verse didn't start off with “I don't believe in an interventionist God”.

Lifting the mood is *Thank You God* by Tim Minchin. There's no point in trying to choose a funniest lyric or most cutting part of this song. All I can say is just go listen to the live version on *Spotify* or *YouTube*. I dare you not to smile and laugh most of the way through. It's simply a fantastic cut-down of the idea of miracles, while pointing out the selectivism, and even racism and classism inherent in so many assumptions related to ‘divine intervention’.

I was delighted when, watching Eddie Vedder play the 3 Arena in 2019, I heard him mention his humanist beliefs in passing. Of my favourite Pearl Jam songs, *I am Mine* might capture them best; “*I know I was born and I know that I'll die / The in-between is mine / I am mine*”, a brilliant expression of autonomy and control humans have over our lives, and the importance of valuing the one life we have. For we are, as pointed out in the next song on the playlist, *Dust in the Wind*. “*Nothing lasts forever but the earth and sky / It slips away, and all your money won't another minute buy*”.

All You Need is Love doesn't warrant much by way of explanation, but with *God* by John Lennon, I feel compelled to briefly contemplate some of my favourite Lennon lyrics. “*God is a concept by which we measure our pain*” is followed by a list of what John *doesn't* believe in, concluding with the simple statement; “*I just believe in me / Yoko and me / And that's reality*”.

While talk of God's disregard for mankind isn't exactly humanist, Randy Newman's *God's Song* is worthy of a spot, as it turns the spotlight on the confirmation bias of the fervent believer. “*I burn down your cities, how blind you must be / I take from you your children and you say how blessed are we / You all must be crazy to put your faith in me / That's why I love mankind*”.

Bertrand Russell once said that to endure uncertainty is difficult, “but so are most of the other virtues”. With that in mind, *Good as Gold (Stupid as Mud)* by the Beautiful South gets a spot thanks to the opening line: “Don’t know what I’m doing here, I’ll carry on regardless”. Uncertain he may be, but I love Paul Heaton’s vocals on one of the catchiest pop tunes of the last three decades.

The name of Father John Misty’s second entry, *When the God of Love Returns There’ll be Hell to Pay* probably tells you all you need to know about the irony contained within. Here he assumes a negative view of humanity – perhaps not the most humanist of angles – but his acerbic takes on unquestioned and contradictory religious beliefs are well worth listening to all the same.

Dear God by XTC also addresses the evil done in the name of God and religion. “All the people that you made in your image / See them fighting in the street / Cos they can’t make opinions meet / About God”. Questions such as “did you make mankind after we made you?” certainly assign humans the responsibility of proliferating misery in God’s name.

Although *Only the Good Die Young* by Billy Joel is packed with religious metaphors, the song can be interpreted as a statement of how religious beliefs prevent one from living life to the full. Lyrics like “They showed you a statue, told you to pray / They built you a temple and locked you away / Au, but they never told you the price that you pay / For things that you might have done” support that interpretation strongly.

Even more philosophical in tone is *Let the Mystery Be* by Iris De Ment, who posits that “everybody is wonderin’ what and where they all came from / Everybody is worryin’ ‘bout where they’re gonna go when the whole thing’s done / But no one knows for certain and so it’s all the same to me / I think I’ll just let the mystery be”. Rather than trying to assign objective meaning to life, let’s just live it for what it is. Take some advice from Iris: “I believe in love, and I live my life accordingly”. Perfect.

Christian and Pagans by Dar Williams is a humorous enough tale of Christians and atheists sharing a Christmas dinner table and finding common ground. “But we love trees, we love the snow, the friends we have, the world we share / You find magic from your God, and we find magic everywhere”.

Staying on the subject of Christmas, in *White Wine in the Sun* Tim Minchin sings of the secular joys of Yule, and the opportunity it provides for appreciating family and togetherness. It’s also pretty damn funny: “And yes, I have all of the usual objections to consumerism / The commercialisation of an ancient religion / And the westernisation of a dead Palestinian / Press-ganged into selling Playstations and beer... But I still really like it”.

“If heaven doesn't exist, what will we have missed? This life is the best we've ever had”

Tonight we Fly by the Divine Comedy is worthy of inclusion for the concluding lines; “If heaven doesn't exist, what will we have missed? This life is the best we've ever had”.

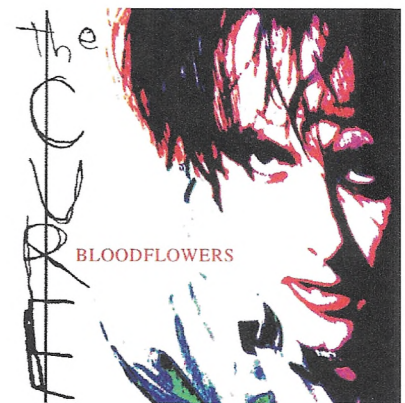
Meanwhile, *Where the Birds Always Sing* posits that “the world is neither fair nor unfair” and deals with man’s struggle to make some sense of the world, against the backdrop of some of the most beautiful music from The Cure’s underrated *Bloodflowers* album.

Keeping the playlist as eclectic as possible, *Best God in Show* by NOFX is a punk rant covering everything from proselytising to science denial, creationism, and the voluntary ceding of free will. I could quote the lyrics in their entirety but as a sample: “I find it’s getting painful to put up with grown adults who actually believe in Unicorns and Creation / and god always takes their side.” That’s probably enough... .

And keeping with the punk theme, *Moral Majority* by the Dead Kennedys takes a pop at the commercialism of organised religion. We are gathered here tonight to pay tribute to our Lord and money unto me. Everyone from Jerry Falwell to Ronald Reagan comes in for criticism.

With other songs from Bob Dylan to Louis Armstrong, and even some hip hop, I have tried to be as broad as possible in styles, themes, genres and generations.

To check out the playlist in full, search Spotify for *Humanist Tunes* by Eamon. Happy listening. □



Irish Freethinkers and Humanists

Assisted Dying

Speaker: Caroline Villar

Thursday 24th March 2022, 8pm

Holiday Inn, Hope Street, Belfast

Free parking opposite hotel

phone 02892677264 for confirmation of venue