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## Ireland's Enviably Beautiful



From the Fishing Boats at Dingle

to the Shores of Donaghadee



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*Freethinker: a person who forms his or her own opinions about important subjects (such as religion or politics) instead of accepting what other people say*



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# Losing my Religion - Trust your Doubt!

**Joe Armstrong**



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### ARTICLES AND DISCLAIMER

Articles will be accepted for publication, in part or whole, according to the space available and at the editor's discretion. 800 words is roughly a page, and so on. Only rarely are articles accepted at more than 2400 words.

Please note: this magazine is not the mouthpiece of any humanist group but a forum for ideas supported by the Irish Freethinkers and Humanists. The views of contributors are the opinions of their authors and are not necessarily the views of any Irish Humanist organisation. Articles text set mainly in Sabon.

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### LETTERS

Letters to the Editor are welcome and need not necessarily be from Humanists. They may be edited for quality and space. Names and addresses will be published unless otherwise requested. Do NOT send text in attachments.

# Ireland's Enviably Beautiful

**I**N July the *Guardian* newspaper carried an editorial which argues, with a reworded quote from Yeats, that in Ireland an 'enviable beauty' is born. It presents three reasons for saying that this 98-year-old nation is 'new'. The first is the latest government. For nearly a century the two ancient rivals of Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil refused to serve in the same coalition. Since June they are doing so, along with the Greens. They have realised that it is the only way of preventing Sinn Féin, a party whose strings are generally believed to be pulled by the IRA, from sharing in government. The *Guardian* says that a generation ago the present coalition was unthinkable; now it feels inevitable.

The second reason why there is an enviable new Ireland is the response to Covid-19. While Britain's response to the pandemic has been shambolic, infected as it was by a crazy notion of Brexit exceptionalism, Ireland has steered a different and wiser course. Dublin has watched what is happening in Europe and following WHO advice. The upshot is a coronavirus death rate that is half Britain's. In a recent poll the approval rating of Leo Varadkar, the Fine Gael leader, has jumped 28 points to 63%.

The third and related reason offered by the *Guardian* is perhaps the most relevant of all. Unlike Brexit-deluded Britain, 21st century Ireland is a firm believer in multilateral institutions and cooperation. It points out that Ireland has an immense influence over the EU's Brexit stance. Phil Hogan has been elevated to the coveted position of EU trade commissioner, and Paschal Donohoe has just become president of the Eurogroup of finance ministers.

As well as these EU positions, in June Ireland beat Canada to a seat on the UN security council. In the words of the *Economist*, "on a per-head basis, Ireland has a good claim to be the world's most diplomatically powerful country".



Why has Ireland become what the *Economist* calls a 'tiny diplomatic superpower'? It cites its 'cultural clout', lack of 'imperial baggage' and political 'dexterity' as possible reasons. Let us examine this last explanation more closely.

Ireland is done with exclusive nationalism. It has had it up to here with a narrow, exclusive conception of what it means to be Irish. It has progressed to a postnationalist vision in which to be Irish is to be a Catholic, Protestant, atheist, humanist, Jew or whatever the individual chooses to believe. And it sees beyond these shores so that to be Irish is also to be a citizen of Europe and indeed the wider world.

But what of the border that divides Ireland? How can the two parts reach out to each other? As the late John Hume (above) put it in 1970:

*"The border is not a line on the map. It is a mental border built on fear, prejudice and misunderstanding and which can only be eradicated by developing understanding and friendship. That is the real task which faces those who genuinely want to solve the Irish problem. Its weakness is that it is undramatic. Its virtue is that it is the only way"* (*Derry Journal*, 13th March 1970).

Friendship and understanding cannot be achieved by inciting people to kill one another. As Hume, who unequivocally condemned IRA violence, said: "when people are divided, the only solution is agreement". To achieve this agreement, Hume knew that it was necessary to persuade the IRA to give up its armed 'struggle'. When criticised for the Hume-Adams talks (the 'pan-nationalist front', according to his critics), he replied that he did not give two balls of roasted snow what they said if the 'war' was ended.

And it was. It can be debated whether Hume was the architect of peace or whether it was inevitable when the IRA realised it could not shoot or bomb a million Protestants into a united Ireland. But the peace process was more than that. It had three strands as envisaged by Hume, which embodied a compromise between unionists and nationalists. Included was the principle of consent, a north-south ministerial council, and power-sharing in Northern Ireland. As Hume said, it was about 'principled compromise, not compromised principles'.

As Edmund Burke, an Irishman, wrote: "All government – indeed every human benefit and enjoyment, every virtue and every prudent act – is founded on compromise and barter". We compromise every day in our lives; we should do it also in politics. The majority of Irish people have finally discovered its fundamental importance, thanks in no small part to the philosophy of John Hume and others like him.

True, unionists in Northern Ireland have not fully learned the lesson. They still tend to believe in slavish adherence to London, whether over Brexit, Covid-19 or examination results. It is time that they looked less for advice and leadership from a state in retreat from the modern world and instead reached out more towards their warm, friendly and accommodating neighbours on this small island.

EDITOR

## Educational Underachievement in Northern Ireland

Roger Kelly

**O**NCE again recent research has highlighted that under-achievement in the education system within Northern Ireland has remained 'entrenched', especially among Protestant working class boys from disadvantaged backgrounds, and also indicated similar trends among working class Catholic children but to a lesser extent.

Fewer than half of children entitled to free school meals left school with at least five GCSEs at grades A\* to C, including English and Maths, in 2017/18. By contrast, almost 80% of pupils not entitled to free school meals left school with at least these qualifications.

A report back in 2012 commissioned by the then office of the First and Deputy First Minister [OMDFM] found similar factors that had a negative impact on education achievement:

1. The impact in terms of confidence levels and self esteem of those pupils who fail or do not sit the transfer test.
2. Grammar schools 'creaming' likely high achievers from non-select schools, thus depriving pupils in the non-grammar sector of positive peer role models.
3. The ways in which the current system of selection favours those parents with the means to pay for private tuition.

Lest we forget, the so-called Eleven Plus exam was abolished by the then Sinn Fein Education Minister Caitriona Ruane in 2008. However, this did not end selection as the grammar schools, both Protestant and Catholic, created their own tests and the St Andrews Agreement enabled the DUP to stymie abolition through the use of the Petition of Concern.

Many proponents of the grammar school system in Northern Ireland and in particular the DUP are of the view that inequality and segregation would increase if the system was changed, but no hard evidence has ever been produced to support this claim. What the evidence does show is that both Protestants and Catholics from middle class backgrounds are benefiting and going to university and eventually securing well paid jobs, and those young people from less privileged backgrounds are often stuck in dead-end low paid jobs or unemployment.

The 11Plus transfer test debacle has illuminated a fascinating dichotomy between the political preferences of N.I.'s Catholic middle class and their social conservatism. For while they vote on the 'progressive' or left wing side of the education argument via SDLP/Sinn Fein, large sections of the Catholic middle class are actually with the Unionist Party/DUP in wanting to maintain the grammar/secondary divide. Interestingly, most middle class Catholics also ignore the official stance taken by the Catholic Church, which to its credit opposes selection.

The persistence of educational underachievement for the working class in N.I. has been regularly researched by Professor Peter Shirlow, director at the University of Liverpool's Institute of Irish Studies. He has commented: 'the failure of the N.I. Government to tackle fundamental problems regarding the structure of education and its inability to agree on a system for post-primary school transfer has only exacerbated the divisions and inequalities within that society'. He has stated that the grammar school system needs to be radically changed: "This is a societal issue and a wider question about the power and resources rooted in the grammar sector. They've been very effective in maintaining themselves". □

## Gay Conversion Therapy

Tom Woolley

BALLYNAHINCH, a small County Down market town more famous for its modern traffic jams and a battle in 1798, is one of the main centres for gay conversion therapy. *The Core Issues Trust*, a registered charity, is based in the town and is the focus of a campaign by the National Secular Society (NSS) and others to remove charitable status from organisations promoting gay conversion.

Gay Conversion therapy is largely regarded as dangerous and an onslaught on the human rights of those who do not fit with particular Christian sexual norms. *The Core Issues Trust* advocates what it calls 'change oriented therapies for people seeking to leave homosexual behaviours and feelings', according to the NSS. Under its objects of association, it encourages 'lifestyle choices consistent with Christian living' and upholds the view that sexual relationships outside heterosexual marriage are 'inconsistent with' the Bible.

The nature of these change-oriented therapies is not clear, but aversion therapies are widely regarded as bogus, ineffective and downright dangerous, leading to mental health problems. Robbie Meredith of the *BBC News* recently revealed that Queens' University Belfast Department of Mental Health gave gay men electric shock aversion therapy treatment in the 1960s and suggests it was still in use into the 1970s, despite being ineffective.

The Northern Ireland Charities Commission has been urged by the NSS to review its policy on granting charitable status to organisations promoting gay conversion and, according to the *Belfast Telegraph* in May, the issue is being considered by the Commissioners. *The Core Issues Trust* apparently achieved charitable status because it advances the Christian religion.

The Core Issues Trust have screened anti-gay films around Northern Ireland and attempted to hold a conference at a Baptist Church in Ballynahinch in 2014, attracting a well-attended demonstration against bigotry and homophobia. Well-groomed ladies stopped their cars outside the protest and shouted 'sodomites' at the demonstrators.

Ballynahinch contains more than its fair share of churches (over 20 in a town of less than 6,000 population). In 2013 police went to the *Congregational Church* to break up a row between two groups after some had heckled the minister during his sermon. More significantly, the town attracted an unpleasant reputation for having a high number of young people committing suicide in the late 90s, though the problem seems to have reduced in recent years.

There are some local groups attempting to respond to the mental health problems of young people, but mental health support resources are limited here. There is little doubt that coping with issues of sexuality as well as drugs and bullying is one of the factors that contributes to this problem. In 2018, Northern Ireland had 18.6 suicides per 100,000 population, far higher than England and Scotland (10.3 and 16.1).

Much of the local charitable work for young people is provided by Christian organisations. There is an urgent need for organisations with a secular non-religious approach to provide alternative guidance and support on mental health and sexual orientation issues that can assist local young people. Dependence on Christian evangelical and anti-gay groups is unsatisfactory. The ability of such organisations to gain charitable status and the resulting tax breaks should also be ended. □

## The Bias of History

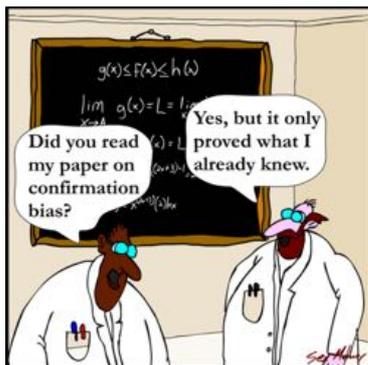
**T**HANKS to a segregated education system, the vast majority of children in Northern Ireland are daily presented in their educational environment with separate sporting and linguistic cultures, separate conceptions of what it means to be a Christian, and separate visions of their historical past.

An example of the last difference can be illustrated in the CCEA History syllabus for GCSE. One optional unit of study is 'Northern Ireland and its Neighbours, 1920 to 1949', while the alternative is 'Northern Ireland and its Neighbours, 1965 to 1998'. A new study under the auspices of the *Parallel Histories* charity has found that the overwhelming majority of Catholic schools teach the more modern unit, which includes civil rights and the Troubles, whereas nearly half of state schools choose the earlier period which includes the unionist ascendancy and Northern Ireland's part in the defeat of the Nazis in the Second World War.

It should be obvious that the earlier period provides material that is favourable to Protestants/unionists, whereas the later period provides material that is favourable to Catholics/nationalists. In other words, the schools are generally choosing periods that bolster their own traditions and prejudices while avoiding parts of history that challenge them. They do not have to engage with the 'other' historical narrative, just as they don't have to confront the basic political divisions.

There is nothing new here. Under Stormont rule there was little or no Irish history in 'Protestant' schools. In the 1960s as a pupil at Inst. I was taught mainly British history, including 'Clive of India', 'Wolfe at Quebec', 'Rhodes in Africa' and 'Palmerston's Foreign Policy'. In the A level special paper we studied the 'Life and Times of the Duke of Marlborough'. What on earth any of this triumphalist British historical extravaganza had to do with Ireland, or the real India, or the real Africa, is anybody's guess (incidentally, Geography wasn't much better: all I can remember is hours of tediously studying the Northumberland and Durham Coalfield – in a classroom on the indigenous island of Ireland!).

Things have improved. Irish History is now a major part of the curriculum, but it is sad to see that pupils at GCSE can avoid being confronted with an alternative narrative (they can even avoid History altogether as it is an optional subject at this level). Studying a period which feeds our own traditional narrative instead of challenging it merely serves to confirm our bias.



## Swear not at all

**T**HE new Bill in the Irish Republic allowing people to make affidavits without revealing their personal beliefs is a small step in the right direction. But Ireland still has a religious constitution with a preamble which begins: "In the name of the most Holy Trinity... and refers to "Almighty God" in Article 44.

And there are still religious oaths enshrined therein. The President has to swear a religious oath as stated in article 12. It begins "in the Presence of Almighty God", and ends: "May God direct and sustain me". Judges and members of the council of state including the Taoiseach and the Tanaiste and other members of the council of state have to swear a religious oath as stated in article 34. A referendum is needed on the removal of these oaths. Blasphemy is no longer a crime (though it still is in Northern Ireland) and, since Ireland is no longer, if it ever was, a purely Christian country, this reality should be reflected in a secular constitution.

There are many people who have taken these religious oaths who do not believe in a god but have been advised that legally they must do so. Eamon Gilmore when he was made Tanaiste in 2011 is a well known example. That is absurd. And yet it is done in courts of law throughout these islands every day. People swear by Almighty God to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth while breaking the promise in the very oath that they are taking. Of course, there is the right to affirm, but millions do not know it exists or decide to swear a religious oath for convenience to avoid discrimination or stigmatisation. So the oath is in many cases a contradiction of the very truth that it stands for.

Some Christian groups even accept this fact. They refer to the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5: 33-37). Jesus says that you have heard in old times that you should perform oaths to the Lord. But "swear not all... but let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil". Quakers reject swearing, believing that they should tell the truth at all times and there is no variable standard of truth. Jeremy Bentham wrote a book entitled *Swear Not At All* (1817), arguing that calling on God to punish liars was tantamount to making man a despot and god a slave.

A religious belief or absence of it should be irrelevant to a legal proceeding or office of state. It is an entirely private matter and nobody else's business but our own. You should be free to speak your belief or not, as you wish. The UN Human Rights Committee in 1993 affirmed the right not to be compelled to reveal one's thoughts or adherence to a religion or belief in public.

So: either there is no need for an oath in court, and the judge should inform people that they are legally obliged to tell the truth, or there is a secular affirmation for everyone to tell the truth in court or to uphold the constitution.

EDITOR

# Intellectual Child Abuse

Nicolas Johnson

**C**ONTEMPORARY society recognises and condemns several types of adult behaviour which are commonly referred to as ‘Child Abuse’. Such behaviour generally includes physical and sexual abuse, neglect, and emotional deprivation. The adverse consequences of these types of abuses have been recognised and studied after generations, if not centuries, of societal neglect. Abuse of the child’s intellect is similar adult behaviour with similar associated adverse consequences, but different in that its existence is still shrouded in silence, denial and ignorance.

There are several valued rational qualities which educators and concerned parents recognise and strive to develop in children. Among these are curiosity, appreciation of knowledge, openness to diverse ideas, ability to think logically, capacity to draw conclusions based on evidence, intellectual honesty to admit to what is not known, and objectivity in viewing the world in its reality. Correspondingly, behaviour by adults toward children is intellectually abusive if it adversely affects these qualities.

Education is the principal process whereby a child’s intellectual capacities are shaped and developed. Its explicit objective is to affect the child’s mind in its capacity to think and reason as well as to influence what it retains as knowledge. For this reason the process of education is the prime candidate for inquiry into the manifestation of intellectually abusive behaviour.

Present-day pedagogical methods in subjects intended to provide understanding of the natural world consist of the teacher’s presenting a body of objectively verifiable facts, a process for organising and analysing those facts, and a logic for arriving at convincing claims or conclusions based on those facts. An alternative approach is based on a process whereby non-verifiable claims are made by the teacher and acceptance by the child of those claims on the basis of ‘faith’ becomes the principal objective of the teaching process.

One aspect of religious education which is common to the majority of religions is that some element of the subject matter must be accepted on the basis of faith. Acceptance on faith is the acceptance of a statement or proposition as true without

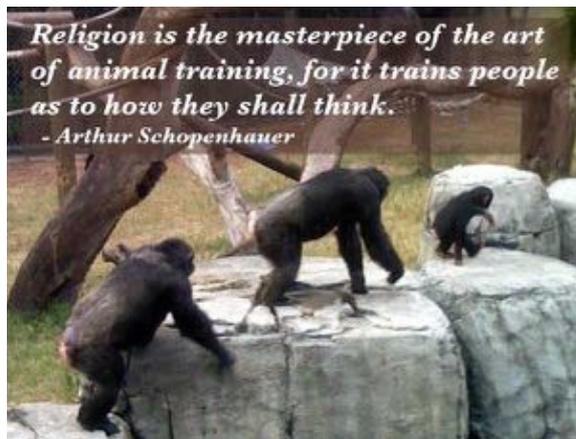
sufficient supporting evidence. What is generally understood as religious faith is the acceptance of a statement on the nature of the universe or life without sufficient supporting evidence or objective reason.

We look now at the effects on the intellect of the child who accepts some proposition on the nature of the world or life as a consequence of the faith-teaching. Specifically, the teaching on the basis of faith will;

- a) Inhibit intellectual curiosity because to the faith-holder contrary evidence has an emotionally disturbing effect,
- b) Devalue knowledge because knowledge of the real world based on evidence is denied,
- c) Constrain the introduction of diverse ideas because a new idea may tend to contradict previous deeply held notions,
- d) Impede a child’s ability to think logically because a child can not hold to one view on faith and objectively evaluate another contrary view,
- e) Diminish the capacity to draw conclusions based on evidence because evidence would lead to a conclusion incompatible with the position held on faith,
- f) Result in intellectual dishonesty in what is known because it tends to claim certainty in areas which science holds open to further investigation, and
- g) Create a delusion as to the nature of the world when the faith-held notion is not in conformity with or supported by facts.

It is clear that these effects are in opposition to all the valued intellectual qualities in children stated earlier and consequently the approach of faith-based teaching is intellectually abusive.

Let us assume that we can develop an approach to teaching about the universe and life without recourse to faith. A reasonable question which critics could raise is whether the resulting approach would be any less abusive than the one based on faith. For it could be —>



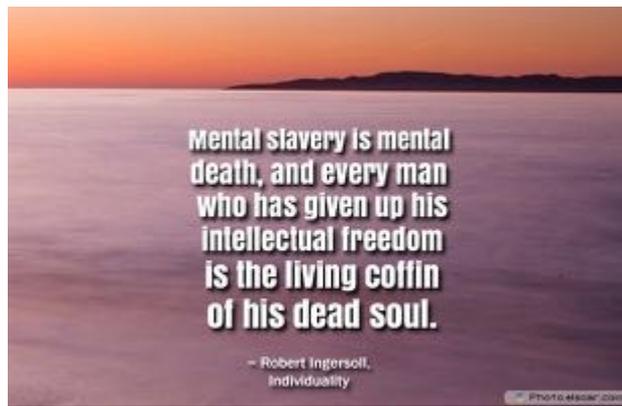
argued that what may appear to one person as instruction and education may be considered by another as indoctrination and intellectually abusive behaviour.

The approach offered here is one which is based essentially on modes of intellectual behaviour which most people already follow in their everyday lives. As such, the elements are very familiar and commonplace and don't require extensive philosophical justification. They can easily form the basis for educating children without the risks of intellectual harm, for the test is whether they indeed enhance a child's intellectual qualities, or at least do not adversely affect them. Four principles can be stated:

- 1) Statements, arguments, and general discussion should follow the rules of everyday logic. That is, our statements and assertions have to follow common sense. For example, a statement about some aspect of our world is either true or false, but it cannot be both true and false at the same time. Likewise, cause and effect statements should be logically connected.
- 2) Within our common-sense reasoning we should incorporate everyday experiences and observations. These include verifiable occurrences of events in the world around us. Individually they may not be profound experiences or observations but in totality they provide a base of knowledge which all intellectually active people share. Thus, when we talk with each other about natural phenomena, we have a common basis on which to carry out such conversations.
- 3) No proposition should be considered true unless there is sufficient basis, either evidential or logical, for its supposition. That is, we accept a proposition as true only if it can be supported by facts or logic.

A corollary to this principle is that if a proposition can be disproved, it is not to be accepted as true. The need for agreeing on this requirement follows from the realisation that otherwise we would find ourselves accepting a multitude of outrageous and contradictory claims.

- 4) We should require that extraordinary claims be supported by extraordinary evidence. We maintained in principle 3 that a statement which is offered as true should be supported by evidence and logic. Here we require that the amount of evidence be related to the degree to which the claim is removed from our everyday experiences, observations, and accumulated knowledge.

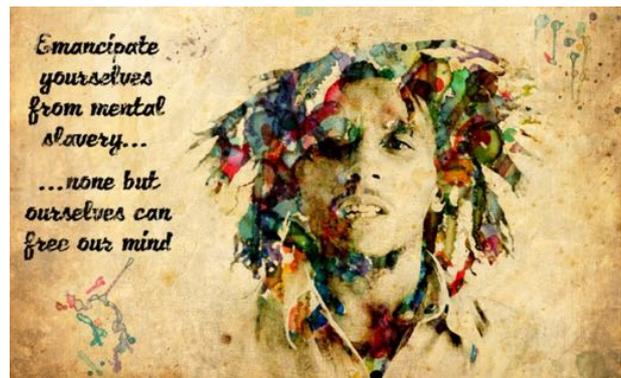


These principles, if applied in the education of children, would enhance the valued intellectual qualities presented earlier. In particular, children would: tend to be curious, for all new evidence would be accepted as candidates for increasing their reservoir of understanding; tend to appreciate knowledge, for their increased knowledge would allow them to cope better with

life; be open to new ideas for they would have no fear of modifying previously held beliefs; be encouraged to apply common logic in their discussions with others and in so doing would cooperatively advance the common understanding of our world; be encouraged to assess evidence by relating it to their everyday experiences before accepting a conclusion as likely to be true; be intellectually honest to what they do not know, for there would be no preconceptions of what must be accepted as true, and be able to face the world without delusions, for what they would find would be in conformity with reality.

There are benefits which are also likely to accrue to society from the acceptance of these principles. In particular, the level of fanatical adherence by individuals to controversial views would likely decrease since one's view would be held only to a level of certainty which relates to the strength of the supporting evidence. There would be an openness to each other's views and since all views would be held subject to modification, there would be no need to defend any position beyond what the facts support. We would all take part in a joint adventure in expanding our knowledge of the world in which we live and living in peace with what we find.

The above article originally appeared in issue No. 29 (April – June 2001) of *The Irish Humanist*, a Quarterly Journal of the Association of Irish Humanists, as the Human Association of Ireland was at the time. The author, Nicolas Johnson, sadly passed away in January after a lifetime working to promote humanism and create a more secular world. The sentiments expressed are, sadly, as relevant in 2020 as they were almost two decades ago. □



# ... By the People, for the People

Bob Rees

**E**LECTIONS are not democratic. Most of those who voted for Brexit in the 2016 referendum had no idea of what they were voting for, having been massively disinformed by a few individuals with vested interests. As David van Reybrouck said in *The Guardian* (29th June 2016): “Never before has the fate of a country – of an entire continent, in fact – been changed by the single swing of such a blunt axe, wielded by disenchanting and poorly informed citizens”. This was not democracy, despite the mantra by the handful of politicians who favoured it, that Brexit was the democratic will of the British people and therefore beyond further debate.

A government must balance decisive action (efficiency) with the support of the people (legitimacy). Hitherto, efficiency has dominated, but with universal suffrage and odd concessions to the people, the system worked reasonably well until the late 1980s. That is when ordinary people gradually became aware of growing inequality, insecurity, and alienation from the government caused by free market neoliberal influences on policy. Since then, most political debates in the West have been increasingly founded on fake news, false interpretations of science, appeals to raw emotion and polarising rhetoric, all promoting short-term neoliberal interests, further complicated by alleged subversion from foreign governments.

By now, the people are used to being lied to and treated like morons, and they have become cynical. Ever fewer of the electorate are bothering to vote. Political parties and their whips are perceived as corrupt, and party membership has declined to something like 5% of the people. Party leaders are mocked, and it is taking ever longer to assemble a coalition government.

Elections do not come cheap. In the 2016 U.S. presidential election, it cost \$2,400 million just to elect Donald Trump, on top of \$5,000 million worth of free media coverage (Clinton got \$3,240 million worth). These obscene amounts of money were devoted to a campaign that ‘disgusted’ most people, according to the *Washington Post*. Elections have been reduced to costly “beauty contests for ugly people”. The fact that it costs a lot of money to win an election clearly favours those with money – businessmen who make ‘investments’, in the form of generous donations, on the understanding that when their man is elected, he will ‘look after’ those who helped to get him elected. And the fact that the media are mostly owned by big corporations ensures that coverage during an election will further favour business interests.

Such electoral manipulation promotes artificial passions, division and corruption. We get government of the people by a despised political party, on behalf of the short-term interests of some greedy businessmen. This is not democracy, it’s what sociologist Colin Crouch calls ‘post-democracy’.

## We Need Democracy without Elections

Unfortunately, the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), Art 21 (3), specifies that “*The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections*”, thus sanctifying the equation of elections with democracy. It seems somehow sinister that the UDHR is so specific on this one point, especially in the light of Karl Marx’s opinion of elections: “*The oppressed are allowed once every few years to decide which particular representatives of the oppressing class shall represent and repress them in parliament*”.

Elections, it turns out, were always known to be undemocratic. Back in Athens in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, they selected officials simply by drawing lots – a process called ‘Sortition’. Aristotle approved: “*It is accepted as democratic (i.e. rule by the people) when offices are allocated by lot; and as oligarchic (i.e. rule by the few) when they are filled by election*”. Sortition was equated with true democracy. In 1492 King Ferdinand II of Aragon wrote: “*Experience shows that cities and municipalities that work with sortition are more likely to promote the good life, a healthy administration and a sound government than regimes based on elections.*” In 1748, political philosopher Montesquieu confirmed Aristotle’s view that “*Voting by lot is in the nature of democracy, voting by choice is in the nature of aristocracy*”.

Those who drafted the UDHR must have known this. Similarly, one might have assumed that the winners of the American and French Revolutions of 1776 and 1789 would have opted for political selection by sortition. But while loudly proclaiming *liberté, égalité, fraternité*, both groups of founding fathers established a system that they knew to be aristocratic – they had no wish for government by an uncouth uneducated rabble. As the French philosopher Bernard Manin reaffirmed in *The Principles of Representative Government* (1995): “*Representative government was instituted in the full awareness that elected representatives would and should be distinguished citizens, socially different from those that elected them.*” From the start, and despite the UDHR, elections were never meant to be democratic!

## Benefits of Sortition

A representative body of citizens chosen by lot, and dependent for advice and direction on experts and professionals (as in a jury), could act alone or interact with an elected chamber to produce legislation. Selectees would serve for a period of, say, four years whilst receiving a generous salary, and each year, one quarter of them would be replaced by someone else who has been similarly chosen by lot. Thus, there could be continuous government by actual representatives of the people; a true democracy immune from the influence of political parties or their whips, MP’s concerns for re-election, —>

disinformation campaigns, foreign meddling, social media or manipulation. The government would be free to get on quietly with its work. With virtually no distinction between ruler and ruled, everyone is free to rule, and be ruled in turn. Sortition is truly government of the people, by the people, for the people.

With sortition we make sure that the people, in the form of a representative sample, understand the nuances of the topic, and have the time to think about it rationally, with access to the true facts, having thoroughly discussed the matter among themselves, and having purged themselves of impulse and emotion before they express their considered opinions, free from coercion by a party whip. A small cross section of society that is informed and involved must inevitably act more responsibly than an entire electorate that is uninterested and disinformed, as with Brexit. We might miss the ballyhoo, the media blitz of famous faces, the heated debates, the party political intrigue, and the excitement of the election results. But we wouldn't miss the enormous waste of money, the posters on every lamppost, the false divisions between the parties, the lies, half-truths and empty promises.

**With sortition we make sure that the people, in the form of a representative sample, understand the nuances of the topic, and have the time to think about it rationally**

We have every reason to believe that ordinary citizens will respond responsibly to being called, because we see it every day with randomly-chosen juries in criminal justice trials. Juries take their work seriously, even though they have no previous experience of, or interest in, legal matters. They allow themselves to be guided in the relevant nuances of the law by the Judge, discuss the case rationally among themselves, and make executive life-and-death decisions with due gravity. Those who are deemed biased or incompetent are weeded out beforehand. A parliamentarian, similarly selected and guided, would surely behave at least as intelligently and responsibly as any of our present elected party politicians who mindlessly do whatever their whips tell them to do, and whose every decision is cynically influenced by their desire to be re-elected.

**Sortition can be incorporated into Several Formats**

Public opinion polls and focus groups are a crude form of uninformed sortition. We saw informed sortition in action in Ireland in the Convention on the Constitution in 2013, when 33 elected politicians together with 66 citizens, “representative of Irish society as reflected in the Census, including age, gender, social class, regional spread etc.”, who had been chosen by lot, jointly considered and ultimately recommended a Constitutional change permitting gay marriage, which was eventually passed in 2015.

Several scholars have considered how sortition might replace elections in a modern setting. Generally they agree that representatives should be chosen to serve a term of office lasting several years, that they should be generously remunerated, and that expert support should be provided as necessary. There is a case to be made for choosing every position from a pool of volun-

teers who have shown themselves to be suitable (educated, intelligent and interested) instead of from the whole electoral register, which includes unsuitable and disinterested individuals. But by debarring such people, one is compromising the legitimacy of the process and opening a possibility for manipulation of the pool of candidates.

Some argue that sortition should be used for just one chamber of parliament, separate from, but complementary to, an elected chamber, which is to say that it should always be deployed in combination with elections, ‘in order to guarantee competence’. For example, it could replace one of the houses of parliament, or a new third house might be introduced to deal with long-term matters such as climate change or constitutional reform. But if an elected house is still required, then the

horrors associated with elections will still be present. Accordingly, US political scientist Terry Bouricius proposes a complex interlocking system of ‘multi-body sortition’ intended to achieve the optimum balance between efficiency and legitimacy.

Clearly, there is plenty of scope for further thought as to the exact form that sortition might take, but whatever is ultimately proposed, we can be confident that true democracy will continue to be bitterly opposed by the neoliberal oligarchy that is currently ruling the western world.

For further reading, I can recommend David Van Reybrouck’s 2013 book *Against Elections*, whose English translation is published by Bodley Head. □



Democracy is two wolves and a lamb voting on what to have for lunch. Liberty is a well-armed lamb contesting the vote.

-Benjamin Franklin

# Visionaries

Ken Murray

**P**RINCE Siddhartha Gautama (**Buddha**) is an example of a person brought up in one set of religious beliefs and, after a period of reflection, insights and mystical encounters, decides to go down a completely different path. After six years wandering, he rejected Hinduism and became the founder of Buddhism.

**Guru Nanak Sahib**, the man who founded Sikhism, was also born into a Hindu family in India. He also claimed a mystical encounter which included a conversation with God. This event occurred sometime during extensive travelling in South Asia and Arabia, including visiting the holy sites of Hinduism and Islam. He was the first of ten Gurus.

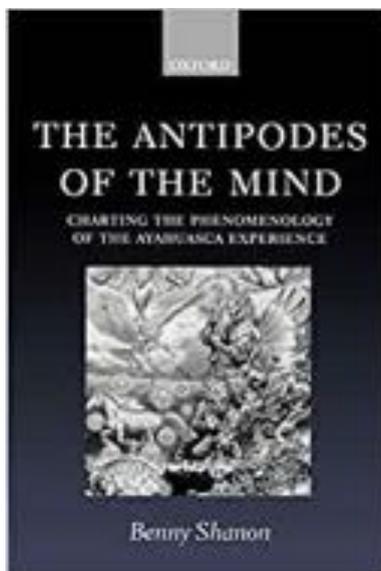
The founding of Jainism is credited to **Mahavira**. He also, like Siddhartha Gautama, rejected a comfortable lifestyle as an Indian prince and spent 12 years living an ascetic life in pursuit of a spiritual awakening.

**Abraham** was born into a family in Mesopotamia in a community that worshipped many gods. A voice in his head told him that such worship was wrong because there was only one god. This was a turning point in the history of religion. Three of today's foremost religions – Christianity, Islam and Judaism – claim this turning point as a major influence in their development. The voice also told him to leave his home and begin a journey which would end in Canaan (modern day Jordan/Palestine/Israel).

**Moses** is regarded as the most important prophet in Judaism. According to religious scriptures, his many mystical conversations began between himself and a burning bush. The conversations are detailed in the biblical books of *Leviticus* and *Numbers*.

The founder of a religion in Arabia, **Muhammad**, took to prayer and meditation in remote locations after he became aware of the corruption of monotheism that he witnessed in his home city, Mecca. After a few years of voices and visions he had absorbed enough to fashion a new version of monotheism: Islam.

**Jesus of Nazareth**, according to the bible, was a Jewish religious leader who became the central figure of a religion that eventually became known as Christianity. Due to his unorthodox views on how best to follow God he was quite often at odds with mainstream Judaism and was ultimately rejected by the Jewish authorities. He also had a wandering period during which time it is recorded that he had numerous conversations with Satan.



In today's world anybody claiming to hear voices from gods or angels might draw mocking comment such as: "*He must be on something*". Speaking of which, the UDV church in Santa Fe, New Mexico, which describes its brand of religion as 'Christian spiritist', incorporates a hallucinogenic tea ritual – drinking hoasca tea – in some of its services. This tea is brewed from the leaves of bushes found in the Amazon. Its active ingredient is dimethyltryptamine (DMT) which is considered an illegal hallucinogen by the US Drug Enforcement Administration.

In 1999 federal agents seized a quantity of hoasca from the church, initiating a seven-year legal battle and a 2006 ruling by the US Supreme Court to allow the church to continue the use of the 'tea' in its services. The church had contended that the 'sacramental' hoasca tea enabled the congregation to commune more closely with God.

A similar psychoactive brew – ayahuasca – has been investigated by Benny Shanon, an emeriti professor of psychology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He describes himself as a Jewish atheist and is best known for the Biblical entheogen hypothesis, which is the idea that the use of hallucinogenic drugs influenced religion. His research has found that the same psychoactive molecules in the plants from which the ayahuasca brew is prepared are also found in plants growing in the arid areas of the Sinai Peninsula.

Shanon has caused controversy by detailing what he sees as parallels between the effects induced by ingesting ayahuasca and the biblical accounts of experiences encountered by Moses: the conversation with the burning bush; the theophany (appearance of a deity) at Mount Sinai; a rod turning into a snake and back into a rod; etc. – all detailed in his book *The Antipodes of The Mind: Charting The Phenomenology of the Ayahuasca Experience*.

Wandering for long periods in wilderness areas, the aforementioned founders of religions would have had to live off the land, and this this would have involved taking advantage of what nature had provided, including plants, bushes, shrubs, etc. It is therefore highly likely that they would have been ingesting at some stage, either accidentally or on purpose, hallucinogenic substances – or even, apparently, smoking dried crushed samsun ants.

Does this explain the visions and voices? Was it Yahweh, Archangel Gabriel, God, or was it simply the effect of ingesting 'visionary' plants? □

# Buddhist Humanism

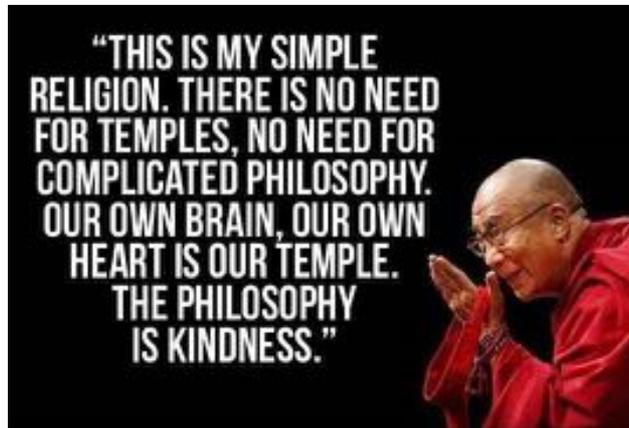
Tom White

**M**OST religions exploit natural human responses to death and suffering by offering the promise of eternal bliss in an afterlife. Eternal life will be given in exchange for faith in the divinity and adherence to the tenets of ‘the one true Faith’ – which, incidentally, invariably coincides with the one the proselytising cleric happens to believe in. If you don’t accept the one true Faith, then you won’t get your one-way ticket to heaven.

Most religions actually go further: they claim that that, because God knows the future, He/She or It knows before you were ever conceived whether you are destined to go to Heaven or Hell. Which raises the question, “If God knowingly creates beings who are destined to eternal suffering in hell, can God be either moral or kind?” Thinking about that further, the whole carrot and stick of Heaven and Hell must call into question the morality of adherents of faiths which embrace these concepts. For example, if a Christian does a good deed, was his or her motivation for goodness sake alone or because she or he wanted to get to Heaven?

Atheists avoid that moral ambiguity. Atheists also avoid the excesses of fundamentalist dogma which have caused wars and acts of terrorism in the name of religion. As religions have been around for a major slice of human history, faiths have been continually reassessed and reinterpreted – generally by patriarchs and prelates who held temporal as well as religious power.

As religions go, Buddhism’s history is longer than most. A few years ago, I was talking to a friend about Buddhism and he said, “Sure Buddhism isn’t even a religion at all!” In which case, I thought, I’d better find out a bit more about it!



My friend was both right and wrong. The founder of the Buddhist faith was studiously silent when enquiries were made as to Heaven, Hell or God. The Buddha made no claims of being a prophet or a relative of God. The historic Buddha seemed rather to have been an early exponent of human psychology, who devoted his life and teaching to advising humanity on ways and means of avoiding suffering. His basic message was: “Train yourself to have compassion, be kind, and help others where it is possible to do so”.

Humanists would have no argument with this world view at all. Where Buddhism as a religion has strayed over the centuries has been in trying to answer the questions that its founder had avoided. Recognising this, secular Buddhism (basically a western reinterpretation of traditional eastern beliefs) seeks to strip Buddhist doctrine of anything that could be considered superstition and which cannot be tested through scientific experiment.

Many of you will have read Sam Harris’s *Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality Without Religion*. If you have a copy of the book handy, just check the index and see how much the author has drawn from Buddhism and meditation in his research into the non-religious experience of transcendence. Given Sam’s status as one of the ‘Four

Horsemen’ (i.e. four leading atheists), it was a brave departure from the what had gone before.

I’m currently reading Stephen Batchelor’s *Confessions of a Buddhist Atheist*. The writer is an ex-Buddhist monk who is focused on stripping back the non-rational aspects of centuries of ancient tradition. Again, there is some bravery in what has been written, as many

traditional Buddhists will be upset by the contents.

The book was reviewed by the late, great Christopher Hitchens (another famous Horseman!), who said that Batchelor “adds the universe of Buddhism to the many fields in which received truth and blind faith are now giving way to ethical and scientific humanism, in which lies our only real hope.”

If traditional ideas of God are being erased, what remains? What is left for us to venerate in this life? Our world is a very beautiful planet, but we as a species have been particularly greedy and selfish in our husbandry of it. Our innate selfishness undermines our claim to rationality.

Is it rational to endanger the survival of our own environment? We are idealists with the instincts of cavemen. We have the capacity to become murderous when inflamed by anger, fear and greed. But we can also exhibit acts of great kindness, and kindness is what makes life worth living.

The Esperanto word for ‘compassion’ is ‘kompati’. Whether Kompati ends up being spelt with a capital K or not, surely it is something worth cherishing and promoting in our lives? For that is exactly the major principle which unites Humanism with secular Buddhism. □

Humanist Masterpieces No 41

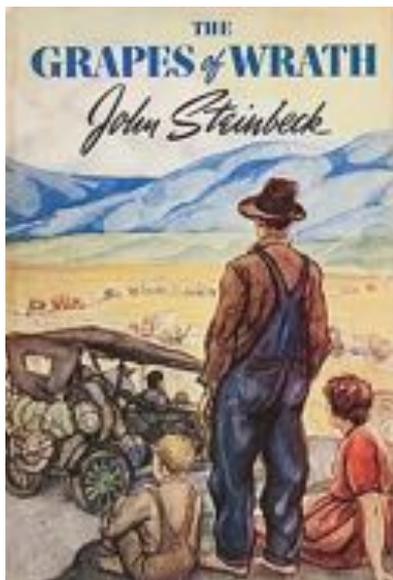
# The Grapes of Wrath (1939)

Brian McClinton

**W**HEN John Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath* was published in April 1939, it met with a mixed reception. In Kern County, California, the Board of Supervisors banned it in schools and libraries. Members of the Associated Farmers, who called it 'communist propaganda', burned a copy in a symbolic act. The *San Bernardino Sun* said, "the fallacy of this (story) should not be dignified with a denial". The *Oklahoma Times* referred to its 'obscenity and inaccuracy'.

Congressman Lyle Borden of Oklahoma called it "a black, infernal creation of a twisted, distorted mind... Some have said this book exposes a condition and a character of people... but the truth is this book exposes nothing but the total depravity, vulgarity, and degraded mentality of the author". Steinbeck was widely seen as a dangerous communist activist using the book as a means of stirring up a revolution. Arthur D. Spearman, a Jesuit priest, called it 'an embodiment of the Marxist Soviet propaganda'.

Edmund Wilson, the literary critic, journalist and author of *To the Finland Station*, a classic history of the Left from Michelet to Lenin, described it as "a propaganda novel, full of preachments and sociological interludes". In *The Boys in the Backroom* (1941) he wrote: "The characters of *The Grapes of Wrath* are animated and put through their paces rather than brought to life; they are like excellent character actors giving very conscientious performances in a fairly well-written play. Their dialect is well managed, but they always sound a little stagy; and, in spite of Mr. Steinbeck's efforts to make them figure as heroic human symbols, one cannot help feeling that these Okies, too, do not exist for him quite seriously as people".



Wilson is otherwise complimentary. He praises the fundamental quality of Steinbeck's intelligence, which looks upon the hard world with robust and virile fearlessness. Eleanor Roosevelt was more fulsome, calling her reading of the novel 'an unforgettable experience'. Her husband, the president, declared that "there are 500,000 Americans that live in the covers of that book". Dorothy Parker, the American poet and critic, called it "the greatest American novel I have ever read". It became the top American seller of 1939 with 430,000 copies sold and in 1940 it was awarded a Pulitzer Prize.

Darryl Zanuck of 20th Century Fox snapped up the movie rights for \$70,000 and hot on the heels of the novel came the film, starring Henry Fonda as Tom Joad and Jane Darwell as Ma Joad. It was nominated for seven Academy Awards and won two: for the director John Ford and for Darwell as supporting actress. Although Steinbeck was left-wing, Ford was right-wing and stated that it appealed to him because it was about simple people and the story was similar to the famine in Ireland.

*The Grapes of Wrath* tells the story of a sharecropping family's forced trek from Oklahoma in search of a better life in the 'promised land' of California during the Dust Bowl. This was the name given to the drought-stricken Southern Plains region of the United States, which suffered severe dust storms during a dry period in the 1930s. The high winds and choking dust swept the region from Texas to Nebraska, people and livestock died and crops failed across the entire area. The Joads suffered the fate of thousands of others when the bank repossessed their farm – "tractorin' off the place", as a neighbour Muley Graves describes it, referring to the caterpillar tractor that 'bumped the hell out of the house'.

In particular, the novel focuses on the moral journey and transformation of Tom Joad. The story begins when he has been released from the Oklahoma State Penitentiary, where he served four years of a seven-year sentence for murder. He and another man were involved in a drunken brawl at a dance. The man stabbed him with a knife, and he replied by hitting him with a shovel that was lying nearby – "knocked his head plum to squash", he says.

On his way home he meets Jim Casey, a former travelling preacher he remembers from childhood. Casey tells him that he has lost his calling and finally concluded that "there ain't no sin and there ain't no virtue. There's just stuff people do. It's all part of the same thing. And some of the things folks do is nice, and some ain't nice, but that's as far as any man got a right to say". All that matters, he finally realises, is the spirit of love, not the love of Jesus because he doesn't know anybody named Jesus, but the love of people. Of course, it is hardly a coincidence that his own initials are 'JC' and, like Jesus, he wanders in the wilderness. Later, -->

while travelling with the Joads, he sacrifices himself, Christ-like, when he turns himself in to save Tom who has knocked a deputy unconscious. When he comes out of jail, he becomes a union activist and leads a strike in support of a living wage. He compares the workers' struggle for justice to that of Lincoln, Washington, and the martyrs of the French Revolution. He is soon killed by a vigilante with a pick handle. He has become a martyr for the Joad family and for the entire class that they represent. He paraphrases Jesus's last words – "forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do" – by crying, "You don' know what you're a doin'".

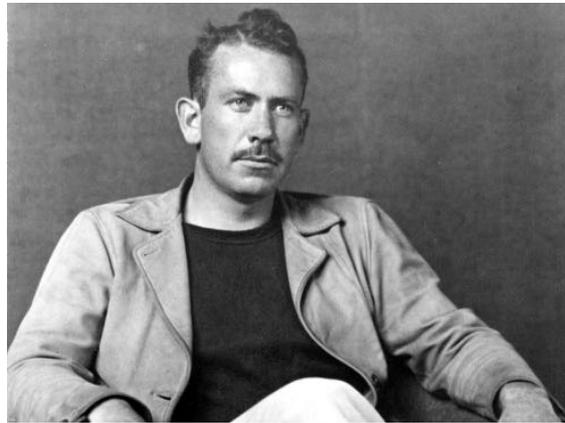
If Casy is a Christ figure then Tom is his disciple who experiences an 'education of the heart'. He begins as a cynic and progresses to a socialist humanism. When he witnesses the death of his grandparents, who are buried along the roadside, and the other hardships of his family on their journey, he assumes responsibility for them and for the community around him. As Steinbeck wrote in an article: "Man is a double thing – a group animal and at the same time an individual. And it occurs to me that he cannot successfully be the second until he has fulfilled the first" (*Some Thoughts on Juvenile Delinquency*, 1955).

The film critic Pauline Kael condemned the film as "a blur of embarrassing sentimental pseudo-biblical pseudo-documentary, a perfect representation of what Bertrand Russell called 'the fallacy of the superior virtue of the oppressed'". It is true that the novel uses copious biblical allusions. It has a religious title from *The Battle Hymn of the Republic* by the abolitionist writer Julia Ward Howe, a stirring call for victory over the racist forces repressing another downtrodden group. Moreover, the journey of the Joads is also a rerun of the Exodus story with Route 66 as the Judean wilderness, although it is a kind of reversal in the sense that the family move from a kind of freedom on the land in Oklahoma to bondage in California.

So, yes, Steinbeck employs biblical tropes and includes elements of

Christianity in promoting love and individual sacrifice, but the novel is not a mouthpiece of Christian doctrine. The humanist philosophy at the centre is active, not passive. Nor is his main protagonist perfect: he is implicated in two killings. Rather, he is saying that the resilience and courage of the oppressed in the face of extreme adversity is to be greatly admired, and they deserve to enjoy the same freedom from want and fear as everybody else.

Steinbeck was accused of being a communist. When preparing the work he wrote: "I want to put a tag of shame on the greedy bastards who are responsible for this" [i.e. the Depression and its effects]. His wrath is directed at the banks who drive farmers off the land and the



businessmen who exploit migrant labour and disband trade unions. And of course he wants the reader to feel this wrath too.

If Steinbeck's position is socialist, it is greatly tinged with rugged individualism and other American philosophies. The concept of the 'Over-Soul' developed by Ralph Waldo Emerson in an essay of that title in 1841 is clearly expressed by Casy who believes that everyone's soul is just part of one big soul. In Emerson's case, the latter is God's soul, what he calls 'the eternal one'. For Casy, however, the one big soul is humanity. He and Steinbeck share a Walt Whitman-like faith in humanity, which is for many the essence of Humanism.

The one big soul is thus the better part of ourselves. Tom sums it up when he tells his mother: "I'll be around in the dark - I'll be everywhere. Wherever you can look - wherever there's a fight, so hungry

people cant eat, I'll be there. Wherever there's a cop beatin' up a guy, I'll be there. I'll be in the way guys yell when they're mad. I'll be in the way kids laugh when they're hungry and they know supper's ready, and when the people are eatin' the stuff they raise and livin' in the houses they buid - I'll be there, too".

There are also elements of Jeffersonian agrarianism in the novel. It maintains that the essential connection between humankind and nature should be protected and enhanced, and therefore the economy should be founded on farming, a rural way of life, and respect for the land.

Yet ultimately, what Steinbeck wants to emphasise is the Christian humanist message of loving one's neighbour. And it is the women above all who embody this compassion. Ma Joad says that "women can change better than a man". She welcomes strangers like Casy into the family and feeds the hungry children in the Hooverville camp. Like millions of women, she works selflessly for others and tries to instil the same attitude in her saucy eldest daughter Rose of Sharon. Ma ultimately succeeds in her mission when, after bearing a stillborn child, Rose bares her breast and offers her milk to a starving man (a scene not shown in the film).

*The Grapes of Wrath* became the cornerstone of John Steinbeck's Nobel Prize for literature in 1962, won "for his realistic and imaginative writings, combining as they do sympathetic humour and keen social perception". Although he wrote 16 other novels, notably *Of Men and Men* (1937), *Cannery Row* (1945) and *East of Eden* (1952), *The Grapes of Wrath* is undoubtedly his masterpiece.

It is certainly not a religious work. In a letter in 1964 he wrote: "I am not religious so that I have no apprehension of a hereafter, either a hope of reward or a fear of punishment. It is not a matter of belief. It is what I feel to be true from my experience, observation and simple tissue feeling". But the novel is imbued throughout with the spirit of an ethically Christian Humanism. □

# The Irrationality of Miracles

Andy Barr

**T**RADITIONALLY, miracles have been understood as violations of the laws of nature, and if that occurs then it is proof of the existence of God. So if it was proved that Jesus had been born of a virgin, then would Christianity be vindicated?

Many of Jesus's Biblical miracles reflect goodwill – he heals the sick, raises the dead, cures blindness, feeds the hungry, and so on. Muhammed is also said to have multiplied food and drink supernaturally to feed the hungry masses. The problem I find with that is when millions of people, at that very moment when somebody is supposedly being cured of blindness, are suffering horribly from disease, famine, cruelty, torture, genocide and death without the almighty lifting a finger to help. It immediately raises the question that God doesn't know about, care about, or doesn't have the power to intervene. Therefore a being that engages in trivial events cannot be a moral God. An infinitely good God wouldn't have left the job half done, or is God unfair?

God is alleged to be infinitely knowledgeable and good, but miracles are not consistent with this, because they can be performed by magicians and illusionists, which can be easily faked. He could do much better if he was trying to prove his existence, like growing limbs. Of course, according to the Bible, he also punishes by using miracles, like turning Lot's wife into a pillar of salt.

Extraordinary claims of miracles surely require extraordinary evidence and no testing will suffice to establish a miracle. Interestingly, people who believe in miracles reject the miracles in other religions. I don't think any other Christian believes that Joseph Smith, founder of the Mormon religion, was given golden plates on top of a mountain in America, yet they believe that the Virgin Mary gave birth to Jesus without any evidence. Nobody checked for an intact hymen before she gave birth and Joseph was not given a DNA test to see if he was the Daddy. All is second hand testimony. Evidence doesn't lie, people do. Treat your own indoctrinated faith just as you treat the religions you reject. It's the only way to know which religion is true, if any. The fact that miracles are reported today doesn't prove anything.

If a watchmaker had to continually repair the watch he made, you would have thought that the watch was made by an inferior watchmaker. If God created the world and had to regularly intervene with miracles then he didn't do a good job in the first place. Martin Luther once said: "Reason is the Devil's Whore", as reason can do nothing but slander and harm all that God says and does.

Why do Christians believe in miracles? One obvious answer is that Christians believe because their ancestors did. Handed down religious beliefs date away back to



the beginnings of the Hebrew religion and earlier religions of the ancient Middle East. Christianity was born at a time in history when every religion included a belief in magic, miraculous healings and wonders. Good things happened to good people and bad people got what they deserve. In the Bible we have angels, devils, unicorns, dragons, and witches. Even today in the 21<sup>st</sup> century we have Christian fundamentalists who continue to inhabit this wonderland. In their minds we all live in this magical world mapped out by our ancestors. Christians argue that miracles are not magic. They say that magic has either a human or demonic source, but miracles are the supernatural work of God. Jesus was not a magician, he was the son of God known for his many miracles.

The Bible is full of astrology, fortune-telling, spell casting, curses, and charms, though a lot of Christians warn against many of these practices. My own mum used to read the tealeaves from cups of women in our street. The domain of the miraculous has certainly shrunk, but it has not gone away. Many of us, including non-believers, are attracted to magic. Audiences flock to see illusionists and magicians.

James Randi, aged 92, is a Canadian-born retired magician and scientific sceptic who set up a challenge offering one million dollars to anyone who could prove paranormal or supernatural powers under scientific conditions. No Church took up the challenge which has lasted for 60 years. Magicians who took it up failed. Randi debunked all of Uri Geller's claims of supernatural powers. He has dedicated the remainder of his career to unmasking frauds. The challenge for Bible-believing —>

Christians is how you know that any verse in the Bible comes from God and not the author.

Christians convinced by the power of prayer have spent a lot of money trying to prove that the practice works, with very poor results, yet that has done little to shake their faith in the power of prayer. Prayer to believers covers ground faster than Skype or Zoom: from your lips to God's ears, as Jewish Rabbis used to say. Visiting Lourdes, a sceptic was shown a cave with hundreds of crutches thrown away by people who had been supposedly cured. He asked to see the room with discarded wooden legs and of course none was forthcoming.

Millions of evangelicals and other Christian fundamentalists believe that the Bible was essentially dictated by God to men who acted as script writers. It is so badly written, containing absurd stories, that I can't believe how people (sometimes intelligent) can believe it. I've concluded that liberal Christians focus on the better parts and ignore the rest.

When religious folk believe that they possess God's truth, there are only too often bad outcomes, such as purges, burnings and religious wars. They could have been easily avoided if the holy books had contained the following:

*Thou shalt not engage in war, don't assume I am on your side and don't pray to me for victory.*

*Thou shalt not enslave other humans – ever.*

*Thou shalt not despise or discriminate on the basis of colour or ethnic origin.*

*Thou shalt not discriminate against women.*

*Thou shalt not discriminate against Gay people.*

The apostle Paul was convinced that Jesus's descent through the clouds was only months away or at the most a few years. Devout Christians of various brands are always warning us that he is on his way any time soon. My Sunday School teacher told us all to prepare for his coming. I remember telling my Granddad that Jesus was on his way and he told me his teacher said the very same thing and he was born in the 19th century.

According to Mark 16:17, baptised Christians (who include myself) have the power to cast out demons. In Mark 6:7 we read that Jesus gave his disciples "authority over the unclean spirits". Why did he not exercise his authority and get rid of them altogether? There is another verse in the New Testament that must make Christians cringe. Luke 14:26 states: "If any man comes to me and hate not his father, mother, wife and children and brethren, and sisters, yea and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple".

Science is the opposite of magic. Where magic and the miraculous aspects of religion demand the supernatural, science rejects any such reliance. Science states that the world is material and it can be successfully investigated through material means. Science is subject to examination and retesting. Evolution follows the rules of science. No other idea about how species originate does. Religion often argues that there is no intermediate species, which is nonsense. Archaeopteryx fossils show an animal that is clearly transitional between small predatory flying dinosaurs and modern birds. It had

feathers, wings, and a wishbone like a bird. It also had a full set of teeth, a flat sternum instead of a deep-keeled one that birds have, a long bony tail like a dinosaur (or lizard) and rib-like bones floating in the muscles of the abdomen, like many dinosaurs and modern crocodiles.

Every culture has its tall tales and legends and ours is no exception with leprechauns and banshees. Sightings of the Madonna are commonly claimed miracles, but only in Catholic countries for obvious reasons. Boxers who have won a bout may give credit to God for their victory. The next fight they could have 7 bells knocked out of them and somehow God is ignored.

In 2 Kings: 23-24 the Prophet Elisha who has wondered about the holy land invoking miracles for pay, approaches the gates of Bethel, when children mocked him for his bald head. Elisha curses them and, hey presto, a pair of bears maul 42 children to death. How can this be claimed as a miracle on behalf of a just and perfect God?

The Old Testament covers the time of Ancient Egypt. Their hieroglyphic writings detail their history, dates of battles, Pharaohs etc. They were deciphered by a famous French archaeologist called Jean-Francois Champolion. There is no mention of Noah's flood and the enslavement of the Hebrew people in these hieroglyphics, and the Catholic Church demanded that he should not publish his findings because they contradicted the Bible.

Hundreds of millions who lived before us have never returned from the grave, so the claim that one did is about as extraordinary as you will find. Even though there is some archaeological evidence for Biblical tales, there is nothing that confirms any miracle. For the resurrection the only evidence is second-third-fourth hand by four gospel authors plus Paul. None of them was written by eyewitnesses.

What we find in the Bible is a world in which God lived in the sky just above the mountains and people who died went to live in dark recesses of the earth. In that world snakes and donkeys could talk. In that world God brought down fire from the sky and threatened sinners with everlasting torment in an eternal fire. In this world a woman turned into a pillar of salt, the sun stopped moving across the sky, a star pointed down at a specific place and someone's shadow or handkerchief could heal the sick. God sent diseases, famines, plagues of locusts and droughts. The ancient world was indeed full of miracle workers and magicians.

These extraordinary beliefs have no evidence for them. Yet billions believe what they read in the Bible and Quran based on ancient prescientific oral testimony, as handed down through word of mouth through generations until written down by anonymous authors we can no longer interrogate.

There is something clearly wrong here. Reasonable people should require objective evidence before accepting such extraordinary tales. Man is not in control of his life. Evil spirits may take possession of him and Satan may inspire him with evil thoughts. This is the nonsense of a prescientific age. Why hold on to faiths that have their roots in ignorance, superstition, fear and hatred? □



# After ☉ 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



**A** FAMILY day was planned for April 1981 – the only one, thankfully, of the novitiate. Before it, I received a letter from my mother deliberating, in copious detail, on the merits or otherwise of her bringing a picnic bag into the chapel or whether leaving it in the car would be preferable.

I was exasperated reading it and despaired of the chasm between us when she said before a presentation on the day: ‘Is there anything you want me to ask?’ She couldn’t grasp that this was my new family, where I could be myself, ask questions and, on most things, speak my mind.

However, there was one area we could not discuss. Nationalist feelings ran high for some novices when IRA hunger striker Bobby Sands was elected Member of Parliament for Fermanagh and South Tyrone in April 1981. He had been on hunger strike for 41 days. It was a non-violent protest and it ignited my Irish nationalism. But we were banned from discussing it in the novitiate, probably because three of our confrères were English; although one English confrère was happy to talk about it and favoured a united Ireland.

The Superior spoke to us about the vow of obedience. After presenting us with the relevant Vatican Council documents, and scriptural passages employed in its support, he said: ‘Obedience is listening to God’s will. We do not ignore our personal judgement but we submit our mind and will to God’s will, the Church, and the call of the Superior. Obedience requires sacrifice.’

Bobby Sands died on 5 May, 1981. Nine more hunger strikers and 61 others died due to sectarian strife during that seven-month protest. But in a seminary on the island where the maelstrom was happening, we were forbidden to discuss it.

I was angry about this prohibition. How could suppression of discussion and debate be good? Now, aged 58, I consider submission of the mind to anyone a dereliction of adult responsibility.

Novitiate life had its comic moments. During an intense, heated community meeting on food wastage, emotions rocketed stratospherically, until a prim novice pricked the tension with: ‘Imagine getting emotional about carrots!’

We exploded into laughter.

In late May, the novitiate got the ferry across the Irish Sea to visit the Marian shrine of Walsingham in England. We travelled in a clapped-out minibus with extraordinary play in the steering wheel. On the English motorways, we swayed from side to side, alarming other road users.

Even to my innocent eyes, Walsingham was a strange place. At a pub frequented by camp Anglican vicars, a clergyman asked a fellow novice, ‘What are you into?’ ‘Elephants!’ my confrère replied, beating a hasty retreat. A third hunger striker died while we were in Walsingham, and we learned that Charles Haughey had dissolved the Government. The election, the first of three in two years, was held on 11 June – the first poll in which I was old enough to vote.

Back in Milltown, our third silent retreat began. Led by Father Peter Allen, it focused on suffering. My mood at the start of the retreat was of anger for no obvious reason. Doubts resurfaced and my journal records thoughts about leaving. But by the third day, happiness, contentment and joy abounded. A spontaneous and authentic smile oozed forth from deep within.

I enjoyed cutting the lawns. Rather than focusing on getting the job done, I lived in the present. When we were finished, four of us got two wheelbarrows, a novice in each, and we had a silent wheelbarrow race!

That evening, while Peter led us through relaxation exercises – in his words ‘breathing in the presence of the Lord’ – I remained joyful and couldn’t stop smiling. ‘*It’s as if some healing is going on within me,*’ I journalled. ‘*The thought of getting a job in the world and staying at that work for the rest of my life appals me. Within religious life, I’ll be changed continually, which should keep my mind broad, adaptable and always learning.*’

It wasn’t just me: everyone looked serene. One night, after compline, a novice broke the silence and whispered to me, ‘We should all become enclosed monks!’

‘Why?’ I asked.

‘Everyone is so happy!’

Next day, I sat outdoors on sweet-smelling hay, the sunny sky above, the potatoes we had planted earlier in the year doing well. I heard a scholastic playing his guitar and singing. I was peaceful, happy and self-aware. I walked barefoot through potato furrows, the clay soft beneath my feet, oozing soil between my toes.

When I had entered novitiate, I thought: ‘Who wants girls, money or independence once you’ve got Jesus?’ But, by the end of the third silent retreat, I had an awakening appreciation of what I’d be giving up.

‘Yes, now I feel I can be a priest,’ I mused, sensing the sacrifice, and believing that faith alone was needed.



## Humanism and Universal Basic Income

**I**N the July-August edition of *Irish Freethinker and Humanist*, Eamon Murphy gave a very clear account of Universal Basic Income: what it is, how it works and the benefits to individuals and society. I'd like to give a humanist context for the concept.

Humanism values the quality of human life. It follows that every individual should be given the best possible opportunity to fulfil their potential. In turn, this implies that society should provide a basic level of security: shelter and liberty.

Part of the value of individual humans is their diversity — we are the products of the diversity of our genes and our experiences. From an evolutionary perspective, this diversity is valuable in itself. Humans live in hugely complex societies with rapidly changing technologies and challenging problems. A diversity of talent is exactly what is needed because we cannot anticipate what skills will be needed in future.

There is perhaps not much we can do about our genetic inheritance, but our experience can be modified. The effects of a damaging environment can persist into adult life and may affect subsequent generations. Severe stress causes long-term damage, and an upbringing where violence is common may permanently impair an individual's ability to form positive, loving relationships.

Poverty is a significant contributor to stress in families where people live in a constant state of anxiety about paying the next bill and as a result do not have the mental space to devote to making the best decisions. That leads to adverse consequences for not only their general well-being and health but also their ability to negotiate with bureaucracy for access to services, employment and education.

It follows that the elimination of poverty should be a primary aim of a compassionate society concerned with the well-being of its citizens. Indeed, without the elimination of poverty, much of the spending on health and education may be wasted. A hungry child is not likely to learn well.

Poverty is caused by lack of money, so the provision of a Universal Basic Income would eliminate poverty by providing a minimum decent level of economic security for everyone. Where this has been tried, it has resulted in beneficial outcomes. The recipients' health has improved and the incidence of early pregnancies falls and there is a much better movement into education and employment. Significantly, the quality of parenting goes up, leading to benefits for society in savings for health care, social services and welfare payments. There is also a saving in the cost of social services since UBI is a flat rate and requires no means testing, and, since everyone is entitled to it, there is little need for expensive systems for detecting welfare fraud. There is no need for expensive mandatory 'back-to work' schemes.

The current pandemic has emphasised the role of compassion in society. In Ireland, the government prioritised the saving of lives over maintaining the economy and went a long way to providing security for those who lost their jobs. Just consider how much better things would have been if there had been a Universal Basic Income. The self-employed — including many in the tourist industry, the arts and entertainment — would have been protected from a complete cessation of their income. This would have resulted in reduced levels of stress for individuals (likely) building up future costs in health care. Society would be more compassionate — and what humanist wouldn't approve that.

*Alan Tuffery, Dublin*

## Hoist by his Own Petard

**PETER Hitchens writing in the *Mail on Sunday* (5th July), about the use of face masks (very much against them) has inadvertently, in the first few sentences, made a case that could be used against his own religious faith. The words he has written could easily have come from a follower of a mainstream religious adherent in the first century CE, making reference to the emerging belief in Christianity:**

*"When this madness began, I behaved as if a new and fanatical religion was spreading among us. Be polite and tolerant, I thought. It may be crazy and damaging but in time it will go away."*

*"Now it is clear that a new faith, based on fear of the invisible and quite immune to reason, has all but taken over the country. And it turns out to be one of those faiths that doesn't have much tolerance for those who don't share it".*

*Ken Murray, Belfast*

## Irish Freethinker Outreach

FREETHINKERS, inevitably, are ahead of their time, even if measured merely in days. A case in point is your most recent issue reaching us in late June, monitored it seems in the upper echelons of the 4th Estate, with no less than the *Financial Times* and the *Irish Times* echoing similar thought processes.

Your *Three Conmen of Corona* headline sat alongside images, from left to right, of Bolsonaro, Trump and Johnson, followed by an article which referred to the Pied Piper of Hamelin. The *FT Weekend* magazine of 4th July offered an 'Opening Shot' (again inside front) on the part of Simon Kuper titled "*The politicians who played the Covid-19 crisis badly*". It profiled the self-same rogues' gallery and commencing: "*Bolsonaro, Trump and Johnson ...*" in curious mirror-image. The Pied Piper, too, made a cameo appearance in this camp.

And on 7th July the letters' page in the *Irish Times* offered us a heading: "*Time for a universal basic income*" — never mind that Eamon Murphy's clear, analytical article entitled "*An old idea whose time has come*" expounded the very idea across two full pages of the aforementioned *Irish Freethinker* issue.

One is reminded somehow of the plight of Chief White Halfcoat of *Catch-22* fame when the oil companies competed to pre-empt his next relocation where, no question, oil riches lay in wait. Is there a scramble in store for bi-monthly issues, to be ahead of the posse *vis-à-vis* the free-thinker mindset?

*Owen Morton, Dublin*

# Living without Free Will

Noel Byrne

**W**ITH Earth's first clay they did the last man knead,  
And there of the last harvest sow'd the seed:  
And the first morning of creation wrote,  
What the last dawn of reckoning shall read.  
(*Rubaiyat of Umar Khayyam*, V 53)

IN a recent article here I maintained that free will is an illusion, though it is ingrained in our psyches and in society for generations. Most folk don't grasp the idea of free will, because they are aware that they make decisions and then proceed to conflate the two ideas. It is a counter-intuitive concept. Living without free will does not come naturally to us, particularly as one of its consequences is a lack of moral responsibility. I believe that the illusion of free will is an adaptive trait that remains in our population in order to sustain our concepts of morality and make group living operable. But what if we had a society in which the non-existence of free will was accepted? How different might that be relative to present society? If, as I contend, free will does not exist and never existed, then present society has actually been built on the absence of free will, just as it was also built on the absence of an interfering god. The free will illusion, I believe, is even more ingrained in the human psyche than the god illusion.

In a society without free will there would be neither blame nor praise and most importantly a realisation of the major part played by luck in our lives through both nature and nurture, by way of our genes and our environment. The principal argument against the acceptance of the absence of free will in a society is that it would bring about the downfall of human civilisation, because nobody would be morally responsible for their conduct. Without moral responsibility, what can prevent the social order from collapsing, they ask?

In relation to society this is the only argument I will deal with here, as this illusion is currently a philosophical issue only, and in the present time extremely unlikely to change laws, policies or society. As free will is neither widely understood nor accepted, I believe that society is not yet ready to let go of its illusion. In fact in present society it is probably still a necessary illusion. It is only if people can live without the concept on a personal basis first that society might be changed.

Further on I will deal with its absence at a personal level. If we are not then personally responsible for our actions how can society deal with this fact? Do murder, rape, pillage and mayhem follow? Actually no. All that would be required would be a change of mindset. Society as presently organised would not require much change. The principal change would be in the area of law and penology. Accountability or answerability would be to society. This is different from personal moral responsibility. The governance of any society requires accountability or an-

swerability. In such a society we would be liable for the consequences of our actions, but not morally responsible. Those who break the laws or interfere with the rights of others or violate community norms, rules or standards would have to be curtailed, but not in a revengeful or punitive manner. This curtailment would have a rehabilitative or deterrent value and not be retributive. Punishment would be justified on consequentialist grounds, not on prior events. Society has to be protected to ensure that peace and order prevail. Deterrence would be required but it wouldn't be seen as punishment but as correctional. The deterrence would need to ensure the rule-breaker is capable of understanding the potential consequences of his or her conduct and can be influenced by the deterrence. Every effort should be made to help these persons function in harmony with the rest of society.

One of the practical consequences of accepting the non-existence of free will is that we would no longer accept revenge as a factor in punishing people who commit a crime. Deterrence would still be a valid argument, though, as would extracting a dangerous individual from society. Such individuals must be prevented from doing more harm by putting them somewhere safe, or by encouraging that person to change, by re-educating them or by dealing with whatever behavioural problems they have. We would also need to discourage others from doing the same socially unacceptable acts. Being presented with the knowledge that a particular action may result in a particular punishment may be sufficient to alter a wrong trajectory of action. It is completely reasonable to act against wrongdoing in any society whether one accepts free will or not.

Among those who try to live their lives free of the illusion of Free Will are the neuroscientist Sam Harris and the psychologist Susan Blackmore. The Stoics also argued that affirming determinism could result in a profound sort of equanimity. From a personal point of view, the difference between genuine free will and the illusion of free will is pretty meaningless. Life basically continues much as before just as it does without god.

When you live without free will, some aspects of your mindset change with the realisation that you are not responsible for your decisions or their outcomes, including the guilt you feel when you let people down, your need to defend yourself against criticism, not putting yourself down, your need to talk about yourself, boasting, your sensitivity to insult or rejection, being willing to be emotionally honest, your grasping for power, or admiration for those who have power, among others. You realise that life's outcomes are determined by disparities in nature and nurture. Realisation of the illusory nature of free will is really quite liberating. You are no longer so concerned with making the wrong decision. You can live in the moment. It makes your emotions easier to control. -->

When you understand that people behave the way they do because of factors beyond their control it becomes harder to hate them for their actions. If one seriously accepts the illusory nature of free will, then emotions such as resentment, anger, spite, vindictiveness and scorn rarely arise and when they do they retreat more quickly. Guilt, shame, fear of failure and much anxiety fall away. You become a better person.

One of the arguments against the illusion is that if we are not morally responsible we will go around pillaging, murdering raping etc. and that people will no longer consciously control themselves. This is untrue. As a species we have evolved a natural reciprocal altruism. This means we are consciously aware that we will be treated as we treat others.

Another issue that arises relates to meaning in our lives. In a deterministic world we are not praiseworthy for what we do, because our actions or deeds are caused by events beyond our control. But achievements and life-hopes are not necessarily tied to praiseworthiness. If one sets out to achieve a goal and accomplishes it, then this is still an achievement that was desired even though one is not praiseworthy for it. A further issue which arises relates to whether life would have any purpose in these circumstances? But we give life purpose ourselves whether or not we believe in free will.

In a deterministic world some might argue that our actions are just part of a course of events and our efforts would not affect it. That they are not in control of their own fate, and without free will all they have and all they have accomplished are not of their doing, but merely a result of circumstances. Determinism and fatalism are not the same. People are also causes. Our deliberations, actions and decisions are determined but causally effective, and they can and do influence the future. This is confusing determined and predetermined. Our actions are not written by the fates. Our genes and our environment determine them, and our environment is changing constantly. Although luck plays a large part in life, our actions and decisions do have consequences for our lives.

Personally I find peace of mind in the notion of determinism and lack of free will as in the *Desiderata*, be at peace with yourself, “and whether or not it is clear to you, no doubt the world is unfolding as it should.” Everything that happens does so for a reason and it could happen no other way.

If we realise that free will is a nonsensical concept, we should be more compassionate. If someone does something bad to you, you're less likely to get angry with them. Free will is not a necessary foundation for morality and responsibility. Codes of morality, legal doctrines, and the language of responsibility are all useful behaviour patterns that result in, or are meant to result in, the reduction of anti-social behaviour and are likely to remain whether the term free will has a meaning or not.

A Society without free will would leave the important things in life intact, such as morality, preventing human evil, as well as fulfilment and meaning in life. We would resist anger, blame and resentment, but we would still feel pain, sadness and regret when wronged. □

## The Sentence Alan Tuffery

“The sentence is the greatest invention of mankind.’ So said John Banville, the distinguished author in a radio interview. Banville is not a man given to the glib phrase. Indeed, he described it as ‘almost his cliché by now.’

So what does this statement mean? We know that language is the distinguishing feature of humankind and that it is unmatched by anything else in the whole of the natural world. Language enables communication of an increasingly sophisticated kind and is the means of cultural evolution, the rapid spread of ideas of all kinds throughout human societies. Cultural evolution, based on language, is the engine of our rapid development, largely independent of our environment.

A sentence requires objects, ideas and actions to be carefully arranged to convey precise information about ourselves and our world and the relationship of one thing to another. That information is not restricted to the tangible and everyday. Articulate sentences allow us to convey information about things that do not exist: unicorns, the past and the future. Well-formulated prose enables us to discuss complex ideas, such as moral values in hypothetical situations, or the most abstruse relationships in physics, biology and philosophy.

The sentence is the vehicle for Abstract Thought. It allows us to reflect on the relationships between things, to see recurrent patterns and to manipulate them in complex ways. Thus, we can recognise classes of ideas and objects and arrange them into hierarchies. This, in turn, allows us to use different frames of reference for different tasks. For example, an economic problem may be looked at in terms of its effects on the family, the town, the state, all of humanity or the whole biosphere.

It is this capacity for Abstract Thought which is humankind's highest attribute — based on that highest invention — the sentence. Crucially, it helps us to distinguish cause and effect which is the basis for the revolution in thinking from the non-rational to the rational. Consider, too, that the whole of science and technology, and great art are dependent upon the sentence, at least in so far as thought is dependent upon sentences.

It is notable that some of the greatest thinkers of recent times have also been prolific writers. For example, Francis Crick, one of the those who discovered the structure and the code of DNA, produced a prolific flow of detailed letters and speculative papers as part of the process of moving towards clearer insights into some of the greatest problems in biology. In his early days in Cambridge, the practice of circulating discussion papers seems to have been central to the working of the Cambridge powerhouse. Crick was also a great talker and his mornings in the lab with Sydney Brenner were famously filled with loud, speculative discussions where ideas were tossed out, examined and rejected or incorporated into a new formulation. After receiving the Nobel Prize, Crick had no difficulty in publishing even very speculative papers in prestigious journals and was never short of invitations to attend gatherings of experts all over the world.

This endless process of forming sentences to express new and complex ideas is a crucial thinking tool. The actual process of constructing the sentence contributes to the clarification of the ideas. The process of writing, discussion, and revision leads to refinement of those ideas. □



Books

# A Philosopher for All Seasons

Owen Morton

**T**HE storyline that follows is part eulogy, part book review, part clarion call and, like all good stories, its backdrop warrants a place in it. It's predicated in reviewing 'the new normal' and how we might cope, with particular reference to conventional wisdom as handed down. It has a humanist flavour and, this being the case, unusually in stressful times, perhaps, religion remains in the background. The antidote is suggested to be found elsewhere.

Your storyteller can't muster a more fitting introduction than to re-present the opening observations in a 2010 *Irish Times* book review penned by UCD's Siofra Pierce: "Is any question more relevant in life than that of how to live? Now that recessionary times offer more opportunity to think, the big issues loom larger than ever: how to live life? How to deal with interpersonal conflict? How to cope with loss? How to enjoy life to the full and feel happy? In these days of gurus and self-help manuals, it is salutary to think that some of the neatest advice on life and the best answers to these questions may come from a book written more than 400 years ago by the French aristocratic landlord, lawyer, mayor and thinker Michel Eyquem de Montaigne".

The book in question is Sarah Bakewell's engaging *How to Live - the life of Michel de Montaigne in one question and twenty attempts at an answer*. And all we're asked to do is fast-forward ten years, replace "recessionary times" in Pierce's intro with "a time of pandemic", and allow our story unfold.

Also in the build-up, there came along in recent weeks, again in the *Irish Times*, a dedicated feature: "Ten philosophers to help us through the corona virus crisis" which might readily have supported the aims of the story – except, unpardonably as some might see it, our hero didn't feature!

And finally, before the story-proper gets under way, there came an invitation to partake in – and perhaps contribute a party piece to – a humanist Summer Solstice celebration. It's this latter piece of the jigsaw that triggered the evangelising bit, the "clarion call" dimension to it all.

Drawing the strands together, hopefully, the aim is:

- To present Montaigne (a) against an 18th Century Enlightenment backdrop; (b) as a quintessential link in the chain between antiquity and modernity, philosophically speaking; and finally (c), as a beacon in the vanguard of modern secular humanism. No mean triad, free-thinkers will agree!
- To review Bakewell's book in summary, and

- To draw inspiration and deliver a message for young and old, facing into the aforementioned "new normal"

Parts 1 and 2 are each divided into six points, the first part focusing on the man himself:

1. Montaigne is a towering figure among precursors of 18th Century Enlightenment thinking. Voltaire, Rousseau, Diderot, Hobbes, Hutcheson, among others, acknowledged the profound influence of his *Essays*. Closely linked to him, idealistically, is the luminary Montesquieu who in the mid 18th Century advocated votes for women, the abolition of slavery, religious tolerance and the separation of Church and State that would find expression in the American Constitution. As an aside, if you should take a tram to or from Université Bordeaux Montaigne you'll find yourself situated in Station Montaigne/Montesquieu.

2. Montaigne presents as the quintessential link between antiquity and modernity, philosophically speaking. Standing on the shoulders of giants, he was majorly influenced by, and beholden, among others, to Cicero, Socrates, Plutarch, Marcus Aurelius, and Seneca on the one hand, whilst on the other, you'll be hard pressed to root out an early modern to modern philosopher from Hobbes to, say, Bertrand Russell who didn't fall victim to the charm and the spell of the aforementioned *Essays*. An anthology profiling prominent 17th and 18th Century philosophers is titled *Moral Philosophy from Montaigne to Kant*. Writing on torture, Matthieu Ricard, the Dalai Lama's French interpreter/understudy, who was a recent guest interviewee in 'Lunch with the *Financial Times*', paraphrasing our illustrious diarist, expands: "As Michel de Montaigne wrote in his *Essays* . . .". Like Montaigne, Ricard believes that learning to live is learning to die. He isn't at all enamoured of the prospect of prolonging life dramatically. As his mother says: "eternity is awfully long, especially towards the end!"

3. His *Essays* have served as a beacon vis-à-vis modern secular humanism. "Let Life be its own answer", he encouraged. Google Steven Pinker and Montaigne conjointly and you'll get over 100,000 responses. Swap Pinker for Huxley (combinations, one supposes, of Thomas, and grandsons Julian and Aldous) and it's 1.3 million responses. Now Google Montaigne and Mindfulness in tandem (not that he'd have used the term), and the count again exceeds 1 million.

4. Space constraints oblige me to choose between calling attention to the many paradoxes in the book or to engage in a bit of celeb name-dropping or chit-chat. Let's go with the hearsay! —>

- Early 19th. Century English humanist essayist William Hazlitt, who expressed boundless admiration for Montaigne, opined: “he didn’t set up for a philosopher, wit, orator, or moralist, but he became all these by merely daring to tell us whatever passed through his mind, in its naked simplicity and force.”
- A compendium of Montaigne’s Essays, it is said, is one of the few books to have graced Shakespeare’s library.
- Gustave Flaubert said: “read him in order to live”; and Friedrich Nietzsche was moved to judge of him: “That such a man wrote, has truly augmented the joy of living on this Earth”.

5. Here we introduce a touch of irony: Montaigne is referred to above as a towering figure; in the real world he stood up to just 1.5m or just under 5 ft. This somewhat ruffled his normally imperturbable complacency, leaving him with a sense that Mother Nature had given him the short straw, so to speak. Taller people were more attractive, he felt.

6. Dogma didn’t fit too comfortably into Montaigne’s world view; that “nothing is certain” is one of the dominant articles of faith he’d absorb from the Greco-Roman philosophical canon to which he was in thrall. His motto or catch-phrase, as a consequence, was: “Que sais-je?” In contemporary texting parlance this presents as “wtfdik? – the foreshortened version of which translates: “what do I know?” He took this to extreme either in prefacing things along the lines: “I wouldn’t be sure, but . . .” or in qualifying them in afterthought, along the lines: “but then again . . .!”

Bakewell teases this out by invoking Socrates’ assertion: “All I know is that I know nothing” – mischievously suggesting that Montaigne appended his very own: “and I’m not even sure about that!”

And now six things to like about the book:

(i) Bakewell, who clearly enjoyed the engagement with Montaigne, has garnered international acclaim by dint of razor-sharp intellectual prowess in her masterful sifting, scanning, harnessing, and contextualising this extensive, meandering, idiosyncratic canon of work. We’re even treated to a touch of Blarney in correlating the Montaigne *Essays* and the labyrinthine shenanigans played out in Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* and, in turn, in Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*. Sterne, Bakewell proposes, is akin to “Montaigne on speed.”

(ii) Here is an invitation, or self-help book if you will, to reflect on life inwardly; no better time, perhaps, than in

this time of pandemic. A modicum of imperturbability, along with a healthy dose of self-examination and reflection, Montaigne-style, is just the job.

(iii) The book is replete with memorable anecdotes and encounters. Let me offer just one, and always remembering Chapter 2 is titled ‘Pay attention’. On visiting Rome, where he imagined himself following in the footsteps of his classical heroes, Montaigne met Pope Gregory XIII. In the course of this audience he kissed the Pope’s toes. Accommodatingly, Montaigne noted, the Bishop of Rome, “who spoke with a Bologna accent, lifted his toes a little to make the kiss easier”. The inquisitive and impressionable visitor was inclined to the view that the octogenarian Pontiff “had a sort of family resemblance to God himself”! Now that’s paying attention!

(iv) Montaigne’s ruminations, his readers conclude, come across as timeless; on occasion I found myself minded of contemporary Anglo-Irish social philosopher Charles Handy – in his wisdom, his pragmatism and his simple but effective, accessible communication style. The correlation is hardly surprising. Bakewell’s Chapter 7 of the 20 is titled: ‘Question everything!’ In Letter 5 of Handy’s 21 Letters to his Grandchildren (his latest book) he writes: “take nothing for granted, question everything, doubt the certainty of your superiors.”

(v) Penultimately, the hub, the kernel; how to live. Exhortations penned over 450 years ago: Suspend judgment; Learn to live, learn to die; Pay attention; Be imperfect; Question everything; Slow down!; Give up control; Guard your humanity.

And have I a favourite quote? How about: “Man is certainly stark mad; he cannot make a worm yet will be making Gods by dozens.”

(vi) Leaving the good wine til last: readers will likely know that A. C. Grayling set himself the task of writing a Humanist Bible (as an aside, his review of the Bakewell book is inspiring). This Bible proposition, mindful of the reductionism that seeks to condense the essence of Christianity into just two Great Commandments, prompts me to contract the entirety of 107 Essays into two simply stated Montaigne-isms that contemporary humanism might usefully embrace.

The first has been alluded to already in paraphrase, as in letting life be its own answer: “Life should be an aim unto itself; a purpose unto itself.” And the second: “The soul entertains philosophy, ought, by its health, to render the body beautiful too.” □





# Thank You

Colin Corkey



**T**HESE recent weeks of lockdown and isolation have shifted all of us into an unreal world, not only of grave uncertainty, but also of unforeseen opportunities. At the outset, a writer friend shared with me his thoughts on the matter, saying that this was a great opportunity for us, he with his writing and I with my painting. “We can just close ourselves away in our ‘studios’ and focus on our respective pursuits, with no disruptions, an ideal opportunity!” These were positive and well-meaning intentions.

However, from day one I have to admit that any inspirational thoughts or ideas I had entertained prior to lockdown very quickly dissipated ‘into the ether’. For four months I felt no motivation whatsoever to apply brush to canvas. I much admire anyone who was able

to make use of such a period of time in which to develop his or her artistic pursuits, whether it was painting, writing poetry or whatever. For me, as a painter, it was a long period of unproductive dearth.

Then one day in early June I began to experience the first signs of an urgency to paint again. These were accompanied by feelings of joy, a certain relief, but essentially a deep sense of gratitude, just to experience once again that familiar strong desire to make art.

I selected a small 10in by 12in canvas and over a few days proceeded to paint a rather modest, unassuming still life featuring a little turned wooden bowl and what may be a hastily scribbled note or a letter leaning to the left, and I entitled the painting ‘*Thank You*’. □



# Exposing the *Perry Mason* Myth

Brian McClinton

**L**IKE many teenagers in the late 1950s and early 1960s, my introduction to American popular culture came partly through listening on a transistor radio under the bed covers to Radio Luxembourg on 208 metres medium wave, especially the *D-E-C-C-A Record Show*. Many American companies had no pressing plant in the UK and much of it was manufactured by Decca, sometimes under that company's own name (e.g. RCA) and sometimes under the London, Brunswick or Coral labels used by Decca for these recordings. So this show featured artists such as Elvis Presley, Roy Orbison, the Everly Brothers, Little Richard, Fats Domino, Jerry Lee Lewis, Eddie Cochran, Sam Cooke, Ricky Nelson, Del Shannon, etc. – indeed the *creme de la creme* of American pop culture. It was unmissable, despite the frequent poor reception.

I also loved some of the American TV crime series. I recall two in particular. *77 Sunset Strip* featured two private investigators: Stu Bailey, played by Efreem Zimbalist Junior, and Jeff Spencer, played by Roger Smith. Then there was *Perry Mason*, in which Raymond Burr played the defence lawyer who rarely lost a case. In 271 episodes of this courtroom drama, which ran from 1957 to 1966, he was assisted by Della Street (Barbara Hale), his secretary, and Paul Drake (William Hopper), a private eye. Typically, witnesses or the real villain confessed in the dock. Moreover, we knew nothing about Mason's family or private life: Erle Stanley Gardner, his creator, maintained that such details were irrelevant to the crimes he was investigating.

In the summer, Sky Atlantic showed HBO's new eight-part miniseries *Perry Mason*, directed mainly by Tim Van Patten, which imagines the protagonist's life in the early 1930s before he became a lawyer, and in so doing seeks to subvert the earlier pristine image. Of course, if we know nothing about Mason's extra-



judicial life, then it is easier to think of him as a perfect hero, but the makers of this series seek to shatter this myth. Here, as played by Matthew Rhys (above), he is a dour, stubbled, alcoholic, private investigator, with a dishonourable discharge in the Great War, PTSD, a failed marriage, and living on an inherited two-cow dairy farm close by an airfield. He is as far removed from Raymond Burr's upright legal superhero as you could imagine.

The demythologisation doesn't stop there. Not only is the main villain a policeman but also the entire LAPD is presented as a corrupt mafia-like organisation. The lone exception is a black officer called Paul Drake (Chris Chalk), who will later give up his badge and become Mason's private investigator, just as Mason will cease to be a private eye and become a lawyer. Even Della Street has a makeover: she is in a lesbian relationship and has a distinctly feminist edge, ultimately demanding equality with Mason in the new legal firm.

And there's more. Evangelical religion also comes out badly. At the heart of the story is the kidnapping and death of a baby whose corpse is recovered with its eyes stitched open. The baby's parents belong to the Radiant Assembly of God, led by a charismatic faith healer Sister Alice (Tatiana Maslany). It turns out that the church is also riddled with corruption and that it had debts of \$100,000, the exact amount demanded by the kidnappers.

The makers of this new *Perry Mason* seem to have an even more ambitious target, however, namely the myth perpetrated by Trump and others of a great American past – a country dedicated to liberty, truth and justice, a country that does the right thing, and a practical nation that 'gets things done'. By having Drake as a black cop, they emphasise that there were no black officials in the original series. By having Street as a feisty lesbian, they emphasise that women were either slaves or sluts in the original.

Above all, the loose ends of the case that occupied the eight episodes are not tied up. How did the baby die? And who was responsible? Mason thinks he knows the answer but it is never tested in court. At the beginning of the last episode, he thinks of putting the chief suspect, Sgt Ennis, in the dock, but Hamilton Burger, the assistant DA, tells him: "No one ever confesses on the stand". The point is that they always did in the original.

In the end Mason has to accept that, although he has achieved a mistrial, he has not proved the mother's innocence or Ennis's guilt. He has failed to ensure that truth and justice are done and seen to be done. He blows the thread from the baby's eye into the Pacific, symbolising that it is time to let the case go and move on to the next one. This is the way the world really is: often messy and impenetrable; and our attempts at fitting the pieces of the jigsaw together are, at best, only moderately successful.

This dark, superbly acted and visually stunning reboot will not be for those who want their crime thrillers to have neat endings when the hero catches and exposes the killer. But it is a brilliant exposé of the *Perry Mason* myth, and simultaneously a debunking of the myth of American exceptionalism. There is to be a second series, and it will be fascinating to see where they take the story on from here. □



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## Humanist Meetings in Ireland

### Humanist Association of Ireland

Monthly meeting at rotating venues, mostly Dublin.

Details of next meeting at [humanism.ie](http://humanism.ie) or HAI Facebook Page

### Mid-West Humanists (Limerick, Clare, Tipperary)

3rd Wednesday in Limerick. Email [info@midwesthumanists.com](mailto:info@midwesthumanists.com)

Check [midwesthumanists.com](http://midwesthumanists.com) and contact Peter at 086 8155102

### Humanist Association of Northern Ireland

Second Thursday, 8pm. Holiday Inn, University St, Belfast

Contact: Roger at 07778583435 ([roger.kelly.2@ntlworld.com](mailto:roger.kelly.2@ntlworld.com))

### North West Humanists

Radisson Hotel, Sligo. 8pm, second Tuesday of the month.

Contact Gill Bell at [humainstgb@gmail.com](mailto:humainstgb@gmail.com); +353 87 295 8206

### Irish Freethinkers and Humanists

Second Thursday, 8pm. Holiday Inn, University St, Belfast

Contact: Brian at 07962122038 ([brianmcclinton@btinternet.com](mailto:brianmcclinton@btinternet.com))

### Waterford Humanists

Meetings third Monday of month, Phil Grimes Pub, 60 John Street,

Waterford, 7 30pm. Contact Teresa at [graham22@gmail.com](mailto:graham22@gmail.com).

### South Dublin Humanist Community (SDHC)

Contact: [Janielazar@gmail.com](mailto:Janielazar@gmail.com), 086 8572005

Mailing List: [southdublinhumanistcommunity@gmail.com](mailto:southdublinhumanistcommunity@gmail.com)

### Belfast Humanist Group

First and third Mondays of month, various venues

Contact Catherine Burnett on 02890642956

**Phone or email  
to check when  
meetings will  
resume after  
the lockdown**

### Cork Humanists

Contact Geraldine O'Neill on 086 812 8892

<http://corkhumanists.weebly.com>

### Humanists West (Galway)

Last Sunday of month, 12 noon, Anno Santo Hotel, Threadneedle Rd.,

Salthill, Galway. Contact Garry O'Lochlainn at 0872222726

### Kilkenny Humanist Group

2nd Sunday of month, in the Langton House Hotel, Kilkenny at 11.00am

Contact Patrick Cassidy at 0894630005; [patrickcassidy@gmail.com](mailto:patrickcassidy@gmail.com)

