

# Irish Freethinker

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Photo: Bertie McCullough

## Beyond God and Ulster

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# Whose Side is God On?

Brian McClinton

*WITH God on our Side* (RTE, 15th November) was billed as former Irish President Mary McAleese asking what role religion played in the conflict. Since most of the people interviewed were religious, this was like asking the pope if he is a Christian. Even Gerry Adams, who appeared, has said that he attends Mass (though he also once said that his religious beliefs were nearer to Protestantism than Catholicism). But he played down the role of religion since he sees it as a national struggle. Why were no non-believers sought to tackle the question?

A similar response was evident in a discussion of the programme on Radio Ulster. For ‘balance’ there was a Protestant Christian and a Catholic Christian. Both largely absolved religion with qualifications. Some balance that. When this question is raised, it is almost always answered in the mainstream media by Christians. None of them is ever going to admit that it was, in any real sense, a religious war. The farthest they will ever go is to say that religion was used as a badge of identity but was not a substantial cause of the conflict – the line taken by Mary McAleese’s loyalist taxi driver among others.

Indeed, both the paramilitary representatives were pretty certain that religion played no part in their actions. The UVF’s Russell Watton, who served 13 years in prison, did say that Paisley stirred him up, but he implied that it was more political than religious: “god is on everybody’s side”. Yet he didn’t regret taking the fight to Irish republicanism.

The IRA’s Séanna Walsh also didn’t think that religion played any part in his republican activism. The IRA struggle was not sectarian, he claimed, yet he admitted that a ‘whole litany’ of IRA acts were hor-

rendous. But it was all a matter of context, an explanation that could mean anything.

Gerry Adams admitted that the Shankill bombing was ‘terrible’ and praised Alan McBride, the husband of one of the victims, as ‘outstanding’ for his efforts at reconciliation. Adams trotted out the usual clichés about religion in its true sense being all about respect and loving your neighbour and treating others as you would want them to treat you.

**Isn’t it strange that Gerry Adams, leader of a ruthless killing organisation, should now espouse the same Christian principles as a lifelong pacifist who condemned the IRA throughout his career?**

Mary’s interview with Pat Hume was the first since John’s death and the last she gave as she died a few weeks later. She quoted John’s non-violent message about patriotism being about loving your country and not destroying it, and respect for diversity and inclusion. Isn’t it strange that Gerry Adams, leader of a ruthless killing organisation, should now espouse the same Christian principles as a lifelong pacifist who condemned the IRA throughout his career?

Arlene Foster made a positive contribution in stressing the importance of integrated education. She also suggested that faith formation should be the role of the home and the church and not the schools, but nevertheless she did think that religion could not be excluded altogether from the curriculum.

*With God on our Side* was a superficial, one-sided examination of the role of religion in the Troubles. The makers tried to disguise its lack of critical analysis by wandering off into narrative accounts of Irish history which were largely irrelevant.

The documentary struck no new ground. Was religion a restraint on violence? Yes, was the usual answer. Does it offer a pathway to peace? Yes, again. Hardly a negative word was heard. The nearest to a criticism came from the Methodist Rev. Harold Good who said that the churches had stood aside from the conflict and if they had not been so silent about the injustices in Northern Ireland before the violence started, then they could have made a difference. Were they cowards, then?

A more probing and balanced programme would have included humanists and non-believers, and it would also have tried to give a deeper analysis of the causes of the Troubles. Why, for example, are there two major opposing identities? What role did the clash of nationalisms – Irish nationalism and British nationalism – play? Bizarrely, nationalism was hardly mentioned at all. Why, for example, are there two nationalisms on the island? And two main branches of Christianity?

We know from other conflicts that religion and nationalism can be a lethal mix: Sunnis v Shias; Israelis v Palestinians; Buddhists v Muslims in Myanmar; Hindus v Muslims in the Indian sub-continent; as well as Catholics and Protestants in Ireland. Why no detailed parallels made with these other causes of division?

Fundamentalist religion discourages tolerance and compromise; it promotes faith and belief and denigrates reason, evidence, critical thinking and science; and it traps believers in primitive ideas about sex and war. None of these bad influences were referenced. Seemingly, religion has no deficiencies at all. There’s just not enough of it, hence the Swift onscreen quote that “we have just enough religion to hate, but not enough to love one another”. But Ireland is increasingly saying: “enough is enough – be gone with you – you have done more than enough harm and we want to be finally free of you”. □

# A New Ireland: Part 2

Tom White

**L**OOKING back through my past copies of the *Irish Freethinker* I found an article by Roger Kelly (*A New Ireland*, No 179 Nov/Dec 2019.) Fresh after the All-Ireland Humanist Summer School in Tullamore, Roger attempted to pull together the complicated strands of political thought post-Brexit, pre-COVID.

Brexit negotiations were entering the final strait back then – a hard Brexit was still the desired option of large segments of essentially English hard right opinion. In the two years that have ensued since Roger Kelly put pen to paper, it would seem that a hard Brexit has been effectively what has taken place. The Brexit deal signed between the EU and the UK has frayed at the edges, both sides at various times claiming “sharp practice” by the other.

The hard right at Westminster have been cynical in the extreme with how they have manipulated public opinion in the UK. The myth that the UK would boom economically upon leaving the EU has been superseded by the myth that all would be well with UK Brexit if the EU applied the terms of withdrawal fairly. And a large segment of English working class opinion (now commonly called “The Blue Wall”) bought both these myths hook, line and sinker. For UKIP, the DUP and other pro-Brexit opinion in Northern Ireland, selling Christmas to the turkeys is just smart politics.

Yet there is a problem: the UK Government can only divert blame for pain towards the EU for so long. Soon they will be looking for fresh diversions and fresh forces to blame. Immigration is always a populist standby in the “Who Do We Blame Next?” stakes, but it has been tried too often recently.

The UK Government no longer needs the DUP for any voting

pact... “how much does Northern Ireland cost us per annum?” The UK exchequer provides a roughly £10.8 billion (€12.8 billion) annual subsidy to Northern Ireland. That money would build quite a few hospitals in England – and the myth that all this saving will be spent on good causes in England might just be sufficient to keep the blue wall marginals voting blue for another election.

Why not promise UK voters a referendum on Northern Ireland remaining in the UK? The outcome might be a lot easier to predict than having a border referendum in Northern Ireland.

## The Good Friday Agreement envisaged the idea of a Bill of Rights to ensure ‘fair play’ for both communities in Northern Ireland

I imagine that the above scenario would present some problems for DUP supporters, but how certain can they be that it will not happen? This is a very cynical and battle-weary UK Government. Cutting NI from the UK would make short-term financial and political sense. Could Albion be so cynical?

In the two years since Roger wrote his article, very little forward planning has taken place to assure voters, North or South. Very few want a return to violence, that’s for sure, but it is equally true that very few have begun work to ensure a peaceful outcome should the UK decide to decamp from Northern Ireland.

One way to start would be by framing a Bill of Rights. It is a document containing a formal statement of rights: specifically, a summary of fundamental rights and privileges

guaranteed to a people against violation by the state. The Good Friday Agreement envisaged the idea of a Bill of Rights to ensure ‘fair play’ for both communities in Northern Ireland. Far from being an alien concept for Loyalists, the Bill of Rights (1689) was a key document paving the way to the Williamite Settlement in Britain. It was a common sense idea, then, and still a common sense idea, especially in an environment where political opinion remains split down the middle on important constitutional issues.

In drafting a new Bill of Rights, the paramount questions which must be asked are “what are the minimum legal protections needed by our community, and how are these protections to be guaranteed?”

The drafting and processing into law of a new Bill of Rights would need significant input and involvement of the Unionist community in Northern Ireland. In the Irish Republic, we could usefully spend our time considering what changes in our constitution would be required to accommodate and welcome all the inhabitants of our island – of every faith and none. That process will be as difficult for many in the Republic as the drafting of a Bill of Rights will be for Loyalists.

Ireland needs an entirely new written constitution to replace the creaking, outmoded De Valera/McQuaid document of 1937. Work on drafting these key documents in tandem would inform and clarify thought on both sides of the border; it would also help stabilise the political situation in the event of a sudden UK decision to withdraw from Northern Ireland.

The beauty of having a Bill of Rights document approved in Northern Ireland would be that it could be incorporated verbatim into the new Irish Constitution if/when that becomes the will of voters North and South.

I would also argue that our small Humanist/Freethinker/Atheist community North and South could play a key role in facilitating the drafting processes by adopting the role of honest, secular brokers. □



# God Lingers in the Irish Constitution

**I**N November 7 judges of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) rejected a legal challenge to religious elements in Ireland's constitutional oaths. It should be borne in mind that the Irish Constitution was drawn up in 1937 with a considerable input from John Charles McQuaid, then Headmaster of Blackrock College and later the Catholic Archbishop of Dublin.

Article 6 states that “all powers of government ... derive, under God, from the people”. In Catholic theory the phrase ‘under God’ means in practice ‘under the Church’, since it is the only authentic voice of God on earth. Indeed the whole document is riddled with Catholic teaching on the family, on education, on divorce, on private property, on the limits to freedom of speech and on public morality, all of which was made explicit in the reference in Article 44 acknowledging the ‘special position’ of the Catholic Church’.

This reference was removed by the 5th Amendment in 1972, but elements of Christian belief remain. Article 12.8 states: “In the presence of Almighty God I do solemnly and sincerely promise and declare that I will maintain the Constitution of Ireland and uphold its laws... May god direct and sustain me”. This oath must be sworn by the incoming President, and in Article 31.4 a similar oath applies to members of the Council of State, which includes the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste.

The legal challenge was made by: Róisín Shortfall, TD, co-leader of the Social Democrats; John Brady, Sinn Féin TD for Wicklow; Senator David Norris, who received 6% of the votes in the 2011 Presidential election; former CEO of Barnardos Fergus Finlay; and Trinity College former Pro-Chancellor and Humanist David McConnell.

The five litigants argued that these oaths were contrary to Article 9 of

the European Convention on Human Rights which affirms the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. They “exclude conscientious non-Christians, non-believers and those who do not wish to violate their consciences both from the office of President and from the office of the Council of State”.

The litigants claimed that, as prominent politicians and members of Irish civil society, they can legitimately aspire to be elected to the office of President or to being appointed to the Council of State. They maintained that the oath requirements would either prevent

**The Irish state defended the oaths on the grounds that they were not religious *per se*, but manifestations of the ‘political and cultural heritage of the country’**

them from taking up these offices or require them to make a declaration against their conscience. It was also an exclusively Christian God (the preamble refers to ‘the most Holy Trinity’ and Jesus Christ, and therefore discriminates against non-Christians as well as non-believers.

The Irish state defended the oaths on the grounds that they were not religious *per se*, but manifestations of the ‘political and cultural heritage of the country.’ Christians might object to the idea that their God is just a cultural tradition. But it is a bizarre defence, worthy of Lewis Carroll in *Through the Looking Glass*: “When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less.” “The question is,” said Alice, “whether you can make words mean so many different

things.” “The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master — that’s all.” It seems that we should not take the words too seriously, even when we are compelled to swear by them.

The ECHR accepted the Irish state’s defence but ruled against the litigants on the grounds that they did not bring reasonable and convincing evidence that they were likely to be directly affected by the requirements. There was no evidence of personal victimisation by the compulsion to swear the oaths because none of the litigants had any realistic prospects of successfully seeking office.

This stipulation that the applicant must be ‘directed affected by the impugned measure’ was simply part of the rules. Yet it seems strange that an appeal to the ECHR cannot be made on a matter of principle and only if the litigant is currently applying for the relevant posts (the oath applies to judges as well). Can a litigant not act on behalf of others now and for the future? And if not, why not?

Róisín Shortall responded to the verdict by saying that she would bring forward a Bill proposing a referendum to amend the Constitution to remove the requirement to make a religious oath when elected President or appointed to the Council of State. During the 2011 election campaign, President Michael D Higgins said he supported the establishment of a constitutional convention to examine the oath for presidents.

He further stated that it was of great importance that the presidency ought to be fit for purpose for a modern state comprising a large number of different religious beliefs as well as none. Early in 2021 he said that the religious oath should be removed and replaced with an affirmation. He himself has said that he is ‘spiritual’ rather than religious.

Ireland is one of only five states in the European Union which mention God at all in their constitution. A secular constitution will come but it would be better if it was sooner rather than later.

**EDITOR**

# Beyond God And Ulster

## The Movement Towards a Secular United Ireland

This article appeared in the December 2021 edition of the French Freethought quarterly review *L'Idee Libre* (Free Idea)

**Brian McClinton**

**T**HE 'Ulster Problem' originates from three main causes: economic, religious and political factors. In the early 17th century Plantation, Protestants from Scotland and England settled in the province of Ulster and stole land from the native Gaelic chiefs. To this economic appropriation was added a religious dimension because the settlers were also generally Calvinist or Puritan in outlook, which meant that, at least in religious terms, they were emotionally and intellectually anti-Catholic. In 1641 there was a Catholic uprising against the settlers in which thousands of Protestants were killed. Tensions were further heightened when Presbyterians adopted the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647), which declared that the pope was the 'antichrist' and the Catholic Mass a form of idolatry.

To these economic and religious divisions was added a political strand in the 19th century. A British nationalism developed in the Protestant culture as Ulster industrialised with linen and shipbuilding, both of which depended on the link with the UK. At the same time the Catholic Church in Ireland became more conservative and centralised and the independence movement, which had a brief period of Protestant leadership in the United Irishmen of the late 18th century, became more pervasively Catholic. There was now essentially a clash of two nationalisms in Ireland: a Catholic Irish nationalism and a Protestant British nationalism.

By the beginning of the 20th century this conflict came close to civil war. The British 'solution' was to partition the country in 1921 into a majority Protestant six-county 'Northern Ireland', which remained in the UK, and a 26-county predominantly Catholic 'Irish Free State', which was granted dominion status, and later declared itself a fully independent Republic.

Thus a small island was divided on sectarian lines: the Republic became a Catholic theocracy and Northern Ireland a Puritan theocracy. Each brand of Christianity ruled its own fiefdom. This narrow equilibrium was challenged in the 1960s when a civil rights movement demanded equal rights for the minority Catholic/nationalist community in Northern Ireland. The result was state repression and the rise of the provisional IRA, which for nearly 30 years waged a military campaign to

end partition and create a united Ireland. 3,700 people were killed during this period of the 'Troubles', the vast majority by the IRA or Protestant paramilitaries. The Belfast Agreement of 1998 acknowledged that Northern Ireland would remain in the United Kingdom as long as the majority wished. So the attempt to bomb and shoot a million Protestants renowned for their stubbornness and intransigence into a united Ireland proved counterproductive.

There is no alternative to persuasion. The good life is about means as well as ends, and violent, coercive re-

publicanism robs Irish unity of its worth. Yet there are signs of peaceful change. First of all, the economic argument against unity is no longer valid. Average income in the Republic of Ireland is now higher than in the

UK, thanks in no small part to Ireland's membership of the European Union (EU).

The benefit of membership was also apparent to a majority in Northern Ireland who voted 56% in favour of remaining in the EU in the 2016 referendum. There is a strong feeling in Ulster that Brexit is an expression of narrow English nationalism which is out of kilter with a growing sense that nationalism itself is a backward and divisive ideology. This feeling is exacerbated by the decision of the British government to sell Unionists down the 'river' by agreeing with the EU to a border in the Irish Sea, thus breaking a vital link with the UK.

The economic benefits of Irish unity also include economies of scale for businesses, greater competition, lower prices and job opportunities, more investment opportunities in the North, an all-Ireland environmental policy and an integrated infrastructure for the whole island. Indeed, instead of having two policies on such matters as health, education, energy and transport, there could be one coordinated policy for the whole island, and this would greatly improve efficiency and the quality of life.

What, then, of the other obstacles to unity? The slogan that 'Home Rule means Rome Rule' has ceased to be applicable. On the contrary, the Irish Republic has liberalised more quickly than the North. The 1990s clerical sex scandals have done enormous damage to —>

the Irish Catholic Church, which was already losing its power as the population became more educated and urbanised. Most Irish people are no longer the Church's compliant slaves on social and moral issues. They voted by clear majorities against its wishes in legalising divorce, same sex marriage and abortion.

The Republic is now a richer, more vibrant, stable society which is no longer a priest-ridden theocracy but instead has become a liberal, cosmopolitan state which has transcended the narrow, closed ethnic nationalism of the past. In a united Ireland the state could not favour any religious group and would therefore be closer to being a truly secular society than the UK.

It is the North that remains backward on these matters. There are still strong Christian anti-abortion and anti-gay lobbies, and progress in these areas has had to be imposed by the UK government rather than generated within the province itself. Local politicians continue to stall on implementing abortion reform, and the DUP has consistently opposed gay rights from the days of its foundation under Paisley. These reactionary attitudes persist in the main churches. The Presbyterian Church forbids gays from becoming full members. Thus Northern Ireland has been persistently behind most other advanced societies in these issues, precisely because of the negative and decidedly 'unchristian' influence of narrow religious dogma by many of the leading politicians and the clergy.

Yet the ideologies behind these archaic attitudes are steadily eroding. The actor Peter Ustinov wisely remarked that "beliefs are what divide people; doubt unites them". Northern Ireland has suffered the tragedy of belief in the two poisonous myths of religion and nationalism for centuries. But there are clear signs that their hold over the people is eroding. A *Life and Times* survey published in June 2021 found that as many as 27% in Northern Ireland regard themselves as having no religion, a figure that has more than doubled in a decade. The figure is probably even higher, as many identify themselves as Protestant or Catholic purely for cultural reasons. Opinion polls also indicate that the majority of people fully support abortion, gay rights and integrated education, and therefore it is the politicians and the churches who are holding the society back.

Another *Life and Times* survey in 2019 found that 50% of the population now describe themselves as neither unionist nor nationalist, up from 33% in 1998. The term 'Northern Irish' has also become popular as a self-description. At the same time, support for the DUP, the extreme unionist party, is eroding and liberal parties in the middle ground, such as Alliance, are gaining support. At the 2019 general election, Alliance received 16.8% of the votes, overtaking the SDLP and UUP to come third overall. In the European election of 2019 Naomi Long, the Alliance leader, received 18.5% of first preference votes.

As a consequence of these developments, Loyalism and Unionism are at a crossroads. It is becoming apparent that what they stand for is rejected by a growing number of Protestants as being both vacuous and negative.

Loyalist 'culture' is riddled with prejudiced anti-Catholic mantras, yet more enlightened Protestants realise that they have been fighting shadows and the perceived religious differences are minor compared to their common interests. Indeed, by any rational argument, the working class Protestant on the Shankill Road ought to be uniting with his or her Catholic counterpart on the Falls to demand more rights and better living standards for both.

Humanists seek to create a unity of philosophy and outlook irrespective of borders. The Irish Freethinkers and Humanists, which is the only all-Ireland Humanist group with members from both sides of the border, aims to reach beyond the narrow ground of God and Ulster to achieve a united Ireland that would have to be secular to ensure that no religion had hegemony but instead had to reflect the diversity of culture and belief. Already, the Republic is moving in that direction: unity would hasten the process. It would ensure that our children would be educated together instead of apart. It would also ensure that faith formation would not be central to the schools' aims or ethos. Children would learn *about* religion but as part of the study of world beliefs and philosophies which would include Humanism.

At the same time this secular Ireland would reach beyond Orange and Green to bring all Irish people together in pursuit of what Thomas Davis called 'our common secular interests' and would reflect our real nature as a warm and friendly people. In this way we can help our small island fulfil the noble vision of Wolfe Tone (below) more than 200 years ago when he talked about breaking down the brazen walls of separation, abolishing the memory of all past dissensions, and substituting the common name of Irish men or Irish women in place of the divisive labels that have plagued and haunted us down the centuries. □



# The Education Bill

Eamon Murphy

**O**N November 16th last, Gary Gannon of the Social Democrats launched the Education (Health, Relationships and Sex Education) Bill 2021 outside Leinster House (opposite).

The Dublin Central TD wants to modernise the teaching of relationship and sex education for students in accordance with best practice in health and science, and to standardise relationship and sex education “across all schools which receive state funding”. Which is to say pretty much all schools.

Such a move will please humanists, for whom the knowledge that the Catholic Church continues to play a disproportionate role in setting the sex and relationship education of Irish primary school children continues to rankle.

Readers cannot have forgotten the controversy over the launch last year of *Flourish*, the educational resource developed by Catholic Bishops as a tool for teaching the subject in Catholic primary schools. If it doesn't sound immediately familiar, I'm sure you recall reading about such gems as puberty “is a gift from God”, not to mention the reminder that when it comes to teaching about relationships in religious schools, “the Church's teaching in relation to marriage between a man and a woman cannot be omitted”.

Other kinds of families, in other words, are lesser or invalid. The lack of regard for the diversity of family types from which students in the class may be coming from is staggering.

While abhorring the fact that religion still plays such a key role in setting the agenda in primary schools, this writer believes that debacles such as *Flourish* are ‘helpful’ in the long run. Many people are non-religious but generally unconcerned about the kind of faith formation that goes on in primary schools, even if their children are of school-going age. They see it as generally benign, but things like *Flourish* give a helpful periodic reminder of the ridiculousness of the situation, and are surely an embarrassment for the broader Catholic church as it seeks to maintain power in one of the last areas of Irish life it exercises significant control.

No doubt all humanists believe that young people and children have a right to unbiased, fact-based and scientifically accurate sex education. Gannon's Bill aims to vindicate that right, which is protected in international human rights standards including the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and, at European level, the European Social Charter and the Lanzarote and Istanbul Conventions.



However, after the Social Democrats tried to use their Private Member's Time in November to bring the Bill to ‘second stage’, the Government instead voted to defer it for 9 months. (This was the best they could manage as it would surely have been too controversial to vote against it).

It is well understood in political circles that Education Minister Norma Foley is a social conservative of the Fianna Fáil old guard, and one of the many public representatives in her party who campaigned against repeal of the 8<sup>th</sup> amendment in 2018. A former teacher herself, she quite likely is fine with the status quo, but many within government (especially in the Green Party and in the socially progressive wing of Fine Gael, in particular Dun Laoghaire's Jennifer Carroll McNeill) are known to be strong supporters of the kind of progress Gannon's Bill represents.

But Government's delay of the Bill is just the latest in a saga of postponements of any such progress. In 2018, the then-Minister for Education, Richard Bruton (Fine Gael), announced a major review of the RSE curriculum in primary and secondary schools. He called on the National Council on Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) to give particular consideration to a number of issues including consent, healthy and positive sexual expression and relationships, and LGBTQ+ matters. That review that has yet to be completed.

While (unfortunately) Gannon's Bill in no way amends the references in the Education Act to ‘ethos’, or ‘spirit’ of schools (schools will continue to exercise autonomy over ethos, something that will take more than a short Private Member's Bill to change) the Bill would amend the Education Act so that when it comes to Health, Relationships and Sex Education, ethos will be overridden by a set curriculum, standardising the type of Sex Education students receive.

Speaking about his Bill, Gannon commented that “in a modern republic, we must have relationship and sexuality education that is informed by best practice in science and healthcare. This means that the curriculum must be standardised across all publicly-funded schools. It is not acceptable that children, in primary schools, can be taught that relationships can be placed in a hierarchy, depending on sexual orientation. It is also utterly unacceptable that LGBTQ teachers could be expected to teach that their relationships are somehow lesser”. Amen. □



# Joe the Human (-ist?)

Joe Armstrong

**O**NE thing we all share in common is that we are humans, I think.

I had a good friend, Bob, in London years ago – we met in an Irish pub in the East End during Italia '90. You'll remember we beat England 1-1 and got all the way to the Quarter Finals without winning a match (apart from beating England!). It was a happy time.

Bob's nickname for me was Joe the Human. I loved it. (And it was far nicer than some of the nicknames I've had over the years!). And I had never even heard the word 'Humanist' back then. Or if I had I didn't know anything about it.

Increasingly these days, I'm happier identifying more as a human than a Humanist. Once you put '-ist' onto a word, it tends to divide humans one from another, which wasn't what I thought Humanism was about. Think capitalist, communist, nationalist, unionist, theist, atheist.

I've been a Humanist celebrant since August 2013. On the whole, I have loved the experience and felt I was well suited to it. It's a great privilege to be with people as they celebrate birth, marriage and death – hatching, matching and despatching. And other occasional ceremonies like coming of age, memorial commemorations and renewals of vows.

I have loved creating and conducting ceremonies without the unbelievable mythologies of any religion. And I'll usually say something like: "Humanism is about reason, compassion and equality. And it's inclusive. So, whether you're Humanist or religious or whatever your philosophy or worldview,

you're very welcome. We're all united in our humanity and in our love for Mary and Tom (or whoever the ceremony is for)".

In recent months or longer, however, I can no longer deliver those words about reason, compassion, equality and inclusion with the same conviction as I once did. And that hurts.

Instead, I feel I need to say something like "Humanism is meant to be about...". And so, I find myself, yet again in my life, questioning if I'm selling a pup to people.

True, Humanism doesn't promote ridiculous beliefs in an imaginary friend, the power of prayer or an afterlife. But in many other respects it seems to me that it may be closer to organised religion than we might care to think.

In recent months, a Humanist organisation abroad removed an award from an academic because of a view that he expressed. Censoring an author for expressing their thoughts seems to me to be alien to Humanism. It is, in my view, manifestly alien to freethinking. And it is discomfotingly similar to the censorship inflicted by religious organisations on those who stray from the dogmatic party line.

Another overseas Humanist organisation, while it may be a very good one, seems to me to seek to raise funds with the same regularity, and perhaps the same success, as churches do. Yes, Humanist organisations need to be funded but it jars when Humanists, freethinkers and atheists sometimes criticise religions for being money-grabbing. Pot calling the kettle black?

Religions often expect people to obey unquestioningly. Humanism, at its core, should be about encouraging people to think for themselves. Humanism is meant to be about questioning the status quo. Authoritarianism and authoritarian leadership styles should have no place in Humanism.

Nor should Humanism have anything to do with establishing a monopoly. Or a hierarchy of power. Or a priesthood. Or a Code of Canon Law. It is fascinating that the teachings of an itinerant preacher in the Middle East two millennia ago mushroomed into an authoritarian monolith like the Roman Catholic Church.

I would be fascinated to read a comparative sociological study into the formation of the structures of Catholicism with nascent Humanist organisations in our own day. For instance, what lessons may be learned from the evolution of the priesthood that could offer insight into the rise of the role of Humanist celebrant in our day?

Perhaps, as in the history of Christianity, many different models of Humanist organisations will emerge. Will some, as within Christianity, seek to be the Established Humanist Organisation within a given country, like Anglicanism in England? Will some adopt an authoritarian leadership style, seeking to control all Humanist communities within a territory, perhaps even seeking to be the only Humanist organisation in a country? And could such an approach ever be reconciled with the fundamental values of Humanism?

Suffice to say that, as a Humanist for more than a decade and having been a student for the Catholic priesthood for about as long, I think there are profound causes for concern and an imperative for humility for all concerned. □

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

# The Meaning of Life

Noel Byrne

Victor Frankl said: “Man’s concern about a meaning of life is the truest expression of being human”. The purpose of life and the meaning of our existence are two of the perennial questions of philosophy. The words ‘purpose’ and ‘meaning’ are often used interchangeably. However, I think purpose is something you fulfil – it is instinctive or innate, it is objective – whereas meaning is subjective. Meaning is something we create and which we can change over time. It is basically an idea, a philosophy or a belief.

What is our goal? These are questions many of us need or desire an answer for. Such questioning often comes from factual observations about the conditions of human existence, which then provokes the quest for an answer. Life has no meaning if it has no purpose or goal. Man has to conquer nature, both internally and externally, to achieve his freedom, both physical and mental: freedom from want, sickness and death.

As Blaise Pascal put it, “when I consider the short duration of my life, swallowed up in the eternity before and after, the little space which I fill, and even can see, engulfed in the infinite immensity of spaces of which I am ignorant, and which know me not, I am frightened, and am astonished at being here rather than there; for there is no reason why here rather than there, why now rather than then. Who has put me here? By whose order and direction have this place and time been allotted to me?”

The current scientific paradigm births the universe from a big bang 13.8 billion years ago. Since that time the universe has continued to expand and is currently approximately ninety three billion light years in extent. Within this universe there are ten thousand billion billion stars distributed among one hundred billion galaxies. Earth evolved about 4.5 billion years ago and life on earth about 2.7 billion years ago. *Homo Sapiens* evolved around 200,000 years ago. The Universe is expected to continue to expand for trillions of years.

Taking the present average lifespan of man at about 80 years it becomes obvious man is here for just an instant of cosmic time, as a speck on a tiny planet circling an average star on the outskirts of a minor constellation in a vast universe. In a few billion years our planet earth will

be absorbed and swallowed by the sun and the universe will continue for trillions of years on its merry way. Whatever man does will be pointless in a thousand years time. With this knowledge his meaninglessness in a cosmic frame becomes obvious. We may or may not be the pinnacle of evolution in the universe but, like the universe itself, we appear to have no purpose.

The meaning of life can have two connotations: there is the religious one in the sense that life has a purpose outside of itself, that is, that it was created for a specific reason. The other meaning relates to the goals, ambitions and hopes we give to ourselves in a universe in which we see no inherent purpose for ourselves individually or as a species. For the religionists the answer is simple, the purpose of life is to attain eternal salvation. As there is no evidence of eternal salvation, we shall leave that meaning out of any further discussion here. We are now at the stage in history where, as Nietzsche’s madman proclaimed, “god is dead.” As such, the religious basis of meaning and purpose in life is gone.

What meaning or purpose has an ant or a mouse? Is it not just to survive and pass on their genes? The answer biologically is the same for man as he is but a more evolutionarily advanced organism than the ant or the mouse. What makes life such a quandary for man: is he, unlike the natural world, and by virtue of his self-consciousness, aware of his mortality and

ponders the question of life’s meaninglessness and the fact that he is just a chance occurrence in a vast universe. Self-awareness in *Homo Sapiens* led to the evolution of cognitive dexterity that greatly advanced our gene transmission skills which gave us an advantage over all other hominids. But the downside of this was the anxiety and angst from the realisation of our mortality, the annihilation of everything we have done and that at some point it will be as if we had never existed at all.

So how does man deal with this existential dilemma? The meaning of life is better known through its literary form than through its philosophical ponderings.

Tolstoy in *My Confessions* expounds on four possible positions to adopt regarding the dilemma of our meaninglessness: ignorance; epicureanism (hedonism); suicide; and accepting one’s lot. Each of the first three positions he deconstructs, opting for the final state of simply living one’s life, despite its inherent absurdity. He eventually found refuge in a peculiar form of pantheism.

Camus in his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* ponders the absurdity of life. His essay begins with the famous first lines: “There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy”. Man’s awareness of his meaninglessness produces three consequences: revolt, freedom and passion. The revolt is identified by the constant hankering for objective meaning which is impossible to achieve. Freedom is distinguished by the realisation →

**“The meaning of life is to find your gift; The purpose of life is to give it away”  
– Pablo Picasso**

that man is free to act and doesn't have to acquiesce to the restrictions imposed by his life and circumstances. Passion or consequence comes about as a result of living life to the full and being unconcerned about the past or the future. Camus's solution is defiance or scorn.

Thomas Nagel in his essay *The Absurd* disagrees with Camus. In the final paragraph he concludes: "If a sense of the absurd is a way to perceiving our true situation (even though the situation is not absurd until the perception arises), then what reason can we have to resent or escape it? Like the capacity for epistemological skepticism, it results from the ability to understand our human limitations. It need not be a matter for agony unless we make it so. Nor need it evoke a defiant contempt of fate that allows us to feel brave or proud. Such dramatics, even if carried on in private, betray a failure to appreciate the cosmic unimportance of the situation. If *sub specie aeternitatis* (from the perspective of the eternal) there is no reason to believe that anything matters, then that does not matter either, and we can approach our absurd lives with irony instead of heroism or despair".

In his villanelle *Do not go gentle into that good Night*, Dylan Thomas also rages against the absurdity of life and the finality of death, and tells the various individuals in the poem to burn and rave against death and absurdity. The poem has four kinds of men: wise men, good men, wild men and grave men. In the final verse he speaks to his father. His solution is to "rage, rage against the dying of the light".

Samuel Beckett in his writings also deals with the issue of the meaninglessness and the absurdity of life. He is the master of absurdist theatre. In *Waiting for Godot* the play acts as a testimony of hopelessness, meaninglessness and absurdity regarding human existence. He considers human existence as the continual force of despair and disappointment. In his works we see man as a seeker of meaning which is not there, a metaphysical anguish. If we take the totality of Beckett's oeuvre, novels, poems and plays, it is clear that he himself is unable to come to any final conclusion about purpose in his lifetime of a search for meaning. In his novel *The Unnamable* he writes: "I can't go on, I'll go on". In his play *Endgame* he says: "You're on earth, there's no cure for that", and in *Waiting for Godot* he notes: "That's how it is in this bitch of an earth".

In Kafka's *Metamorphosis* the character Gregor, who metamorphoses into a large beetle, had lived his life and acted as his family wanted him to, and was unable to fulfil his own ambitions that would have given meaning to his life. It is Kafka's belief that life has no meaning and that each individual thereby has to create his own meaning. This is entirely missed by Kafka's character Gregor. By using the mindsets of Gregor and his family Kafka illustrates the importance of the individual fulfilling their own needs and desires.

"We are thrown into this life", Sartre says, "and so responsible for everything we do". We did not ask to be born and we have no control over our genes or our environment. All life is meaningless, and it is man's realisation of his meaninglessness that makes life absurd. "We are condemned to be free", he says, and so his answer is

that as free agents we can give life meaning. He refers to the "anguish of existence", whereby he means that nothing is pre-ordained for us and as such all things are possible. Our freedom gives us endless possibilities and choices. His work centres around our unfulfilled potential as individuals and as a species.

Because of life's absolute purposelessness we must give ourselves goals, and although these goals are truly meaningless in a cosmic sense they are sufficient for us to achieve a certain happiness if completed, or even as aspirations during our efforts at completion. Perhaps some happiness is sufficient for us? And if we do not ponder too much we can ignore the fact that these goals will be repeated by ourselves or our children. We cannot, however, find a goal or purpose that gives ultimate meaning to our lives that we might attain. Were we to do so and attain our ultimate purpose then life would be completed and would have no further purpose.

If the search for meaning is in and of itself meaningless then we might as well just get on with life unburdened by metaphysical anguish and wishful thinking. Freedom, then, comes from accepting and confronting our meaninglessness. Life is just what it is: nothing more and nothing less.

So although our lives are created for no known purpose and with death as the final destination, that is no reason to conclude it is totally meaningless. It is up to ourselves individually to make it meaningful and giving it meaning makes it worthwhile. We need to understand the difference between the meaning of life and meaning within life.

Perhaps at the end of our philosophical search the only solution is to take Monty Python's advice in *The Life of Brian* and "Always look on the bright side of life". For an even more practical view why not the conclusion of their film *The Meaning of life* that: "It's nothing very special really, try to be nice to people, avoid eating fat, read a good book every now and then, get some walking in, and try and live together in peace and harmony with people of all creeds and nations". □

**"I believe in an aristocracy of the sensitive, the considerate and the plucky. Its members are to be found in all nations and classes, and all though the ages, and there is a secret understanding when they meet. They represent the true human tradition, the one permanent victory over cruelty and chaos".**

**- E.M. Forster**

# She is the Belle of Belfast City

Owen Morton

**N**O fewer than six Belfast females vie for centre stage at different points in our interweaving story. Where ‘middle sister’ is the unnamed, fictional central character in Anna Burns’

*Milkman*, elder sister, is the ‘arrestingly beautiful’, Dolours Price in Patrick Radden Keefe’s investigative hair raiser *Say Nothing*. Younger sister Marian makes up the ‘Crazy Prices’ complement and between them they share the limelight in this very real-life saga with mother of ten Jean McConville.

And just when you thought you’d seen and heard it all, along comes a newly born grand-daughter, Mary-Mae, to one crazed Eric Miller, a dark stage-play creation in the inventive mind of playwright David Ireland. Mary-Mae is the queer one, too!

For good measure, former President McAleese makes a guest appearance; let’s designate Mary the Belle of her native City in our title, with justification. Her appearance isn’t gratuitous; she hails from the Ardoyne where, maybe, *Milkman* lurked, and she was classmate in St. Dominic’s Grammar School on the Falls Road to Dolours Price. The latter, in the opinion of journalist Ed Molony, might readily have matched the achievements of the former, under different direction or focus, but that’s another story.

*Cyprus Avenue*, the name the aforementioned play carries, is a leafy Belfast suburb, the envy, in real life, not just of Mr. Ireland but also of Van Morrison. Growing up close-by, yet on the wrong side of the tracks, literally, in “Protestant working-class East Belfast”, more than just the name of the leafy avenue lingered to inspire artistic expression on stage and in song. This same “wrong side” enclave delivered into a waiting world, high-profile individuals the likes of George Best, David Ervine, Stephen Rea.

Across the City, in West Belfast we find the Catholic enclaves where the main thrust of our story plays out. Where Anna Burns graced the Ardoyne, an unglamorous, segregated suburb divided by a peace-line, it’s Andersonstown and the Falls Road areas that dominate the landscape spanning some 30 years of societal upheaval described as “the Troubles”.

The two books and the play are singled out by dint of acclaim, and then by dint of common backdrop.

*Guardian* Headline: “Two books about the Troubles have been announced as winners of Orwell Foundation

prizes for 2019. Anna Burns’ experimental novel *Milkman* won the inaugural prize for political fiction, while the prize for political writing was awarded to Patrick Radden Keefe for his book *Say Nothing*”.

And, again, the *Guardian*: *Cyprus Avenue* is “the most shocking play on the London stage”. See review extract, later. It was also *Best New Play* at the *Irish Times* Theatre Awards, and the James Tait Black Prize for Drama in 2017.

Your storyteller shies away from a book/play review proper – in part by way of conserving the intriguing, speculative climax to Radden Keefe’s research. We’ll attempt, instead, to draw the diverse strands into a mixum-gatherum mélange, setting the scene, perhaps, with a nostalgic preamble.

## The Swinging Sixties

Can it be that a short three-year stint residing at the corner of University Avenue and Ormeau Road – sharing a house with TCD history graduate the late Jonathan Bardon OBE (*The History of Ulster, The History of Ireland, The Plantation of Ulster*) – nurtured a special interest on my part in ‘Ulster’ affairs?

Like me, from Dublin, arriving in Belfast in 1964, Jonathan’s first engagement as a teacher, before he’d upgrade to Queens’ University history faculty, was in East Belfast’s Orangefield Grammar School.

Moving along; now relocated on ‘the mainland’, East Belfast (Cregagh, colloquially ‘Craigie’), local hero Georgie Best’s Adonis-like image featured as prominently in Carnaby St. as it did in Old Trafford fan club paraphernalia. And at the same time Van the Man’s *Brown Eyed Girl* was launching an equally famous/infamous, attention-grabbing international career in the pop charts.

It was, in truth, a good time for two Southerners to explore and discover the Northern Capital, even if one had little awareness that in times past it was the nerve-centre of Enlightenment challenge, of intellectual dissent, of religious tolerance; in a word, of (all-Ireland) *Republicanism* – ironic inasmuch as it was Non-Establishment Protestants who were in the vanguard. The late Eighteenth Century *Society of the United Irishmen* agitation, as we know, that fomented the ‘98 Rebellion, was spawned and nurtured by the Lagan on the part of radical dissenting Protestants. The 1800 Act of Union put paid to all of that and so to be in central Belfast, in the carefree 1960s, out of sight of tricolours flying in nearby Divis Flats and Lr. Falls Road precincts, one might be in Manchester.

Of course this was a culture shock to a Dubliner. His very first engagement, arriving at Victoria St. Station, witnessed an in-your-face mural, positioned by way of welcoming Southern visitors: a joint of bacon artistically captioned *cured in Lourdes*. The pedant in one, even then, drew a curious satisfaction that in industrial Belfast, an antagonistic graffiti artist had the savvy (one surmised), in rhyme, to utter Lourde(s) in the French manner. No offence taken then! —>

There was one significant exception to the Manchester analogy, of course; at the dictat of the prevailing Protestant ethos, Sabbath Day observance demanded the closure of public parks. Furthermore *Brown Eyed Girl* or whatever else was playing at your Saturday evening hop came to an abrupt ending at 11:45 p.m., substituted by *God Save the Queen*, in preparedness for resting and prerequisite worship. As I recall, only the chippers in Bangor had a dispensation beyond midnight. And all the while, at the behest of a maverick if kindly Christian Brother (Fitzgerald, bless him) in the O'Connell's finishing school in Dublin's North inner city, this storyteller was well on course towards the liberal, questioning mindset of an infidel.

Meantime, hailing from Ballymena, Ian Paisley was on a different trajectory, and one was on hand to observe this sinister development. How much of what's unfolding in this narrative might not have eventuated if Divine Grace, peppered with Williamite fervour, hadn't enveloped this larger-than-life personality, directing him to East Belfast's Beersbridge Road (adjoining Cyprus Avenue!), and inspiring hate-fuelled, collection-plate-filled, anti-Popish rhetoric as bellowed out in his populist Ulster Hall rallies. How the aforementioned '98 tolerant Presbyterians would turn in their graves to discover that a latter day evangelist would revisit the script, proclaiming them to be 'Free!' – never mind what they'd make of a prime minister, a quarter of a millennium hence, who believed the Giant's Causeway to be less than 10,000 years old! It is necessarily so, he blurts.

Some fifty years on, one's letter to the *Irish Times* editor, following on Paisley's demise in September 2014 – perhaps making allowances of sorts for his firebrand personality, or suggesting that perhaps the impressionable messenger is less blameworthy or accountable in situations such as this, commanded prime slot:

Sir,

*The major flaw in Ian Paisley's psyche, leading in turn to his deathly, divisive agenda, whatever his latter day sainthood, is characteristic of all religious fundamentalism – a misguided, destructive belief in having an exclusive in matters of truth; that, absurdly, one has a divine mandate - heaven forbid.*

*History is ill-served if this dehumanising force is air-brushed by dint of political correctness or not speaking ill of the dead.*

*Yours etc....*

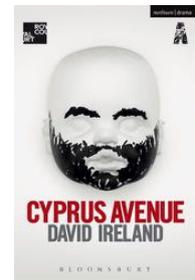
### Cyprus Avenue

A pause for breath interlude affords an invitation to engage *Cyprus Avenue's* possessed Eric Miller, who surely would have attended such an Ulster Hall rally. The playwright, on the evidence, had first-hand account in some shape. Now hilarious, now horrific, to get away with it, the spectacle could only have been penned by an insider, in self-parody; an outsider firing insults would surely have missed the target. To give a sense of the drama unfolding, I defer to the *Guardian* Theatre Critic Michael Billington:

“What makes Ireland's play so terrifying is that it takes fanaticism to its logical conclusion and laces lunacy

with laughter. Ireland's protagonist, Eric, is a Belfast loyalist convinced that the Protestant unionist cause is being destroyed by what he terms 'the Fenians'. His dementia reaches such a pitch that he believes his five-week-old granddaughter to be Gerry Adams”.

He concludes: “If *Cyprus Avenue* reminded me of anything, it was of Martin McDonagh's *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* (2001) which showed an extremist Irish republican driven to a murderous frenzy by the loss of his beloved cat. Like McDonagh, Ireland uses the blackest of comedy to expose the absurdity of sectarian hatred” (*Guardian*, 11 April, 2016).



The protagonist Eric Miller presents in a Stephen Rea *tour de force*. In real life Stephen would deliver the media voice-over of Gerry Adams in the 1988-1994 U.K. broadcasting ban – and, again in real life, he married Dolours Price, their twenty-year partnership bearing them two sons.

In *Say Nothing* Keefe describes a visit by Dolours and Marian to the Royal Court on March 7<sup>th</sup> 1973, the eve of the IRA London bombings, to see a production of *The Freedom of the City*, a new play by Brian Friel. It told a story that must have resonated with the Price sisters about three civil rights protestors who seek refuge from gas and rubber bullets in the Guildhall in Derry. The play was inspired, in part, by Bloody Sunday which Friel had witnessed personally. As Keefe says: “This was delicate material for a London audience and crowds for the show had been sparse and noticeably uneasy. One of the three leads in the production, a young actor named Stephen Rea, later remarked that it had been received by London audiences ‘in a frost of ignorance’.”

Whereas Rea and Price had known each other from Queens' and early civil rights' engagement (Rea's background notwithstanding), at this point they had lost contact, meeting up again in the early Eighties in Dublin, then marrying in London. They would eventually settle in Malahide, a comfortable, coastal suburb on Dublin's Northside. Dolours would die here in 2013 aged 62 – ‘death by misadventure’.

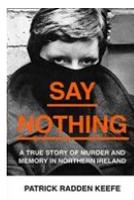
Ironically, noted Anglo-Irish journalist and TV presenter (*All our Yesterdays*), Brian Inglis (1916-1963) afforded a nostalgic account of his roots in Malahide in a memoir titled *West Briton*, reflecting the Anglophile persuasion of the mid-20<sup>th</sup>. Century Protestant demographic settled in the area. A long way from West Belfast.

### Say Nothing

Will the real Gerry Adams stand up? It's hardly surprising that, as in real life, Gerry Adams presents as an enigmatic figure permeating the various strands herein. Even the Boston College Tapes - released to British Authorities to the chagrin of the those who had recorded them, their having promised lifetime anonymity to participants - on the strength of which, in 2014, Adams was arrested and questioned for four days in relation to the disappearance of Jean McConville, failed to penetrate the security screen that protects his IRA membership denials. —>

In the tapes Brendan Hughes and Dolours Price attest as to Mr. Adams' uppermost ranking in the IRA chain-of-command during the Troubles. The ripple effects of this claim and of its denial, impact to this day, North and South of the border, in terms of Sinn Féin's *bona fides*.

Raddan Keefe's would-be all-revealing exposé moves insightfully in and out of the lives of the Price sisters and of the lives of Jean McConville's offspring, as efforts to locate McConville's 'disappeared' remains captured media and public attention spanning all of 31 years, 1972-2003.



The 1973 IRA London Bombings' aftermath delivered the Price siblings (Dolours was the first female volunteer in the Provisional IRA) firstly to Brixton Prison, wherein they emulated Terence McSwiney's 1920 hunger strike protest, before they were transferred to Armagh women's prison. The elder Price, who was incarcerated for 8 years all told, in the tapes, acknowledges hands-on involvement in McConville's fate. In an 'exclusive' the intrepid researcher Keefe, it seems, is the only sleuth to have conjoined the pieces, in turn speculating as to who fired the shot that ended Jean McConville's misery. It's a rather startling revelation, the designated Dundalk-based Provisional IRA unit, to which Dolours had delivered the intended victim, having dithered for seven days, then balking at the at proposition of executing a woman.

### **Milkman**

Just as with *Cyprus Avenue*, insider information or first-hand account on the part of the author is a prerequisite in the telling of the *Milkman* story. Peace lines, security checks, collaborators, punishment retributions, sectarian divide, 'say nothing' furtiveness, present as a matter of daily routine, it seems, in the life of a young woman growing up in the Ardoyne during the troubles. Ask Mary McAleese. Anna Burns was no exception — possessed of acute, perceptive observation, a vivid imagination, and a Celtic flair in wordplay, she harnesses the gamut of misfortune and of misadventure above into an engaging rollercoaster Man Booker Prize-winning novel.



Joyce, Beckett, Flann O'Brien, Sterne (*Tristram Shandy*) references permeate award citations and critiques – a clear indication that *Milkman* garners a mixed reader reaction. A jazz analogy comes to mind; approached in a "humour me, entertain me" mindset may well lead to disappointment, it's not about me; a blank canvas openness to what the artist is poised to deliver can more readily engender an uplifting experience. Sometimes sublime.

Mischievously, Ms. Burns plays the "no names no pack drill" mantra to purposeful Orwellian effect – in sympathy with Mr. Radden Keefe's book title. She eschews identifying location, era, paramilitaries or even individuals, no matter how closely related. Her on-off relationship with her beau tags him 'maybe boyfriend'; "Somebody McSomebody" threatens to shoot her. Republican sympathisers are 'renouncers'; mainland U.K. is 'over the water'; and beyond the peace line is 'over there'.

Given the disturbing dystopian culture permeating the narrative and the linguistic gymnastics at the author's command, winning the *Orwell Foundation inaugural award for political fiction* was a shoo-in. Indeed 'inaugural' suggests that the impact of the book triggered the creation of the award; the tail wagging the dog, as it should in this instance. The *Washington Post* rightly said: "*Milkman*, one of the most challenging books of the year, is also one of the most rewarding". □

## **Nurse Helen Coulter**

HELEN Coulter trained as a nurse for several reasons. She saw in herself the carer, the healer, and today, with a wealth of experience under her belt, she works as a stoma nurse. This work helps her to continue her aspirations, while reaching out to others who are about to undergo life changing cancer surgery, or who have had this operation involving cancer of the bladder. With Helen's help I have managed to come to terms with day to day situations involving anxiety-provoking situations.

The practical and emotional issues bring up many challenges and without the support of nurse Helen and her Respond team at Larne I would have been in a very difficult situation. Knowing that there is a phone number to reach her is a blessing, and all calls are returned, there is never a message asking the patient to call again another time. So there is no worry about running up phone bills and frustration if one cannot get through. This is Northern Ireland at its best, I believe in the old fashioned good nursing care, with no shortcuts.

Over the years Helen, like us all, has made many sacrifices especially working long hours, and the weather conditions have not always been favourable. Patients like myself, who have been through experimental medical trials like the 'TB Vaccine trials' which for me did not prove to be as effective as first believed, have been, and still need, the good nursing care after being let down. There were many post operative problems for me and these had been mentioned by my surgeon, but his words were lost in the maize of fast flowing information. In fact at one stage I thought that he mixed me up with another patient having been reassured about the TB Vaccine being held as a cure. As he cited stage this and that I was confused and just picked up an information booklet on the way out.

He mentioned possible complications like deep vein thrombosis, bowel problems, damage to lymph glands, lymphoedema, blocks, leaks, and the possibility of dying on the operation table. Soon after surgery I was rushed to A and E and given a blood transfusion and thereafter I am dealing with most of these problems as outlined. For these reasons I needed the care of a nurse such as Helen who has been nominated and has received the British Citizen Award on 12<sup>th</sup> June 2018 followed by Stoma of the Year Nurse 2021 as featured in the *British Journal of Nursing* and walking away with the British Empire Medal from the Queen in the New Year's Honour's list. To conclude I am grateful for all the support from those who have been there for me. I have come a long way.

**Doctor Rosaleen Rogers**



# After Θ God

Joe Armstrong

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



## Ch. 26

**Y**OU'LL never guess who's just been on the phone!' teased my sister, her voice jubilant at the other end of the line.

'No, who?'

'David!'

Our missing brother David flew home on a Friday in early March 1982. My brother Paul is convinced that David left Ireland in 1972, so this was our first sight of him in a decade. He was 27, I was 19. I hadn't seen him since I was nine. And he was rarely at home in the years before he disappeared.

My mother, sister, brothers and I visited Dad's grave. It is also the grave of my brothers' mother, Joan, and baby brother Arthur, named after my father. I still can't fathom that my life was contingent upon the death of my father's first wife. Without her dying, and all the grief and pain her absence caused in the lives of my father and brothers, neither I, my sister nor my children would exist.

David treated us all to dinner in a hotel. No expense was spared. At the end of the meal, he asked for the cheeseboard, tested the temperature of the cheese, and sent it back – saying it had only just been taken from the fridge. There was no ill-feeling involved. When he asked for another bottle of wine, the waiter said it was late and he was sorry but he couldn't oblige. Smiling, David put a £20 note in the waiter's breast pocket: the wine arrived.

He ordered two taxis to take us back to Donny-carney. My mother, sister and I took the first, while David and Paul travelled in the second.

'Don't bring up the past!' Paul warned him on their way home.

I wish he hadn't. I found the whole weekend exasperating. Anytime I sought to steer the conversation beyond the superficial, a conspiracy of silence descended. Everything stayed hidden, unexpressed. Missing for so long, his departure and disappearance were ignored. However, that conversation was never going to happen with my mother in the room.

That extraordinary and anticlimactic weekend ended with David flying back to London and, as far as I know, he never returned to Ireland again.

\*

The previous month, on 9 February, 1982, six months to the day after my father's death, the Superior knocked on my bedroom door.

'Sad news, Joseph. Your Uncle John has died.'

'Fuck,' I said.

Uncle John wanted to be buried in South Africa, where he had served as a priest for 23 years. I couldn't attend his funeral and mourned him alone.

## Ch. 27

Meanwhile, I was growing in self-knowledge. By mid-June, I wrote in my journal, '*Much within others that I used to regard as degenerate or base, I am discovering within myself. I can no longer condemn any man.*' From which I decode that my idealistic 20-year-old self, struggling with celibacy and racked by Catholic guilt, was losing the battle of id versus superego and succumbing to sexual desire through solitary pleasure.

My religious upbringing and the ideal of chastity clashed with my sexual desires, which I could no longer suppress. Isolation, loneliness and abstinence fought with my desire for affection, intimacy and an exclusive relationship.

It has, for me, been a lifelong journey to extricate myself from my childhood-ingrained Catholic guilt. I envy children who did not have it drummed into them from the cradle that sex was evil, that Adam's sin caused all our woe, and that humanity could only be redeemed by a God-man born of a Virgin Mother, an ontological conundrum begot by a sexual contradiction.

\*

My pastoral work in the summer of 1982 was in a Legion of Mary shelter for homeless men in nationalist West Belfast. Located near the peace line on Divis Street, it was a stone's throw – tested by both sides – from the loyalist Shankill Road.

Despite the political and security tensions, as RUC armoured vehicles rumbled by and British Army helicopters chuntered overhead, I felt at ease in Belfast.

I was in Belfast for the Twelfth of July, the Unionist celebration of the 1690 Battle of the Boyne. Catholics told me how much they hated the Twelfth, when many kept their heads down or travelled to the 'Free State' to escape.

An enormous bonfire, visible from the hostel, was prepared on the Shankill, with the papal flag and Irish tricolour at the top of it, for triumphant incineration by loyalists. I attended the parade in Belfast city centre but kept my mouth closed lest my southern accent drew unwelcome attention.

In fact, Pope Innocent XI backed Protestant King William of Orange in the Battle of the Boyne. A painting by Dutch artist Pieter van der Meulen, acquired unseen by the Unionist Stormont Government in 1933, caused consternation for some unionists when it was discovered that it portrayed the Pope blessing King William. Indeed, the Pope had a *Te Deum* sung in the Vatican to celebrate William's victory at the Battle of the Boyne.

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Joe Armstrong's memoir *In My Gut, I Don't Believe*, two chapters of which are abridged above, is now available as an audiobook, Kindle and paperback on Amazon.

# The Case for Humanism

## Part 2

Daltún Ó Ceallaigh

**I**t should be emphasised that we have been talking about so far as basic is *primary* morality involving life and death, personal security, human solidarity, and so on. But, there is also broader or *secondary* morality involving questions such as those of divorce, contraception, abortion, homosexuality, euthanasia, justifiable violence, etc. Primary morality is distinguished by its being universally agreed on, whereas with secondary morality there is no consensus in principle or practice across the species. What is then necessary is widespread engagement in ethical debate and the search for maximal accord, taking into account the boundary between public law and private choice.

Yet even when existence is made secure, we search for significance in life. For some people, this requires a godly universe with a purpose in which we strive to meet what is demanded of us by a divinity through living an aptly conducted life. Whence do purpose and meaning come if we live in a godless and neutral universe? The answer is ‘ourselves’. We decide on and give meaning to our lives. We are our own inspiration. As Erich Fromm once put it, the meaning of life is in living. In other words, significance can only be realised *ante-mortem*, while the fiction of immortality results in the devaluation of life.

Humanism deals with the reality of existence, not the fantasy of the ethereal. Some experience meaning in the arts, others in their professions, others again in public service, to give but a few illustrations. There are seemingly endless ways in which meaning can be found. Some religious people insist that meaning simply cannot be found in life without a god. Yet, there are multitudinous examples of those who in real life falsify that proposition. And, in so doing, they underscore that it is not just a matter of different paths to the one meaning, but in fact of many meanings covering different people, while of course some may share the same meaning. One of the things to remember here is that individual diversity and uniqueness are more particular to the human animal than any other. But the common factor is that *all* can have meaning of a suitable kind. And what underlies this is human autonomy rather than divine authority. That is the real human condition.

Simpliciter, life has to be based on what we know to be the realities of existence and the universe. It has to rest on the ‘what is’, not on the ‘what is wished to be’ or the ‘what is believed ought to be’. Yet, that seems too stark for some. So the response is fantasy and self-deception.

But ultimately, that reaction leads to neglect of the actual possibilities of life. It is ultimately a loser. To yearn for a life in the supernatural signals a failure to live fully in the natural. Heaven (of course we are never going to hell) is held out as the ultimate avoidance of disappointment. Instead of confronting and coping with the latter when it occurs in life, it is parked in the queue to eternity.

Nor is there a need to become depressed by Nietzschean fear of chilling despair or Sartrean anxiety in the face of existential anomie, both of which apprehensions generated anguished strivings towards ‘overcoming’. Emotionally, some varieties of existentialism have the same effect as the religious devaluation of human beings as sinners.

These fears were largely the result of a distinctive form of PTSD, namely Post Theistic Stress Disorder, which has been elevated philosophically beyond its due. True, Nietzsche and Sartre point respectively to the more positive possibilities of will to power (for the elite) and freedom in authenticity (hopefully for all), but there remains the awesome threat for many of being hurled into the abyss of nihilism.

Of course, there is contingency and tragedy in life with which one has to cope, but there is no justification for allowing this to be represented as the leitmotif of existence. Instead of reacting with existential despondency, the humanist should be foremostly concerned with the positive and creative potential of life.

Naturally, life must cease. We are not infinite, not only in the sense that we will not go on forever (does anybody really want to), but also in the sense that we have not already been here before. We do not dwell on the fact that we did not exist prior to conception; rather are we concerned by the prospect of unavoidable expiry, which is in fact a return to nonexistence, a future which is thus a mirror of the past. It is understandable that we would prefer not to become nonexistent, but the rational being has simply to come to accept it. Why spoil present possibility by dwelling on future inevitability? On the other hand, longevity is a reasonable desire which is increasingly being fulfilled by economic and medical circumstance, while eternal life remains fanciful thinking. We can in fact invest in life and then finally repose in a dreamless sleep.

(I have long since noticed that some ‘nonbelievers’ enduringly bear the psychic marks of a religious upbringing whereby they understandably can never —>



wholly shake off emotionally the effects of the indoctrination that they were subjected to in childhood, no matter how hard the intellect tries, while there are others who are not so burdened owing to being less 'got at' in their earlier years. As for Nietzsche, his father was a Lutheran pastor. For his part, Sartre was reared in a decidedly religious household with a mixture of pronounced Protestant and Catholic doctrines in it. In addition, one is offered bleak pictures of the world by others yet again who were likewise affected by personal conditions or experiences.

**A humanist existentialism can reasonably exult in life, not tamely shrivel in it; for many if not most of the non-religious, the death of religion, and its gods and goddesses, is an occasion of liberation, if not elation**

For instance, the atheistic Schopenhauer [an early influence on Nietzsche] was a misanthrope, a catastrophist about life and a chronic depressive. Looking to the East, Siddhartha Gautama [the Buddha], no theist either, was appalled by the destitution he discovered outside his palace, which was typically to be found in the Indian subcontinent of 2,500 years ago, and responded by adopting a path to nirvana [literally transcendental extinction of individual Being]).

The most that is sometimes offered in such perspectives is fatalistic resignation rather than optimistic participation in life. In fact, there is an ironic psychological congruence between a certain type of existentialist dread and religious misery. These philosophies, sometimes presumptuously presenting themselves as the ultimate in insight, and as the articulation of a supposedly underlying and allegedly inescapable angst, exude a joylessness that simply need not be and is far from being the inescapable result of a search for essential truth.

A humanist existentialism can reasonably exult in life, not tamely shrivel in it; for many if not most of the non-religious, the death of religion, and its gods and goddesses, is an occasion of liberation, if not elation. In reality, some dejected existentialists could just be viewed as illogically extrapolating from a personal particular to a societal general. One might further speculate that what one is encountering here may also to a certain extent be an alienation of some bourgeois from their own class's creation of flaccid, individualistic consumer-capitalism. But that is a subject for another day). 1

Finally, there is an inherent need in us to seek the profound enrichment that comes from love and respect. Again, we must give in order to receive. But it is not a matter here just relating to security of one's person, but of completion and fulfilment in our being. Our individual Being is the I, the core of the human existent. The I is not a loner, and is imbued with the constant urge to be intensely unalone. The yearning for completion is captured by the Greek myth that the earth was once populated by noble creatures whom the gods sundered in two and whose parts have ever since been in search of their other halves. When they meet, they experience the sublime in loving reunification. The parts have entered into wholeness again.

That is the consummation of personal existence and the achievement of supreme harmony. (This could also be

viewed as a form of transcendental assurance). And one can on that basis proceed to embrace the human race of which one is also a part through being in communion with it. Thus is existence further enhanced through engagement with our essence, viz the common humanity that we all share, which both precedes and succeeds us, which is perpetual and not ephemeral. 2

*"We should as far as possible immortalise ourselves"* – Aristotle.

*"Melancholy is always bad"* – Baruch Spinoza.

NOTES

1. "God is dead, but considering the state the species man is in, there will perhaps be caves, for ages yet, in which his shadow will be shown." – Friedrich Nietzsche. Not necessarily intended at that stage as a self-reflection, but perhaps, nonetheless in fact so. At school, Nietzsche was recorded as excelling in Christian theology. He also subsequently did one semester as a trainee pastor. "That God does not exist, I cannot deny. That my whole being cries out for God, I cannot forget" – Jean-Paul Sartre.

2. Existence is typically characterised by change; we (individual humans) change, the world around us changes. And the essence of which we are a part (common humanity) also can change over time as evolution shapes new general physical and psychological attributes for it. Moreover, we search in the essence for the ideal, i.e. the best attributes to inspire us and to seek to realise in existence. □

**"Humanism is a philosophy of joyous service for the greater good of all humanity, of application of new ideas of scientific progress for the benefit of all"**  
**- Linus Pauling**





## The Abolition of Man

C.S. Lewis (1943)

Alan Tuffery

**C.S.** LEWIS was a Christian apologist and a popular public intellectual during the Second World War. *The Abolition of Man* seems to be an attempt to counter the increasing rationality and the rise of science of the 1920s and 1930s, perhaps exemplified for him by Aldous Huxley's 1932 novel, *Brave New World*, a dystopian vision of a world where humans have complete domination over nature and can manipulate themselves in ways desired by a powerful elite.

However, Lewis does not mention *Brave New World*, nor any of his contemporary rationalist public intellectuals, such as AJ Ayer, Bertrand Russell, JS Huxley, HG Wells or JBS Haldane, whose ideas he rejects. Indeed, the whole book is remarkably short on specifics.

Lewis considers that values reside in the 'Tao' which, if I understand him, is a set of 'external', immutable values, a "reality beyond all predicates, the abyss that was before the Creator himself". For Lewis, if humans desert the *Tao*, all values will disappear and Man's power over Nature will turn out to be power over all other men; and most of mankind will become slaves to a few and eventually die out.

His argument depends critically on the *Tao*, so let us examine the concept a little further. The *Tao* appears to be an eternal, absolute and immutable set of values, external to mankind. This is in contrast to a modern understanding of morals as *cultural*, that is, evolved by human communities, and *relative*, adaptable to the world around them, and not absolute. It is noteworthy that Lewis takes the *Tao* as a given and makes no attempt to justify it: we appear to be in the religious world of revelation. This suspicion is confirmed by the realisation that lurking behind all his ideas is a sneaking duality, the idea that there is something beyond the world of men and matter, something supernatural. This is the intellectual dirty secret that is required to maintain any sort of religious position and is never to be admitted.

Lewis's argument is developed by setting up a series of straw men. The 'straw man' is a specious rhetorical device which misrepresents an opposing view to make it ridiculous and easy to refute. Thus, humans are only a *mere* part of nature, science concerns itself with *mere* facts. Lewis traduces science as concerned with *mere* quantity, with no concern for quality, aesthetics or values. (Has he ever read any science I wonder. Certainly, the science I read, from Darwin to Dawkins, is full of awe and wonder). He represents science as *merely* analytical. But major advances in science come about by



AF archive / Alamy Stock Photo

the synthesis of hypotheses with greater explanatory power and including more phenomena. He refers to "Man's power to regard himself as a 'mere natural object'" as some terrible tragedy. I suggest that our recognition of 'our place in nature' is a great achievement.

Lewis does not consider that any meaningful discussion of values can take place outside his mystical 'Tao'. In other words, no questioning of these ideas is permitted. Now where have we heard that before? Just before the end Lewis reveals the true colours of the religious: "A dogmatic belief on objective value is necessary to the very idea of a rule which is not tyranny or an obedience which is not slavery". This is breathtakingly arrogant but a moment's reflection shows it to be the true 'tyranny' of the dogmatic: "We are right and not to be questioned; you must obey (or else)".

But our knowledge of ourselves and our world and its evolution lead us to a set of values which transcend the trivial daily round and "impulses" or "mere nature" that Lewis despises. These values, as JS Huxley argued in his essay *The Humanist Frame*, lead us to humankind's 'destiny' as the 'sole agents of evolution' on Earth.

From this short review you will conclude that I, as a humanist, disagree with almost every syllable of this book. I looked for common ground, but, apart from the fact that we share a birth date, I found none

"But there must be a redeeming feature", I hear you cry! Well, yes, there is: it's only about 50 pages long! That said, having dipped my toe into the muddy waters of Christian apologetics, I have no wish to go there again. If I am ever tempted, I will recall the words of Darwin's great proponent, TH Huxley: "Life is too short to occupy oneself with the slaying of the slain more than once". □

(As ever, thanks to the North Dublin Humanist Community Book Club for stimulating and valuable discussions)

**"Two things are infinite: the universe and human stupidity; and I'm not sure about the universe"**  
— Albert Einstein



ART

# River Piece

Colin Corkey



## RIVER

makes its own bed  
lies in it  
faithfully  
more or less  
plunges thundering  
loiters in shallow  
conversations  
until the reaches  
of its unnamings ...

The opening lines of 'River' by the Irish/Devon poet Frances Corkey Thompson from *Watching the Door*, published in 2020.

**R**IVERS have been a constant source of inspiration for artists throughout history, whether they're tumbling over boulders, or meandering at a more leisurely pace through open countryside, and not least when they meet the tidal waters of the ocean.

Some time ago I was involved in a three-person exhibition with a poet and a painter. As a ceramist, my part in the project was to create eight ceramic columns, each measuring approximately 70cms in height, and representing markers or boundary posts in the landscape.

It soon became evident that such a creative journey would be one with a known point of departure but with an unknown conclusion. This is especially true when one is working in the field of ceramics due to the nature of clay and the firing process. This project neces-

sitated collecting a selection of local clays, ground up rock, and river sand and silt from several rivers throughout the north and west of Ireland.

This material was then applied to the surface of the slab-built columns along with some incised markings referring to Celtic/Christian iconography before being subjected to the intense heat of the kiln.

For me one of the most challenging aspects of the creative process has been to recognise and be guided by the autonomous nature of the work in progress and to accept and respect unanticipated outcomes. The Chinese potters of old no doubt taught us much, as they celebrated Lao Tzu's philosophy of Taoism when they were withdrawing those early Raku ceremonial tea mugs from their kilns. □



# Classical Collection

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

## 3. Baroque Delights

THE term baroque may be derived from the French or Portuguese word for a 'misshapen pearl', which suggests that it refers to a type of music that is rough but beautiful. But that is a mistake. It's better to look at it as referring to a period rather than a style. As such it covers the time between the Renaissance and Classical periods, i.e. about 1600-1750. The truth is that it includes some of the greatest works ever written. Although there were some well known composers in the early and middle part of the period, such as Monteverdi, Lully and Purcell, it was the late Baroque from about 1680 that produced the real pearls. Indeed, from Corelli's *Concerti Grossi* (1714) to Handel's *Fireworks* (1749) is a period of only 35 years, yet it spawned a musical treasure trove.

With the Baroque, European music began to free itself from the religious straitjacket and, although many of the composers wrote church music, none of it is included here, having been discussed in parts 1 and 2. The music began to express a range of purely secular feelings, made more use of ornament, and was more virtuosic in its use of instruments. New forms took shape: concertos, cantatas, sonatas, opera. It was also greatly influenced by the dance, so that much of it is high-spirited, joyous and refreshing. There is nothing more pleasurable than to wake up on a sunny morning to the sound of a Bach *Brandenburg*.

Many of the greatest Baroque composers were Italian, so we shall begin there, with **Arcangelo Corelli** (1653-1713). His output, though small, had a big influence and was used as a model, especially in relation to the concerto grosso. It was new in that the orchestra was organised into two different groups: a small group ('concerto') and a larger group ('grosso') which played in alternation, so that there was a contrast between loud and soft passages. You can savour *Corelli's 12 Concerti Grossi Opus 6*, including No 8 (*Christmas Concerto*) played by **The English Concert** directed by **Trevor Pinnock** (Archiv), *Gli Incogniti* directed by **Amandine Beyer** (Zigzag), or *Capella Istropolitana* under **Jaroslav Kr(e)chek** (Naxos).

Then there was **Tomaso Albinoni** (1678-1751). It is often said that he is known for a piece that he didn't actually write: the *Adagio in G Minor*. The Italian musicologist Remo Giazotto built it on a fragment of a trio sonata that may have been written by Albinoni. Nevertheless, he was a prolific composer whose works include the attractive *Oboe Concerto in D minor, Op 9 No 2*. The whole opus can be heard from the **Academy of Ancient Music** directed by

**Christopher Hogwood** (Decca). There is a CD of *Albinoni Oboe Concertos* by **I Musici** featuring **Heinz Holliger** (Decca). It also includes Alessandro Marcello's famous *Oboe Concerto in D Minor*. You can hear it also on a CD of *Baroque Masterpieces* by **Il Giardino Armonico** (Warner Classics). Try also *Albinoni Adagios* by **I Solisti Veneti** (Erato).

Last, but not least among the Italians, was **Antonio Vivaldi** (1678-1741, right). Known as 'the red priest' from the colour of his hair, he spent most of his life as music teacher at a conservatory for orphan girls in Venice. He wrote almost 500 concertos, the most famous of which are the first four movements of the *Opus 8, The Trial between Harmony and Invention*. They are of course *The Four Seasons*, the most recorded piece of classical music. Each one depicts a season, beginning with spring. Of the many recordings, the following are recommended: **Alan Loveday** (violin) and the **Academy of St Martin in the Fields/Neville Marriner** (Decca); **Nils-Erik Sparf and the Drottingholm Baroque Ensemble** (BIS); **Il Giardino Armonico** directed by **Giovanni Antonini** (Warner Classics); and the lively best-selling **Nigel Kennedy and the English Chamber Orchestra** (EMI). As for the rest of Vivaldi's many works, I would single out the *Concerto for Violin and Strings in E minor (RV277)*,



known as 'il favorito'. The andante is positively elysian, especially in the recording by **Arthur Grumiaux with the Staatskapelle Dresden** conducted by **Antonio Negri** (Decca).

Moving away from Italy, the three other major late baroque composers were all German. **Johann Sebastian Bach** (1685-1750) was largely neglected as a composer until Mendelssohn revived interest. A prolific man in more senses than one -- he was twice married and had 20 children -- he composed some of the greatest music ever written. His violin concertos date from about the year 1720, and 3 of them survive in their original form: the A minor, the E major, and the D minor double concerto. The 1978 recording by **Arthur Grumiaux and Les Solistes Romands** stands out (Decca). In the double concerto he is joined by Herman Krebbers. Grumiaux's purity of tone and expressiveness are heart-warming.

Bach's *Brandenburg Concertos* are in many ways the peak of the baroque. In his dedication to the Margrave of Brandenburg, Bach described them simply as 'six concerts avec plusieurs instruments'. Again, recordings are legion, but a favourite set remains **The English Concert** directed by **Trevor Pinnock** (DG), using period instruments. The close recording gives great immediacy to the sound, the playing is polished and the balance of the instruments is exemplary. There is a superb feeling of authenticity about this set, which makes it the clear first choice. -->

**Georg Philipp Telemann** (1681-1767) was born in Magdeburg, the son of a clergyman. He was a self-taught musician who became an organist like JS Bach. He was held in higher regard than Bach at the time, and the latter became music director at Leipzig only because Telemann turned it down. "Since the best man could not be obtained, we were forced to fall back on mediocrities", declared Councillor Platz of the Leipzig City Council. Telemann went instead to become city musical director in Hamburg, where he remained for the rest of his life. Today it is Bach who is regarded as infinitely superior, but Telemann was nevertheless exceptionally prolific, writing about 40 operas, 46 Passions and 5 complete cycles of cantatas, as well as more than 90 overtures and an enormous amount of concertos and chamber music.

His *Tafelmusik* ('banquet music') of 1733 is a melodious collection which includes suites, quartets and trios lasting over four hours. Highly recommended is the sparkling and elegant set by the **Freiburg Baroque Orchestra directed by Peter Müllejans and Gottfried von der Goltz** (Harmonia Mundi). It is also worth investing in *Telemann's Flute Concertos* in a CD by the **Berlin Baroque Soloists** (EMI). The *Flute Concerto in D* with flautist Emmanuel Pahud is delightful.

**George Frideric Handel** (1685-1759, right) was born in Halle in the duchy of Magdeburg. His father was a barber-surgeon who hated music. Yet somehow Handel managed to learn the organ and thus became a self-taught genius. In 1710 he was appointed court musician to the Elector of Hanover, but he deserted his post and settled in England. In 1714



Queen Anne died and was succeeded by George I, who was none other than Handel's former employer, the Elector of Hanover. Far from punishing Handel, the king gave him a pension of £400 a year.

Handel's contribution to baroque music includes two sets of *Concerti Grossi*, the opus 3 and opus 6. Both are included in a fine set by the **Academy of St Martin in the Fields conducted by Neville Marriner** (Decca). More recent CDs include *The English Concert* directed by **Trevor Pinnock** (DG) and the Newcastle-based group the **Avison Ensemble** directed by **Pavlo Beznosiuk** (Linn).

Then of course there is the *Water Music* and *Royal Fireworks Music*. The former was a gift for George I that helped Handel to earn the king's forgiveness for his 'extended' English holiday. It was first played on 17th July 1717, in response to the king's request for a concert on the River Thames. The latter was a commission from King George II in celebration of the end of the War of the Austrian Succession and the resulting peace treaty. The fireworks took place in London's Green Park on 27th April 1749. Again, the *English Concert* conducted by **Trevor Pinnock** shine in these works (DG). Yet the *Academy of St Martin in the Fields* conducted by **Neville Marriner** (Decca) is elegant, resilient, melodic and urbane.

As well as CDs of individual composers, there is a huge choice of general recordings of baroque music. The following is only a selection.

#### GROUPS

**I MUSICI:** Pachelbel Canon • Albinoni Adagio etc (Decca)  
**ORPHEUS CHAMBER ORCH:** Pachelbel Canon • Albinoni Adagio • Bach Jesu Joy if Man's Desiring • Purcell Chacony Bach Air • Corelli Christmas Concerto • Handel Arrival of the Queen of Sheba • Handel Largo • Vivaldi Concerto for 4 violins (DG)  
**JEAN-FRANÇOIS PAILLARD CHAMBER ORCH:** Baroque Melodies (RCA)  
**THE KING'S CONSORT BAROQUE COLLECTION** (Hyperion)

#### GENERAL

Sarabande: Baroque Favourites (EMI)  
Baroque Adagios (Decca)  
The Baroque Collection (Naxos)  
Pathways of Baroque Music (Harmonia Mundi)  
Baroque Masterpieces (Naxos)  
The Baroque Collection (Warner Classics)  
The Best Ever Baroque Collection (DG)  
The Ultimate Baroque Collection (Erato)  
Zefiro: The Baroque Collection (Arcana)  
50 CD Collection: Baroque & Ancient Music (Harmonia Mundi)  
Baroque Music (Sony)  
Best Baroque 100 (Warner/EMI)  
Best Baroque 50 (EMI)  
The Golden Age of Baroque Music (Pegasus)  
The Best Baroque Album Ever (EMI)  
Favourite Baroque Classics (Helios)

#### INDIVIDUAL

Baroque, Nicola Benedetti, violin (Decca)  
The Art of the Baroque Harpsichord (Naxos)  
Baroque Flute Concertos (Decca)  
Baroque Trumpet: Hardenberger/I Musici (Decca)  
Family Matters: Bach Family, Musica Novantica (Gramola)  
The Baroque Album: John Williams (guitar) (Sony)  
Instrumental Baroque Music (Centurion)

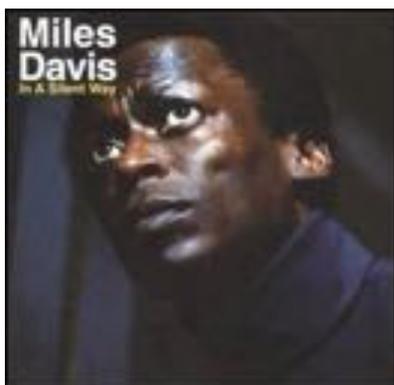
## Irish Freethinkers and Humanists

# Climate Justice

**Speaker: Declan Owens**

**Declan is CEO of Ecojustice Ireland and Ecojustice Legal Action Centre and is Chair of the Haldane Society of Socialist Lawyers in the UK**

**Thursday 27th January 2022  
Holiday Inn Express,  
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# Miles of Delights

Roger Kelly

**A**T the start of the first Covid 19 lockdown last year I began listening again to several old Miles Davis jazz albums that I hadn't listened to for some time. *In a Silent Way* particularly caught the strange atmosphere during the early spring of that year when one was aware of the stillness and noiseless ambience as a result of less traffic and the general movement of people rushing about. One could clearly hear the beauty of different bird songs and the whistling winds which reminded me of Miles's trumpet playing.

It seems weird that this album was met by controversy among critics due to Davis's electric approach and first fusion recording. To me, this is one of Davis's best works, which embraced the future not only of jazz but of music itself. The ethereal beauty of the actual music has remained beautiful and wonderful. Listening to this record convinces me – and it may seem like undue hyperbole – that music is one of the most primal and fundamental aspects of human culture. Miles Davis's music, in particular, is at the centre of what it means to be human: it is the sounds of human bodies and minds in creative, story-making ways.

Music and song as I sensed in early spring are represented across animal worlds: birds and whales produce sounds, likewise wind and rain, and it is not surprising that Darwin understood that both music and consideration of emotion to be human core capabilities.

Enough of my psychobabble, let's get back to the music. I am aware from friends that they find it hard

to appreciate jazz compared to classical or popular music, but with a little bit of open-mindedness and perseverance, the delights can be gained. Jazz is a varied form of music itself, but most jazz is very rhythmic including trad, swing, bebop, cool, modern, and fusion rock among other styles.

It is hard to categorise Davis's style of jazz as he kept stretching boundaries with diverse musicians, crafting an array of sounds that were all distinctively 'Miles'. Two of his other most accessible albums that I would recommend are *Kind of Blue* and *Milestones*.

One Saturday in November this year I was listening to J to Z on BBC Radio 3, which I often do, and was taken aback by a track played from a newly released record of Miles called *The Lost Concert*. This was recorded live in the summer of 1991 at La Grande Hall, La Villette in Paris.

The concert was simply billed as 'Miles and friends'. And what friends they were, some of the greatest jazz musicians of the era: Bill Evans, Wayne Shorter on saxophone; Chick Corea, Joe Zawinuel, Herbie Hancock on piano; John McLoughlin, John Schofield on guitar; Dave Holland on base; and Ricky Wellman on drums.

I subsequently bought a copy of the record and I cannot recommend this lost recording enough. It is totally funky and is one of the best live recordings of the trumpeters ever released. Sadly, a little over a month later Miles would be dead and the career of one of the most original artists of the 20th century came to its conclusion. The two discs on this album capture the essence of Miles Davis and I would highly recommend it – great music played with real passion, fire and fun. □



# Donaghadee Stars in *Hope Street*

Brian McClinton



**H**ope Street, the police drama produced in Northern Ireland, got off to an anodyne start with a bland story about the arrival in a fictional seaside town named Port Devine (aka Donaghadee) of a new policewoman from England and some knock-off vodka. It was a scene-setting episode. And what a scene! The panoramic drone views showed the sea front of Donaghadee in all its magnificence, displaying one of the most beautiful harbours with its famous lighthouse to be seen anywhere in the world.

The only downside of this idyllic vista was that the harbour looked almost empty. At one time there were about 15 half-decker boats taking passengers to the Copeland Islands and beyond: boats with iconic names such as *Miss Dorothy*, *Laura* and *White Heather* and those in the above picture (in the foreground from left to right: *Carpathia*, *Miss Josephine*, *Lady Franklin* and the *Brothers*). They are now alas all gone, the *Brothers* being the last to be retired in 2015 at the age of 80.

Perhaps this series will put the 'Dee' on the map again and revive a tradition enjoyed by thousands each summer, including this writer. When I was a kid, my grandmother rented a house right on the sea front every August. And when she died my mother continued the tradition well into my teens. When you spend 11 months looking out a window at a row of tiny terraced houses with outside toilets and a graveyard at the end of the street, and one month you look out and see an island on the left and a lovely harbour and bright white lighthouse on the right,

you think you are in paradise.

It was all pretty innocent back then during my August sojourns. Being there was really all that mattered, and so it initially seemed in Port Devine. But that first episode was designed to lull the viewer into a false sense of security.

In episodes two and three we dived into the deep end with storylines about a secret gay marriage, people trafficking and prostitution. Who can believe what dubious goings-on lurk beneath the pretty surface shores of Donaghadee – sorry – Port Devine?

Clearly the creators, Susanne Farrell and Paul Marquess, aim to do something different from the usual bleak crime dramas associated with Northern Ireland, while at the

**Who knows what dubious goings-on lurk beneath the pretty surface shores of Donaghadee – sorry – Port Devine?**

same time introducing controversial subjects that also aren't normally treated in the local context. Who would have believed that Donaghadee/ Port Devine was harbouring secret gays and a brothel? It is all done in a light-hearted *Ballykissangel* manner, with a cast including Ciarán McMenamin, Amara Karan, Brid Brennan, Des McAleer and Kerri Quinn.

Many viewers may have been turned off by the rather insipid beginning episode, but already it has turned up some surprises and sticking with it has paid dividends so far. At the moment *Hope Street* is airing on BBC One Northern Ireland on Wednesday evenings at 7pm. Early in this new year it will be shown on BBC Daytime TV and on Britbox North America. □



The *Brothers* leaving Donaghadee harbour for the Copelands, July 2013