

IFH NEWS

Irish Freethinkers & Humanists

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1. *IFH NEWS & IRISH FREETHINKER*

The year 2023 sees new developments in the publishing efforts of Irish Freethinkers and Humanists. The long-standing periodical *Irish Freethinker* is going quarterly, with the intention of expanding and deepening content, both with regard to range and quality of subject matter and actual size of product. This will only become fully clear from the next edition onwards, because of the transition involved in taking over from Brian McClinton, following his sad passing away in the middle of last year. Along with this approach, this bulletin is the first edition of a new monthly emailed item entitled *IFH News*. The bulletin (of which this one is only a short introductory example) will keep pace with developments of interest to Humanists as they occur as well as include brief articles that are usually contained in the periodical. Persons in receipt of *IFH News* will be encouraged to give their reactions, as they see fit, and also to make or suggest succinct contributions thereto (ifh.sde@gmail.com).

Otherwise, IFH hopes to collaborate as before in the relaunching of an all-Ireland Humanist Summer School. In addition, IFH may sponsor from time to time seminar gatherings about topics of immediate and ongoing interest.

The IFH website (www.irishfreethinkers.com) has also been reconstructed and is still undergoing development to include as much as the last one and more.

2. PREACHING & HATE SPEECH IN THE BIBLE

A recent case in Britain was submitted against public preaching. The references the Crown Prosecution Service made to parts of the Bible in their arguments to the court, all from the Old Testament, are as follows (in NIV translation):

Exodus 21 begins by saying “if you buy a Hebrew servant, he is to serve you for six years. But in the seventh year, he shall go free without paying anything”

Verse 7 onwards says: “‘And if a man sells his daughter as a servant, she is not to go free as the manservants do.

“If she is displeasing in the eyes of her master who had designated her for himself, he must allow her to be redeemed.

“He has no right to sell her to foreigners, since he has broken faith with her. And if he chooses her for his son, he must deal with her as with a daughter”

Exodus 35:2 says: "For six days, work is to be done, but the seventh day shall be your holy day, a day of sabbath rest to the Lord. Whoever does any work on it is to be put to death."

Leviticus 24:16 says: " ... anyone who blasphemes the name of the Lord is to be put to death. The entire assembly must stone them. Whether foreigner or native-born, when they blaspheme the Name they are to be put to death."

And Deuteronomy 28:27, which the CPS claims is about "cannibalism" actually says: "The Lord will afflict you with the boils of Egypt and with tumours, festering sores and the itch, from which you cannot

be cured."

The CPS may have been thinking of Deuteronomy 28:53, which warns about the punishments which enemies will inflict if God's commands are ignored.

It says: "Because of the suffering your enemy will inflict on you during the siege, you will eat the fruit of the womb, the flesh of the sons and daughters the Lord your God has given you. Even the most gentle and sensitive man among you will have no compassion on his own brother or the wife he loves or his surviving children..."

Other such passages can be quoted about homosexuality

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3. SECULARISATION & PROTESTANTISM IN NI CENSUS

*Charlie Lynch, 8 Nov 2022, in THE FREETHINKER (UK)
Research Associate in History at Ulster University*

Northern Ireland's progress towards an increasingly secular, less religious society, is revealed in its most recent census.

One morning I found myself at a bus stop in the suburbs of East Belfast, feeling rather disconcerted. Next to me on the bench was a small leaflet which announced the love of Jesus, secured by an irregularly shaped pebble. It had been left there by an elderly man, now quietly trudging away down the street. After leaving, I had spent over a decade living in Scotland, statistically the least religious part of the British Isles. I had recently arrived back to work on an LGBT history project and found myself having to readjust to life in Northern Ireland.

It is hard to ignore the presence of Christianity here. It ranges from small signals of everyday piety and confessional identities to the frequent presence of religious signs in political discourse. A browse through a recent edition of a local

newspaper in County Down brought me to the 'religious matters' page. One of its features was a redemption narrative of female transgression which had been contributed by a local reader. The story told of the 'sin' of an unmarried woman in the city and her subsequent conversion and joyful reunion with her family in the countryside; the article would not have been out of place in the 1950s. Some of the most egregious voices in Christianity shout the loudest. It would be hard, for instance, to avoid the homophobic ravings of fundamentalist preachers in Belfast city centre on a Saturday afternoon. A plethora of churches dot their way across town and country; those belonging to fringe Protestant churches are amongst the most conspicuous.

Yet the results of the 2021 census show that secularisation is gathering pace. Most commentary thus far has focused upon a key demographic shift. Catholics now

outnumber Protestants for the first time, a development with profound political implications for a statelet which was designed to deliver a permanent Protestant electoral majority. The increasing Catholic population does not translate in a surge of enthusiasm for the Catholic Church. As in the Republic of Ireland, it is indicative of an ethnic identity which is ever further divorced from religious adherence.

Commentators have given less attention to another feature of the census: the increasing number of people in Northern Ireland who state that they do not have a religion. When they were asked what 'religion, denomination or body' they belonged to, 330,983 people ticked 'none' in response, compared with 183,164 in 2011. This represents an 80 per cent increase in the number of the non-religious in the space of a decade. Furthermore, there has been an increase in the number of people who report that they were not raised in a religion. According to the census, the total number of those who stated their upbringing was not religious rose from 6,600 in 2001 to 28,500 in 2022. The non-religious now comprise 17.4 per cent of the total population.

Protestant decline

Commentary on the census by David Marshall, Director of Census and Population Statistics at the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, has emphasised that the changing religious demography of Northern Ireland has in part been driven by age structures. Analysis of the 2011 census demonstrated that the Catholic population was on average younger and that there was a higher number of births than deaths. The pattern was reversed for Protestants, with the overall Protestant population decreasing more

rapidly than it was being renewed. The declining membership of the mainstream Protestant churches is therefore underpinned by an overall decrease in population for them to recruit from.

However, the census data for the decline of the major Protestant churches indicates a more complex story of secularisation and shifting political identities. Strikingly, the non-religious are now more numerous than adherents of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. In the mid-twentieth century, membership of the Presbyterians surpassed that of any other Protestant church in Northern Ireland. In the early 2000s, the non-religious overtook the number of those who identified themselves with the Church of Ireland, an Anglican body which shares heritage and doctrine with the Church of England due to the legacy of English colonialism. The two major churches in Northern Ireland have experienced long-term decline since the 1960s. Back then, as the 2021 census again shows, the Presbyterian Church garnered the affections of around 30 per cent of the population and the Church of Ireland, 25 per cent. Only 11.5 per cent of the population now identify themselves with the Church of Ireland and 16.6 per cent with the Presbyterian Church in Ireland.

While it seems unlikely that all of those who say that they have 'no religion' were formerly associated with these two churches, it seems probable that the vast majority were. The decline of 'national' churches is a typical symptom of secularisation. These organisations once claimed the default adherence of large numbers of people, but as the social power of religion has diminished, the imperative has dwindled for individuals who are less religious to claim that they identify with a church.

Writing nearly twenty years ago, the sociologist John Brewer observed that the mainstream Protestant churches were suffering from declining participation and reductions in membership. Brewer concluded that patterns of personal religiosity were being affected by broader social changes, declining religious practice, liberalisation in beliefs and other attitudes and behaviour. Religion was retreating into the private sphere; yet nominal identification with Protestantism had remained high. To misquote Grace Davie, a sociologist of religion, this was ‘belonging without believing.’ Yet Brewer highlighted the defection and disenchantment of the youth, noting how the most popular affiliation amongst the young (aged 18-34) was ‘no religion.’ Since then, this trend has continued swiftly, and nominal identification is now eroding away. There has been some growth in the membership of minor Protestant churches and sects - often evangelical and fundamentalist - as well as a small increase in adherents of non-Christian religions. However, this is dwarfed by the decline of the major Protestant churches.

Secularisation and political change

The regional breakdown of the 2021 census results shows that some of the areas of Northern Ireland with the highest percentage of Protestants are also those with the highest percentage of the non-religious. The most irreligious area of the region is currently Ards and North Down, at 32.1 per cent, followed by Lisburn and Castlereagh at 25.3, Mid and East Antrim at 23.9 and Belfast at 23.8.

The secularisation of an ever-increasing proportion of the Protestant population has wrought changes to political as well as religious identities. As discussed in

an article by Mary C. Murphy, the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland was formed in 1970. It aims to be a non-sectarian political grouping able to appeal to members of all communities. After failing to make a significant breakthrough for many years, it has grown apace in the last twenty. Alliance is a close relative of the Liberal Democrat Party. It combines economic centrism with an advocacy of socially liberal and reformist policies. Recent analysis by Christopher Raymond at Queen’s University Belfast shows a direct correlation between the growth of non-religion and electoral support for Alliance, with both increasing *in tandem*.

The rise of Alliance has been fuelled by younger and more middle-class ex-Protestant voters who are infuriated with the religiosity and social conservatism of the unionist parties - in particular, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP). The 2022 Northern Ireland Assembly election saw Alliance making gains, notably in Upper Bann, a predominantly rural area previously considered unpromising territory. Here, a twenty-four-year-old councillor, Eóin Tennyson, became the first openly gay Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) to be elected.

The marked increase in the number of the non-religious, recorded in the 2021 Northern Ireland census, reveals the emergence of a more secular society. The growth of non-religion has largely been at the expense of the main Protestant churches; the ranks of the non-religious have now surpassed those of the Presbyterian church, formerly the largest such grouping. Many of the non-religious can be surmised to be younger and likely to adhere to a more socially liberal worldview. Consequently, the statistical rise of non-religion has been accompanied by

the increasing electoral fortunes of the Alliance Party, who have successfully capitalised on a growing demographic of people who are alienated by the traditionalism and social conservatism of the two main unionist parties. It seems

likely that, as secularisation continues to progress in years to come, support for a more secular and socially liberal politics will increase in tandem.



4. CHRISTIAN MINORITY IN ENGLAND-WALES

Robert Booth, Pamela Duncan & Carmen Aguilar Garcia

England and Wales are now minority Christian countries, according to the 2021 census, which also shows that Leicester and Birmingham have become the first UK cities to have “minority majorities”. The census revealed a 5.5 million drop in the number of Christians and a 44 per cent rise in the number of people following Islam. It is the first time in a census of England and Wales that less than half of the population have described themselves as “Christian”.

Meanwhile, 37.2 per cent of people – 22.2 million – declared they had “no religion”, the second most common response after Christian. It means that over the past 20 years, the proportion of people reporting no religion has soared from 14.8 per cent.

The archbishop of York, Stephen Cottrell, said the census result “throws down a challenge to us not only to trust that God will build his kingdom on Earth but also to play our part in making Christ known”.

“We have left behind the era when many people almost automatically identified as Christian but other surveys consistently show how the same people still seek spiritual truth and wisdom and a set of values to live by,” he said.

The chief executive of Humanists UK, Andrew Copson, said: “One of the most striking things about these census results is

how at odds the population is from the state itself. No state in Europe has such a religious set-up as we do in terms of law and public policy, while at the same time having such a non-religious population.”

The slump in religion, and emergence of minority ethnic populations as a combined majority in whole conurbations in England and Wales, are revealed in data about the ethnicity, religion and language of close to 60 million people gathered in a snapshot census on March 21st, 2021.

Across the two countries, 81.7 per cent of the population is now white, including non-British, down from 86 per cent in 2011, 9.3 per cent is Asian British, up from 7.5 per cent, 2.5 per cent is Black, Black British, Black Welsh, Caribbean-African and African, up from 1.8 per cent, and 1.6 percent are other ethnicities.

Ushering in a new age of city-wide “super diversity”, the Office for National Statistics data showed that 59.1 per cent of the people of Leicester are now from ethnic minority groups, a major change since 1991, when black and minority ethnic people made up just over a quarter of the city’s residents.

Leicester’s Asian population first became well established after 20,000 people settled in the east Midlands manufacturing city after expulsion from Uganda in 1972.

Minority ethnic people also make up more than half the population in Luton (54.8 per cent) and Birmingham (51.4 per

cent), the UK's second largest city where 20 years ago seven out of 10 people were white. Since the second World War, Birmingham's population has grown with immigration from the Caribbean and south Asia.

The figures will present a fresh impetus to policymakers to tackle embedded racial

inequalities, which mean black and minority ethnic people are two and a half times more likely to be in relative poverty and are falling faster and further below the poverty line in the cost of living crisis.

'Guardian' newspaper

5. MANAGING THE BUSINESS OF IRISH HUMANISM

Irish Humanism flickered into life a few decades ago, when a few like-minded people met, probably in the back room of a smoky pub - all pubs were smoky back then. Our founders were chiefly concerned with the ethics of the cause, and were only deeply aware of the shortcomings and downright crimes which had been exposed in the Irish Churches. The grand task we then had was to present our fellow citizens with an alternative vision of society - ethical, caring and beyond the diktats of clerical grandees.

Having established that we had a serious job to do to reform Irish society, we turned to what seemed a relatively minor task- how to organise and structure ourselves to prepare for the battle ahead. We signed up members. We set up means of communication between our local groups. National organisations were formed. We drafted constitutions for ourselves and set up bank accounts. The more business-like amongst us began to fret about numbers - the number of members we had on our books, how much money was in the bank. Numbers were an easy way of judging our progress year to year. We bickered with one another if the numbers weren't right. Like teenagers, we had 'growing pains'. But in spite of it all, we were part of the enormous changes which have shifted the foundations of Irish society, north and south. And that is

something we can all be proud of.

Would we structure ourselves in the same way if we had it all to do again? Probably not; we would have taken more time to research humanist organisations overseas, we would have looked at how kindred organisations structured themselves within our national context. We might have avoided some of the pitfalls we fell into along the way. If we made errors, that was because we were imperfect human beings striving desperately to make things better. We brought in business acumen to help us along the way. We developed income streams. Many of us who had been around in the back rooms of pubs in those early days became uneasy. The ethics of Humanism were somehow being lost sight of in the race to become a profitable business. We reached for our dictionaries to confirm that Humanism is "a rationalistic outlook or system of thought"- there, you see - a philosophy, not a product or a service provided by a private company. So we pined to get back to the good old days.

Ditch the business model and start again? I don't think so. Apart from Lady MacBeth's stricture that "What's done cannot be undone", our organisations will always need to have some degree of business nous in order to survive and prosper. So, there will always be a fundamental need for a balance to be struck between the ethics of Humanism and the

business of supporting and promoting it. Let's strive to get that balance right.

Many medical organisations have Ethics Committees to supervise and uphold standards of healthcare for patients, and there are increasing numbers of commercial businesses which also feel the need for an Ethics Committee to act as a semi-autonomous advisor or arbitrator on a wide variety of matters. People serving an Ethics Committees often get involved in setting up the initial guidelines and policies for behaviour within an organisation. The impetus for new or revised rules may start with a conflict. Such problems may arise from conflicts between management and front-line staff or between customers and the company. Ethics committee responsibilities include creating guidelines for various circumstances. The committee may step in as the arbiter of conflicts and find solutions that then can be integrated into company policies.

In a Humanist context, an Ethics Committee would be a directly elected body with a duty to investigate complaints made against the conduct of the organisation, its employees and

contractors. Members of the Committee would be elected for their expertise in Humanism, and their ability to uphold humanist values. The Committee would have power to prevent the Board from implementing contentious decisions between general meetings of the organisation. To avoid any hint of conflict of interest, Ethics Committee members, whilst being members of the organisation of several years standing, could not also be members of the Board of management or employees or contractors of the company.

Some conflict is always inevitable within organisations, and conflict can act as a catalyst for improvement and reflection. It is a matter of how best to resolve serious issues and get back to doing the business of Humanism in as ethical and constructive a way as possible. I'd suggest that organisations which claim an ethical ethos should seek to incorporate Ethics Committees into their structures. Good business and good ethics can go hand in hand. But please, let's put our ethics first!

Tom White

6. HUMANIST MEETINGS IN IRELAND

Irish Freethinkers and Humanists

2nd Thursday of month, 8pm.
Holiday Inn, University St, Belfast.
Contact: Roger 0777 858 3435
roger.kelly.2@ntlworld.com

North Dublin Humanist Community

3rd Monday of month.
Contact: Alan Tuffery
atuffery@tcd.ie

South Dublin Humanist Community (SDHC)

Contact: 086 8572005
Janielazar@gmail.com

Mailing List:

southdublinhumanistcommunity

Humanist Association of Ireland

Monthly meeting at rotating venues, mostly Dublin.

Details of next meeting at humanism.ie or HAI Facebook Page.

Westport Humanist Group

2nd Sunday of month at 12 noon,
via HAI Zoom facility.
Contact: Seamus O'Connell 087 245 3536
shayoc37@gmail.com

Cork Humanists

Contact: Geraldine O'Neill 086 812 8892
<http://corkhumanists.weebly.com>

Humanists West (Galway)

Last Sunday of month, 12 noon.
Anno Santo Hotel, Threadneedle Rd.,
Salthill,
Contact: Garry O'Lochlainn 087 2222726

Kilkenny Humanist Group

2nd Sunday of month, 11.00am.
Langton House Hotel, Kilkenny.
Contact: Patrick Cassidy 0894630005;
patrickacassidy@gmail.com

Mid-West Humanists (Limerick, Clare,

Tipperary)

3rd Wednesday of month in Limerick.
Contact: Peter 086 8155102
info@midwesthumanists.com
Also check <https://midwesthumanists.com>

North West Humanists

2nd Tuesday of month.
Radisson Hotel, Sligo.
Contact: Gill Bell 087 295 8206
humainstgb@gmail.com

Waterford Humanists

3rd Monday of month, 7.30 pm.
Phil Grimes Pub, John St, Waterford.
Contact: Teresa graham22@gmail.com

Forever is composed of Nows. Emily Dickinson

Emptiness is the fasting of the heart. Zhuangzi

Societies in decline are cacophonous. Chinese saying about music

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