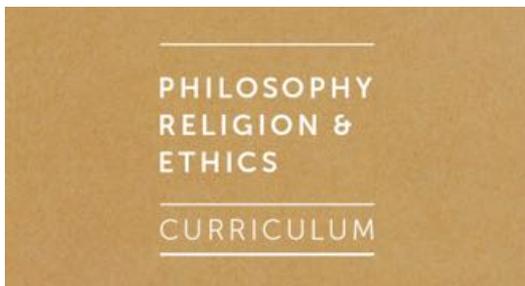




Irish Freethinkers and Humanists Manifesto, 2017-27



Uniting and Enriching Ireland through Humanism

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What is Humanism?

HUMANISM is a view of life and a way of life. It is for those people who base their interpretation of existence on the evidence of the natural world and its evolution, and not on belief in a supernatural power. Humanism is the belief that we can live good lives without religious or superstitious beliefs. Humanists make sense of the world through reason, experience and shared human values. We seek to make the best of the one life we have by creating meaning for ourselves. We take responsibility for our actions and work with others for the common good.

It is important to stress that Humanism differs from atheism in that it is **not simply a negative anti-religious stance** but is a positive and forward-looking philosophy concerned with the happiness and wellbeing of all humankind, now and into the future. Humanists are tolerant of those with religious faith and are prepared to work with them in a spirit of mutual respect. They ask only to be treated with equal rights. In any case,

Humanism differs from atheism in that it is not a purely negative anti-religious stance

some Humanists describe themselves as agnostic or sceptical rather than atheistic and are more interested in promoting positive values than criticising religion. Ultimately, though, Humanists are **essentially freethinkers** and therefore a humanist community will inevitably be a 'broad church', embracing a range of opinions on the nature of the universe and our place in it.

The Humanist vision for Northern Ireland is a society where reason, compassion, justice and ethical living prevail in a liberal, tolerant environment that acknowledges both human diversity and common humanity despite our differences. It is a society where each individual is able to choose his or her own identity and lifestyle, provided that they do not harm others. It is a society where each individual is granted basic human rights and human dignity, while also accepting his or her responsibilities to others as members of the same community.

Ten Principles

HUMANISM has no 10 commandments. There are **no dogmatic rules** that must be obeyed unquestioningly in all situations, at all times. In keeping with a critical yet open-minded approach, Humanists question many of the accepted notions that govern belief and behaviour and do the same with their own tentative opinions which are subject to constant scrutiny and reappraisal. Humanists are always searching for truth, justice and humane treatment. The following are 10 of the key principles.

Humanism:

1 IS a philosophy of life based on reason, love, compassion, tolerance and our common humanity.

2 REJECTS authoritative opinion and believes that an individual should think and act for himself/herself.

3 REJECTS or is highly sceptical of belief in gods and an afterlife and affirms that human beings are as much a natural phenomenon as an animal or a plant.

4 VIEWS scientific knowledge not as certain but provisional, theories not as final answers but working tools, and values not as god-given but springing from human nature and human needs.

5 ASSERTS that we can live decent, honest and upright lives, with full respect and consideration for others, without belief in the supernatural, religion, dogma, superstition or blind faith.

6 AFFIRMS the worth, dignity and autonomy of the individual and the right of every person to the greatest possible freedom compatible with the rights of others.

7 BELIEVES that we should try to live full and happy lives ourselves and help others to do the same.

8 THINKS that the meaning of our lives is not part of a supernatural 'plan' but rather lies in our enrichment of the lives of others.

9 EMBRACES diversity while asserting the primacy of fundamental human values and rights.

10 CAMPAIGNS for a pluralist and more secular state in which religion no longer occupies a privileged position or unduly influences government policy.

Education

EDUCATION plays a very important part in Humanist thought. We believe that it is the duty of every community to help make the future better than the present. Education is an investment, not only or even mainly in a narrow economic sense but also socially and morally. It should try to fulfil at least three basic functions:

- The development of **talents and skills**.
- The fostering of **independence of thought**.
- The advancement of **moral and social behaviour**.

(A) Integrated Schools

It is essential that all children should be taught in a relaxed, friendly atmosphere to encourage them to love and be loved, to show respect for others, and to enjoy life. Children from all cultures and religious denominations should be educated together so that they are able to form friendships, experience the **diversity** of the wider society, and understand 'the other side'. This implies a commitment to integrated education, where children and teachers from Catholic and Protestant traditions, as well as those of **other religious faiths or none**, work together in one school.

For most of Northern Ireland's history, the vast majority of children have been educated in segregated schools. In 1981, however, Lagan College was established as the first integrated school with 28 pupils. In 1989 the Education Reform Order gave the Department of Education a duty "to encourage and facilitate the development of integrated education". In the years since, progress has been slow and, at the time of writing, **93% of pupils still attend largely segregated schools**.

Integrated education is a vital part of building a shared future for our children. Humanists reject the concept of so-called 'shared' education, which has failed elsewhere in Europe. It is an evasion of the moral responsibility to bring children together. In 2010 the then First Minister Peter Robinson remarked that the system of education was a "benign form of apartheid which is fundamentally damaging to our society". Opinion polls indicate that the vast majority of the population believe that the executive should fulfil its duty to **prioritise funding for integrated schools**. It should act now.

(B) More Secular Schools

RELIGIOUS authorities have enormous power in Northern Ireland education through ownership of the schools, participation in their management committees, or influence on local politicians. Thus not only are all schools legally bound to have collective worship but also they have an **RE Core Syllabus**, drawn up by the four main Christian churches, that in all Key Stages is heavily Christian, except for Key Stage 3 where two world religions are included. **Humanism or Philosophy** or real comparative religion do not feature on the syllabus at all.

This privileged position for Christianity has been questioned, even by some Christians. In December 2015 the report of the Woolf Commission on Religion and Belief in Public Life, *Living with Difference*, was critical of the Northern Ireland RE syllabus, stating that the study of world religions "is only available for Key Stage 3 pupils on the basis of the church's argument that younger children would be confused". It suggested that growing numbers of

Many Humanists would support the Religion, Philosophy and Ethics (RPE) Model

children and young people from other cultural and religious backgrounds "are not well served by a churches-devised RE core syllabus that positions itself as having an **essential Christian character**". It called for RE to be renamed and "given an explicitly educational rather than confessional focus". Non-religious world views, such as Humanism, should be included. Many Humanists support the **Religion, Philosophy and Ethics (RPE) model**. It is the approach followed by many other regions; it gives the study of religion a place in a pluralist system; it is a degree course in many universities; and it includes Philosophy, which is studied in schools throughout the world.

Humanists want to see a more secular education system in which state-funded schools no longer favour any religion in pupil admissions, the curriculum, assemblies, or staff appointments. Children have a basic right not to be indoctrinated, but this right is flouted daily in our sectarian education system.

Private Morality

HUMANISTS seek an enhancement of the good life in which happiness and well-being are widely achieved. As Saintfield's **Francis Hutcheson** put it, "that action is best which accomplishes the greatest happiness of the greatest numbers". We should therefore have as much freedom as possible to determine our own lifestyle and fulfil our potential but, being social animals, we should also lead a virtuous life in which we show consideration and empathy for others.

Moral axioms are not divine commands but grander versions of the Highway Code. **The Golden Rule** of treating others as you yourself would like to be treated, which is at least as old as Confucius, is a good general principle. Immanuel Kant dressed it up in philosophical terms in the **categorical imperative** whereby we always treat other people as ends in themselves, and never as means to our own ends. Rawls's **difference principle** is also useful, whereby inequality is only permitted if the least well off are made better off than they would be under strict equality.

What applies generally in the wider society is also true on the micro level between individuals. The churches here have focused too much on matters of personal intimacy, such as sex before marriage, same-sex marriage, abortion and contraception, and not enough on issues such as conflict resolution, truth recovery or wider global concerns like poverty, climate change, world peace, and so on. Moreover, they have taken a negative view of sexuality which, instead of increasing happiness, has increased the amount of misery and guilt. Sex is an essential part of the joy of living and the Humanist approach is **positive and life-enhancing**.

Abortion

NORTHERN Ireland is a highly **patriarchal society** in which women are regarded as secondary creations. Calvinist Protestantism and conservative Catholicism are both opposed to equal rights for women. This opposition can be seen clearly on the issue of abortion, where the denial to women of the right to control their bodies reflects the general lack of control over their lives.

Much of the theoretical opposition to abortion focuses on the issue of when life begins. For many

Christians, it begins at conception. Yet there is life in a single cell. Humanists take personhood to begin at **viability** – the potential of the foetus to survive outside the womb – and want to see the 1967 Act extended to Northern Ireland, although some argue that the current limit of 24 weeks is too long and should be reduced to around 20-21 weeks.

Same-Sex Marriage

CONTRARY to the assumption of conservative Christians, marriage has not been set in stone but has constantly evolved. Many ancient cultures, including Hebrews in the **Old Testament**, were **polygamous** and a woman was likely to be only one of a man's many wives. We no longer treat women as chattels, and those of a lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender sexual orientation only want what others take for granted: the right to have their love celebrated, recognised and protected.

At the time of writing, Northern Ireland is the **only part** of these islands where same-sex marriage is still prohibited. There have been **5 recent votes** in Stormont on the issue, with the last being only rejected on a petition of concern. Humanists hope that this matter will be resolved in favour of LGBT rights long before 2026.

The Right to Die

IT is astonishing that in many countries human beings are still denied the ownership of their own lives. Humanists greatly value personal autonomy and free choice and also think that the quality of life is more important than its duration. We should all have the right to choose a painless and dignified end for ourselves.

Humanists encourage the writing of **Living Wills**, a form of advance directive leaving instructions for care in the event of a serious illness and incapacity to make decisions for oneself. An **Advance Decision** signed by the person and a witness is a legally binding wish to forego life-saving treatment.

Humanists also seek the adoption of a regulated system of **assisted dying** where an adult who has a terminal illness and is mentally competent is permitted to take prescribed medicine that will end their life. Such a system works well in several American states and countries in Europe, where it is recognised as a core part of patient-centred approaches to end of life care.

Community Relations

HUMANISTS realise that our local problems will not be solved in the short run. Yet there is hope from the evidence of surveys that the majority of people want to live together in peace and harmony and support changes that would bring about a more liberal and tolerant society. In pursuit of a more peaceable Northern Ireland, we propose that:

- A new neutral 'Northern Irish' flag, which would be flown on designated days, should be created. There is an official flag for Scotland and Wales, so why not one for Northern Ireland? An advantage of such a flag is its potential to unite people from both sides of the sectarian divide behind it. A recent BBC/RTE survey indicates that about 23% of the population now regard themselves as 'Northern Irish', and presumably this percentage will continue to grow. A Northern Irish flag would assist in this development.
- All groups that killed or injured people in the Troubles, whether republican, loyalist or security forces, should make an **official apology** to the victims and their families, similar to the 'abject and true remorse' statement made by the UVF in 1994.
- All groups that killed or injured people in the Troubles, whether republican, loyalist or security forces, should also issue a **statement of errors**. The British government started this process by apologising for Bloody Sunday. Further statements should be forthcoming from all relevant groups.
- There should be a **Commission of Historical Clarification**, as proposed by Arkiv, a group of historians formed in 2013, which would produce a comprehensive and balanced account of the Troubles. The Commission would be appointed by both the British and Irish governments and consist of both British and Irish historians chaired by an internationally renowned historian.

Arkiv's proposal is surely an excellent idea and an opportunity to establish a narrative which is as close as possible to being objective and free from political bias. It could act as a convincing counterbalance to current myth-making narratives which focus excessively on the conflict. After all, the vast majority of people, both unionist and nationalist, did not subscribe to the cult of the gun or the myth of redemptive violence and in many cases considered it to be futile and counterproductive. The voice of this silent majority needs to be heard and recorded.

- A **Truth or Legacy Commission** should be established, as proposed by the Consultative Group on the Past in 2009. To be trusted and impartial, it should be conducted by an international agency such as the UN. The aim of such a commission would not simply be to establish the truth or punish those who committed criminal offences. Where there is conflict and killing in a divided society, the truth can also bring closure, healing, justice and reconciliation. Open discussion of suffering helps the healing process. The lack of opportunity or inability to communicate feelings contributes to mental depression. A problem shared is a problem halved, and bringing your story to people with similar experiences is likely to be a positive step.

This was clearly seen in the BBC's *Facing the Truth* series in 2006 chaired by Desmond Tutu. Victims and perpetrators of violence met each other across a table. In the third and final programme, Sylvia Hackett faced loyalist Michael Stone, who killed her husband Dermot. Sylvia, who was able to bear witness to her pain and suffering, said afterwards that she had waited a long time for this day and it had given her a 'little bit of healing'.

- **The Civic Forum** should be reconstructed to be more inclusive of the opinions in the wider society. For example, it includes representatives of the churches but not of secular organisations, even though nearly a quarter of the population openly declare that they have no religion. Moreover, the more liberal and tolerant citizens tend to be the younger generation, who have no historical baggage and want to live and let live, yet they are less likely to vote. Representatives of the young should be included in the Forum to encourage this generation to take part in local politics and bring their more optimistic and progressive values to bear on the decisions that affect us all.
- Although human rights are essential in a free society, there should be a general acceptance that rights are not absolute and where they conflict, as is frequently the case in a divided society like Northern Ireland, the most desirable process is one of **consultation and compromise** between the parties involved in disputes. Such consultations do take place in most instances of parades and marches, and only a few cases, notably in Ardoyne and the Garvaghy Road, are still a matter of contention. Marchers and residents in these areas need to talk to each other as a matter of urgency.

Global and Local Issues

1. Poverty and Inequality

NEARLY half the world's 7 billion people live on less than \$2.50 a day, and 1 billion are living in poverty. According to an Oxfam report in 2016, the richest **62 billionaires** own as much wealth as the **poorest half** of the world's population. This shocking gap between the richest and the rest is widening fast.

The persistence of such extreme poverty and injustice diminishes us all. Every human being is entitled to equal care and respect, and equality of opportunity is therefore a basic human right. Neoliberal economic policies have failed both rich and poor countries. Change must come through both trade and aid. Trade arrangements must be made fairer and guarantee export markets for the least developed countries (LDCs). Multilateral aid through the UN and the World Bank needs to be increased and properly targeted. As for bilateral aid, the UN target of 0.7% of rich countries' GDP devoted to **Official Development Assistance**, set in 1970, should be increased to at least 1%. Rich countries should encourage the education of women and improve access to health care, clean water and sanitation.

We would go further and advocate the idea of a **universal basic income** (UBI), set at a level sufficient for subsistence, to which all member countries of the UN should commit themselves. We also support **birth control policies** to slow the growth of population and deplore the continued opposition of the Catholic Church to artificial contraception.

At the local level, according to the New Policy Institute in 2014, poverty in Northern Ireland increased in the previous five years, with average income falling by almost 10% compared with 7% for the UK as a whole. Poverty among young adults aged 16 to 29 rose by 8 percentage points to reach 26 per cent. Also in 2014, Save the Children reported that almost **one in four children** or 100,000 will be living in poverty in the province by 2020. West Belfast has the second highest level of child poverty of any UK constituency area, with 43% of children growing up poor. Research by the University of Ulster has shown that, in areas worst

affected by the Troubles, welfare dependency has risen, suicide rates have doubled and men's life expectancy has fallen.

In Northern Ireland we desperately need well-paid, good quality jobs, a more effective child poverty strategy, and measures to eradicate fuel poverty and homelessness. In March 2015 the charity Age Sector Platform reported that **42% of households were in fuel poverty**, making Northern Ireland worse than any other region in the UK.

Increases in the minimum wage, while necessary, will not be sufficient to tackle these problems. A more radical approach is needed and again a universal basic income is an idea whose time has come. Already it has been introduced in Finland and in 20 municipalities in Holland and in the Irish Republic, Fianna Fail promised a commission on the idea in its 2016 election manifesto.

A UBI would make a huge difference in an economically disadvantaged region such as Northern Ireland

A UBI has been advocated by many humanists throughout history. Thomas More includes it in his *Utopia* (1516); Juan Vives, the Valencian humanist contemporary of More, promotes it in his pamphlet *On the Assistance to the Poor* (1526); Thomas Paine includes it in his *Agrarian Justice* (1795); John Stuart Mill advocated it in his *Principles of Political Economy* (second edition, 1849); and Bertrand Russell favours it in his *Roads to Freedom* (1918).

A universal or uniform basic income is an income paid by government, at a uniform level and at regular intervals, to each adult member of society. The income is paid, and its level is fixed, irrespective of whether the person is rich or poor, lives alone or with others, is willing to work or not. There would be many advantages, two of the most important being that it would increase liberty by providing a reasonable alternative to being coerced into unpleasant work, and it would increase equality by increasing the standard of living of the poor. A UBI would make a huge difference in an economically disadvantaged region such as Northern Ireland.

2. Climate Change and the Environment

THE evidence for global warming is overwhelming. The earth is warm enough to sustain life because of greenhouse gases (GHG) in the atmosphere which act like a blanket, keeping the Earth warm by preventing some of the sun's energy being re-radiated into space. If we add more GHG, then even less heat is lost. The main GHG, carbon dioxide, has increased by nearly 43% in the last 150 years, mainly as a result of burning fossil fuels. Over the last 100 years the average global temperature has risen by about 0.74C, and 11 of the 12 hottest years recorded have all occurred since 1995. Climate change is a major moral crisis of our times.

The worst impacts of climate change have fallen disproportionately on people living in the poorest countries who have done the least to cause the problem. As with so many problems, it is **the poor who suffer the most**. If the rise in global warming is not kept below 2°C, the potential results are over 200 million people at risk from malaria, 20 million people at risk from coastal flooding, 12 million people at risk from hunger as crop yields fail, and about a third of the world's population at risk from water shortages. Therefore, as well as the scientific case, there is also a strong moral argument in terms of social justice for us in the developed world to play our part in tackling climate change.

In Northern Ireland, climate change is already producing an increased risk of flooding and coastal erosion which will put pressure on drainage, sewage, roads, water and habitat. Increased temperature, increased pollution and poorer air quality may also bring discomfort to the vulnerable and threaten species of animals and crops.

Northern Ireland's GHG emissions account for 4% of the total UK GHG. But it accounts for **7.8% of the UK's methane** and 9.1% of its nitrous oxide emissions, the reason being that agricultural sources are a higher percentage of the regional total than in the rest of the UK. In the period 1990 to 2013, the UK as a whole reduced GHG emissions by 30%, England reduced them by 32%, Scotland by 35%, Wales by 12% and Northern Ireland by 16%. The Executive set a target of 35% reduction by 2025 from the 1990 baseline but the latest prediction is of 33.3%.

Northern Ireland is the only region of the UK not to have legislated on the issue. In 2016 the UK's Committee on Climate Change advised that the unique circumstances here mean that locally led and developed legislation is needed. In 2015 Mark H Durkan produced a discussion paper which recommended setting a long-term target of an 80% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 on a 1990 baseline and an interim target of 34% by 2020, which would be consistent with existing targets in the rest of the UK. He also suggested placing a duty to set limits in carbon budgets on the total amount of greenhouse gas emissions that can be emitted in Northern Ireland.

Humanists support the **Climate Change Adaptation Programme** published by the Department of the Environment in 2014. It focuses on new and existing policies under the primary areas of water, flooding, agriculture and forestry and natural environment. The Programme seeks to help departments become more aware and more resilient to climate change impacts in the future. We also support a **Climate Change Act** because, as

Northern Ireland is the only region of the UK not to have legislated on the issue

the Green Party argues, it would give a clear signal to both the private and public sectors about the direction of long-term government policy, provide greater certainty for future investment decisions, and promote a green economy.

We also need to develop and invest in policies to move away from our dependency on fossil fuels. The province spends about £2bn per year on imported fuel. If we invested in energy efficiency measures and generated more of our own energy through greater use of renewables, we could radically reduce this spending and also create jobs in home insulation and other industries.

The threat from climate change is not only to humans but also to the entire ecosystem of the planet. We see the effects in the form of extreme weather and the loss of biodiversity as species lose their habitats. Farmers are facing soil erosion and the resulting loss of land. Our greed must not prevent us from keeping the planet healthy so that future generations may enjoy what we have taken for granted.

3. Human and Animal Rights

HUMANISTS are committed to the protection and enhancement of human rights. **The 1998 Human Rights Act**, which incorporates part of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) into British law, is a vital protection of citizens' rights, and we oppose any attempt by the present government to repeal it.

The ECHR is based in part on the UN's *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, ratified in 1949. It begins by recognising the 'inherent dignity' of all members of the human family and, as its name suggests, it proclaims rights that are **fundamental to all human beings irrespective of nationality**. These rights are not granted by individual states and therefore it is wrong for states to take them away.

The Human Rights Act, which is embedded in the **Good Friday Agreement**, ensuring that the Assembly can only make laws compatible with it, allows British courts to deal with alleged breaches

The leading figures in politics, the professions and the judiciary are predominantly male

of the ECHR, rather than the expensive process of having to be heard in Strasbourg. The Act and the ECHR have upheld the rights of victims of crime, widows, old people in care, employees wearing Christian crosses, newspapers reporting scandals like thalidomide, homosexuals, the innocent from having their DNA databases retained, and more. Scrapping the Human Rights Act would only strengthen state power and diminish our liberties and should be opposed as a retrograde step.

We live in a highly patriarchal society. The leading figures in politics, the professions and the judiciary are predominantly male. Only 20 (19%) of the 108 MLAs elected in 2011 were women and this second class status is a major concern for Humanists. Hostility towards female MLAs, particularly by unionist members, has also been frequently noted. There should be an **Equality Committee** within the Assembly, with the power to recommend action aimed at improving the disadvantaged position of women within the Assembly and in the wider society.

Domestic and sexual abuse of women was prevalent during the conflict and much of this is only now coming to light. The contribution of women to the maintenance of society during a bitter conflict has been **largely ignored**, and even today in many areas women struggle to maintain a stable family life against the threat of paramilitaries and the high levels of mostly male criminality and drug taking. In the past, women have been largely excluded and silenced, but their voices now need to be heard and included in the process of building peace, justice and a civilised society.

Scientists have confirmed what we already know, namely that animals can feel pain and joy, just like us. Humanists believe that animals have rights and do not exist merely for our benefit, and we want to see the end of the widespread exploitation of non-human species. According to the UN, about 60bn land animals are slaughtered each year for food. They come largely from intensive factory farms where they experience pain, boredom, fear and anxiety. All this cruel mistreatment must end.

Animal cruelty is a major problem in the province. According to a USPCA report in 2013, of more than 5,000 complaints to councils in the previous year, only two prosecutions were made. We hear almost daily stories of dogs and cats being maltreated or killed, yet no action is taken. Even in the case of the horrific attack on Cody the border collie, where for the first time under animal cruelty legislation a custodial sentence was imposed, the man was given only a 10 month sentence. We want to see stiffer sentences for those inflicting animal cruelty and we support the campaign by the Green Party to have a **register of animal cruelty perpetrators**.

Northern Ireland is also the last place in the UK where setting dogs on wild mammals remains legal. The Hunting Act of 2004 only applied in England and Wales and has not been extended to the province. An Ipsos MORI poll in 2015 showed that when the people of Northern Ireland were asked which if any of foxes, deer, and hares should remain legal to hunt by dogs, less than 1 in 20 supported deer hunting remaining legal, less than 1 in 8 supported hare hunting remaining legal and less than 1 in 5 supported fox hunting remaining legal. We want to see the **barbaric acting of hunting banned** in Northern Ireland.

4. Free Speech and Tolerance

FREE speech and tolerance are central to the good society. Without them, we open the door to tyranny, oppression, injustice, corruption and incompetence. Free speech allows the truth to surface and prevail, creates a marketplace of ideas, and prevents the abuse of power.

One of the most eloquent defences of free speech and tolerance is John Stuart Mill's work *On Liberty* (1859). He offers three main arguments against repressing an opinion. First, **we can never be sure that it is false**. Truth can only emerge from constant argument, discussion and debate. Mill also notes that we should tolerate even the opinion we hate because truth is most likely to emerge in a free intellectual combat from which no idea has been excluded. He notes how learned persons joined with those who persecuted Socrates and Jesus for holding 'extreme' opinions which later won many adherents.

It is a sign of weakness that orthodox religions fear the sort of open debate that Humanists cherish

Mill's second argument for freedom of speech relates to its value in **keeping established truths and doctrines alive**. Such discussion challenges us to know the reasons for our beliefs. Without challenge, even accepted beliefs and moral codes become lifeless. Organised intolerance of opinions which conflict with the official views destroys 'the moral courage of the human mind'. With no enemy at hand, 'both teachers and learners go to sleep at their post'. In short, tolerance is educational and may even enable us to strengthen our own viewpoint.

Mill's third argument rests on the possibility that **competing views may share the truth between them**. Opinions may not be wholly right or wholly wrong. He points out, for example, that the accepted moral codes of the modern era are not purely Christian but also stem from pre-Christian Greek and Roman influences. Many of our modern ethical codes and political philosophies are based on eclectic compromises over time. So tolerance and compromise may be inextricably connected.

There is another justification for tolerance which is not only implicit in Mill's case but can be traced to earlier philosophers such as Kant. It is **the principle of respect**. Kant stressed that we should treat other people as ends in themselves and not as means to our own ends. In a democracy we must respect each individual's status as a free and equal member of the community. If we believe that all individuals are of equal worth and dignity, then their opinions deserve to be heard even if we strongly disagree with them. This position is well summed up in the remark attributed to Voltaire: "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it".

A final justification for tolerance of opinion lies in the principles of **neutrality and diversity**, which underlie the concept of a pluralist society. It is one where power is diffused among many divergent groups and the state acts as a neutral referee between the various conceptions of the good held and acted upon by its citizens. The state should neither prescribe nor proscribe any particular moral or religious view but should instead welcome diversity.

Free speech and tolerance have limits. We should oppose '**hate speech**' on grounds of race, sex, age or infirmity, because these are states that people cannot change. But it should be open season on beliefs and opinions. As Salman Rushdie said, the giving of offence cannot be a basis for censorship, or freedom of expression would perish instantly. In a healthy society we should all be exposed to open debate, criticism and even ridicule. It is a sign of weakness that orthodox religions fear the sort of open debate that Humanists cherish.

Free speech is under serious threat from the current phase of campus censorship. The idea of a university is that of a school of universal learning which students attend to find answers, not to echo opinions already held. It should not be a cosy environment where students are shielded from ideas they find offensive. Universities are a microcosm of the world and should be places that encourage free enquiry and provocative ideas in the search for a better society. They should be the true 'safe place' where students can freely discuss and argue big issues and confront ideas they find objectionable. There is actually a name for this process: it is called education.

5. Promoting Peace

A HATRED of war has been shared by Humanists throughout history. The great Roman Humanist Cicero argued that there are few acceptable reasons for war because human nature and human reason biased a society against war. The Renaissance Humanist Erasmus was an absolute pacifist. War, he suggested, was 'unnatural': animals did not make war on one another. Bertrand Russell's opposition to the First World War led him to be sent to prison for six months. However, he supported the war against Nazi Germany. In an essay on *The Future of Pacifism* (1943) he identified his position as 'relative political pacifism'.

War brings out the worst in humanity. As Eisenhower put it: "I hate war as only a soldier who has lived in it can, only as one who has seen its brutality, its futility, its stupidity". The bloodiness and awfulness of war is a truism. In a spectrum which ranges from extreme militarism to absolute pacifism, many Humanists would tend to agree with Russell that only in a few exceptional circumstances is war justified.

War or at least political violence has been an endemic feature of Irish history for centuries. Part of the reason is perfectly understandable. Ireland was ruled and oppressed by Britain. But there has also been an ingrained religious **myth of redemptive violence**. This is the notion that violence in the service of the nation, whether an Irish nation or a British nation, is necessary to bring order out of chaos. "Bloodshed", said Patrick Pearse, "is a cleansing and satisfying thing, and the nation which regards it as the final horror has lost its manhood". Pearse was thinking of republican violence, but his message could equally have been addressed to loyalists who were prepared to make a blood sacrifice for 'God and Ulster'. Conor Cruise O'Brien called it a 'sacral nationalism'.

We have entered a period of commemoration of events in the early 20th century, including the Easter Rebellion, the Somme and partition. We should bear in mind that both unionists and republicans were prepared to use force to achieve their aims in defiance of democracy: the unionists, with the Covenant, the gun-running, the Curragh

Mutiny and rejection of the 1918 Irish election result; and the republicans with the 1916 Rebellion and the Anglo-Irish War. Historically, on this island, both major traditions have used or threatened bloodshed against the other. Recognising this truth is the first step to a more peaceful future.

Humanists hope that the power-sharing Executive and the removal of Articles 2 and 3 of the Irish Constitution which claimed jurisdiction over Northern Ireland have together inaugurated an era of **permanent peace and good will** on the island. Perhaps we can say that James Joyce's wish has been fulfilled: history is a nightmare from which Ireland has finally escaped.

Indeed, Northern Irish people can play their part in promoting peace throughout the world. We should participate fully in international organisations such as the **United Nations** and the **European Union**, and help to ensure that they are effectively used and not ignored. We can certainly offer our experience as a model of **conflict**

Humanists can also take the lead by uniting together as one Humanist movement on the whole island

resolution to those countries still experiencing civil and ethnic strife. Northern Ireland can be an inspiration to other parts of the world that the journey towards lasting peace can be completed. If one of the longest running conflicts in European history can be resolved, then there is hope for even the most bitter and intractable disputes elsewhere.

Humanists can also take the lead by uniting together as one Humanist movement on the whole island. We can show that there is a real alternative beyond Orange and Green which brings all Irish people together in pursuit of our common secular interests and reflects our real nature as a warm and friendly people. In this way we can help our small Ireland fulfil the noble vision of Wolfe Tone 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 us down the centuries.



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