Brexit: The Best should not be the Enemy of the Good

At the time of writing, the British state is in crisis, with an avalanche of MPs venting their anger at the Prime Minister who, although she won a vote of confidence from her own party, is still being assailed from a variety of perspectives: eurosceptics who want a hard Brexit; Remainers who want a second referendum; the Labour party which is itself divided and unclear; and all those MPS who despise the Backstop.

In the 2016 referendum, Northern Ireland (56%) and Scotland (62%) voted to remain in the EU. England (53%) and Wales (52.5%), however, voted to leave. With apologies to the Welsh, it seems fair to agree with Fintan O’Toole that “Brexit is essentially an English phenomenon”. That fact ought to suggest that, in terms of the UK as a whole, the result was not a clear victory to leave.

The implication is that either (a) there should be a second referendum or (b) a hard Brexit is undesirable and a compromise is inevitable. Ironically, (a) was actually being advocated by some prominent Brexiteers before the June 2016 vote. In 2011 Jacob Rees-Mogg told the Commons: “we could have two referendums...it might make more sense to have the second referendum after the negotiation is completed”. In May 2016, a month before the vote, Nigel Farage stated that a 52/48 Remain victory would be ‘unfinished business by a long way’ and that “win or lose this battle, we will win this war”.

There is nothing final about a referendum, any more than an election. In a free society people are allowed to change their mind – even admit that they got it wrong – and others have every right to try to persuade them to do so. Otherwise the same party would be in power in perpetuity. Moreover, in the UK referendums are only advisory. They cannot be legally binding because a fundamental principle of the British constitution is the sovereignty of Parliament. It would be another irony to ignore this principle while maintaining that a major motive for leaving the EU is precisely to restore this sovereignty.

The fact is that the majority of MPs are Remainers. A survey before the referendum indicated that there were 480 and only 159 Leavers. So the vote demonstrated a major conflict between Parliament and the people. Does this prove that MPs are out of touch? No, for a basic objection to referendums has always been that politicians are often ahead of the voters, who tend to be more easily influenced by emotional campaigns and prejudice. The death penalty is an obvious example. According to opinion polls, a majority now favour a second referendum and the UK would vote to stay in the EU if asked again. Parliament and the people are moving towards alignment.

There are sound reasons for having a second referendum, not least that the Brexit result was tainted. Many of the Leave campaign’s misleading statements, such as the fantasy promise of £350m a week for the NHS, have been exposed. They have also been found by the Electoral Commission to have cheated by funnelling £675,315 through the pro-Brexit youth group BeLeave, thus exceeding their £7m spending limit.

Again, some of the implications of Brexit are becoming clearer. For example, Northern Ireland’s beef, sheep and hill farming sectors have joined with red meat processors to warn that ‘No Deal’ would be a disastrous outcome. Sam Chesney, UFU beef and lamb Chairman, said that they would face up to 60 per cent tariffs on exports and unfair competition in the UK market from lower standard meat imported from outside Europe.

One possibility after the negotiations is a two-stage referendum. In the first stage voters would be asked whether they still wished to leave the EU. If they didn’t, then no second stage would be needed. If they did, then the second stage would ask whether they favoured the deal negotiated by the government or a ‘No Deal’ decision. This second referendum would provide a clearer picture of the public’s considered attitude to the EU and help to heal the deep divisions thrown up by the first vote in June 2016.

However, a compromise deal has been done between the EU and the UK government. There will be a vote on it before 21st January. If MPs vote against it, then the result could be a no deal Brexit with all the disasters including a hard Irish border that will ensue. That would be the worst possible option as most of them already acknowledge.

As Voltaire put it, a situation cannot develop where “the best is the enemy of the good’. Labour as the main opposition party has a responsibility to act in the national interest. Seeking to unite the country by rescuing May from the clutches of the hard Brexiteers would stand it in good stead for the 2022 general election which it could fight partly on its avowed policy of a permanent customs union with the EU. The current deal of keeping the UK and the EU temporarily in a close economic relationship is not so far removed from what Labour says it wants anyway.

As for the DUP, it is at odds with practically every business organisation in Northern Ireland, including crucially the CBI, the Federation of Small Businesses, Manufacturing NI, and the Ulster Farmers' Union. Its obsession with the backstop is the real project fear.

Considered in conjunction with its opposition to abortion, same-sex marriage, and scientific evidence on the age of the earth and global warming, the Duppers are actually in danger of being renamed ‘Sinn Fein’ – ourselves alone!
The World, Going Forward...

Bob Rees

I was born in 1936. In my short lifetime, the world’s population has grown by 350%, from 2.2 billion to 7.6 billion. It is no coincidence that during that time, our race has been introduced to air pollution, shortages of resources like fresh water, arable land and habitat, and right now we are facing the very real threat of irreversible climate change. My generation and those that have followed it have methodically and short-sightedly destroyed our planet in our quest for the good life and a balanced economy.

Our democratic system only addresses short-term problems – there’s nothing in it for a political party that invests in something that won’t pay off for several decades. Similarly our giant corporations are obsessed with short-term growth and quick profits in order to impress the Stock Markets, because nobody is prepared to wait for long-term dividends. Everything is expected to grow and keep growing: markets, cities, world trade, life expectancy, profits, tourism, consumption, living standards and foreign travel, as well as the world’s gross population and its armies. But this is short-termism gone mad. Our planet is not infinite, and already it is seriously overstretched.

Clearly, there is a limit to our resources. We can’t keep growing for ever and ever. Equally clearly, we must recognise that our planet and its ecosystem are infinitely more important than Brexit, or the economy, or party politics, or international relations, or anything else. Our world is seriously overpopulated. God won’t fix it and democracy can’t fix it – we need a benign dictator to make some very hard, unpopular decisions, if the human race is to be saved from itself in the long term. A compassionate but totally authoritarian all-powerful world government is urgently needed.

Instead, the World Economic Forum report (published January 2018) envisages a way to feed most of the masses even after our eco-system has failed. It describes a Fourth Industrial revolution in agricultural technology, with genetically-engineered plants and animals, synthetic foods, and alternative protein sources; reduced water and land requirements; all highly efficient, productive, and profitable, and owned and driven by corporate agricultural giants with political and economic power. Great!

And no doubt nuclear fusion will supply our energy needs, and tall buildings will enable us to pack the people tight and stack ‘em high. No problems. And so we plan to continue along our path into a synthetic oblivion, a brave new world which ignores the fundamental problem.

It’s a problem which clearly has a lot to do not only with fossil fuels and lifestyles, need and greed, but also with gross overpopulation. There’d be plenty of everything for everyone if there weren’t so many of us. It has been in their quest for economic growth, rather than to protect their eco-systems, that individual governments in India, Pakistan, China, Nigeria and elsewhere have tried to tackle overpopulation using various means, including:

- Educating and empowering women;
- Promoting and incentivising family planning via radio and slogans;
- Encouraging voluntary sterilisation;
- Promoting contraception;
- Raising the age of consent to 20;
- Liberalising the abortion laws;
- Reducing poverty and infant mortality (no need for lots of kids);
- Forbidding parents from selling their kids into slavery, child labour and begging;
- Enforcing one-child legislation, as in China.

Needless to say, Catholic and Muslim leaders have protected their power by vigorously opposing these attempts to limit their spheres of influence. In India, Hindus fear for their future existence as Muslims with their four wives fill the maternity hospitals. And in their religiously-motivated desire for sons, couples keep trying, regardless of the daughters they keep producing. Meanwhile, in the developed world where birth rates are declining, the problem of ageing populations means higher taxes on the young. Such shrinking populations are compensated by immigration, mostly of Muslims who are reluctant to integrate because of divisive Muslim teaching (e.g. Qur’an 3.118 and Wahhabism). No one wants to be the one who cuts back.

Before farming was invented, the Earth sustained possibly 50 million of our hunter-gatherer forefathers. When I was at school, it was popularly thought that the population limit was around 5 billion. At present we’re at 7.6 billion and growing at 140/minute, and the UN reckons we’ll hit 9 billion by 2050. They assure us that we will be able to feed the 10 billion people predicted by 2100, and that by then, the human population will have self-regulated and will have stopped rising. So there’s nothing to worry about …

… Except for global overheating, rising sea levels, billions of displaced people, absence of any natural habitat, fierce squabbles and fighting over fresh water, habitable land and remaining resources. And people building walls to keep each other out.

This is not the humanist vision.
INCE the summer the news has abated about the case of Billy Caldwell (above), the 11 year-old boy from Northern Ireland with severe epilepsy who became the first person to receive an NHS prescription for medical marijuana in the UK.

Billy had started taking cannabis oil for his seizures after seeing a childhood epilepsy expert in California, where its use is legal. His mother bravely and tenaciously exposed the restricted thinking, among so-called medical experts and also the legal restrictions.

It took prolonged public outcry over Billy’s life-threatening condition to make the government change its position. Even then, the Home Office was at pains to stress that the drug would only be administered under an exceptional license granted after doctors said it was needed for a ‘medical emergency’.

It is ludicrous that in one developed country, Canada, where the government has found a way to legislate for the recreational and medical use of cannabis, while in another an extremely sick child must be made to produce evidence of life-threatening symptoms before it can be prescribed for medical purposes.

Hopefully, the example of Canada legalising the possession and use of cannabis will once again drag the UK and Ireland back into the spotlight.

One of the main problems raised by those against legalisation is the detrimental effect it is believed to have on young peoples’ health, particularly their mental state. In Canada, measures have been taken to address specific concerns in this area: products that are ‘appealing to youth’ have been prohibited; cannabis will not be available to buy in vending machines; and promotional advertising of the drug is not allowed.

There is no reason that similar approaches couldn’t be made in the UK and Ireland as the framework is already in place, following rule changes for cigarette packaging and the introduction of the sugar tax.

“An adult should be able to have cannabis without worrying what the police are doing”

However, to discuss effective restrictions already existing for alcohol, tobacco, etc., on the use of cannabis, and the new business and health opportunities it could bring, is to assume that there could be a rational discourse on the topic.

Sadly, at present, as portrayed by the hysteria around the confiscation of cannabis oil used by Billy Caldwell, we don’t have it. The UK government in particular has constantly shot down the opportunity of debating possible legalisation after the Billy Caldwell debacle. However, some light has been thrown on the debate by the former Conservative leader William Hague who, in an article in the Daily Telegraph, called on Theresa May to reform the UK’s ‘inappropriate, ineffective and utterly out of date’ drug policy. Alas, the Home Office response was that it had ‘no intention of reviewing the classification of cannabis’.

Cannabis remains the most commonly used drug in the UK and Ireland, with the rate of usage basically unchanged over the last 10 years. Current government strategies are failing to reduce it – proof, if it were needed – that the establishments position on drug policy is solely a moral one.

Interestingly, the Chief Constable of Durham Police, Mike Barton, said in June 2018 that the ban on the class B drug cannabis takes up disproportionate amounts of police time and gives millions of pounds to organised crime. He even went on to say: “An adult should be able to have cannabis without worrying what the police are doing. That happens in many states in the USA and civilisation does not disappear before their eyes”.

The medical use of cannabis is a no brainer and it is positive to report that in August of this year all the political parties, yes even the DUP, in the North have united around the need for a Billy’s Law to allow the prescription of medicinal cannabis. This unfortunately is on hold due to the political crisis at the Stormont Assembly.

In the Republic NORML are the main group campaigning to legalise cannabis. It is a non-partisan, non-profit organisation whose aim is to provide a support network to those seeking the normalisation of cannabis. It stresses the need to highlight the positive transformation that legalisation could bring enabling responsible, medical, therapeutic, recreational, agricultural and industrial uses.

Referendums on same sex marriage and abortion would have been unthinkable a couple of years ago, so why not one this year to legalise cannabis?

Prohibition does not work. Legalise cannabis now.

Legalise Cannabis Now

Roger Kelly
Why Religion is Holding Ulster Society Back

Brian McClinton

The German poet Heine wrote: “Mark this well, you proud men of action. You are nothing but the unwitting agents of the men of thought”. Keynes, the economist agreed about the importance of ideas. Indeed, he wrote, the world is ruled by little else. So what are the ideas that rule our society? I shall deal with four.

1. The Curse of Belief
The first idea is the necessity, I would say curse, of belief. In both religion and politics, there is a widespread need to become emotionally committed to a belief, Orange or Green, Protestant or Catholic, and once hooked, there is a blindness to reason and even self-preservation. This excess of devotion to one cause is accompanied by hostility to the other dominant cause. Blind love is mixed with blind hate. The Greek philosopher Socrates sought to expose the prejudices and unproven assumptions of his students and sow the seeds of doubt and scepticism. He is reported as putting it is to say that there is too much faith and not enough philosophy, especially of the Socratic variety.

Doubt, on the other hand allows us to feel sympathy for the experience and ideas of others. It unites us in the recognition that we are limited in time and space, that no individual or group has the whole truth and that there is so much that we do not know. In short, there is too much belief and not enough doubt in Northern Ireland. Another way of putting it is to say that there is too much faith and not enough philosophy, especially of the Socratic variety.

2. The Sacralisation of Politics
The second idea is the sacralisation of politics, a term coined by the Italian historian Emilio Gentile about fascism. The French philosopher Raymond Aron referred to the systems in Nazi Germany and Communist Russia as ‘secular religions’. So whether we talk of secular religions or sacral politics or even political religions, there is a deep-seated religious or spiritual dimension to political life. There are many similarities. Like religion, the politics has dogmas, sacred texts, rigid ethical values, messianic leaders, hierarchical structures, control of education, symbols, myths, rituals, etc.

This phenomenon has characterised Northern Ireland for four centuries. Religion and state are intertwined, so that the politics fails to reflect the increasing pluralism of the wider society. Instead the beliefs and values of the main churches have permeated our civic life and poisoned it. Religious-inspired laws on Sunday observance, abortion, homosexuality and segregated education, and the privileged position of religion in schools and the media, testify to this toxic fusion.

3. Religion and Nationalism
Thirdly, there is a conflation of religious and nationalism – a lethal cocktail, as we know not only from our own conflict but many others. This malign mix lies at the heart of our problem. Here we have a clash of religions, Protestant versus Catholic, hand in hand with a clash of nationalisms: British nationalism versus Irish nationalism. And of course for most of the last century the two dominant strands of Christianity carved up their own bit of the island. There was a Catholic theocracy in the south and a puritan theocracy in the North. Now instead we have a similar carve up within Northern Ireland.

In his book Ancestral Voices Conor Cruise O’Brien calls the Republicanism of Patrick Pearse a sacral nationalism. In his collection of essays, Passion and Cunning, he notes that Bobby Sands, like Pearse, saw himself as one of a line of martyrs for the Republic, whose sacrifice repeats the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. Militant loyalists are a mirror image prepared to give their lives ‘for God and Ulster’.

This is the essence of the myth of redemptive violence. Pearse, who identified the Irish nation with Jesus, summed it up in saying that “without the shedding of blood there is no redemption”. That has been the justification for our Holy Wars over the centuries and for the 30 years since the 1960s. It is a tribal conflict that is passed on from generation to generation in our largely segregated housing, segregated schools and segregated cultures.

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The beliefs and values of the main churches have permeated our civic life and poisoned it.
4. Hostility to Compromise and Tolerance

Finally, there is a hostility to compromise and tolerance. The two dominant strands of Christianity here are fundamentalist, uncompromising and intolerant. Therefore our politics is also fundamentalist, uncompromising and intolerant.

Compromise is generally taken as a sign of betrayal or watering down of principles; a dirty word, a surrender of ideals, demonstrating weakness or lack of integrity. “There can be no compromise between good and evil”, after all. It is also said that we should not compromise our principles because it is these moral and political beliefs that constitute who ‘we’ are. They are a stamp of our identity, and therefore a clear and unequivocal stand in their defence is a matter of integrity. If we are passionately committed to some principle, then to make concessions seems to be a betrayal of ourselves, or else it reveals a weak will, a lapse of reason, a lack of sincerity, or just plain hypocrisy.

Yet compromise occurs in all behaviour involving human interactions, whether personal or political. As Edmund Burke put it, “All government – indeed every human benefit and enjoyment, every virtue and every prudent act – is founded on compromise and barter”. We do not often achieve our first priority, either as individuals or as collectives. Freedom versus equality; the market versus the state; order versus disorder; individual versus majority rights; nation versus internationalism. The mature politics of now and the future is a constant search for compromises or give-and-take between these absolutes. It is the sane and sensible way to approach fundamental conflicts, whether personal or political.

Unionism in Northern Ireland has a religious concept of compromise which regards it as immoral because the alleged rights in the conflict are not regarded as equally legitimate. If God is ‘on our side’, then the other side must be fatally flawed. This philosophy was the basis of Unionist rule for 50 years and justified discrimination against those who were not ‘equal’ in God’s eyes. Thus it could never willingly compromise because that would have entailed not only a loss of privilege but also a surrender to ‘evil’. Even today extreme unionism backs itself into a corner when it refuses to compromise on such matters as Brexit, the Irish language or same-sex marriage.

Compromise is intimately connected with tolerance, which is putting up with ideas and practices of which we disapprove. It’s not something that ranks highly here. The Presbyterian Church decides that anyone in a same-sex relationship cannot be a full member and their children cannot be baptised. The Orange Order bans its members from attending a Catholic service because they reject the Mass as if, by being there, you are somehow infected with it. And evangelical bakers want their cakes shielded from contamination by the heinous sin of same-sex marriage. Oh, horror of horrors! And all in defence of freedom of expression!

The UN World Happiness Report in March 2018 ranked Finland, Norway, Denmark and Iceland as the happiest countries in which to live. It is no coincidence that they are also the most secular. All the evidence is that the happiest and most peaceful countries are also the least religious.

Our society can only become a better place if it loosens the grip of the main churches and seeks a more tolerant and compromising alternative to the extremes of Protestant and Catholic, Orange and Green.

◆ This is an edited version of a speech given in a debate at the C.S. Lewis Festival in the Crescent Arts Centre, Belfast, on 7th November.

Press Freedom under Threat

According to a report published on 5th December by Article 19, a UK-based human rights group working to advance freedom of expression and information, journalism is more dangerous, and more under threat, than at any time in the last 10 years. 78 journalists were killed and 326 imprisoned in 2017, a big increase on the previous year.

Hostility towards the media is becoming normalised around the world. A proliferation of ‘strongmen’ populist leaders have echoed the abusive language of Donald Trump, who declared the media as ‘the enemy of the American people’ and decreed factual reporting as ‘fake news’. The impact extends beyond the US. Myanmar’s Aung San Suu Kyi, Syria’s Bashar al-Assad and Venezuela’s Nicolas Maduro are leaders who have adopted the ‘fake news’ epithet in attempts to discredit the media.

2018 has been no better for journalists. In October The death of Maltese journalist Daphne Caruana Galicia in a car bomb explosion and the gruesome murder and dismemberment of the Saudi dissident and writer Jamal Khashoggi (above) at the Saudi Arabian consulate in Istanbul were among more than 30 journalists murdered during the year.

The Khashoggi murder was especially barbaric. Both the CIA and leading Senators have concluded that the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman was integrally involved in the murder. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis had tried to argue that “there is no smoking gun”. Senator Lindsey Graham replied: “there’s not a smoking gun, there’s a smoking saw”. Senator Bob Corker added that if the crown prince went to trial, he’d be convicted “in 30 minutes or less”.

In a posthumous article in the Washington Post, Khashoggi had argued that “What the Arab world needs most is free expression”. It seems that this request can be a death sentence – brutally administered.
**Why North Korea is no Argument against Secularism**

Tom Farrell

One of the more surreal travel experiences of my life would seem to bear this out. It was November 2003 and I had managed to get an entry visa to North Korea. Foreigners are generally chaperoned by official ‘minders’ when visiting this hermetically sealed nation, created (along with a rival state in the south) in mid 1948 when Moscow and Washington were quarrelling over the ruins of Imperial Japan. And one of the first things mine did after my arrival in the airport was to take me to Mansu Hill in the heart of Pyongyang. Here stood a twenty metre statue of the nation’s founding patriarch, Kim il-Sung. I was required to buy a bouquet of flowers and lay them before the ‘Great Leader’s’ immense bronze shoes, then bow in silent prayer.

Kim il-Sung had been a partisan fighter in Japanese occupied Korea during the 1930s. His good fortune was to attain the patronage of Joseph Stalin during the Second World War. Like numerous East European despots, Kim was duly installed as a supplicant on the Soviet Union’s borders after 1945, in this case in the Far East. He died in 1994 and has been succeeded by his son Kim Jong-il and most recently, his grandson, Kim Jong-Un.

When I made a return visit to Pyongyang in early 2012, the latter man, still in his early thirties, had just acquired the throne. But eight years on, son and grandson were secondary figures. For North Koreans, life is characterised by cradle to grave worship of Kim il-Sung, a man afforded almost supernatural powers of wisdom, whose photograph is in every room and whose image glowers from the metal badge every adult must wear. In 1998, the Constitution made Kim il-Sung ‘President for Eternity’ and, to my regret, on both of my visits, the palace containing his embalmed corpse was off limits.

During my first visit, North Korea had recently emerged from a famine that was said to have killed two million people. Despite the censorious behaviour of the ‘minders’ it was still possible to see the atrocious state of the countryside. What little agricultural machinery was on display outside Pyongyang was battered and ancient looking. People looked hungry and shabby on the roads.

A ‘godless’ state like North Korea is surely worse than the most unyielding theocracy. This is a view even held by some who do not profess religious belief. In an October 2010 Irish Independent column, Kevin Myers admitted to his own absence of belief because: “I am intellectually unable to; but on the other, I prefer a society which generally respects and reveres a god, and the organised system of pieties and rules that a god-based religion generates. The alternative seems to be...The great secular gods of the 20th century: Hitler, Stalin, Mao, Kim Il Sung, Pol Pot. They all triumphed in political cultures of obligatory godlessness. Remember -- there have, in fact, been few societies which made godlessness mandatory.

and without exception, they soon degenerated into orgies of murder.”

But how irreverent some of these tyrants really were is debatable: on the right during the early 20th century, pacts were signed with established churches (although the clergy produced honourable dissenters and martyrs) and if a given fascist despot wasn’t parading himself as a defender of the faith, like Franco, he was busy trying to cobbled together a faith of his own out of Nordic blood rights and anti-Semitic babble, like Hitler. Further east, the Soviet and Maoist tyrannies often aped the authoritarian traditions of the Orthodox Church or Confucianism to buttress police states spouting the rhetoric of workers’ emancipation and scientific progress.

When one arrives at the domain of the Kim dynasty, the argument can be turned on its head. If anything the insane cultic nature of the regime draws a sharp line under the dangers of religiosity. And with a population of 25 million in North Korea and no apostasy or doubt permitted on pain of expulsion to a labour camp, the ideology of Juche is actually the world’s fifth largest religion.

Moreover, while the regime blocks outside television signals and seals its borders, this is not simply a matter of lies and censorship. Kim worship allows no external existence or identity. “A North Korean who decided that it was all a lie and a waste would have to face the fact that his life had been a lie and a waste also,” wrote Christopher Hitchens after a visit in the early 2000s.

At a time when North Korea shared borders with both China and the Soviet Union and a pro-American regime in the south, Kim was able to fall back on Confucian notions of hierarchy and discipline. This was dressed up in socialist jargon to keep the aid from Beijing and Moscow flowing. Juche is intensely nationalist, even racist, and it appealed to a proud people who felt humiliated by decades of Japanese colonialism and traumatised by the American-led war in the 1950s. Ecstatic Christianity likely played a role too. Some of Kim’s family were evangelical Christians at a time in the early 1900s when Pyongyang was called ‘the Jerusalem of the East.’

Certainly the concept of a divine saviour bearing the chosen people to salvation is wound into the state’s proclamations. So in overbearing cultism of North Korea, ‘obligatory godlessness’ is the last thing to be witnessed there.
A New Global Calendar

Daltún Ó Ceallaigh

The calendar with which most of the world is familiar is the Gregorian (a Christocentric) one which places us in the year 2019 AD (Anno Domini) based upon the originally supposed date of the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, later described as Christ (from the Greek ‘khristos’ – anointed).

The other main calendars give the current year as follows:

- Jewish – 5780 AM (Anno Mundi – Year of the World), being the time since the world began according to the Old Testament;
- Hindu – 5120, being the date since Krishna left the earth and the beginning of Kali Yuga (Last Stage of the World);
- Chinese – 4715, being the time since the supposed beginning of the reign of the Yellow Emperor;
- Buddhist – 2563, being the time since Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha – Sanskrit for enlightened);
- Islamic – 1441, being the time since Mohammad’s migration from Mecca to Medina.

Homo sapiens is now thought to have emerged about 300,000 years ago, although nobody has suggested a calendar based on that! An alternative secular annual dating system is the Holocene calendar proposed by the Italian-American scientist Cesare Emiliani in 1993. This is based upon the estimated end of the last Ice Age around 10,000 years ago. That would entail making the current year 12,019. The systematic development of agriculture followed shortly after, c. 9,500 years ago. Next came the construction of proto-cities and civilisation about 8000 years ago.

Creating a new secular calendar should involve two criteria, namely be unwieldy and maintain similarity or familiarity, as far as possible. A suggestion for achieving this in annual terms would be alternatively to proceed from the approximate point at which human writing, and thus the consolidation of civilisation, came into being. That is about 5000 years ago in Sumeria.

The consequence would be that the current year could be stated, as now, in four digits, viz. 5019. Moreover, historical dates with which we are familiar would be largely still recognisable under this system. For example, the Thirty Years’ War (1618–48) would be listed as 4618 to 4648, the Battle of Waterloo (1815) at 4815 and the Second World War (1939–45) as 4939 to 4945. In addition, the somewhat confusing BC (Before Christ) dates would disappear. Compare Caesar’s Gallic Wars 58 BC to 50 BC as opposed to 2942 to 2950. Thus we would not have one set of dates proceeding forward and another proceeding backwards. Of course, during a transitional period, the old yearly dates could still be given in parentheses.

Moreover, more ancient events would still be enumerated as now in ‘Before Present’ terms, i.e. homo sapiens thus beginning at say, 300,000 BP and agriculture becoming manifest about 9,500 BP (in other words, one does not speak of the former as 297,982 BC!).

In choosing a Sumerian base, one should not therefore offend against occidental versus oriental sensitivity. Indeed, the latter is semantically more represented in the modern usage of ‘Middle East’. Also, we are not selecting one civilisation as opposed to another; it is just a simple fact that, historically and globally, human writing began in Sumeria around 5000 years ago.

Of course, the Sumerians had their own calendar; thus, one might call the innovation described here as the Sumeric Calendar to make the distinction.

That still leaves the question of designating days, dates, and months. In the Gregorian calendar, these are not Christocentric but mainly pagan, but they are occidental. A way of getting around this is for the days to be called simply Day-one, Day-two, etc; for the specific dates to be First, Second, Third etc, as now; for the months to be called First, Second, and so on, but given in Esperanto to avoid repetition. For example, Tuesday 4th December 2018 would then become Day-two 4th Dekdua 5018 (also cf. the current simplified approach 4/12/18 which would therefore remain the same).

However, once the year-numbering system has ceased to be Christocentric, the day-date-month appellations could be debated, while still adhering to the basic principles involved. If it is to be made clear that one is using a Sumeric Calendar, years could be written as ‘5018 SC’, and so on (also, for example, Caesar’s Gallic Wars, 2942 SC-2950 SC).
Evolution and Humanism

Part 2: Applying the Humanist Frame to Aspects of Human Life

Alan Tuffy

In the first part, Man's Place in the Universe, I showed how Julian Huxley's analysis in his Essay 'The Humanist Frame' in Essays of a Humanist (1964) leads to two conclusions: (a) Evolution tells us we are part of nature, not something inherently different and set apart; (b) The acquisition of language and hence other means of the rapid, accurate transmission of knowledge, ideas and skills leads to cultural evolution. From these conclusions we may infer that cultural evolution gives mankind power — and hence responsibility — over our own lives, our 'destiny' and that of the planet and all its inhabitants.

Given these ideas and inferences, we can begin to use the frame of evolutionary humanism to examine (with Huxley) some aspects of human life to see how these principles of evolutionary humanism might be applied to conservation, art, religion and education.

Evolutionary Thinking

For our analysis we require only one more principle, namely that all human attributes and constructs are subject to scientific scrutiny and evolution. The test of evolution, namely of fitness for purpose, is rigorous and, as well as leading to change, may also lead extinction, as was the case with so many classes of organism.

Consequently, our thinking must be in terms of change and must recognise the vast potential of humankind — if it doesn't destroy itself in the meantime. (Recall that in 50s and 60s, when Huxley was writing, the threat of nuclear annihilation was ever-present. While that threat may have receded somewhat, other more certain threats remain, such as the pollution of our world and the consequent climate change.) Our thinking must also be global, because in order to effect change on a global scale, we must act as one powerful group without ideological conflict. Inward-looking little tribes and nations will not be able to resolve global problems.

In considering Huxley's use of evolutionary thinking on exploring conservation, art, religion and education, I shall make liberal use of quotations from 'The Humanist Frame'. (Huxley's use of the masculine pronoun may jar our modern sensibilities, but any attempt to rewrite does excessive violence to his prose.)

Conservation

The part of the planet that we live in — the biosphere — is less than 10 km deep; from somewhere below the tops of the highest mountains on Earth to a few hundred metres (at most) below ground. As the image of Earth from the Moon — Sagan's 'small blue dot' — reminds us, it is small and very delicate: ours to preserve or destroy.

An evolutionary view allows us to look at environmental problems in a new way. Huxley himself was one of the first to recognise the need for a supranational organisation to deal with the big problems of the environment: deforestation, pollution, depletion of water resources, war, overpopulation and excessive consumption. He went on to become the first director-general of UNESCO.

It must be admitted that our efforts have not been very successful so far — even though all these problems were recognised at least 60 years ago. It is beyond the scope of this essay to consider the reasons for this failure, but it is clear that we must find new ways to move forward. Evolution is full of dead-ends; whole groups of organisms that failed to adapt to changes in their environment are now extinct. So it may be with Homo sapiens and its inventions, societies and organisations. However, cultural evolution gives us the means to adapt.

If this seems bleak, Huxley considers the qualities we can bring: ‘all the possibilities of wonder and knowledge, of delight and reverence, of creative belief and moral purpose, of passionate effort and embracing love … rational, knowledge-based imagination … intelligence, …[and] cooperative goodwill’.

Art

Huxley gives a very broad functional definition of art: ‘the organisation of experience into integrated forms which are emotionally satisfying’. In the context of the development and fulfilment of the individual, art ‘enriches life by diversity of experience’, ‘feeds and sustains the imagination’ and elevates by beautifying the public sector, evoking sense of pride. Art can also be a useful refuge from the daily round. Art may be transcendental in the sense that it inspires awe and allows us to see ourselves as part of a much greater whole. (AC Grayling, in What is Good, argues that literature has value as an aid in exploring moral views and their consequences, often of situations which we have not experienced.)

Religion

Just in case you think this article is turning into a hagiography or a case for a new sacred text — this is where I have serious difficulties with Huxley's views, or at least his mode of expression. Huxley uses words like sacred, believe, sanctify, mystery, destiny, which I find confusing and potentially obscuring more important ideas. Such words are often used by religious apologists to ‘smuggle’ in religious ideas.

To briefly digress from our main theme, Huxley gives a devastating account of the flaw in theistic religions: ->
“belief in supernatural creators, rulers or influencers of natural or human processes introduces an irreparable split into the universe, and prevent us from grasping its real unity”. He goes on to say that ideas of the Absolute block understanding, which has to deal with uncertainty. From an evolutionary perspective, we could see these flaws as fatally condemning such ideas to extinction. Alternatively, failure to rid ourselves of such notions may prevent us from taking the actions required to save ourselves and our planet and condemn us to extinction.

Huxley’s view of religion is firmly based on the evolutionary view: “Evolutionary truth frees us from subservient fear of the unknown and supernatural, and exhorts us to face this new freedom with courage tempered with wisdom and hope tempered with knowledge”.

Huxley argues that what he calls the ‘new religion’ can concern itself with the relationships between individuals and societies and be based on knowledge, not the supernatural. It would also be concerned with self-transcendence — ‘relating himself to some broader frame of reference, or ... communion with a larger reality’. This seems to imply that some things are beyond the scope of science or reason. I see no reason to accept this idea. Further, despite his strictures about the failings of religion, he appears to be suggesting that religion and science are not incompatible. I disagree. This may be a reflection of his time and an unwillingness to advocate wholesale rejection of religion as a concept. Since Huxley’s time we have seen advances in psychology and neuroscience which are beginning to shed light on aspects of human behaviour previously thought beyond the reach of scientific research. Perhaps we are observing a stage in the evolution of ideas.

It would be easier to incorporate Huxley’s thinking about religion into a scientific understanding, if some of the language is changed and the faith-based and mysterious language is abolished. Further, instead of calling this a religion — which is essentially faith-based — we could call it a world-view and base it on our best understanding of the world about us, our minds, emotions and relationships. However, the key idea is that religions are human constructs and therefore cannot be outside the range of science. For example, ‘values are phenomena and therefore capable of being investigated by the methods of science.’ They are also subject to the forces of evolution.

Education

Since fulfilment of the individual as a conscious agent of evolution is a paramount goal, it follows that education is a crucial element — the engine of cultural evolution. Education will pass on and will aim to equip individuals with ‘ideas — the necessary tools of comprehension’. The focus will be on a rational view of the world, based on evolutionary ideas, which provide a framework in which to set systems, ideas etc., and to recognise that they are subject to test and change. Nothing is to be taken for granted or on trust. Ideas, especially examples from nature, can excite wonder and feelings of transcendence (consider the scale of the universe, the complexity of the ecosystem of the Amazonian rain forest or the delicacy of a butterfly’s wing).

Moral education would not be specific (as it is in religious moral education) but “... [provide] children with more effective means of directing their own moral, intellectual ... development”. In other words, it would provide the critical basis for making moral judgments, both in terms of individuals and of societies.

Myth (including religious myths) will not be taught as equal to scientific truth. At the same time their beauty and cultural value will be admired. (Richard Dawkins, in The Magic of Reality, juxtaposes myths from different cultures and the scientific explanations for various phenomena, such as the evolution of mankind, earthquakes, and rainbows).

Huxley recognised that education should not just be ‘chalk and talk’ (or ‘search and see’). Education must be engaging and give opportunities to experience things from meditation to mountaineering, from music to mash-ups. In this he was in tune with the most enlightened educationalists of his day. The curriculum needs to be integrated, recognising mankind’s place in nature and cultural processes and not boxed off into separate compartments of knowledge; there must be an emphasis on how each subject links up with others — ‘the interconnectedness of things’. Education is not confined to the classroom and ‘extracurricular activities’ will be seen as part of the overall education process.

Essential to Huxley’s view is the diversity of individual humans and that education must meet a range of abilities, and learning styles and must provide a ‘... range of opportunities to meet the pupils’ range of aptitudes’. He points out that this also implies fostering those with very high abilities because they will be needed in a modern complex society; stunting their development would be a waste, both in terms of the fulfilment of individuals’ potential, but also in terms of the development of societies.

Conclusion

I have tried to give an account of Julian Huxley’s application of an evolutionary framework to humanist thinking on a variety of topics. For me this frame offers a very satisfying internally consistent view of our place in nature — and indeed in the universe. It is an important aid to forming an ethical framework to guide our moral thinking in all aspects of our existence, from our behaviour as individuals, to interaction with societies and with our environment. This to me is the greatest challenge facing secular thinkers: our apparent failure to have such an overall framework is often used in attempts to undermine our position.

An evolutionary viewpoint also offers an alternative to existential despair in the face of the vastness and indifference of the universe. The recognition that we are the only species capable — at least in principle — of regulating our environment on a global scale in a deliberate, conscious way is empowering. If we have the power, then we have the responsibility to get on with it.

The individual is the agent of evolution hence the value of the individual human being is paramount. We should organise our world as best we can to maximise the potential for all individuals. I think these are powerful ideas and lead to right actions and good lives.

- This article is based on presentations given to some humanist groups and it is a pleasure to thank them, both for the opportunity to put forward these ideas, and also for their valuable discussion – Alan Tuffery (a former university lecturer in a biological science, a member of the Humanist Association of Ireland, and a regular attender at meetings of the North Dublin Humanist Community.
ECONOMICS is a term derived from the Greek word ‘Oikonomia’, meaning household management. Economics as a social science gradually extended the management beyond the household to the society as a whole. By the late 18th century, Adam Smith (1723-90) had defined it as “the science that inquires into the nature and causes of the wealth of nations” (1776).

Smith, the father of modern Economics, is also regarded as the founder of the classical school, which championed the free market. His ideas were developed by others including Jean-Baptiste Say (1767-1832) and David Ricardo (1772-1823), and later refined by neoclassical economists in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

It might be thought that a free market would lead to chaos and eventually the law of the jungle. But Smith suggests that although each producer pursues his own self-interest, he is led as if by an ‘invisible hand’ to maximise social welfare. The hand in question was the competitive price mechanism of demand and supply. The producer wants to charge as high a price as possible but, being in competition with others producers, he is forced to keep his prices down and improve quality, otherwise they will undercut him and his sales will collapse. Competition therefore keeps prices low and quality high. Smith did not explain his metaphor of the ‘invisible hand’ in exactly this way (the relevant passage is obscure) but it is effectively the gist of his argument.

Smith, in common with these other economists, nevertheless played down the influence of demand on price, believing in a modification of the labour theory of value — the price of a good is determined by the total amount of labour required to produce it — which added other costs of production. Jean-Baptiste Say was a French economist best known for Say’s Law which, in Keynes’s formulation, states that supply creates its own demand. Again, supply is seen as the crucial factor in the market. Since resources are scarce relative to people’s needs, there can be no shortage of demand. According to Ricardo, “demand is only limited by production”. People will buy what they produce because every activity generates incomes in the form of wages, profits, rents etc equivalent to the value of its output.

The weaknesses of this Classical school led in the late 19th century to the growth of neoclassical economics (first coined in 1900). It gave demand a more important role and indeed initially it was the basic factor in the works of the Englishman William Jevons (1835-1882) and the Austrian Carl Menger (1840-1921). Both separately formulated a marginal utility theory, in which ‘value’ depends entirely on utility or satisfaction.

It was the Frenchman Léon Walras (1834-1910) and the Englishman Alfred Marshall (1842-1924) in his Principles of Economics, first published in 1890, who claimed that both demand and supply determine price. Rational buyers maximising utility and rational sellers maximising profits barter their way towards a balance or ‘equilibrium’. Marshall argued that demand is more important in the short run because supply is slower to react to changing conditions, but it becomes more important in the long run when investment can be changed.

Although there were differences, all of these economists, both classical and neoclassical, agreed that competition in the market produces a socially beneficial outcome, not least because the market is self-regulating. There may be occasional disturbances and temporary unemployment but, if left alone, it will quickly revert to a general full employment equilibrium. Consequently, government interferences in the free market were condemned not only as unnecessary but also as barriers to efficiency.

Then came the Great Depression. Between 1929 and 1933 the American economy suffered a GDP decline of nearly 30% (real disposable income fell by nearly 40%). The unemployment rate soared from 3% in 1929 to 25% in 1933 and 85,000 businesses failed. In the UK the unemployment rate rose to about 22% and in Germany by 1933 it was nearly 30%. Neoclassical economists, whose ideas dominated government thinking in both America and the UK, regarded this slump as a temporary aberration, but it lasted for more than a decade.

At first, neoclassical economists such as Lionel Robbins—who thought in terms of a zero-sum game—called for wage reductions to increase profits and employment, and cuts in state spending, which was seen as a rival to the private sector for resources. Yet when implemented, —>
they produced the opposite result: unemployment rose and output fell. In some countries different policies were eventually applied. In America under Roosevelt’s New Deal and in Hitler’s Germany, a policy of increased spending by governments was operated. This was done without a proper theoretical framework. That was provided by John Maynard Keynes in 1936 in *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money.*

A year earlier, Keynes had written to George Bernard Shaw: “I believe myself to be writing a book on economic theory which will largely revolutionise – not, I suppose, at once but in the course of the next ten years – the way the world thinks about its economic problems”. He was not exaggerating, for he basically invented macroeconomics, the study of the whole economy, based on the assumption that what is good for individuals and single markets is not necessarily good for the general society.

For example, a fall in the wages of workers in a particular firm might indeed lead to an increase in the demand for workers in that particular firm (law of demand), but a fall in wages in general might reduce consumption (aggregate demand), followed by a fall in production, and so cause the economy to settle for a prolonged period at an equilibrium level of output well below the full employment level. The neoclassical approach in a depression of supply side policies thus leads to the opposite result of what was intended. Similarly, an increase in savings may lead to a fall in aggregate demand and thus a decrease in total output and income which will in turn reduce total saving. This paradox of thrift, first noted by Bernard Mandeville in his *Fable of the Bees* (1714) – that thrift may be good for the individual but bad for the collective and instead that prosperity may be increased by spending rather than saving – is a cornerstone of Keynesian economics.

*The General Theory* shifted the thrust of economics from the concept of aggregate supply stressed by economists from Ricardo onwards to the concept of aggregate demand. In a sense, Keynes was able to alter the perspective because he was not a professional economist and therefore not encumbered by the weight of tradition which caused orthodox economists to fail to see the wood for the trees. He also believed that allowing people to suffer unemployment and poverty while waiting for the free market to bring the economy back into equilibrium was morally and socially unacceptable. As he famously wrote: “this long run is a misleading guide to current affairs. In the long run we are all dead. Economists set themselves too easy, too useless a task if in tempestuous seasons they think only of tomorrow’s newspaper... this long run is a misleading guide to current affairs. In the long run we are all dead. Economists set themselves too easy, too useless a task if in tempestuous seasons they set only of tomorrow’s newspapers...”

If I and/or C falls then G needs to increase to plug the deflationary gap, a situation where the level of total expenditure is less than the capacity of the economy to produce, leading to unemployment and idle capital equipment. Here then, is an active role for government to facilitate injections (J) into the circular flow. It can do it by increasing its own spending and introducing measures to boost investment and exports. Alternatively, or in addition, it can help to reduce withdrawals (W) from the flow, namely savings, taxes and imports. Moreover, there is a multiplier effect (k) as an increase in J will be multiplied as it goes through the economy. The size of the multiplier in a two sector economy (Y=C+I) depends on the proportion of any extra injection that is consumed rather than saved. If fact, it is the reciprocal of the marginal propensity to save (MPS). If the MPS is 0.25, then k is 4. So, if the government spends, say, an extra £1bn, then the final increase in expenditure will be £4bn. In practice, it is not as high because there are actually three leakages, not one: as well as saving, there are taxes and imports to consider. In fact, the IMF estimates that the multiplier for most developed economies is about 1.5.

The Keynesian solution of increased government expenditure and lower taxes to stimulate demand and pull the economy out of a depression was not implemented in his own country until the 1940s. After the war the ‘Keynesian consensus’ dominated western economic policies until the 1970s. The combination of high inflation and unemployment in the mid-1970s contributed to a return to neoclassicism under Reagan and Thatcher which lasted into the latest recession that began in 2008. Keynesianism was a dirty word for 30 years. As Paul Krugman notes, “in 2005 the right-wing magazine Human Events listed listed Keynes’s *General Theory* among the ten most harmful books of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, right up there with Mein Kampf and Das Kapital” (End this Depression Now! Norton, 2013, p94).

Part of the reason is that conservatives have always seen it as the thin end of the wedge: concede that governments can play a useful role in fighting slumps, and the next thing you know we’ll be living under socialism. Yet Keynes himself was not a socialist. He described his book as ‘moderately conservative in its implications’. Indeed, what he was saying was really obvious when you think about it. Believing in an invisible hand guiding a social system is no different from believing in a hidden god. It’s as silly as saying that a ship doesn’t need a crew to steer it. Without human guidance it will almost certainly end up on the rocks. Keynes believed that capitalism needed to be wisely managed. In the recent recession, so too did many governments and, without openly admitting it, they adopted Keynesian policies once again. At least the wiser ones did. The UK government has proved, not for the first time, to be a late convert to its own countryman’s ideas, announcing the end of austerity in 2018.
Blasphemy Exits the Republic...

Declan McGrath

The time is up for Ireland’s blasphemy laws. In a landslide victory for the Yes campaign in the October 2018 referendum, 64.85% of voters supported the amending of the Irish constitution to remove references to blasphemy. As a result, a clumsy defamation law that was put in place to implement the constitutional provisions would also melt away. In the immediate lead up to the referendum, few commentators thought that the references to blasphemy should have remained in the constitution. However, in The Times John Waters proposed that they should be kept in place to safeguard respect and belief. Even with the blasphemy laws successfully repealed, it is important to note that his argument is confused.

Firstly, just because something is held as a belief should not mean that it is automatically worthy of respect. For example, you could hold the belief that it is right to slaughter 5000 innocent women and children, but it does not follow that this belief should be respected. Secondly, and perhaps worth exploring in more detail here, is the question of the meaning of belief itself. It could be argued that religions, typically, do not truly offer a set of beliefs. Rather, they assert to know. This may seem like a trivial difference, but it has important consequences. We can flesh this out with a thought experiment.

I may be looking for my jacket at the end of an evening at a friend’s house. I am standing in the hall and vaguely remember leaving the jacket in the kitchen, which is directly off the hall. If it is in the kitchen, but I do not have a clear line of sight to it, then I may believe that the jacket is in the kitchen. However, if I do have a clear line of sight to the jacket, then I will know that it is in the kitchen. The effect of these two differing mindsets can be tested. If I merely believe that my jacket is in the kitchen, and someone then tells me that it is in the sitting room, I will most likely accept their suggestion as a possibility. I will not dogmatically argue with them that, in fact, the jacket is in the kitchen. I will not get angry at them. Nor will I demand that it is offensive for them to suggest that the jacket may be in a different room to the one I had in mind.

However, if I am asserting that I know that the jacket is in the kitchen and someone tells me otherwise, there is a good chance that I would robustly disagree with them. For I would know that the jacket is in the room; I may even be pointing at the jacket with conviction. Which of the two – belief or assert to know – best describes the position of those who would argue for the preservation of blasphemy legislation? Do they ever put forward their beliefs and then qualify them by saying they might be wrong? Do these sound like the kind of beliefs that may need defending by a constitutional or legislative protection? Do these sounds like beliefs at all?

This difference, between belief and asserted knowledge, is not a new concept being introduced here. Rather, it has been at the heart of civilisation for over two thousand years as epistemology – the study of how certain we can be of things. This is one of the core fields of philosophy, arguably first argued by Xenophanes in the 5th century BCE. Since then, Plato, Aristotle and pretty much every significant philosopher has had something to say about it. This difference is crucial and, amongst other things, can guide us as to whether we want to live in a world with blasphemy legislation, or without.

The former was the situation in Ireland and still is in other jurisdictions that have legal measures in place to repress critical thinking. The Irish electorate has taken the opportunity to put clear light between Ireland and countries that would threaten, sanction and, in some cases, torture those who would defy religious belief. The margin of victory may suggest this was an easily won referendum but it was anything but. The blasphemy libel law only entered the statute books in 2009 as a result of that most troublesome of arts, a cartoon.

It is telling that it was deemed a preferable course of political action to go to the effort of introducing this law than to seek removal of the constitutional provision that necessitated it. We should be thankful for the courage of those who walked a long, and often lonely, road to effect a reversal of this. And we should take pride in the significant new course plotted for Ireland, along with the extra freedom this affords us all. We are at a point in history where we can assert to know that repealing this law was the right thing to do.

The blasphemy libel law only entered the statute books in 2009 as a result of that most troublesome of arts, a cartoon

I’m afraid I don’t believe there’s such a thing as blasphemy, just outrage from those insecure in their own faith.

- Stephen Fry

The Irish Freethinker and Humanist • January-February 2019
THE offence of blasphemy was originally part of canon law.
The medieval Church forged an act of parliament enabling the arrest and imprisonment of heretics under this law. During this time there is a long list of people burnt at the stake, which was used as a deterrent to anyone who dared to criticise the established Church. The most common punishment in the Bible for blasphemers was stoning to death, justified by Leviticus (24: 13-16).

The last person sent to prison under blasphemy laws was in 1921, but a number of attempts have been made to use it since. Mary Whitehouse tried and failed in 1977 in an action against Gay News and in 2005 Christian fundamentalists sought a private blasphemy against the BBC over Jerry Springer the Opera. Iran issued a fatwa against Salman Rushdie over The Satanic Verses, and Christians have been persecuted for blasphemy laws in Bangladesh and Pakistan.

On 31 October, Pakistan’s supreme court acquitted Asia Bibi, a 54-year-old Christian woman who had been sentenced to death for blasphemy. Bibi, a farm labourer and mother of five, had spent eight years on death row, accused of insulting the Prophet Muhammad after an argument with her neighbours. After her acquittal, protests erupted in all of Pakistan’s major cities: rioters smashed shop fronts, blocked motorways, burning tyres. And it has left the prime minister, Imran Khan, wavering between defending the verdict and trying to appease the hard-line religious protesters.

A few years ago the Garda investigated a complaint of blasphemy against atheist Stephen Fry regarding his RTE interview with Gay Byrne. Byrne asked Fry: “suppose it is true and he exists, what would you say to him when confronted with God at the pearly gates?” Fry replied: “How dare you cause bone cancer in children. What kind of God would inflict such injustice and pain?”

In March 2008 Gordon Brown’s Labour government abolished the law on blasphemy in England and Wales. Recently the Republic of Ireland has done likewise. These medieval laws of blasphemy and blasphemous libel continue to be offences in Northern Ireland, so as humanists we are calling on our local MLAs to make their position known about this law and hopefully, when Stormont does reconvene, they will abolish this undemocratic law. Hopefully the churches will support this call as I have said Christians are being persecuted at this very moment in different parts of the world on blasphemy laws.

It’s quite common for people to be very offended when confronted on their views and beliefs on religion, as if it gives them certain rights to be exempted from any criticism because the “good book” is above that sort of thing. That is simply a whine. Deeply held religious views should be open to debate and even ridicule. In a healthy society our beliefs should be regularly exposed to question and criticism.

It is surely a sign of weakness that politically powerful religions fear that sort of open debate that humanists cherish, but in saying that, we should not insult people of any religion or incite hatred against them. We cannot be considered to have a free society and have blasphemy laws. It’s a law to protect an all-powerful, supernatural deity from getting its feelings hurt.
N my last years at secondary school I pondered that, if God existed and intervened in human history, then the Gospel should change our lives. But during the consecration at mass people looked bored. If we believed the bread and wine became the body and blood of Christ, Second Person of the Holy Trinity, would anyone waste their time watching telly or playing golf?

As a student member of the Society of St Vincent de Paul, we visited old folks once a week, kept them company and disbursed a small allowance from the charity to each. We visited a hospital, running errands for patients. But this seemed to me to fall short of the radical response of the first disciples of Jesus who had left wife, family, work and possessions to follow Christ.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s in Dublin, as around the world, the charismatic renewal was taking off. Prayer groups were sprouting up in parishes and schools. There were ‘Camp Jesus’ youth jamborees, all-night vigils, and thousands of laity and clergy attended charismatic conferences. People spoke of a new outpouring of the Holy Spirit, that the gifts of the Spirit in the Acts of the Apostles were being seen anew. There were ‘Life in the Spirit’ seminars, with people ‘baptised in the Holy Spirit’. If Jesus healed the sick two thousand years ago, it made sense that miracles would still happen today; and there were reports of priests, nuns and others with the ‘gift of healing’.

I began attending a charismatic prayer meeting at our school. About 20 adults and teenagers gathered, male and female, singing lively songs and raising hands aloft in prayer. Some strummed guitars. Enthusiasts, they seemed to believe the faith, compared to the monotonous recitation of the Mass. Some stories were shared, and if it doesn’t move, hug it until it moves’. I was comforted by scriptural passages like: ‘Come to me all ye who labour and are overburdened and I shall give you rest. Shoulder my yoke and learn from me, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light’.

I went with a school friend Colm Kenny for an all-night vigil at a priest’s house. The priest and perhaps 20 young people stayed all night. People were prayed over individually. When my turn came, I knelt and felt the heat of many hands being laid on my head, shoulders, back and legs. They prayed, ‘Praise you Jesus!’ and in tongues. Someone broke into song, the noise grew louder and I realised I was crying.

I cried my eyes out and, after they’d finished praying over me, I continued crying for ages.

“What’s wrong?” asked Colm.

“I haven’t got a clue’.

I don’t know to this day what caused it. Maybe it was a release of pent-up sadness, loneliness or anguish. Perhaps I was overwhelmed by the intimacy of being touched by so many people and receiving their collective attention. Possibly it was because I felt accepted and acceptable, that it was OK to cry, and I was allowed to feel whatever I was feeling deep down.

The vigil had a profound effect on me. When I returned home next day, neither of my parents asked me about the night. They didn’t seem interested. There were people within the charismatic renewal, relative strangers, who knew me far better than anyone in my family.

I came to hate going home. My mother was, as ever, unpredictable. I never knew what she would be like when I walked in the door, what mask she’d be wearing. I felt stifled and unable to be myself or to grow there. It was for me a place of tension and pretence. I could not relax there.

As soon as I turned on to our street, heading home, my heart sank. I needed to get out and find a place where I could grow.

It was a friendly welcoming space. I felt accepted and that I belonged. It helped that girls attended. There was lots of hugging. As someone put it: ‘If it moves, hug it; and if it doesn’t move, hug it until it moves’. I was comforted by scriptural passages like: ‘Come to me all ye who labour and are overburdened and I shall give you rest. Shoulder my yoke and learn from me, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light’.

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As soon as I turned on to our street, heading home, my heart sank. I needed to get out and find a place where I could grow.

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A Responsible Irish Education System

There are certain things which an evolved society shouldn’t tolerate, and one of them is disinformation, or information in which we don’t ourselves necessarily believe, deliberately given to children by their parents or through an education system for which every citizen pays. A responsible Irish education system would instead enable our children by providing all young citizens with rational life information which can be backed up by evidence. A great disservice that religion does to humanity is that it causes many to squander our precious time and energy in discussing nonsense, which the individual should be using wisely to insure that he lives a full, honest life.

While I can easily understand why an individual would want to keep a well paid government job, what I will never understand is why so many fail to see that aligning with religious opinion throws a shadow of doubt over everything else that one does, which could be an otherwise acceptable body of work. If it is human to need to know that life has a purpose, is that not to use our time to learn how to love the self, and is care about the spiritual wellbeing of our fellow man not the individual’s means to self-fulfilment?

Should religious Irish people not join with their thinking fellow citizens so that a nation united as one loving, caring heart and mind will be enabled to reclaim the positive core human values which religions hijacked from humanity so that they could sell them back to the people as ‘religious values’?

Should equally entitled people not be looking for similarities with each other instead of minor differences which are all too obvious and easily overcome where there is a will to do so?

No one will stop Ireland’s older generation from frittering away what remains of their life diverted by trivial pursuits, but no-one gets to be sixty plus without being fully aware that the Irish have not always treated our children as positively as we might have.

Imagine their surprise if their parents and priests experienced a change of heart and managed to make the leap from superstitious nonsense to supporting the honest reality of the young. Instead of being written into Irish history as a generation which compromised its children’s future earnings, ours could become known as the one which finally brought generations currently at philosophical loggerheads together. Would that not be a legacy worth bequeathing to the young?

How good would it make the Irish feel to at least try to do this much to encourage a generation facing the realities of global warming?

Catrina McDermott, Ravensdale, County Louth

IFH MEETINGS

All welcome

JANUARY MEETING

Thursday 10th January,
Holiday Inn Express, University St. 8pm

Harbouring Doubts on the Road to a Progressive Faith

The speaker will be Steve Ames, Minister of Harbour Faith Community, Carrickfergus (‘the home of progressive Christianity’)

FEBRUARY MEETING

Thursday 14th February,
Holiday Inn Express, University St., 8pm

Reflections on the Present State of Affairs

The speaker will be Brian Pelan. Brian is the co-founder and editor of View, an independent social affairs magazine that covers issues that affect society such as poverty, homelessness, suicide and welfare benefits. Brian has been a journalist for over 20 years, including working for the Belfast Telegraph, the Western Mail in Cardiff and the Examiner group in Cork. Recently he has appeared on the BBC’s Nolan Show and Talkback as a social commentator and his analyses of social, political events are often sparky and humorous.
Remembrance without Things Crass

Stuart Hartill

2018 marked the centenary of the end of the First World War. For the Isle of Man Freethinkers, it also marked the first year when, on November 11th, we remembered the dead of all wars on our own terms.

We took a decision last Autumn to try to devise our own more appropriate ceremony, and two celebrants and I began to look for or create suitable material.

By common consent, the impromptu, low tech ceremony we devised was far more meaningful to all who attended than the ‘official’ one earlier that day. Free of distractions from the state, the state’s church or the military, we were finally able to remember all of the dead of all wars. We plan to build on this year by year, and we offer our experience in the hope that other humanists will consider similar schemes.

For our own ceremony, we set the scene as people arrived with music from Gorecki’s Symphony of Sorrowful Songs. After an introduction from our chair, a poem was then read by one member’s grand-daughter. I followed with my text (see below), which preceded the two minutes silence.

We then sang Dylan’s Blowing in the Wind, before hearing three pieces written for the occasion by the two celebrants and me, entitled Humanity, Heroism and The need to be vigilant. Another poem read by a child followed, then the lighting of a candle to Martin Luther King’s words on the need to drive out darkness with light. A Taoist prayer for peace then preceded the final piece of music (John Lennon’s Imagine) as people dispersed.

The event proved more powerful than we had anticipated, moving some to tears and causing debate in the room amongst participants for some time. We deliberately concentrated on individual experience in our words, and this personalising seemed to be the key.

Reviewing the event now, it is clear to me that we need to encourage or even commission new materials. Done well, this would create public debate about the nature of war memorials and might even cause others to collaborate with us or create similar new ceremonies, given that a century has passed since the creation of the vacuous state models.

One of my concerns is the need to create our own ‘liturgy’ for such ceremonies, and not just use ‘faith-free’ poetry or statements by world figures. This year, my main contribution was a short text to replace the ‘Going down of the sun’ oration which features in state war memorials. This was used in both a local authority ceremony and our own.

The text runs as follows, and others are welcome to use or adapt it if useful.

Today we remember all who died in conflict or who were victims of conflict.
We remember the soldiers, the sailors, and the aircrew.
We remember those on the merchant ships.
We remember the civilian victims of other government’s aggression.
We remember the civilian victims of their own government’s aggression.
We remember the emergency workers and the volunteers.
We remember the refugees, the prisoners, the forced labourers and those who died in concentration camps.
We remember all those who died in circumstances still hidden from public knowledge, or which may never be known to us.

Today we remember them all.
Without favour and without hate, we remember them all.

I have suggested two key musical projects to my fellow Isle of Man Freethinkers which could equally well be implemented elsewhere. Original spoken texts, orations and poetry would also be useful.

The first is an open competition to create a short introductory piece of music for a ceremony. Ideally, this would be no more than two minutes in length, and playable by a few musicians of average ability – for example a string quartet. This would be a one-off project, with the winner being used each year by whatever musicians are available. The second would be an annual competition to create a short lament, possibly on themes like loss, or peace and reconciliation. The winner each year could then be invited to perform the song at the ceremony. This would also build a catalogue of such pieces as years go by. The project would be of great interest to folk musicians. It could, for example, also produce Gaelic language or local dialect examples.

As we are a unique small nation, I would envisage Isle of Man Freethinkers being able to pursue these projects at a national level. But elsewhere, both projects are realisable in collaboration with local or national government arts and cultural bodies. In addition, humanists get seen as patrons of creative projects, rather than just oddballs who grumble about religion.

I hope these ideas inspire humanists elsewhere to create a myriad of unique, local projects, and would be interested to hear of examples or collaborate with others in their creation.
Why Humanism Should Promote Mental Well-being

Tom White

Amongst many of the misunderstandings theists hold about humanists is the opinion that we must be terrified of death. In fact, there is solid scientific evidence to suggest the opposite. Dr Jonathan Jong and a world-wide group of researchers examined 100 relevant articles that were published between 1961 and 2014 with information about 26,000 people and their personal attitudes to death and religion (Daily Mail, 24/3/2017). The results showed that atheists seem to find comfort in death (i.e. they are not scared) and conversely also found those who are not afraid of death do not seek out a religion. The latter finding is, I think, significant because it seems to confirm my suspicion that theists’ terror of having their consciousness extinguished at death helps propel them into the “comfort blanket” of traditional religious faith.

For some theists, the comfort blanket works. Strong belief in a heavenly after-life does help reduce anxiety surrounding death; on the other hand, it is exactly those ultra-firm believers who are more likely to become martyrs or jihadists for their particular brand of faith – those “personal comfort blankets” can have very unfortunate consequences for the wider community.

As humanists, we rightly pride ourselves on our rationality and respect for the scientific method which has produced major advances in medicine, psychology and so many other fields of human knowledge and endeavour. But we have tended to neglect other less quantifiable but fundamental aspects of the human condition, especially the love and compassion men and women hold for each other. It would be a very dark and bleak universe indeed without compassion. Life would be meaningless and insufferable without that wonderful human “spark” of love and friendship.

I would contend that humanists have a moral obligation to promote mental well-being for ourselves and for humanity generally. How can we work towards that end? I hope, but have little expectation, that humanism will shortly become a major social force to rival world religions. Yet there are strands of both psychology and traditional faith with which we can and should align ourselves. If something appears to work by helping the human condition with no apparent major adverse effects, then that something is worth investigating. Let’s adapt what science tells us works well to what we do as humanists. That surely is plain common sense!

Secular Buddhism, which venerates compassion and promotes mental-wellbeing through meditation is, I believe, a natural ally of humanism. After stripping out the detritus of false gurus and “mystical” terms of arcane practice, meditation is simple, direct – and with proven health benefits for those who practice personally as well as for society generally. What’s not to like about that?

For Atheists of a more nervous disposition, I would recommend reading Secular Meditation, a guide to 32 meditation techniques from the Humanist Community at Harvard, compiled by Rick Heller. For those who still baulk at the religious connotations of the term “meditation”, mainstream psychology is hot on the concept of “mindfulness” these days; it’s called acceptance and commitment therapy. I’m sure someone will someday soon write a great thesis on the differences between meditation and mindfulness; but until someone does, I’ll continue to regard the two Ms as more or less the same thing. On the scientific side of things, I’m about to dive into a book called Acceptance and Commitment Therapy for Dummies (Drs Brown and Gillard, 2016); and yes, I know, it does seem my kind of book!

So, if you want to spice up the atmosphere at humanist meetings, why not suggest that the first twenty minutes or so be devoted to a meditation/mindfulness session? The “lost” time will quickly be compensated for by greater personal calmness, compassion and group focus. The psychological benefits of mindfulness/meditation is as solidly scientifically based as the 5 fruit/5 veg per day formula for the adult human diet, and our 10,000 steps per day.

There is nothing wrong in putting ritual and ceremony into humanism as long as it can be proven to be beneficial – that’s why we appoint humanist celebrants! This is a world where bad news and depression seems to surround us and people need a means of reducing stress and despair.

As humanists, we have everything to gain by presenting humanity with a pathway to a more caring, as well as a more rational, future.
Two years ago I received an unexpected phone call from a painter and colleague to tell me he had just found an old newspaper cutting from 1916. It contained a photograph of a First World War chaplain. He told me that when he and his wife were clearing out her elderly mother’s house they had come across an old cardboard box at the back of a cupboard and in it they discovered cuttings and photographs of First World War casualties. One of these, the photograph of the army chaplain, caught his attention as the caption underneath it read, ‘Rev D. S. Corkey B.A. Wounded in France.’

I knew immediately that this was my great uncle, who had served with some distinction as a chaplain in the First World War. Commended for his courage he was mentioned in ‘Dispatches’ and had been seriously wounded. This find was all the more intriguing as it had lain undiscovered for 100 years and, as far as we were aware, there was never any connection between our respective families.

My colleague by this stage had already built up a substantial body of work, paintings and drawings of First World War casualties, researching the archives of the Imperial War Museum in London, in preparation for a commemorative ‘end of War’ exhibition. Following the discovery of the photograph I was invited to paint a triptych representing my relative as a significant part of the exhibition.

The Triptych: Introduction

Prior to embarking on this project, my knowledge of my Great Uncle David was scanty but valuable. My father spoke often of him, recalling his fond memories of a delightful character, fun loving and a great sportsman. He had a deep sensitivity and love for nature, amazing courage and a unique sense of humour.

In preparation for this exhibition, through research, the study of my Great Uncle’s biography, which includes vast portions of his war diaries and other sources, I can now more fully conjure up an all-round, exceptional human being who embodied all these traits and much more. He was an avid reader, thorough in theological matters, a man of relentless energy which he expended on improving the plight of impoverished and vulnerable people, and one who showed formidable courage at the expense of his own wellbeing and safety.

Underpinning all this was a profound, unshakeable Christian faith, driven, not by biblical dogmatic fundamentalism, but by a self-sacrificial love which touched everyone with whom he came into contact. This no doubt enabled him to reach out to those troubled souls he encountered, not only during his war experiences, but also in his earlier work at home in the poorer areas of Belfast with the Shankill Road Mission. At this time he and his sister Mary took a little house in Percy Street between the Shankill and the Falls —>
so that he could live and work among the people, and then later in his own congregation in Dundrod. David’s natural empathy, along with a deep understanding of the essence of Christianity was, I’m sure, what endeared him to so many.

Central Panel: ‘The Photograph’
From the outset of the project it was the discovery of a photograph that was to be my principal focus. So I concentrated my efforts on a small unassuming newspaper cutout from 1916 that had lain untouched in a cardboard box at the back of a cupboard for 100 years.

The central panel is therefore still-life based, rendered in careful, meticulous detail in order to emphasise the blemishes, the aged discolouration including the ‘badly’ cut edging and fading print. This was painted on to an already prepared ‘ground’ made up of numerous paper fragments from three specific books of the Bible: Psalms, Matthew and John. My intention was to represent something of the diversity of David’s huge personality and I felt that these particular books reflected three of the many facets to his character, (a) his love of music and the arts, (b) his profound understanding of the essence of Christianity and (c) his breadth and depth of knowledge in theological matters. The music and poetry of the Psalms seemed an appropriate choice coupled with the fact that they were allegedly composed and performed by his Biblical namesake. The Gospel of St Matthew contains in its entirety ‘The Sermon on the Mount’. In this succinct passage of Biblical teaching lies arguably the essence of Christianity, while the book of St John presents an objective and more philosophical approach on the life of Christ’s ministry.

This apparently ‘broken’ fragmented surface helped to pave the way into a more emphatic ‘cubist’ style which would later predominate in the left hand panel. A light staining was finally applied to the entire surface of the central panel. This semi-transparent glaze mix included clay from Dundrod, retrieved from beneath the oldest tree in the manse garden with which David would well have been familiar.

Left Hand Panel: ‘The Blessing’
As a painter I am all too aware of the pitfalls of over planning. For me, having preconceived ideas of the final result would mean the creative process would be dead before it even started, and through experience I’ve learned that having respect for the autonomous nature of a painting is one of the preconditions for a successful outcome. So I felt in my heart that each stage of the process would ‘light the way’ for the next. Not only that but I was somewhat surprised by the frequency of coincidences and connections that occurred during the whole process.

It was, however, with a certain reservation that I approached the first of the side panels. From the beginning I was determined to avoid at all costs any attempts in a pictorial sense to depict or illustrate the indescribable horrors of the Great War. The renowned war artist Paul Nash said that it was impossible even for him as a painter to describe the horrors he witnessed. So for reasons of avoiding presumption and pretentiousness on my part, coupled with the fact that events have been well documented by the great war artists of the day, I turned to the war poets as a means of approach. I was convinced from the start that a poetic foundation was always going to lie at the source of the work, but even considering much of the powerfully evocative language from the likes of Wilfred Owen, Isaac Rosenberg, David Jones and others, who in their images portray such horrors, I still felt uncomfortable as regards my inadequacy in rendering something that would do justice to the task in hand.

Ever since my student days I have been intrigued by the poem The Waste Land by T.S. Eliot. It has always been beyond my intellectual grasp, especially the obscurity of the language and the juxtaposition of the disparate elements. Despite these problems, or possibly because of them, I was aware that the poem communicated something of the turmoil in society – a nation ill at ease with itself. A further reason for my choice has something to do with an undercurrent of a sound that has stayed with me: a beat, a heartbeat, regular and irregular, and the music that emanates from the language, harmonious and discordant. The narrative or narratives, therefore, are subservient to a more profound ‘sound’. In a recent appraisal of The Waste Land the poet Jorie Graham, reflecting Eliot’s own thoughts, stated that one should “suspend the desires of the conceptual intellect – the desire to know who’s speaking, where you are, what they’re about – and read with your ear, read with your body”. So I felt some degree of confidence that the poetry of The Waste Land would provide an appropriate ‘ground’ for the left hand panel and would facilitate an entry, a way in, to embark on the second stage of the triptych.

I began by collecting an assortment of cheap quality waste papers and proceeded to use these on which to hand write the entire poem. This helped me to become a little more familiar with the language while much of its meaning still remained obscure. I tore the irregular sheets into random pieces and pasted them onto the panel in a haphazard but considered arrangement – the resulting effect creating further disjointed phrases and words.

Once the ground had been laid, I began to detect elements of a ‘Cubist’ nature emerging. In 1915 a young French soldier named Gaudier-Brzeska was killed in action in the Trenches. He was only 23 years of age, but as an artist working in London he had already established a reputation in the art world for his radical, progressive work, assisting the development of painting and sculpture in the 20th century. He was a leading light in the English Vorticist movement that included influential figures such as Wyndham Lewis, Ezra Pound and Jacob Epstein. Vorticism, which is an offshoot of Cubism, emphasises in a painting or sculpture a central energy force that runs through the work. Gaudier left an astonishingly vast body of paintings, sculpture and drawings, astonishing for one so young and at the beginning of his career. Part of my thinking from here on was influenced by that central force of energy. At the same time the appearance of a saint-like figure seemed to emerge out of the surrounding ‘confusion’.

This I felt would be an appropriate visual metaphor for the chaplain administering blessing to the wounded and suffering. A certain emphasis on the verticals and horizontals in relation to the central figure helps, I feel, to convey a further sense of peace and stillness. Another unanticipated feature emerged out of the confusion. This was the suggestion of a cross that appeared to give structure or skeletal support to the apparent instability of the painting. I proceeded therefore to apply a little more emphasis in specific areas by a lightening of tone.

The word ‘Shantih’ from the ancient Indian Sanskrit language concludes The Waste Land. The word is etched into and burnt across the fingers and palm of the ‘saint’s’ right hand. ‘The peace which passeth understanding’ would seem to...
be a suitable counterbalance to the unimaginable suffering of warfare. Both are beyond comprehension.

Right Hand Panel: ‘The Tree of Life’
Each panel of the triptych represents my Great Uncle David in three different modes. This third panel is also essentially symbolic but more graphic in its portrayal, the visual metaphor of the wounded tree being the main feature. In Michael Longley’s latest collection ‘Angel Hill’ there is a lovely couplet at the start of his short poem ‘The Storm’ - “Wind-wounded, lopsided now/Our mighty beech has lost an arm.” The tree, although damaged, continues to provide shelter, a place of refuge, comfort and peace. David was taking shelter from a barrage of enemy shelling in a little dressing station hut along with another chaplain friend when it was hit by a shell, resulting in him losing his left arm. After five months recuperation at home he returned to the Trenches. He had tried to encourage his parishioners to appoint another minister in his place as he felt it unfair to leave them for so long without one. But such was the love and respect the people of Dundrod had for him that they insisted on keeping his position open for his eventual return.

In order to reflect something of the many attributes of this remarkable person and after much consideration I began by copying out numerous extracts from his war diaries. These handwritten scripts dwelt not only on the dreadful events experienced at the time, but also those little gems such as the beauty of the natural world, the sounds of birdsong, along with those frequent snippets of humour. As in the two previous panels these were then torn into smaller pieces and applied over the entire surface, again creating a broken, fragmented ‘ground’. Some are quite legible while others are partially or completely hidden by overlay, thus alluding to the fact that so many of those who experienced the horrors of the Great War rarely if ever spoke of them during their lifetime.

The tree may also refer to the cross of the Crucifixion, or the universal ‘Tree of Life’ and its mystical and magical connotations within many cultures, carrying with it all its associations of physical, emotional and spiritual healing. The hints of colour emerging may point to happier times ahead as the war would soon be over. As with both the first and second panel, I again made use of some Dundrod clay from the manse – with those frequent snippets of humour. As in the two previous panels these were then torn into smaller pieces and applied over the entire surface, again creating a broken, fragmented ‘ground’. Some are quite legible while others are partially or completely hidden by overlay, thus alluding to the fact that so many of those who experienced the horrors of the Great War rarely if ever spoke of them during their lifetime.

Echoes and influences running through this panel range from Graham Sutherland’s Welsh landscapes of the 1930s which portray a certain anonymous presence in his intriguing organic forms, to the highly charged emotional pastoral scenes by the 19th century visionary painter Samuel Palmer. In order to adhere to a quieter and more contemplative mood I introduced the figure at the base of the tree. A single image portrayed over the entire surface, again creating a broken, fragmented ‘ground’. Some are quite legible while others are partially or completely hidden by overlay, thus alluding to the fact that so many of those who experienced the horrors of the Great War rarely if ever spoke of them during their lifetime.

Triptych is part of a two person art installation by Leslie Nicholl and Colin Corkey. Entitled God is on Leave, it is currently in the Long Gallery, North Down Museum, Bangor, Co. Down, and continues until the end of January 2019.


THE Starvation Order was harsh to say the least
There goes the old saying
‘Beggars breed while rich men feed’
This archaic Order was enacted by the Irish Parliament
On the 2nd September 1939
The very next day the Government was to have sweeping powers
They had laid it on the line
These affected Press, movement of person, Correspondence and other things
Young girls in the family of so called deserters
Like me have witnessed the result
Of what pain these laws did bring
Such laws did punish us who were related to family members
Who joined the British Army
These brave Irishmen went off to battle against the enemy
Donned their British uniform and walked into battle calmly
Shaking hands they said ‘goodbye’
Wondering if their family they would ever see again
What can be said of these courageous men?
During the period of the ‘Emergency’
Many workers were quickly drafted in
Especially in the Department of Posts and Telegraphs
This was to check the security issues
Convinced that never would they do things in half
Threats of an invasion was hot on their minds
Parish Councils were set up here and there
To monitor any uprisings one did find
Tea was smuggled in big time
Sometimes a hearse was used to create the crime
Because of the rationing tea and flour
Were high on the smuggler’s list
There were fast and furious clashes
Between the smuggler and the Revenue fist to fist
Lots of flour was lost in the affray
Many Revenue persons were lost in these far off days
As a child starved by the Catholic and State
No one was there for me
When my father stole food for me to feed on
He was sentenced to 6 months bread and water in Lim-erick Jail
The only one who ever loved me – now he was gone
Starved for 6 months for what did he have to atone?
When he was released he was just skin and bone
It was a criminal offence to nourish me
This Order was enacted to bring about my early death
I have survived against all odds
In spite of the contempt I have met.

Doctor Rogers, Prisoner of War number 9294
Hawking’s Final Answers

Brian McClinton

STEPHEN Hawking, died last March, aged 76. Brief Answers to the Big Questions (John Murray) draws from his personal archive and was in development at the time of his death. It was completed in collaboration with his academic colleagues, his family and his estate. The book also includes: a foreword by Eddie Redmayne, who played him in The Theory of Everything; an introduction by Nobel Prize-winning physicist and friend Kip Thorne; and a moving afterword by Hawking’s daughter, Lucy.

Brief Answers addresses 10 big questions on the existence of god, the beginning of the universe, other intelligent life, predicting the future, black holes, time travel, the survival of the earth, colonising space, artificial intelligence, and how we shape the future. His approach is both rational and generally sceptical but infused with optimism.

On the question of the existence of a God, Hawking answers in the negative: “I think the universe was spontaneously created out of nothing, according to the laws of science”. Space and energy were invented in an event we now call the Big Bang. But do we not need a God to set it up so that the Big Bang could bang? No, nothing caused the Big Bang because time began at that instant. There is no possibility of a creator because there is no time for a creator to have existed in.

The second question expands on the first. How did it all begin? He begins by quoting Hamlet: “I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space”. Hawking interprets this as particularly fitting for himself because Hamlet is saying that, although we humans are very limited physically, our minds are free to explore the whole universe. This is not too far wrong because Hamlet means that he could live in his mind and conjure up infinite imaginative possibilities, “were it not that I have bad dreams”. In other words, the horror of the real world keeps intruding into his thoughts, not least the murder of his father. Perhaps, owing to his condition, the real world intruded less on Hawking and he was free mentally to explore the whole universe.

The ‘nutshell’ metaphor is also used to explain the beginning of the universe, which was initially small and dense. It was actually a hot fireball, which burst into being 13.8bn years ago and expanded and cooled down.

However, this chapter digresses a lot from the question. I would have liked more detail on the moment of the Big Bang and the subsequent expansion. He says that there may be other universes, indeed a great many which, like our own, were created out of nothing. He delivered a paper just before his death where he committed to the idea of a multiverse, but there is no mention of it here.

The question whether there is other intelligent life in the universe is difficult, and Hawking offers a number of possible answers. Maybe earth is the only planet in the galaxy — or the observable universe — where life happened. He prefers to think that there are other forms of intelligent life out there but we have been overlooked. Yet he offers a warning: meeting a more advanced civilisation might be a bit like the original inhabitants of America meeting Columbus.

Hawking believes that we have two options for the future: the exploration of space for alternative planets on which to live, and the positive use of artificial intelligence to improve our world. But it is surely wrong to think that only science will save us — indeed he implies that it can be used for good or bad purposes. So science alone is not enough. We also need an ethic and a philosophy that insure science is used wisely.

Where do we go? When an artificial intelligence (AI) becomes better than human beings it can improve itself without human help, we may face an intelligence explosion that ultimately results in machines whose intelligence exceeds ours. AI might then take off on its own and redesign itself so that humans couldn’t compete and would be superseded. Our future is therefore a race between the growing power of our technology and the wisdom with which we use it.

There is also too much repetition between the chapters, suggesting that it was rushed out without proper editing. That said, Brief Answers is an easy and pleasurable read. Hawking’s wit and enthusiasm is evident in every page.