

# Atheism or Agnosticism?

Bob Rees

**T**HE In the last issue of IFH, Noel Byrne pointed to the illogicality of the Christian Omni-God. Unfortunately Atheism, the assertively-held belief that there is no God, is logically unprovable too.

Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence, and in an argument, Agnosticism (the observation that nothing is known about the existence or nature of God) is the only logically defensible stance. However, in his book *A Very Short Introduction to Atheism*, Julian Baggini disagrees: he concedes that dogmatic disbelief in God is logically untenable, but he claims that this merely means that atheists must abandon their dogmatism and admit that they *could* be wrong.

This, he claims, is not agnosticism. Baggini's point is that the evidence for atheism is overwhelming. It is the experience of living in a natural world that is governed by natural laws, where everything that happens throughout the universe is (or will ultimately be) explainable according to those laws. The absence of logical proof for the veracity of atheism is balanced by the overwhelming evidence for atheistic naturalism. We are *obviously* mortal biological animals and not embodied souls – who needs logic?

It is certainly a better explanation of our experiences than belief in some magic God that interferes in human affairs. But naturalism is not necessarily incompatible with the possibility of, for example, a non-intervening creator-god which originally defined the natural laws and constants, as some deists believe. It really all depends on what you mean by 'God'.

Baggini goes on to show that the evidence for the religions is extremely weak, being subjective and anecdotal. It is not hard to reject any of the irrational religious creeds that teach a variety of contradictory

dogma, such as you would expect of belief systems invented by men of different eras and cultures. "Blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed" (John 20:29), for example, is clearly a convenient component of an improbable religion for which there is no good evidence.

Atheists' claims that all religions are false and usually harmful, incompatible with happiness, and obsessed with money and self-survival, are founded on observation and experience. Religion has contributed absolutely nothing to humanity's store of knowledge, nothing but false hope, false guilt and misery.

## I'm an atheist, but in an intellectual discussion I'm agnostic

Baggini asks us to look religion in the eye, claiming that under the cool light of reason, its falsity will become self-evident; and its superstition, myth and ungrounded authority will be exposed as purely human devices.

But debunking the major religions is not a disproof of God, even though most religions are parasitic on such a belief. God and religion are different things – God is an undefined metaphysical concept which is not disproved simply by exposing the falseness and sophistry of the religions. It's much harder than that – I'm an atheist, but in an intellectual discussion I'm agnostic.

On the topic of ethics, I have argued that there is no ethical dimension to atheism, which is a mere disbelief in God. Baggini agrees that atheists must confront the notion that atheism is amoral, mentioning that opponents of atheism often point to the 'godless' Soviet Union as an example of what happened when people denied God. He claims that the

fact that the Soviet Union was an atheist regime was as irrelevant to the gulags as the fact that Hitler was a vegetarian; and if Nazi war crimes are used as a refutation of atheism, then the atrocities of the Inquisition and the crusades equally refute Christianity, and 9/11 invalidates Islam. Baggini observes that very few atheists would elect to live in an atheist state, preferring a secular state where all matters of disbelief are freely chosen.

Nevertheless, the charge that atheists are amoral clearly touches a nerve because it turns out that most 'practising' atheists' distaste for religion is such that it has motivated them to campaign against religious influence in government, especially in the areas of education and human rights, two areas of interest also to Irish humanists.

The Atheist Alliance International supports and coordinates atheist groups worldwide by helping with local campaigns against religious indoctrination in primary schools, promoting secular education, upholding the rights of non-believers, and supporting individual atheists whose lives are threatened or diminished by religious laws and practices.

Unfortunately, the Humanist Association of Ireland (HAI) has legally debarred itself from any such campaigning, even against obviously biased laws such as the Civil Registration (Amendment) Act 2012, that discriminates directly against the HAI, as a result of its Board's decision to prioritise HAI's Ceremonies activities – a Catch 22 situation.

This means that, in the Republic, it is left to Atheist Ireland to do the serious campaigning against religious, especially Catholic, influence and interference in government, particularly in education and health, but also against the Civil Registration (Amendment) Act. Thanks for that, Atheist Ireland. □

## Counter-Enlightenment Thinkers:

### Johann Gottfried Von Herder

**J**OHANN Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803) was born in Prussia and attended the University of Königsberg, where he became a student of Kant but was drawn instead to the philosophy of Johann Georg Hamann, a patriotic Francophobe who championed emotions over reason and faith in a god over philosophy. Herder's philosophy, which has been more influential than is often realised, is a kind of anti-philosophy.



He rejected the Enlightenment ideal of universal, rational standards in favour of the unique and particular in a specific time and place. He attached great importance to the nation and to patriotism and maintained that "there is only one class in the state, the Volk (not the rabble), and the king belongs to this class as well as the peasant".

Each nation should feel deep inside itself and proudly proclaim its singularity, derived from its distinct geography and climate, language, customs and traditions. Although he was not a nationalist in the modern sense, Herder was the intellectual father of modern nationalism, a term which he himself coined. He rejected the philosophes' cosmopolitan model of modernity, which he believed is the shedding of all that makes us most human, and dismissed Enlightenment rationalism as the 'cold philosophy of the age' (*Another Philosophy of History*, 1774). Human beings, he argued, were moved by the simplest of delights and to belong to a given community is a basic human need no less natural than that for food or drink.

Some scholars have seen Herder's ideas as containing the roots of Nazism, especially because he advocated the idea that Europeans are the descendants of Indo-Aryan people who, he believed, were advanced peoples possessing a great capacity for wisdom, nobility and science. Jews were alien to Germany and to Europe.

In *Ideas for the Philosophy of the History of Humanity* (1774) he wrote: "For thousands of years, since their emergence on the stage of history, the Jews were a parasitic growth on the stem of other nations, a race of cunning brokers all over the earth. They have caused great evil to many ill-organised states, by retarding the free and natural economic development of their indigenous population".

He thought that Judaism as a religion had degenerated from the time of Moses but that Jews should have a homeland in Palestine, which indicates that his reflection was ambivalent, defending Jews against persecution while also producing an ideology to support their exclusion. Of course, it was the negative aspects which helped to fuel the antisemitism that developed in the latter half of the 19th century. □

## Let's Not Forget Compassion

### Alan Tuffery

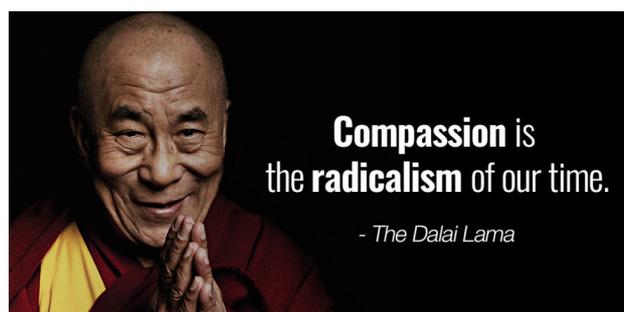


**A**N ESRI study was reported as indicating that "more than one-fifth of children could be left living in poverty in Ireland if the economy fails to recover". As usual, the tone of the report suggests that the increase in child poverty is an inevitable consequence of difficulties in 'the economy'. But it is not inevitable: it is a *choice* that we can make.

If we have learned anything in the last few months of unprecedented and drastic social change, it is that nothing is impossible. A way can be found. The Irish Government has managed the pandemic pretty well. Very much against the grain of its traditional ideas, the biggest change was a switch in emphasis from the 'economy' to compassion.

The government behaved as if it was more important to save lives and to mitigate the suffering of people, rather than to have pretty economic figures about 'budget deficits'. That said, more could have been done to protect the vulnerable, especially the self-employed, those with mental health issues or disabilities, and the elderly in care.

Other countries have chosen to set the balance between compassion and the economy in a different place. The USA, England, Wales and Brazil, appear to have made the choice to put the economy first and as a consequence they have the highest covid-19-related death rates. □



# Debating Irish Unity

Roger Kelly

**C**HRIS Donnelly, educationalist and political commentator was spot on when he said on the *Stephen Nolan Show* on Radio Ulster on 1st April that no matter how Sinn Féin apologised about the Bobby Storey funeral it would make no difference to hard-line Unionists and Loyalists.

He went on to say that Sinn Féin had undoubtedly made a major mistake in the debacle surrounding their involvement in the funeral and that more importantly, they need to address their own shortcomings in appearing arrogant and above criticism. Sadly, this whole foray has come at an unfortunate time especially when the debate around a United Ireland was gaining some impetus.

The *Claire Byrne Show* in March on RTE1 debated the question: *A United Ireland What Would It Mean?* Many anticipated an explosive discussion between the likes of Sinn Féin leader Mary Lou McDonald, Táiniste Leo Varadkar, the DUP MP Gregory Campbell, Alliance MLA Naomi Long, Loyalist blogger Jamie Bryson, and others. However, viewers were left surprised and impressed that the show produced a balanced and measured debate.

Mary Lou McDonald pointed out that, between the Brexit vote and the subsequent N.I. Protocol and the Covid pandemic, the issue of the Northern Ireland border had been thrust into the spotlight in a way that it had not been before. Leo Varadkar agreed and both of them also concurred that it was important to start a detailed conversation with all political, economic, social and cultural groups on the island of Ireland as to what a new Ireland could possibly look like.

Their main difference was around setting a specific date for a border poll. Unsurprisingly, the two main Unionist/Loyalist representatives

were the most negative about having a discussion to consider the consequences of Irish Unity. Jamie Bryson, who once remarked that he would rather ‘choke on his own blood’ than be part of a United Ireland, said it didn’t matter how a ‘New Ireland’ is packaged or what is done to try to accommodate unionists: “a New Ireland, an Old Ireland or I can’t believe it’s not a United Ireland Ireland, is never going to be tolerable to unionism”.

Gregory Campbell made similar comments, and while he acknowledged that a border poll was inevitable as outlined in the Good Friday Agreement (GFA), he was nevertheless unimpressed with the need to consider the possibility of any new all Ireland dispensation.

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It is an inescapable fact that in the next 10/15 years Unionism will be an electoral minority and it can’t go on saying no, no, no to meaningful discourse about future working relationships that may lead to a united Ireland.

Many Unionists/Loyalists still fail to accept that the GFA gives legitimacy to the desire for reunification and that this aim will be decided by discussion, debate and a democratic vote via a border poll when the Secretary of State of Northern Ireland deems it appropriate to call it.

Also in March this year, the Fianna Fail TD Jim O’Callaghan delivered a speech at Sidney Sussex College, England, outlining his thoughts on the political, economic and legal consequences of Irish reunification. He is to be commended for producing a 24-page paper that is the first

overarching analysis of what a new united Ireland might look like.

O’Callaghan speaks respectfully of unionists and their tradition but argues that they would have more influence in a united Ireland than in the UK. Currently, they have about 1% influence in the political structures of the UK but would have 11% in a new Ireland, thus having a greater influence in the governance of a new united Ireland than they enjoy in the governance of the UK.

The paper also proposed other interesting ideas. The new state would have two national languages and a regional system of policing that would include An Garda Síochána and the PSNI.

There should be a 10/15 year phasing out of the current up-to-£10bn UK government subvention with EU regional development funding accessed during the transition period. A high-speed rail system between Belfast and Dublin could be built and extended to other cities.

Religious references or affiliation should not form any part of a new constitution. It is acknowledged there would be contentious issues around flags, emblems and anthems which it is suggested that could be dealt with outside of the political framework through an all-island citizens assembly.

While O’Callaghan’s paper does not fully address every possible scenario it does provide at least a template for a rational, meaningful discussion as to the merits of contemplating a united Ireland.

Sinn Féin needs to be a bit savvier in their role in any future campaign and debate around a possible border poll and what a new Ireland would look like and not be viewed as ourselves alone but as part of a broader civic national movement that is respectful of all traditions in attempting to build Irish unity. □

# Dying with Dignity Bill

## — The Time Is Now

Alan Tuffery

**T**HE Dying With Dignity Bill is now before the Oireachtas. Its provisions apply to anyone over the age of 18 resident on ‘the island of Ireland.’ If passed, it will raise some problems in Northern Ireland because no part of the UK has a dying with dignity law, although active debates are in progress.

In this article, I argue that the time is right for the enactment of this Bill because of the rate of social change in Ireland. Even since the Dying With Dignity Bill was first presented in 2015, Ireland has continued the pattern of change of the last few decades. Ireland was a country in which one narrow framework applied to everyone. Now it has become a more compassionate society which recognises diversity; a society that increasingly recognises that different people have different needs.

The Republic of Ireland has had two momentous referendums. First, the 2015 marriage equality referendum and then the 2018 referendum to repeal the 8<sup>th</sup> amendment to the Constitution which prohibited abortion. Both were passed very comfortably and reflect the continuing shift in Irish society towards a society which recognises and respects a higher level of individual autonomy. It is no longer a case of one rule for everyone. Individuals may take the decisions that are best for them, in terms of their ‘most cherished values and beliefs’ — a key part of the concept of personal autonomy.

The common theme here is compassion — society’s compassion for individuals and our compassion for one another. Both lead us to a desire to live in a kinder world and to reduce suffering.

The Dying with Dignity Bill aims to allow individuals with a terminal illness to be helped to end their suffering. At present we do not grant to our fellow citizens the same merciful end to suffering that we grant to the animals in our care.

Laws like the Dying with Dignity Bill are in place in many jurisdictions. In recent times, over thirty countries have legalised some form of voluntary assisted dying, so that, in effect, over 200 million people worldwide now have a legal provision that allows them to end their suffering at the end of life.

Some jurisdictions have only recently passed their laws on voluntary assisted dying. This means that detailed recent arguments are available to us many times over and

can speed up our discussions. How many times do we need to hear the same arguments and the same evidence before we are convinced.

Some jurisdictions have had laws on voluntary assisted dying for well over 20 years now. This means that there is a great deal of experience of operating the safeguards and the procedures. We do not have to start from scratch in Ireland. We can learn from the experience of other jurisdictions and adapt existing procedures to suit our society.

International experience shows that when individuals with a terminal illness know that voluntary assisted dying is available to them, their quality of life is greatly improved. It removes much stress and anxiety, both for themselves and for their loved ones. It provides an

‘emotional insurance’ — as it has been called — that allows them to live out the life that remains to them, without the fear of great pain outside their control. They are also free of the emotional pain that comes with knowing that those who care for them and for whom they care will not have to watch

them die in suffering and degradation.

This ‘emotional insurance’ also removes any need for the terminally ill person to consider suicide — a lonely thought because, in principle, any discussion with others might implicate them in the serious crime of ‘assisting a suicide’. If they decide to travel to end their lives — a complicated and expensive business — they may have to do so alone and may have to end their lives early while they still have some decent quality of life left. It is time to end the practice of ‘exporting our problems’. We have been doing that for far too long.

In every country where voluntary assisted dying is available, surveys show that it is massively popular among the population at large. In no case has such legislation been repealed.

Voluntary assisted dying works. Surveys here show that Irish people support the policy. Now is the time to enact appropriate legislation in Ireland and end suffering for the terminally ill, and the people who care about them.

*(Alan Tuffery is a member of the End of Life Ireland (EOLI), a voluntary organisation aiming to foster conversations about end of life and to support the Dying With Dignity Bill. This article was based on a presentation to an EOLI event in early April).* □