

Faith Versus Reason

Noel Byrne

IN this article I am referring to Faith strictly in the religious sense. At heart, religious faith is belief based on alleged divine revelation, tradition and the various holy books of the different religions. Religious faith has no need of evidence and can be accepted even in the light of contrary evidence. Faith in Christianity is basically what is stated in the creed. It is exemplified in St. Anselm's quotes: "*Credo ut intelligam*" – I believe so that I may understand – and "*fides quaerens intellectum*" – faith seeking understanding.

Article 143 of the *Catechism* of the Catholic Church states: "by faith man completely submits his intellect and his will to God. With his whole being man gives his assent to God the revealer. Sacred scripture calls this human response to God, the author of revelation, the obedience of faith".

St Paul in Hebrews 11:1 says: "*Now faith is the confidence in what we hope for and the assurance of what we do not see.*" In Colossians 2:8 he again says: "*See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ.*" In John 20:29 Jesus himself says to Thomas: "*Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.*"

The early Christian theologian Tertullian states: "*And the son of God died; it is by all means to be believed, because it is absurd. And he was buried and rose again; the fact is certain because it is impossible.*"

The clash between faith and reason is again exemplified in the story of the intended sacrifice of Isaac by his father Abraham in the book of Genesis. The commandment to sacrifice him makes no rational sense, even putting morality aside. At Isaac's birth Abraham was 100 years old and Sarah 90. Sarah was childless up to that point. Abraham was explicitly promised by god that Isaac will have children, "*for through Isaac shall seed be raised unto you*". Yet several verses after

this prophesy Abraham is commanded by god to give up his son as a sacrificial offering. Abraham obeys, or attempts to. God sends an angel to stop him as he is about to kill Isaac. The angel praises Abraham on behalf of God for his blind faith. The test was to see if he would blindly obey this command, despite both its irrationality and its immorality. This story is a refutation of rationalism.

Beliefs can be based on faith or reason. Both are epistemologies. But beliefs based on faith have no real foundation and no proper justification. Reason allows us to draw conclusions from whatever evidence we have. If god gave us reason then presumably he intended us to use it.

Reason is about justifying beliefs using evidence and logic. It justifies decisions and supports explanations and conduct. Knowledge is not the same as belief or opinion. A belief or an opinion may or may not be true. Knowledge is facts, information or skills acquired through experience and can be justified. Reason and faith cannot coexist. They are not compatible. Attempts to reconcile or accommodate faith and reason, religion and science, over the centuries, have all failed, as they must, for it is logically impossible to reconcile reason and faith. They are contradictory.

Since religions are faith-based they do not encourage, or in some cases even allow, questioning or scepticism. Neither do they allow neutrality, in the sense that one must commit oneself to a particular belief system. You must accept their 'true belief' and no other actual or potential beliefs.

All religion is based on faith. As Marx said, "*religion is the opium of the people*". If you need the crutch of religion, which faith do you choose – Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Mormonism, Hinduism, Scientology?

They cannot all be correct. There is no one religion, only religions, and they are all different. Logically, they cannot all be true. Likewise their faith-based dogmas cannot all be true.

Apologetics is the discipline that attempts a rational defence of faith. Why do religions require apologetics to justify their dogmas? In the case of the older religions, and particularly the three monotheisms, which have been around for over two thousand years, they should surely at this point have no difficulty in justifying their dogmas and beliefs. Apologetics is required because in reality when religions talk about the dogmas and tenets of their faith they quite literally do not know what they are talking about.

Reason frees and liberates the mind, faith subjugates and enslaves it by virtue of it being a closed system. God is the answer to every question for faith believers. Faith requires no questions. Reason delights in questions. Faith is credulous, whereas reason is sceptical. In the 2000 years since monotheism developed, what has faith given us? Nothing but division and war.

Reason is proven by its success, unlike faith which has proven or done nothing, except to give false hope. Reason has given us modern medicine and hygiene, technology, man on the moon, the Internet and much more. Reason gives us truth and practical answers. Religion has no equivalent record of discovering hidden truths.

Interestingly those who have faith don't go to the priest, imam or rabbi when they are ill, just like the rest of us. They go to the doctor or hospital and rely on reason and science and not faith to cure their illness. Neither god nor faith will end injustice, poverty, ignorance or war. Reason may.

If you can defend a belief on rational grounds, then there is no need to take it on faith. However, if it cannot be defended on rational grounds why should you believe it on faith? Is it right to believe without sufficient evidence? I think not.

Humanism is a chosen life stance as opposed to a life mandated by doctrines inherited from cultural and religious traditions and alleged divine revelation. □

Talking about Dying with Dignity

Alan Tuffery

IN the Republic of Ireland the Dying with Dignity Bill (2020) has passed its Second Reading in the Dáil and is now with the Oireachtas Committee for Justice and Equality which will receive submissions from the public and interested bodies in early January. The Dying with Dignity Bill offers those with a terminal illness a chance to end their lives— in strictly controlled circumstances.

I want to look at some of the language used about end-of life issues. Language is important because of the emphasis it puts on some aspects and the associations it calls up.

I prefer the term *voluntary assisted dying*. I like it because it emphasises that the decision to end one's life is voluntary, that is, a thoughtful, free decision on the part of an individual. Those opposed to the Bill never ever use the term voluntary. It seems that they are trying to suggest that such a decision can never be free. They suggest that individuals may be pressured into the decision. There is no evidence in international experience of such pressure. The safeguards work.

The term *voluntary assisted dying* also captures the idea that, if the individual can't take the lethal dose because of a disability, they will be helped to take it — again, in strictly controlled circumstances.

Those opposed to the Bill use terms such as 'assisted suicide' and 'euthanasia'. These are attempts to call up unpleasant associations. This suggestion skips the fact that suicide is not a crime in this jurisdiction. Society has moved on from treating suicide as a moral wrong — suicide is viewed with compassion.

Those opposed to the Bill also try to undermine terms like *autonomy* and *choice*. They contrast individual autonomy with social obligations, as if they are somehow mutually exclusive. This is a false opposition because we all live in a social context — networks of family, friends and the wider society. It is impossible to separate personal autonomy and social obligations. Indeed, dying is essentially part of an individual's relationship to society. It doesn't just involve one person: it involves their families and their carers and a wide circle of people. Just look at funeral attendances in normal times. Voluntary Assisted Dying is not a purely selfish matter.

Autonomy has been defined by Dr Campbell, a medical ethicist from NUI Galway, as follows. "[Autonomy is] a person's interest in making and acting on choices of

momentous significance in that person's life according to that person's most cherished values and beliefs. It is not just about having a range of choices and choosing between them". In other words, autonomy is the ability to make critical decisions about one's individuality and integrity and that is an essential part of individual dignity.

Similarly, the concept of *choice* is undermined, usually by using terms like 'innate' or 'intrinsic' human dignity. I suspect that these represent a coded religious argument: Life is not ours to dispose of — it is solely a matter for a divine power which we are not to question. Of course, this religious argument is never overt. I have also seen the concept of choice diminished by associating it with market capitalism, as if choosing to end one's life when it is intolerable and without prospect of improvement were as trivial as choosing a pair of socks.

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I assert such end-of-life choices are an essential part of my human dignity. Voluntary Assisted Dying is a choice I would like to have — and I'd like it for others. That's what the Dying with Dignity Bill offers — a chance to make a

considered, informed choice about the end of life.

Based on a contribution to End of Life Ireland Conference on 11th November 2020

Dignity in death is a birthright of each living thing.

Bhagat Puran Singh

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What Can Humanism Learn from Religion?

Eve Darcy

ON 15th September the HAI held an ‘open floor’ discussion via Zoom. The subject for discussion was *What can Humanism learn from Religion in order to be more successful?* Before the matter was thrown open to attendees, four HAI members gave their thoughts. The following is an adaptation of comments from Ciara Lynch, masquerading under her comedic alias Eve Darcy.

The first step in answering a question like this must be to define religion and Humanism. A quick google of ‘religion’ throws up the following explanation: the belief in, or worship of, a super-human power, especially a god or gods. Humanism, on the other hand, is a ‘rationalist outlook or system of thought, attaching prime importance to human, rather than divine or supernatural, matters’.

This is the first problem. I believe the rationalist outlook and the fact that Humanism is a system of thought are two of the main areas holding us back. If history has taught us nothing else, it’s that encouraging people to think for themselves is a terrible idea. Much better to simply tell them what to think: there is a God, he is the correct one, you are correct for choosing to believe in him – and above all, under no circumstance are you to touch yourself in a sexually pleasing manner.

Bertrand Russell wrote that “most people would die sooner than think—in fact, most do”, and I personally think you’ll get far more people on board telling them what’s what. If you can use fear, emotional manipulation and psychological abuse, all the better! You’ll be more successful again if there’s an element of shame that can be used as a stick with which to beat people.

Think about what that would mean for humanists: we could

say all sorts of outlandish things and when they’re questioned, we can just tell people they need to have faith. No one really knows what ‘faith’ is, but that doesn’t matter because the thing you’re being asked to believe in doesn’t exist anyway.

It’s all well and good being logical and rational, but it’s very limiting. Religion isn’t bound by logic or any kind of rationality, so its proponents can basically say whatever they want. We humanists and atheists are really limiting ourselves by not using our imaginations (and indeed, some of the most religious people I know have amazing imaginations).

Catholicism is the religion I feel most comfortable with making fun of, as it is the one that has caused me the most trauma in my life, and

Maybe it’s time humanists started claiming we can see the face of Charles Darwin on the wall of the natural history museum

Catholicism is responsible for some of the greatest uses of the human imagination I know.

Take, for example, apparitions, and how useful *they* are. Just think of Knock! Practically no one had heard of it before Mary visited in

the 19th century. She did for Knock what Queen Victoria did for Killarney, and before they knew it the visitors were rolling in. What would likely have remained a tiny insignificant village in county Mayo now has a whole economy built around pilgrims and religious tat, not to mention its own airport.

Then there’s Medjugorje, located in a poor war-torn part of Bosnia, but now with excellent road infrastructure, footpaths and pizzerias which would certainly not be there had herself not appeared back in 1981 (and continually to this day, apparently).

Another thing the Catholic’s imagination does very well is moving statues. The most famous Irish example of this was in 1985 in Ballinspittle. Maybe it’s time humanists started claiming we can see the face of Charles Darwin on the wall of the natural history museum or in the skeleton of that huge moose in there? Or just simply claim that the statues in the ‘Dead Zoo’ move around at night?

What I found most interesting (and heart warming) about the reports of these apparitions and moving statues was that most were made by children and young women, and were immediately believed. So it’s good to know the Church is capable of believing children and young women at least some of the time.

Religion also has a lot going for it around the issue of death. Not only is it promising you something at the end of it all, but you can get redemption simply by confessing, even if it’s just on your deathbed. Going to heaven, just for saying a few prayers: who wouldn’t want to believe that?

I’ve always thought of it as being similar to a child wrestling with the notion →



of the existence of Santa Claus. No child wants to stop believing because they're all too aware of how much they stand to lose by not believing in Santa. God is like Santa for adults, except with everlasting life (eternal presence?!) instead of Christmas presents.

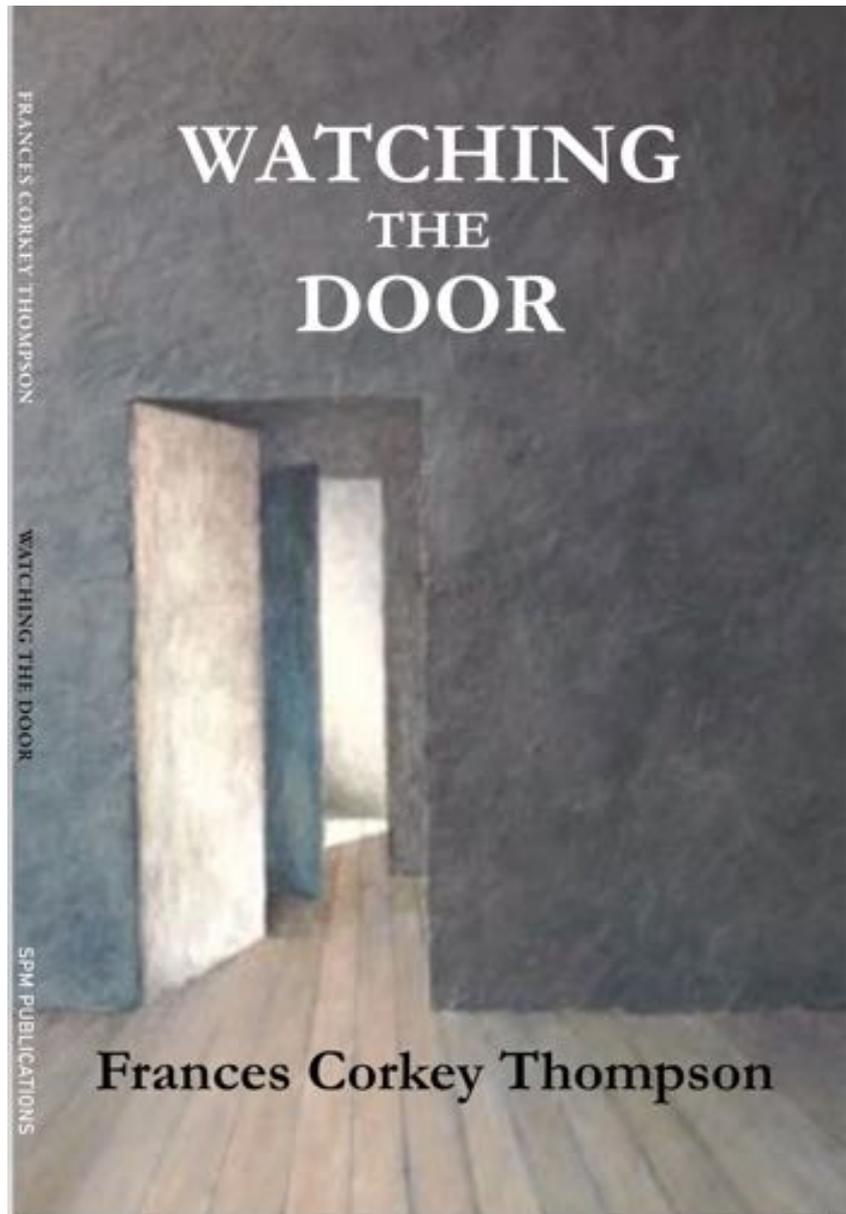
So to the question at hand: how can we be more successful as humanists, and what can we learn from religion in order to achieve that? Well, that of course depends on how one measures success, and it is clear that by today's standards, success is all about how many social media followers you have. A cursory glance online will tell you that the most successful influencers on Instagram usually have great abs and are scantily clad.

Clearly humanists need to do more of this! Because in fairness to Jesus, he did have very good abs and was usually scantily clad. In fact those 'Stations of the Cross' were the only things that kept me going to mass as an atheistic teenager.



Being serious for a moment, I think the question should not be what can Humanism learn from religion but the other way around. This is a far more pertinent question, because having people believe in what you're preaching out of fear, social pressure, tradition or an internalised shame is not a measure of success.

It is, as I alluded to earlier, emotional manipulation and psychological abuse. With this in mind, the fact that the Catholic Church in Ireland *still* has such a hold on Primary Schools is terrifying. Emma Goldman once accused religion of making people too complicit in this life, whereas what was needed was real individual and social change needed to improve people's lives in the here and now. So to religion, I would suggest that you be more rational, more ethical and more compassionate. In summary: be more humanist. □



FRANCES CORKEY THOMPSON **WATCHING THE DOOR**

First Prize Winner, Sentinel Poetry Book Competition 2018

Watching the Door is a rich and varied collection, often passionate, sometimes surprising, occasionally quirky, and always an entertaining read. It's a collection which offers an engaging variety of tone, mood, subject, effect and, consequently, poetic pleasures. Imagery here is frequently colourful, phrased with apt succinctness, cleverly wrought or simply resonant with implication. Thompson can sustain a hidden suggestion throughout a poem, and is able to convey a great deal in few words, allowing allusion rather than literal description to do the work. For the range of its offering, the cleverness of its constructs, and the sheer delight of its offerings, it deserves to be very widely read.

Noel Williams

Frances Corkey Thompson is an Irish poet living in Devon. Her poems have appeared in various publications including *The Rialto*, *Irish Pages*, *Mslexia*, *Wasafiri*, *Oxford Poets 2007*, *Poetry Ireland Review*, *Sam Smith's Journal*, *PLAY* and many others. Her chapbook, *The Long Acre*, was published in 2008 by HappenStance. In 2015, Indigo Dreams published her first full collection, *Wild Gooseberries of Hailung*, which arose from visits she made to China in search of traces of her missionary father. It was *The Poetry Kit's Book of the Month*. This collection, *Watching the Door*, won first prize in the *Sentinel Poetry Book Competition 2018*.