

Humanist Handbook



Brian McClinton

First published 1996, Revised 2016

HUMANIST HANDBOOK (1998; revised 2016)

Brian McClinton

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1. The First Humanists

Humanism is a view of life and a way of life. It is for those people who base their interpretation of existence on the evidence of the natural world and its evolution, and not on belief in a supernatural power. As such, Humanism is older and more universal than Christianity. But when and where did it begin?

Of course, there have always been those who doubted the existence of Gods. But we can only look to the written evidence, and it is Protagoras, a teacher and philosopher of the 5th century BC, who is usually regarded as 'the first Humanist'. He formulated the dictum that man is the measure of all things, by which he probably meant that there is no objective standard or ultimate truth outside human values derived from human experience.

He also taught that justice is a matter of agreed rules, not divine commands. He wrote a book *On the Gods*, which began: "With regard to the gods, I cannot feel sure either that they are or they are not, nor what they are like in figure; for there are many things that hinder our knowledge the obscurity of the subject and the shortness of human life".

There is a tradition that for this and similar thoughts the Athenian authorities accused Protagoras of blasphemy, banished him from the city and burned his books in the market place, after sending round a herald to collect them from all who had copies in their possession.

Yet even before Protagoras, there were at least three other prominent figures in the East who could claim to be 'the first Humanist'. Lao Tzu, possibly born about 600 BC, is said to have

rejected the idea of a personal god, which he regarded as an imaginative emanation of the life force. His ethic rejected violence and stressed compassion and humility. He said: "Recompense to none evil for evil; repay evil with good"; and "Do good, expecting no return". Many similar maxims are attributed to Lao, whose pacifist code is more consistent even than that of Jesus Christ.

Confucius, who is said to have met Lao Tzu, is another claimant. Born in 551 BC, he spent about fourteen years of his life travelling through China as a teacher. His teachings can be summed up in one word, 'jen', which means love, humanity, or goodness. Central to his ethic was the so-called 'golden rule', which he expressed as: "Do not do to others what you would not like yourself". "Virtue", he also said, "is to love men, and wisdom is to understand men". As to the gods, he suggested keeping them far off. As to serving them, "How, if you know not how to serve men, can you serve their ghosts?"

Then there was Gautama Siddhartha, the Buddha or 'enlightened one'. He was born in Nepal about 563 BC, the son of the local rajah. At about the age of thirty he left the luxuries of the court, his wife and all earthly ambitions for the life of an ascetic. After six years of self-torturing he saw what he believed was the perfect way to self-enlightenment.

Partly it lay neither in asceticism nor in excess but in the 'middle way', or *via media*. He also taught forgiveness of enemies and non-violence. Again, he believed that there was no such thing as a soul and that the universe had no beginning and no end. Clearly, therefore, Buddhism cannot be a religion in the sense of reverential worship of the supernatural but is instead largely a system of social ethics.

Yet, consider the fate of the ideas of these three wise men, Confucius, Lao Tzu and the Buddha. Taoism developed as a superstitious and idolatrous religion in which its founder was

worshipped as a deity. Lao Tzu would thus hardly recognise his own philosophy if he could return and see it (but of course the same applies to Christianity; as Nietzsche remarked, the last Christian died on the cross). Nor was it any intention of Confucius to found a religion in the traditional sense though, to be fair, Confucianism, despite its rituals, has no Bible, church, clergy or creed as such.

As for the Buddha, he certainly was not interested in religious rituals and sacrifices and would be horrified to discover that he has been elevated to divine status and is worshipped by millions in the East. So although Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism have been distorted into religions, their founders were Humanists and possibly atheists.

Why do such perversions occur? Two reasons at once spring to mind. One has to do with power. As Shaw said, religions are founded by laymen but are administered by priests. Each new faith represents initially a breakaway from an older creed. Its founders first appear in the eyes of their converts as innovators, even heretics or iconoclasts. But as soon as it becomes a going concern the priests, who are the official 'custodians' of the faith, step in and hereafter take charge. Under their leadership the philosophy then sheds its original, radical and heretical character and becomes a new orthodoxy. The radical layman has given way to the conservative priest, who interprets the creed in ways that strengthen his hold over the faithful. Strong doses of myth, mysticism and mumbo jumbo all add to priestly power and authority.

The second reason for the perversions relates to the general longing for heroes and saviours. Recall the scene at the shuttered window in *Life of Brian*. The eponymous anti-hero, mistakenly thought to be a messiah, appears above the assembled multitude and tells them: "You don't need to follow me, you don't need to follow anybody, you've gotta think for yourselves, you're all

individuals". The adoring crowd responds by repeating his every word and pleading to be told more.

It need no longer be thus. As liberal, secular democracy spreads throughout the world, educated and free citizens do not need to be told what to think by power mad priests and politicians. And soon we shall all come to accept Lao Tzu, Confucius and the Buddha for what they really were: early exponents of the Humanism that will eventually replace all religions as the guiding light of the human race.

2. The Development of Humanism

Stage 1: Ancient Greece and Rome

In the Western World Humanism began in Greece in the 5th century before Christ. It was the Sophists, and in particular Protagoras, who, as Cicero later put it, 'called philosophy down from heaven to earth'. Instead of speculating purely about the cosmos and gods, they introduced political and moral questions. Protagoras, however, was not alone in questioning superstitious belief. Anaxagoras (500 - 428 BC) asserted that the sun was a mass of red hot metal, not a god, an observation which led to a charge of impiety against him.

Then there was Democritus (450-370BC). He was also a materialist, who put forward the theory that the physical world was made up of atoms. Matter, in his view, comprised changeable combinations of atoms which had always existed, the world being formed out of a primeval whirling motion. He also believed that our minds are furnished with ideas based on the experience of things we see and touch and smell and feel and taste - by our experience of the material world. The view of ethics and behaviour he advocated was based on the natural world and not a supernatural one. This view also lies at the heart of modern humanism.

Epicurus (341-270BC) developed the atomism of Democritus and the view that the natural world has no purpose imposed on it. He believed that the universe is eternal and infinitely extended. Life for him is a complex of particularly fine atoms which form both body and mind in a single natural entity whose death is irrevocable dispersal of the person.

The view of life of Epicurus became widely accepted throughout the six hundred years of Greek and Roman civilisation. Since human life had come about by natural processes, people should live according to nature. This would be easy if people were content with what was enough. He wrote: "Death is nothing to us: for after our bodies have been dissolved by death they are without sensation, and that which lacks sensation is nothing to us. And therefore a right understanding of death makes the mortality of life enjoyable, not because it adds to it an infinite span of time, but because it takes away the craving for immortality".

Epicurus influenced Romans like Lucretius (100 - 55BC). He was a famous poet, who wrote *De Rerum Natura* ('On the Nature of Things'). It tells of an immense period of time during which the sun, moon and stars appeared, then animals and then human beings - and all this came about without design. The highlight of the poem is an extended argument that human beings are purely material things and so they cannot survive the physical destruction of their bodies. Religion, which teaches otherwise, is therefore a damaging superstition.

Cicero (106-43BC), a contemporary of Julius Caesar, was the most brilliant of Roman orators. His lasting influence was on education, where he adopted the Greek model for the school curriculum, known as *humanitas*, which means humane conduct based on human needs, not supernatural commands.

Stage 2: The Renaissance

Humanism as an influential philosophy was destroyed by the Roman conversion to Christianity. The Dark Ages were so called because the medieval church placed a ball and chain around the human mind. Humanism did not resurface until the Renaissance, which began in 14th century Italy and reached its peak in the ages of Leonardo, Bacon and the works attributed to Shakespeare.

'Renaissance', of course, means rebirth. What was reborn was not only an interest in classical learning and culture but also the rebirth of humanity itself. In contrast to the medieval vision of man as a depraved, helpless creature, the Renaissance viewed man as a being of immense possibilities. God still remained as creator and supreme authority because Renaissance Humanists were certainly not atheists, but his activity was seen as less immediate, more as general control than as day-to-day interference.

Leonardo (1452 - 1519) and Francis Bacon (1561 - 1626) represented the archetypal renaissance man, with their all embracing curiosity to discover new knowledge and insights and their amazing versatility in both arts and sciences. "I have taken all knowledge to be my province", declared Bacon, and both he and Leonardo believed that the way forward was to reject established authority and go straight to nature itself. Man was again the measure of all things and, as the painter Masaccio put it, he was also free to shape the world as he might choose. The essence of the Renaissance was therefore self-emancipation.

The result, as in ancient Greece, was a further effusion of intellectual, scientific and cultural vitality. Art, literature, astronomy flourished. In literature it reached its peak in the plays and poems ascribed to William Shakespeare. Like Bacon, the mastermind behind the works wished to 'insinuate into men's minds the love of virtue and equity and peace'. The whole Shakespearean drama is indeed intended as a monumental effort to lead man towards a more desirable reality by confronting him with the stark nature of his errors and failings thus far. The playwright

seeks to fulfil the role of Orpheus as outlined by Bacon in *The Advancement of Learning*. It is an educational enterprise, and therefore essentially Humanist. This didactic function in Shakespeare has been recognised by almost every subsequent great artist though frequently denied by literary critics.

The Renaissance project was destroyed by religion. True, Erasmus, More, Luther and others did not hesitate to challenge the power and corruption of institutionalised Christianity. Luther's protest to the Diet of Worms - "Here I stand, I can do no other" ~ could even be taken as the motto of dissenters and freethinkers everywhere. But the Reformation itself and the Counter-Reformation of the Catholic Church were destructive forces, which resulted in a century of religious wars in Europe. Both Puritanism and Catholicism are essentially anti freethought and anti-humanist.

Stage 3: The 18th Century Enlightenment

The third stage in the historical development of Humanism was the 18th century Enlightenment. It was the age of anti-clericalism and the age of reason. Voltaire, Diderot, Rousseau, D'Holbach, Paine and Hume stood foursquare for human liberation from all tyrannies, not least the tyranny of established religion. "What folly", declared Diderot, "to claim that the authority of tradition is higher than that of reason".

The French philosophes opposed intolerance, superstition and mysticism and believed that the world could be made a better and happier place with a more humane philosophy. Both Voltaire (1694 - 1778) and Diderot (1713 - 1784) were deists rather than atheists, but they were relentless in their attack on the organised churches and in their support for freedom of thought. "Scepticism is the first step towards truth", wrote Diderot in his *Pensées Philosophiques*.

Voltaire, the assumed name of François-Marie Arouet, spent much of his life in flight or exile or under fear of imprisonment for his writings. He believed that the Christian God of fear and punishment was a travesty of the natural God of the universe. In his early poem *Epître à Uranie* he wrote: "A God has no need of our assiduous attentions; if he can be offended, it is only by injustice; he judges by our virtues, and not by our sacrifices". His later work *Dictionnaire Philosophique* (Philosophical Dictionary, Penguin Classics, £7.99) was condemned by the government and church as an 'alphabetical abomination'. The procureur of Geneva described it as a 'deplorable monument of the extent to which intelligence and erudition can be abused'. He objected that Voltaire quoted from the Bible passages which 'taken literally would be unworthy of Divine Majesty'.

The first avowedly atheist writer was probably D'Holbach (1723 - 1789), a close friend of Diderot. It was his mother-in-law's chateau which became an open house for the philosophes. In *Christianity Unveiled* D'Holbach wrote: "Many men without morals have attacked religion because it was contrary to their inclinations. Many wise men have despised it because it seemed to them ridiculous. Many persons have regarded it with indifference, because they have never felt its true disadvantages.

But it is as a citizen that I attack it, because it seems to me harmful to the happiness of the state, hostile to the march of the mind of man, and contrary to sound morality".

In this work D'Holbach depicted Christianity as a combination of Judaism and Eastern mythologies which dominated by playing upon the fears and passions of humanity and by blinding reason with a series of fantastic dogmas and rites. This mixture produced conflict within states and wars between nations. He believed that freedom of thought would cause superstition to 'fall away by itself'. He wrote: "Tolerance and freedom of thought are the veritable antidotes to religious fanaticism".

In another work, *System of Nature*, D'Holbach stressed the materialist basis of all life. He presented a monist vision of the oneness of the universe, with man as a part of the entirety of nature. He thought that the idea of a metaphysical component of the universe was mere prejudice and error fostered by the clergy. In an abbreviated version, called *Good Sense*, he wrote: "Religion has ever filled the mind of man with darkness, and kept him in ignorance of his real duties and true interest. It is only by dispelling the clouds and phantoms of religion, that we shall discover truth, reason and morality. Religion diverts us from the causes of evils, and from the remedies which nature prescribes; far from curing, it only aggravates, multiplies and perpetuates them".

"The world is my country, all mankind are my brethren, and to do good is my religion" - Thomas Paine

Thomas Paine (1737 - 1809) was another freethinker of this period. Although a deist, he strongly attacked the Bible because he thought it was too violent and ridiculous to be the word of God and the Christian story made no sense of the universe. In *The Age of Reason* he depicted the Bible as a potpourri of muddled history, poetry and violence. He attacked Christianity, especially the Resurrection, and speculated that if there were men in other worlds God would be busy sending his Son all over the universe to die in atonement. "The Bible", he concluded, "is a book of lies, wickedness and blasphemy; for what can be a greater blasphemy than to ascribe the wickedness of man to the orders of the Almighty". Again: "The most detestable wickedness, the most horrid cruelties, and the greatest miseries that have afflicted the human race, have had their origin in this thing called revelation, or revealed religion".

Stage 4: 19th century – present

Since the 19th century, many of the most important thinkers in philosophy, politics and ethics have been essentially Humanists. In

England Jeremy Bentham (1748 - 1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806 - 73) were key figures. Bentham campaigned for democracy and equality and the utilitarian principle of 'the greatest happiness of the greatest number'. He did not base his ethics on a god-given code but argued that human beings must work out their own morality. In *Analysis of Natural Religion on the Temporal Happiness of Mankind* (1822) he attacked what he called 'Jug' (juggernaut), his private nickname for religion, claiming that it was irrational and so damaging that

it created the 'greatest unhappiness for the greatest number'. Even if God did exist, religion would be 'impotent for the purpose of resisting any temptation, and efficient only in the production of needless and unprofitable misery'.

Like the German philosopher Feuerbach, Karl Marx (1818-83) believed that it was essential to reject God. "The criticism of religion is the foundation of all criticism", he wrote. Like Feuerbach, Marx also regarded it as a projection of man: it is "the self-consciousness and self-esteem of man who has either not yet found himself or has already lost himself again". Marx, however, went further than Feuerbach in claiming that what produces this projection is an unjust 'inhuman society. It is 'the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world', as well as 'the opium of the people'. It was not only the result of inhuman social conditions; it was also powerless against them. As a protest it was totally ineffectual because in diverting attention from the need to change the real world it merely acts as a consolation which serves the interests of those who wield power over others. For Marx, therefore, atheism leads to socialism: "To abolish religion as the illusory happiness of the people is to demand their real happiness"; and again: "The criticism of religion ends with the teaching that man is the highest being for man, hence with the categorical imperative to overthrow all relations in which man is a debased, enslaved, forsaken, despised being".

The attack on God in the mid-19th century was not confined to radicals and socialists. The argument from design was effectively destroyed by the theory of evolution by natural selection, espoused by Charles Darwin (1809 ~ 82), in his 1859 landmark work *On the Origin of Species*. Darwin is central in the development of Humanism because he represents that point in time when the human race first became aware of its place in the evolutionary process. The implication of Darwinism, as Dawkins puts it, is that "slow, gradual, cumulative, natural selection is the ultimate explanation of existence".

Darwin's ideas greatly influenced Sigmund Freud (1856 - 1939), who declared a year before he died: "Neither in my private life nor in my writings have I ever made a secret of being an out-and out unbeliever". In *Totem and Taboo* (1912) and *The Future of an Illusion* (1927) Freud gave an explanation of religion in terms of evolutionary psychology. It was, he wrote, "a universal obsessional neurosis", an infantile illusion in which God is nothing but an exalted, jealous father. Just as the child fears the power of its parents but also trusts them for protection, so adults make gods in their father's image.

The modern history of freethought in Britain probably dates from the 1860s. In 1860 the word 'humanist' was used in print in the modern sense for the first time. In 1866 the National Secular Society was founded, and in 1869 the South Place Ethical Society, at first a radical unitarian movement, became Humanist after its minister Moncure Conway told the group that he could no longer pray because he no longer believed in God. It was also in 1869 that Thomas Huxley (1826 - 95) coined the term 'agnostic'. In his collected essays he explained: "As the chief thing I was sure of was that I did not know a great many things that the -ists and the -ites about me professed to be familiar with, I called myself an agnostic".

Some Humanists still call themselves agnostic in preference to atheist, though there is not much practical difference between saying that knowledge about any gods is impossible (agnosticism) and saying that we simply do not have such knowledge and will therefore not assume that gods exist (atheism). This was the distinction made by G.W. Foote, the founder of The Freethinker magazine, which first appeared in 1881.

Humanism in both Britain and Europe suffered setbacks between the Two World Wars. In Russia the socialist ideal was perverted into a ruthless totalitarianism, while fascism ruled in many other European countries. Both movements were essentially anti-humanist. But the situation changed again after 1945. Humanism quickly acquired a major status in some European countries, such as Holland and Norway. There are today no fewer than 14 different Dutch Humanist organisations. In 1952 the International Humanist and Ethical Union was founded. It now has a membership of more than 4 million Humanists worldwide. In 1963 the British Humanist Association was founded, followed in 1964 by the Belfast Humanist Group, now the Humanist Association of Northern Ireland, which is rapidly expanding throughout the province.

Bertrand Russell (1871-1970) was one of many famous modern Humanists. In his nineties he informed the American Humanist Association: "My views on religion remain those which I acquired at the age of sixteen. I consider all forms of religion not only false but harmful". The Humanist movement today includes many renowned figures in both the arts and sciences, such as Sir Hermann Bondi, Noam Chomsky, Richard Dawkins, Michael Foot, Eric Hobsbawm, Ted Honderich, Sir Fred Hoyle, Lord Jenkins, Ludovic Kennedy, Richard Leakey, George Melly, Brian Moore, Dr Conor Cruise O'Brien and Arnold Wesker. Humanism is clearly an idea whose time has come.

3. John Toland, Father of Irish Secular Philosophy

It was not until the end of the 17th century that Ireland acquired its first secular thinker. John Toland (1670-1722), who has been called the ‘founding father of modern Irish philosophy’, made a huge contribution to the development of Freethought in Ireland and was a prolific author and polemicist, but his writings have been sadly neglected in his own country and in Britain. Despite his importance as an independent thinker, his work has been largely published in France, Holland and Germany, leaving him almost unknown in the English-speaking world.

He was born in the peninsula of Inishowen, Co Donegal, and brought up in the Catholic faith. His exact birthplace was probably the townland of Ardagh in the parish of Clonmany. Nothing is known of his parents,

though some sources suggest that he was the bastard son of an Irish priest and a prostitute (see Philip McGuinness etc, *Christianity Not Mysterious*, Lilliput Press, 1997, p262). His addiction to literature and learning led him to be known in his youth in Donegal as 'Eoghain na Leabhar' (Eoin of the Books, Eoin being an alternative to Sean or John). He later jokingly claimed that his baptismal name was ‘Janus Junius Eoganesius’. Janus was the two-faced Roman God, Junius Brutus was the founder of the Roman Republic, and Eoganesius refers to his birth area of Inishowen (‘Inis Eoghain’ in Irish). Next to this pseudonym, near his death in 1722, he signed the word ‘cosmopoli’, a citizen of the world. This, along with his use of Latin, his allusion to ancient Rome, his reference to his Irish roots, and his own secular evolution indicate a man who ultimately transcended all borders and all faiths.

He enrolled as a scholarship student at the Protestant school in Redcastle where, at the age of 15 or 16, he threw off Catholicism, having been “educated, from my cradle, in the grossest superstition and idolatry”, as he wrote in the Preface to *Christianity Not Mysterious* (1696). Catholicism he described as “the insupportable yoke of the most pompous and tyrannical policy that ever enslav’d mankind under the name or shew of religion” (his own *Apology for Mr Toland*, 1697). In 1686 he went to study divinity at Glasgow University, where he aligned himself with the Presbyterians and gained notoriety as an anti-papal firebrand. From Glasgow he went to the University of Edinburgh where he obtained an MA in theology in 1690. His knowledge of classical languages by this time was extensive and he spoke most European languages fluently.

Toland then moved to London seeking sponsorship and became friendly with a group of dissenters including Dr Daniel Williams, a leading London nonconformist, through whom he made contact with the Huguenot savant Jean Le Clerc, who had taken refuge in Holland. Toland sent him a copy of *Gospel Truth Stated and Vindicated* by Williams with a covering letter explaining that a controversy had developed over the book. On Toland’s suggestion, Le Clerc published an extract, along with his letter, in *Bibliothèque Universelle* of which he was editor. Williams and his friends were so impressed with Toland's zeal that they collected money in 1692 to send him to study at Leiden. His exposure to the freethinking, tolerant atmosphere of Holland and his encounters with heretical organisations there caused him to reject all forms of 'spiritual authority' from then on.

In 1693 Toland returned to England and spent some time at Oxford, using its library facilities ostensibly to write an Irish dictionary. In Oxford he soon became known as “a man of fine parts, great learning, and little religion”, as one anonymous correspondent put it. He then went back to London where he

became involved with John Locke, who published his *Reasonableness of Christianity* in 1695. It is still not certain whether Locke's book was written in reply to Toland's *Christianity not Mysterious* (which Locke may have seen in manuscript) or whether Toland was responding to Locke's work. Toland's book, though dated 1696, came out around Christmas 1695, so which was written first is not clear. But one thing is not in doubt: Toland's work caused greater hostility than Locke's, even though it embraced the same concept: Christianity is a rational and comprehensible creed. There was, however, one crucial difference in that Locke, wanting to have his cake and eat it, also believed in revelation, whereas Toland rejected it altogether, except purely as a 'means of information'. Locke thought that revelation is a kind of expanded or heightened reason which enables us to grasp the mysteries of Christianity, whereas Toland more radically believed that there were no Christian mysteries.

Toland argued that the churches do not allow people to think for themselves, claiming that faith is so complex that only authorised persons may expound it. He defined as 'mysterious' any doctrine that is beyond human comprehension and asked: why would God, who had given us the power of reason, expect anyone to believe a doctrine that we could not understand? Thus his aim in *Christianity not Mysterious* was stated in the subtitle: "A Treatise Shewing that there is Nothing in the Gospel Contrary to Reason, nor Above It". The so-called 'mysteries', enhanced by the trappings of images, garments, altars, rites and rituals, were therefore deliberate mystifications imposed upon Christianity by competing sects and churches after its inception. As clerics sought to enhance their own power and the Christian Church tried to win over converts, it copied pagan religious mysteries and ceremonies, yet "there is nothing so naturally opposite as ceremony and Christianity".

The first edition of *Christianity Not Mysterious* had been published anonymously. Toland then brought out a second, signed, edition and in the spring of 1697 went to Dublin where perhaps he hoped that publicity from the book might help him obtain patronage or employment. But he soon found that the book had infuriated the Church of Ireland hierarchy. It was declared heretical by the Grand Jury in the Court of the King's Bench in Dublin at the instigation of Peter Browne, then a fellow of Trinity College, Dublin, and later Bishop of Cork. In August it was brought before a committee of religion in the Parliament, which ordered it to be publicly burned by the common hangman and the author to be taken into custody (some members of the Irish House of Commons demanded that he should be burned with it). The sentence on the book was carried out on 11th September when it was burnt in front of the Parliament House gate in the open street, although Toland himself evaded arrest by fleeing to England. The book and the events surrounding it distinguish him as Ireland's first dissident writer whose criticism of the established religious perception of man, creation and the universe brought him into conflict with both Church and State.

Toland's *Christianity Not Mysterious* was a late 17th century victim of a long tradition of censorship by the Christian churches of any writing that challenged orthodoxy, stretching back to works such as Martin Luther's 95 Theses, banned in 1521, all of Giordano Bruno's works, banned in 1603, and Galileo's *Dialogues*, banned in 1632. Nor was it only the Catholic Church that persecuted people for their beliefs: in 1697, the same year as the Irish controversy over Toland's book, the last person hanged for blasphemy in Britain was Thomas Aitkenhead, a University of Edinburgh student, with the Church of Scotland urging 'vigorous execution' to curb 'the abounding of impiety and profanity in this land'. And of course it was the Church of Ireland that was behind the banning of Toland's book in his own country.

So, what was all the fuss about? Part of it was that he had written an anticlerical polemic against all forms of priestcraft. William Molyneux, whose own work advocating legislative independence for the Irish Parliament was ceremonially burned at Tyburn by the public hangman a year later and who had told Locke that Toland was ‘a candid free-thinker, and a good scholar’, later wrote that the clergy were “alarmed to a mighty degree against him” and that “the poor man, by his impudent conduct, has raised against himself so universal a commotion that it was dangerous to be known to have spoken with him even once”. Toland made no secret of his antipathy towards ‘the idolatry and tyranny of the Romish clergy’, but he didn’t stop there: a wise and good man, he wrote, “knows no difference between Popish infallibility, and being oblig’d blindly to acquiesce in the decisions of fallible Protestants”. He referred to the Protestant Parliament which banned the book as ‘Popish Inquisitors’ and later wrote that “there may very well be such a thing as Protestant popery” (A Memorial for the Earl of Oxford, 1711). To claim that the Irish ruling class were as ‘popish’ as Catholics was to undermine the entire basis of Protestant rule in Ireland.

Controversy also arose from what Toland omitted as much as what he said. He wrote that *Christianity Not Mysterious* was the first in a series of three books he intended to write, and in the second he would specify which Christian doctrines should not be accepted because they contradicted human reason. But of course this only encouraged speculation. Was he denying all miracles? Was he attacking the whole basis of Christianity? Was the whole idea of the divine nature of Jesus being dismissed as just an invented ‘mystery’? Swift, in his *Argument Against Abolishing Christianity* (1708) denounced Toland as “the great Oracle of the Anti-Christians”. Was Toland indeed out to destroy religion? The answers are not clear, but Toland gave the distinct impression that he was sceptical of the entire Christian myth, although he respected Jesus as a person, and his subsequent writings bear this

out. Whatever the truth, the fact remains that if he was trying to undermine traditional Christianity, it was only because he was raising a fundamental question about its rationality.

Back in England after fleeing Ireland, Toland had busied himself in both theological and political controversy. As far as he was concerned, bishops and kings were as bad as each other. In 1700 he published James Harrington's *Oceana*, which he regarded as a republican textbook. In the Introduction he recommended the careful perusal of Greek and Roman historians as a way of rediscovering republican theory, and he wrote: "I have always been, now am, and ever shall be persuaded that all sorts of magistrates are made for and by the people, and not the people for or by the magistrates ... and consequently that it is lawful to resist and punish tyrants of all sorts ... I am therefore avowedly a Commonwealth's man".

In 1701 he went to Hanover as part of an official delegation to present the Act of Settlement which decreed that Anne, Mary's sister and sister-in-law of William, would succeed William to the throne. William and the Parliament accepted this settlement because it prevented the Stuart princes from demanding the Crown at a future date, while Toland and his supporters were satisfied because it placed most of the real power under the control of Parliament. Another objective of the delegation was to explain the Act to the Electress Sophia of Hanover, who was to succeed Anne (she died months before she would have become Queen), and during his stay Toland developed a friendship with her and her daughter Serena, the Queen of Prussia, and discussed philosophy with Gottfried Leibniz. On his return the following year he recorded his impressions of the courts of Prussia and Hanover and noted that in both there was an absence of sectarian divisiveness and "the clergy seldom appear at court in either Hanover or Berlin".

As a result of his relationship with Sophia and her daughter, he produced a book entitled *Letters to Serena* in 1704, which indicates that by this time he had moved on from the deism of *Christianity Not Mysterious*. In the first three letters he examined superstition, prejudice and notions of an ‘immortal soul’, and sought to demonstrate that the supernatural is shown to be mere human invention. In the final two letters he addressed the ideas of the philosopher Baruch Spinoza, who argued that God and Nature are two names for the same reality. Although Toland criticised Spinoza, it is clear that he too, like the Dutchman, now espoused pantheism, a term first used in Latin as ‘pantheismus’ by the mathematician Joseph Raphson in his work *De Spatio Reali seu Ente Infinito*, published in 1697. Toland had also found and translated Giordano Bruno’s *Lo Spaccio de la Bestia Trifontane*, known in English as ‘*The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast*’.

In his works Bruno, the first modern pantheist, argued that God is in all things, that the sun is one of an infinite number of stars, and also that life may exist elsewhere in the universe. Bruno’s ideas impressed Toland, but he was not so taken by Spinoza. His preference for Bruno relates to a distinction made by Raphson between atheistic ‘panhylists’ (from the Greek words *pan*, meaning ‘all’, and *hyle*, meaning ‘matter’), who believe everything is matter, and ‘pantheists’ who believe in “a certain universal substance, material as well as intelligent, that fashions all things that exist out of its own essence”. We might say that, in terms of this distinction, Toland believed Spinoza was

closer to atheism than pantheism, even though he effectively labels him a pantheist. His beef with Spinoza was over the nature of matter. For Toland, it was not ‘an inactive dead lump in absolute repose’ but instead is active or dynamic. Following the Roman poet and philosopher Lucretius, he suggested that all parts of the universe are in a constant motion, one thing living by the destruction or decay of another. Of course, if motion is essential to

matter, then there seems to be no need of a presiding intelligence or First Cause. But this was not Toland's conclusion because he maintained that motion by itself could not create the order and variety that exists in the world, "nor cause the organization of a flower or a fly". This appears to be an acceptance of a god through the argument from design.

Yet a year later in 1705 Toland produced *Socinianism Truly Stated*, which included on the title page the words 'recommended by a pantheist', and in the work he refers to pantheists, "of which number I profess myself to be one". This was the first use of the word in English, and Toland later explained in a letter to Leibniz (1710) that a pantheist was someone who believed "in no other eternal being but the universe". Later again, in *Pantheisticon* (1720), originally published privately in Latin and only translated into English in 1751, he asserted: "The universe is infinite, with infinite stars and inhabited worlds: in an infinite space there can be no up or down, no centre or extremities... There is an infinite number of other worlds similar to the earth we inhabit, circling around their suns (which we call the fixed stars)... The Universe (of which the world we know is only a very small part), is infinite in extent as well as in potential. By the continuity of all and by the contiguity of its parts it is one. In its totality it is immobile, having no space outside of itself, but in its parts it is mobile by infinite intervals. The universe is a unity: Every material thing is in all things... All things come from all, and all is in all things. The universe is divine: The power and energy of all, which has created all and which governs all, having always the best goal as it aim, is God, whom we call the mind, if you please, and soul of the universe". The title page of the work named 'Cosmopolis' as the place of publication, and this is explained later when he told the story that, when asked by an inn-keeper what country he came from, he had replied: "the sun is my father, the earth my mother, the world's my country, and all men are my relations".

This early fusion of the Gaia hypothesis with cosmopolitan humanism raises the question whether Toland was really an atheist in disguise. Of course, when accused of irreligion, Toland always denied the charge, but he often wrote about the need for dissimulation in dangerous times, and the fact that *Pantheisticon* was published anonymously and distributed privately supports the view that his public declarations of Christianity were insincere, or at best should be interpreted only in an ethical sense. The fact is that, as we have seen, in at least two (anonymous) writings he called himself a pantheist and expressed a pantheistic philosophy. Whether this, in turn, is a disguise for atheism is a tricky question because some have argued that pantheism IS atheism. Schopenhauer thought it was a euphemism for atheism, and in *The God Delusion* Richard Dawkins writes that “pantheism is sexed-up atheism”. On the other hand, others suggest that pantheism is actually a kind of theism because it claims that the universe is imbued with some of the characteristics normally ascribed to a God and therefore one’s attitude to it is akin to a religious experience. The universe is in a real sense holy or sacred and we should regard it with awe, or even fear. It is unlikely that Toland would have been afraid of the universe and there was nothing supernatural about his God-universe identity. Therefore sexed-up atheism seems a fair description of his philosophical position.

Toland died in 1722 in a carpenter’s house in Putney where he had lodged for the last few years, having lost what little property he had in the financial collapse of the South Sea Company in 1720. One report said that “he died... as he had lived, in great poverty, in the midst of his books, with his pen in his hand”. Just before his death, he composed his own epitaph: "He was an assertor of liberty, a lover of all sorts of learning ... but no man’s follower or dependent. Nor could frowns or fortune bend him to decline from the ways he had chosen”. His writings have been largely suppressed or ignored in his own country for centuries and, whenever mentioned, have often been distorted in order to

discredit him. The time is long overdue to recognise him as one of Ireland's greatest thinkers.

4. The Humanism of Francis Hutcheson

Francis Hutcheson (1694-1746) was born in the manse at Drumalig, near Saintfield, Co. Down, where his grandfather Alexander, the local Presbyterian minister since 1658, had come over from Ayrshire at the age of 25 to tender to the spiritual needs of Scottish settlers. Francis's Irish father John Hutcheson was also a minister, first in Downpatrick and later in Armagh. His mother, the first of John's three wives, was the daughter of Lieutenant-Colonel James Trail of Killyleagh. Francis lived at Ballyrea, near Armagh, until he was eight, when he went to stay with his grandfather. He attended a school run by John Hamilton in a disused meeting house near Saintfield, and under his tutelage and that of his grandfather he gained the basis of his classical education. At the age of 13 he was sent to Killyleagh Philosophy School, a dissenting academy founded by James McAlpine in the town in about 1696, where he was taught logic, theology and moral philosophy up to university standard.

Dissenters, like Catholics, were prohibited from gaining degrees at Oxford, Cambridge or Trinity College, Dublin, and some of them completed their education at Scottish universities. In 1710 Hutcheson went to the University of Glasgow to study philosophy, classics and theology. After taking his MA degree in 1712, he enrolled in the theology department and began six years of training to become a minister. His teachers at Glasgow included John Simson, Professor of Divinity, and Gershom Carmichael, Professor of Moral Philosophy, both of whom challenged the harsh dogma of orthodox Calvinism, viewing God and humanity in more benevolent terms (Simson was later accused of heresy and prohibited from further teaching in 1729). They clearly influenced

Hutcheson in defying the old-time Presbyterianism of his father and grandfather.

He returned to Ulster in 1718 to his father's residence in Ballyrea, and in 1719 entered the ministry of the local Presbyterian church as a probationer. He was, however, considered too liberal for some of the elders. After he had stood in for his father one Sunday, one of them told Hutcheson Senior: "Your silly loon, Frank, has fashed a' the congregation wi' his idle cackle; for he has been babbling this oor about a gude and benevolent God, and that the souls o' the heathens themsels will gang to heeven if they follow the licht o' their ain consciences. Not a word does the daft boy ken, speer, nor say about the gude auld comfortable doctrines o' election, reprobation, original sin, and faith. Hoot, man, awa' wi' sic a fellow" (quoted in W.R. Scott: *Francis Hutcheson*, Cambridge, 1900, pp20-21).

Although he was called as minister to a church in Magherally near Banbridge, probably in 1720, he declined and – perhaps seeking a more congenial and less confrontational atmosphere – instead took up the invitation of a group of Dublin Presbyterians to establish a dissenting academy for nonconformist students in the city similar to the one he had attended in Killyleagh. So, at the age of twenty six, he moved to Dublin where he stayed for the next ten years, teaching and writing. One of his first assistants at the academy, situated in Drumcondra Lane (now Dorset Street), was Thomas Drennan, father of the United Irishman William Drennan, whose writings reflected many of Hutcheson's ideas. The school itself was a great success and Hutcheson's abilities soon came to the attention of prominent figures in Dublin society.

Presbyterians and Anglicans in the city often mixed together in a fair degree of mutual tolerance, partly as a common front against the large Catholic majority and partly because of a shared intellectual enthusiasm for the new ideas emanating from England and Europe. Two prosecutions against Hutcheson for operating a

school without an episcopal licence came to nothing because he had made friendships with several notable members of the established church including William King, Lord Archbishop of Dublin, who was unwilling to take action against him. Hutcheson made such an impression generally that John Carteret, lord lieutenant of Ireland, tried to persuade him to accept a living in the established Church, but he declined the offer, making it clear that the form of church government was not ‘determined in the Gospels’.

The most significant influence on him in Dublin was the Irish peer Robert Molesworth, who established what was known as the Molesworth Circle, a group of eminent scientists, philosophers and thinkers including Hutcheson who met at his estate in Brackenstown. Molesworth had been a close friend of the third Earl of Shaftesbury (died 1713), and it was probably through him that Hutcheson first became acquainted with Shaftesbury’s works. Like Molesworth, Shaftesbury was a Whig who strongly believed in the principles of the 1688 Revolution and in the idea of political liberty. He also rejected Hobbes’s egoistic philosophy and maintained that human nature is basically good. Many aspects of his worldview appealed strongly to Hutcheson, and when in 1725 the latter published his first book – *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* – he dedicated it to him, “the teacher he never met” (Arthur Herman: *The Scottish Enlightenment*, Harper Perennial, 2006, p75). Hutcheson followed it up in 1728 with his second substantial work *An Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions and Affections*.

The impact of these works was such that when his old teacher at Glasgow, Gershom Carmichael, died in 1729 he was offered, and accepted, the post of Professor of Moral Philosophy, a position he took up the following year and which he held until his death in 1746. As well as his writings, his work at the university established him as ‘the father of the Scottish Enlightenment’. He

broke with tradition in delivering his lectures in English rather than Latin, and indeed his classes were so popular and stimulating that they were regularly oversubscribed. One of his students said that “he displayed a fervent and persuasive eloquence which was irresistible”. His most famous student, Adam Smith, described him as “the never to be forgotten Dr Hutcheson” and wrote that “he was undoubtedly and beyond all comparison the most acute, the most distinct and the most philosophical of all my teachers”. Another student, Alexander Carlyle, who himself became a key figure in the Scottish Enlightenment, said that “he never taught any heresy, yet he opened and enlarged the minds of the students, which gave them a turn for free enquiry, the result of which was candour and liberality of sentiment”.

Francis Hutcheson married his cousin Mary Wilson, of Tully, Co. Longford, in 1725 and by this marriage he acquired extensive property in Ireland. They had seven children, of whom only one survived. In June 1746 Francis returned to Dublin on a visit but became ill of a fever and died on 8th August, the day of his 52nd birthday. He was buried in a tomb in the churchyard of St Mary’s Church, Dublin. When the graveyard became a public park in what is now Wolfe Tone Street, any remains were reinterred elsewhere, but it is not known what happened to Hutcheson’s tomb. In 2012 a plaque was erected in his honour on the stair tower of The Church on nearby Mary Street (a religious building now converted into a bar and restaurant). After his death, his *Short Introduction to Moral philosophy*, written in Latin and first published in 1742, was translated into English (1747), and in 1755 his son, also called Francis, published *A System of Moral Philosophy* which, like the *Introduction*, was written by Hutcheson specifically for university students.

Although Hutcheson is not generally regarded as a great writer or a first rank thinker, he nevertheless exerted enormous influence on subsequent moral and political ideas, not only in Britain and

Ireland but also in Europe and colonial America. In many respects, he was very 'modern' in his outlook and pioneered progressive values. He certainly wanted to give Presbyterianism a human face and this inevitably annoyed the Kirk establishment. In 1738 he appeared before the Glasgow Presbytery on a charge of heresy, on the grounds that he was teaching 'two false and dangerous doctrines', first that the standard of moral goodness was the promotion of the happiness of others and, second, that "we have a knowledge of good and evil prior in the order of knowledge to any notion of the will or law of God". Hutcheson was acquitted partly because his students stated that they found nothing objectionable in his teachings. In a letter to Thomas Drennan on 5th March 1739, he dismissed the accusation as 'some whimsical buffoonery about my heresy'. A few years later he wrote to Drennan: "I am already called New Light Here. I don't value it for myself, but I see it hurts some ministers who are most intimate with me" (31st May 1742). Nevertheless, his aim, as he states a little later, is nothing less than to "put a new face upon theology in Scotland".

Hutcheson's attempt to ground ethics in humanity is made clear at the very beginning of the *System of Moral Philosophy*. Its aim, he writes, is "to direct men to that course of action which tends most effectually to promote their greatest happiness and perfection; as far as it can be done by observations and conclusions discoverable from the constitution of nature, without any aids of supernatural revelation". To suggest that the study of morality is the study of human nature is to place it on secular grounds independent of theology. Indeed Hutcheson, following Shaftesbury before him, argues that non-Christians and even atheists have equal access with Christians to moral knowledge and virtuous actions. Hence the charge of heresy in 1738. As he says in the *Inquiry*, "many people have high notions of honour, faith, generosity, justice, while having almost no opinions about the Deity, and no thoughts of future rewards; and abhor any thing that is treacherous, cruel, or unjust, without any regard to future punishments".

The view of mainstream Presbyterianism, following John Calvin and John Knox, was that humans were depraved and corrupt from birth, warped by the effects of original sin. This conclusion was supported by the ethical theories of later writers such as Thomas Hobbes and Bernard Mandeville, who argued that humans were naturally selfish and aggressive and that, in the words of Hobbes, the general condition of mankind is “a perpetual and restless desire of power after power, that ceaseth only in death”. All four men thought that these depraved and egotistical impulses had to be severely restricted by a controlling authority – in the view of Calvin and Knox by church leaders trained and dedicated to following God’s word, and in the view of Hobbes and Mandeville by a powerful state made up of skilful politicians. In neither scenario was there any role for the concept of personal freedom.

Hutcheson rejected the notion of natural human depravity in favour of a more complex nature which is capable of altruistic as well as egoistic behaviour. He maintained that, as well as the five external senses, we have internal senses, different in quality but not in kind from seeing and smelling, that enable us to discern non-physical properties and relationships. They include a sense of beauty, a sense of honour, a public sense, and even a sense of the ridiculous. Most important of all and governing some of the others is the moral sense, a term he adopted from Shaftesbury, which is implanted in us by God, though we do not have to be religious to be motivated by it. This sense is a faculty which approves of virtue for its own sake and begins with a feeling of pleasure, resulting from our natural instinct of benevolence, defined as the disinterested “desire of the happiness of another”. The feeling is spontaneous and passive and in no way based on calculation of advantage or interest to ourselves (note that Hutcheson here relates pleasure to the natural love of others, rather than to a duty imposed by God or the state). Moreover, the object of the moral sense is not so much actions as the character reflected in them: “the love, humanity, gratitude, compassion, a study of the good of

others and a deep delight in their happiness” (*Inquiry*, Section 1, pp110-111). Indeed, the ultimate criterion of virtue is that “that action is best, which accomplishes the greatest happiness for the greatest numbers; and that worst, which, in like manner, occasions misery” (op. cit., Section 3, p164).

Here, then, was Hutcheson coining the phrase that summed up the greatest happiness principle which Jeremy Bentham proposed as central to utilitarianism. According to Hutcheson, when we are faced with having to choose between alternative courses of action, we have to ‘compute’ which action will lead to the highest virtue which “is in proportion to the number of persons to whom the happiness shall extend”. He thus shares with later utilitarians the belief that whether actions are right or wrong depends on their consequences. But, in positing the existence of a moral sense, he also suggests the reason we seek the happiness of others is that it accords with our benevolent instinct. This renders his philosophy a mixture of hedonism, utilitarianism and emotional intuitionism. He was also what was called a ‘sentimentalist’, that is, one who believes that morality is a matter of feeling rather than philosophical knowledge.

It is easy to accuse Hutcheson of naivety. If human beings are naturally benevolent, why is goodness in such short supply and instead why is there so much hatred and cruelty in the world? Do some people not actually take pleasure in the pain or misery of others? Hutcheson rejects the idea that human beings are capable of what he calls ‘malicious disinterested hatred’, or what Coleridge, writing about Iago, described as ‘motiveless malignity’, and suggests that if people take pleasure in the pain or misery of others, it is because we believe that they have done evil and deserve to have evil done to them in just retribution. Much evil he regards as a form of misguided self-love; for example, many bad actions result from merely satisfying sensual appetites or from a distorted sense of justice or honour.

We may feel that Hutcheson pushes his case too far in the opposite direction to the Calvinist- Hobbesian view, yet an antidote was clearly needed to their bleak diagnosis of human nature. And it was indeed his positive and optimistic vision that gained the ascendancy, not only in philosophy but also with regard to social and political rights. Even before Kant, it was he who made the connection: as he writes, “from this (moral) sense too we derive our ideas of rights ” (*Inquiry*, Sect. 7, p256). Like Kant, he saw that ought implies can. If people are morally obliged to perform a certain action, then they must logically be able to perform it, and there is no point in calling on them to do something if it is not within their power. Freedom is a prerequisite of moral duty, because rights are legal or moral entitlements which each individual needs to do what he thinks is right. In short, we should all be free to choose for ourselves rather than having morality imposed on us, and the benevolent principle will, according to Hutcheson, ensure that what is good for the individual cannot but be good for all. Liberty would lead not to anarchy, as Hobbes suggested, but to general happiness.

Hutcheson’s political philosophy was taken very seriously in the American colonies and inspired some of the Founding Fathers. His books were studied as required or recommended course readings in all the main colonial educational establishments from the 1730s onwards. The three men most closely associated with the American Declaration of Independence – Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin and John Adams – all displayed a knowledge of the Ulsterman’s writings. In his 1749 pamphlet on *Proposals Relating to the Education of Youth* in Pennsylvania, Benjamin Franklin quotes approvingly from ‘the ingenious Mr Hutcheson’. Copies of several of Hutcheson’s books were found in the library of John Adams, and his Diary entry for 16th January 1756 tells us that he is: “Reading Hutcheson’s *Introduction to Moral Philosophy*”. In his *Thoughts on Government*, written in 1776 on the eve of the *Declaration of Independence* he states, echoing

Hutcheson, that the purpose of government was ‘the greatest quantity of human happiness’.

In *Inventing America* (1978) Garry Wills challenges the conventional view that Thomas Jefferson, who drew up the draft of the *Declaration*, relied heavily on John Locke’s *Second Treatise of Government*, and instead argues that he took his ideas from the Scottish Enlightenment and, above all, from Hutcheson. The *Declaration* refers to all men being endowed with certain ‘unalienable rights’, but Wills points out that Locke had no theory of inalienability. This concept originates in Hutcheson who, in both the *Inquiry* and the *System*, distinguishes between alienable and unalienable rights. An unalienable or inalienable right is one that cannot be bought, sold or transferred from one person to another. Hutcheson also refers to the right to life and to natural liberty, “of which liberty of conscience is not only an essential but an unalienable branch”, while Locke refers to ‘natural rights’ and states that three of the most fundamental are ‘life, liberty and estate’. However, whether Jefferson took the term ‘unalienable rights’ directly from Hutcheson is another matter, for he never cites him in any of his writings, though he does refer to Locke on several occasions. Moreover, the distinction between the two kinds of rights is also made in *The Principles of Natural and Politic Law*, first published in 1747. Its author was Jean-Jacques Burlamaqui, the Swiss theorist who was however a disciple of Hutcheson and presumably took it from his *Inquiry*.

In writing that “all men are created equal, Jefferson was undoing the ancient formula of Aristotle (who had written that “from the hour of their birth, some men are marked out for subjection, others for rule”). Locke also writes that “it is evident that all human beings... are equal amongst themselves” and also refers to “this equality of men by nature”; while Hutcheson writes that “in this respect all men are originally equal, that these natural rights equally belong to all... nature makes none masters, none

slaves” (Short Introduction). Hutcheson, on the other hand, interprets equality more comprehensively than Locke by condemning slavery. Indeed, he was the first modern writer to formulate ethical principles inimical to slavery as an institution, specifically repudiating Aristotle: “We must therefore conclude, that no endowments, natural or acquired, can give a perfect right to assume power over others, without their consent . . . This is intended against the doctrine of Aristotle, and some others of the ancients, ‘that some men are naturally slaves, of low genius but great bodily strength for labour’” (System). No men, he argues, were born ‘natural slaves’, because despite their difference from each other in terms of wisdom, virtue, beauty or strength, “the lowest of them, who have the use of reason, differ in this from the brutes, that by forethought and reflection they are capable of incomparably greater happiness or misery”. Of course, Jefferson included a denunciation of slavery and the slave trade in his draft of the *Declaration*, but the passage was excised by the Continental Congress (paradoxically Jefferson during his lifetime owned about 600 slaves).

The evidence suggests that Jefferson was probably aware of the ideas of both Hutcheson and Locke and incorporated elements from each into the Declaration. And indisputably Hutcheson’s ideas influenced other Founding Fathers, notably Franklin and Adams. What would have particularly attracted many of them was the fact that Hutcheson championed the right of the oppressed to overthrow an unjust sovereignty. As all civil power is constituted for the benefit of the public good and not for the good of the ruler, it follows that if the ruler acts against the interests of the public good, then the contract between the two is broken and the people have a right to change the government: “but as the end of civil power is acknowledged by all to be the safety and happiness of the whole body, any power not naturally conducive to this end is unjust; which the people, who rashly granted it under an error, may justly abolish again when they find it necessary to their safety

to do do” (*Short Introduction*). And again: “But when the common rights of the community are trampled upon, and what at first is attempted against one is made to be precedent against all the rest, then as the governor is plainly perfidious to his trust, he has forfeited all the power committed to him” (ibid). Hutcheson explicitly applied these principles to colonies. Colonial subjects also have a right to beneficial government. If they fail to receive such government, and are oppressed, they may justly overthrow their oppressor: “if the mother country attempts anything oppressive towards a colony, and the colony be able to subsist as a sovereign state by itself... the colony is not bound to remain subject any longer”. Indeed, he stresses the point: “the people’s right of resistance is unquestionable” (ibid).

It is clear from this survey that Hutcheson had a major impact on moral and political philosophy. And of course his ideas, which had been imported into pre-revolutionary America, were re-imported to his native Ireland in the insurrectionist ideology of the United Irishmen. In his book on *The Scottish Enlightenment*, Arthur Herman puts it strongly: “Francis Hutcheson had created a new political and social vision, one that went far beyond Locke or any comparable English thinker: the vision of a ‘free society’. He is Europe’s first liberal in the classic sense: a believer in maximising personal liberty in the social, economic and intellectual spheres, as well as the political. But the ultimate goal of this liberty was, we should remember, happiness – which Hutcheson always defined as resulting from helping others to be happy” (p80).

It is indeed a grand vision and, although Francis Hutcheson was a religious man, it is an essentially Humanist one. Life, liberty, equality, benevolence and the pursuit of happiness were his concerns, as they are of Humanists everywhere. Hutcheson was clearly well ahead of his time: he opposed slavery and the oppression of women and children. He championed freedom and

equality. And he promoted a secular morality which emphasised the positive values of benevolence, love and happiness.

Yet sadly, after a brief influence in the 1790s, he became a forgotten man in his own country just like John Toland. Both have been shunted into oblivion by the dominant conservative religious ideologies, whether Catholic or Protestant. For these two far-sighted Irishmen were too liberal, too freethinking, too radical, too individualistic for Ireland's reactionary and retarded tribes. A new Irish Enlightenment, based on the lost legacies of John Toland and Francis Hutcheson, is well overdue, and Humanists must strongly advance this project.

5. Humanism in Ireland

The development of Humanism in Europe is a splendid legacy and a magnificent dream. But where does Ireland stand amidst the splendour? After all, both parts of the island belong to the European Union, and the Irish are certainly European in origin. The first settlers came from Europe, as did the Celts and the later Gaelic tribe from Gaul. Yet when we begin to search for the influence of freethought and Humanism on Irish history and culture, we discover some serious gaps.

There was no Greek influence on Ireland. Its saints and scholars questioned nothing. Nor did Ireland experience a Renaissance. It produced no Leonardos and no Bacons. Nor did it have an equivalent of an Erasmus, a More or a Luther. The Reformation passed Ireland by, without so much as a whiff of critical inquiry. The pastoral, warlike, slave culture of the Gaels did produce literature and art, but it rarely challenged the society. And the Protestant settlers who arrived in the 17th century brought with them less a smattering of individual thought and more a pious and bigoted anti-Catholicism.

To be sure, there have been freethinkers. But the wave of revolutionary ideas that struck Irish shores briefly in the 1790s under the influence of Theobald Wolfe Tone and William Drennan was quickly smothered in the sectarian massacres at Scullabogue and Wexford Bridge. The United Irishmen proved to be a mere flicker of light in a deep, drab, steeped bog of bigotry. Since the 19th century a narrow nationalism has triumphed over Tone's and Davis's republican vision of uniting Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter'. It was a sacral nationalism which believed that God had naturally assigned to each nation its definite task on earth. It was a conception fully imbibed by Patrick Pearse who said that nationality was a 'spiritual thing' and that in a nation we see 'the image and likeness of God'.

Among Protestants, a puritanism achieved hegemony in the 19th century, especially after the 1859 Revival. It stamped its authority on Northern society through the Orange Order, an antiquated mixture of reactionary Christianity and militarism. with an endemic hatred of Catholicism. Orange jibes at the cultural repression of the Irish Republic were deeply tainted with irony. For the Orange State between 1922 and 1972 would have censored literature if it had had the power to do so; in the theatre and the cinema where it did have local control it showed itself every bit as circumscribed in its freedom as the Republic. Each tradition was, therefore, in many respects a mirror image of the other.

Why has Ireland so tragically ignored the critical, challenging legacy of Europe's greatest culture and instead adopted only its darker nationalist spirit? Why have we had no Renaissance or Reformation or ethos of internationalism? Why are we still so stuck in a primitive mystical bog? Why does no vision of a better society stir us? Why are we so content to wallow in our simple certainties?

There is one overriding answer to these questions. We have simply permitted the dead weight of tradition and authority to poison and devour us. Here, of course, there is not one but two traditions. Yet they are mirror images of each other: two hate inspiring, bigoted and crushing creeds which cannibalistically feed off each other. And most of us are happy to allow them to hold sway. True, we have had our dissenting writers and artists and thinkers. But whether it is James Joyce or Oscar Wilde, John Hewitt or Gerry Fitt, we have treated them with either philistine indifference or downright hostility. Most of our greatest minds have found no alternative to escape.

Behind all this neglect of Europe's questioning legacy lies the one power which has never been seriously challenged throughout our history. That is the power of organised religion. The Greeks challenged it the Renaissance minds challenged it, the Enlightenment thinkers challenged it, and Europe's modern secular age has largely made it an irrelevance.

But the power of the churches in Ireland remains, despite the recent scandals. And until and unless we stand up and openly challenge them and their role in Ireland, north and south, our whole society will stay in its stupor, the carbuncle on the nose of Europe, and our few dissenting voices will continue to cry in the wilderness; or leave us with our simple, traditional certainties the nice, friendly people with the nasty, bigoted minds.

The imperative, therefore, is NOT parity of esteem for both traditions because that is frankly a road to nowhere - each tradition is founded upon hatred of the other - but rather parity of disesteem in which we begin to subject our own traditions to severe critical scrutiny and seek a Third Way which is neither Orange nor Green. And that Third Way is Humanism. Today there are growing Humanist movements north and south of the border. Both the Humanist Association of Northern Ireland and the Humanist

Association of Ireland have memberships in three figures and their impact is beginning to be felt in both societies.

6. The Existence of a God

“Is man one of God's blunders? Or is God one of man's blunders?”
– Nietzsche

“Religion, n. A daughter of Hope and Fear, explaining to Ignorance the nature of the Unknowable” – Ambrose Bierce: *The Devil's Dictionary*

(A) CREATIONISM, REPRESSION AND ANTI-CATHOLICISM

The basalt columns at the Giant's Causeway were formed about 60 million years ago as a result of volcanic action. Three lava outflows occurred known as the Lower, Middle and Upper Basaltic. The hexagonal columns occur in the middle basalt layer, and the same formations can be seen at Staffa in Scotland. They also occur in the surrounding landscape of North Antrim and many other parts of the world. The fascinating pattern that we see in the causeway stones formed as a result of rock crystallisation under conditions of accelerated cooling. This usually occurs when molten lava comes into immediate contact with water. The subsequent fast cooling causes cracking and results in what we see today.

For all credible scientists, evolution is a fact and the universe is about 13.7bn years old. The earth itself is about 4.57bn years, not 6,000 years old, as Archbishop Ussher imagined. These facts are established in physics, chemistry, biology, geology and astronomy, to name only a few scientific disciplines. Astronomy tells us that the stars we see in the sky are billions of years old, a knowledge of

erosion tells us that it took millions of years to create the 300-mile long Grand Canyon, and continental drift, or plate tectonics, shows us how the earth's continents have drifted over the Earth's surface over hundreds of millions of years. Archaeology, palaeontology, genetics and dendrochronology all prove that life is many many times older than 6,000 years. For example, dendrochronology tells us that trees still exist which were alive 11,000 years ago.

As far as the Giant's Causeway is concerned, thanks to physicists like Rutherford, radiometric dating is used to determine the age of rocks and minerals from the decay of their radioactive elements and it has been in widespread use for over half a century. There are over 40 such techniques, such as radiocarbon dating, each using a different radioactive element or a different way of measuring them. These radiometric dating techniques agree with each other and present a coherent picture in which the Earth was formed and evolved over billions of years.

Rocks are made up of many individual crystals, and each crystal is usually made up of at least several different chemical elements such as iron, magnesium, silicon, etc. Most of the elements in nature are stable and do not change. However, some elements are not completely stable in their natural state. Some of the atoms eventually change from one element to another by a process called radioactive decay. If the original element, called the parent element, is unstable, the atoms decay to another element, called the daughter element, at a predictable rate. This process tells us that the Giant's Causeway was formed about 60 million years ago.

Yet, along with the scientific view, the National Trust initially decided to include an interactive audio exhibition which also explained the creationist view of the site's origin, i.e. that the basalt columns were formed around 4,500 years ago as a result of Noah's flood. Young Earth creationists generally follow

Archbishop Ussher's judgment that the earth was created by God about 6,000 years ago (Ussher dated it from 23rd October 4004 BC!). By 'earth', they actually mean the entire universe! But the creationists' theory of how the basalt columns were formed as a result of the supposed Flood does not even remotely stand up to the test of common sense, let alone geological scrutiny.

When creating the exhibition, the National Trust appeared to have been under pressure from the Caleb Foundation, a group which represents evangelical Christians in Northern Ireland and includes prominent members of the DUP. The Caleb Foundation said that they 'worked closely with the National Trust over many months' on the project. In the *Belfast Telegraph* (7th July 2012) North Antrim DUP MLA Mervyn Storey admitted that he lobbied the National Trust on behalf of the Caleb Foundation. The South Down MLA Jim Wells, NI's future Health Minister, welcomed the 'very tangential and not very hard-hitting reference to creationism' at the Causeway and said he would like to see a creationist viewpoint in the Ulster Museum (*News Letter*, 7th July 2012).

Putting creationist views on display in a National Trust site gave them an unfair appearance of legitimacy. It is false to claim that there is still a 'debate' going on over the origins of the Giant's Causeway, because the creationist viewpoint has no scientific evidence to back it up, and it is completely wrong to portray it on an equal footing with the genuine scientific account. In the end, an outcry forced the National Trust to abandon the creationist display, but the case indicates the pressure any organisation is under from the forces of religious backwardness in Northern Ireland. Creationist political interference in the province has a history. In 2010 Nelson McCausland, then Northern Ireland's fundamentalist Christian Culture Minister, wrote to the Ulster Museum asking it to include exhibits reflecting the view that the universe was created only a few thousand years ago. He claimed that the

inclusion of anti-Darwinian theories in the museum was ‘a human rights issue’.

In intervening, McCausland made several fundamental errors. Firstly, the government should not compromise the independence of a public educational institution. This smacks of Nazi or Communist dictatorship. It’s akin to the government telling the BBC not to include broadcasts critical of it or ordering teachers to include young earth creationism in their biology or history classes. Secondly, a museum or a natural history visitor centre is a place for collecting and displaying objects of scientific, historical or artistic value. What it includes under those categories is a matter for professional experts, not governments nor pressure groups nor the public in general for that matter. McCausland said that he had ‘a common desire to ensure that museums are reflective of the views, beliefs and cultural traditions that make up society in Northern Ireland’. But knowledge is determined by evidence, not by head counts. It is not a matter of democratic votes. Even here, the Young Earth Creationist view is held by only a minority of Christians. Moreover, why only Christian creationist views? Other religions have other creationist myths. In a multicultural society, balance would require reference to other creationist stories.

This matter is not a conflict between religion and atheism or Humanism. Most Christians, including the Catholic Church and most modern Protestant denominations, accept evolution as fact. Indeed, the Catholic Church has accepted evolution since 1950. It’s entirely possible to be a creationist in the simple sense of believing that a god created the universe without believing that it was done only 6,000 years ago in 6 days. To repeat, Young Earth creationism is a minority belief, even among the world’s Christians. Humanists and many Christians believe that it is wrong to give Young Earth creationist views space in publicly-funded

museums or visitor centres that explain natural history, or in school science lessons or science textbooks.

The question has to be asked: why does political Protestantism in Northern Ireland persistently give Christianity a bad name? It appears to be dominated by backward, intolerant and bigoted opinions which continue to make the province the laughing stock of the civilised world. If it is not creationism, it is sexuality. Why are they so killjoy and negative about it? And why do they reserve their special intolerance for homosexuals? In 2007, Iain Paisley Junior told a magazine that gay people 'repulse' him and harm society. In 2008 Iris Robinson told the Nolan Show that homosexuality was an 'abomination' and made her feel sick and 'nauseous'. She later told a parliamentary committee that homosexuals were worse than paedophiles.

Edwin Poots, as Minister of Sport, attacked the formation of a gay rugby team in 2008 on the spurious grounds that he couldn't fathom why people saw the necessity to develop an apartheid in sport. Later, as Minister of Health, he refused to follow the rest of the UK in relaxing legislation on the donation of blood by gay men. Poots stated that he would uphold the ban, despite the fact that Northern Ireland accepts blood from other parts of the kingdom. In February 2012 he told the Belfast Telegraph that blood donations from prostitutes are less dangerous than those from gay men.

Then Lord Maginnis, again on the Nolan Show, called homosexuality 'unnatural and deviant' and a 'rung on the ladder' to bestiality. He stuck by his remarks the next day on the same programme and received a measure of backing from Lord Kilclooney, who said that there was widespread support for Maginnis's opposition to gay marriage.

If it is not homophobia, it is a deep-seated anti-Catholicism that has permeated Protestant politics for centuries and retarded a more

healthy and progressive culture. We see it in burnt papal effigies every 11th night and we hear it in speeches at every 12th, including endless references to the 'antichrist' and the 'errors of Romanism'. The late Iain Paisley called the pope 'the antichrist' and told a loyalist rally in 1969 that Catholics "breed like rabbits and multiply like vermin". Orange marches are ultimately all about banners, drumming and playing tunes of songs jeering at or triumphing over their Catholic neighbours. Derry, Aughrim, the Boyne, the Diamond, Garvagh, Dolly's Brae and so on, were all battles or skirmishes which kept the papists firmly in their place.

Why is there such a vocal and influential evangelical Protestantism in Northern Ireland which clings to such backward, intolerant and often bigoted views – on creationism, on homosexuality, on abortion, on assisted dying and of course not least on the Catholic Church? That is a big question, and we shall avoid giving an immediate and simplistic answer. But what we can say, first of all, is that this primitive Protestantism exists within a highly religious society. But what exactly does this mean? We shall examine it here and in further chapters.

(B) RELIGION

Religion is a slippery concept about which there is much disagreement. Even the Latin origin of the word is disputed. Cicero (106-43BCE) thought it stemmed from the word 'relegare', meaning to reflect on something. Then, perhaps, it is from 'relegere', to read again, or from 'religare', to bind fast. In the latter case it could refer to a bond of piety or to any institution which binds people together, just like the family. Definitions reflect this confusion and tend to be either too narrow or too vague. It may be taken to mean simply a commitment to certain ideals of life – any committed faith. For many, it is the more narrow belief in and worship of a spiritual or supernatural being or

beings. Daniel Dennett defines religions as “social systems whose participants avow belief in a supernatural agent or agents whose approval is sought” (Breaking the Spell, 2006, p9). Yuval Noah Harari in his recent book Sapiens (Harvill Secker, 2014) defined it as “a system of human norms and values that is founded on a belief in a superhuman order”. H.L. Mencken, in his Treatise on the Gods, said that "whether it happens to show itself in the artless mumbo-jumbo of a Winnebago Indian or in the elaborately refined and metaphysical rites of a Christian archbishop, its single function is to give man access to the powers which seem to control his destiny, and its single purpose is to induce those powers to be friendly to him".

In this narrow conception, an atheist cannot be religious, nor would he want to be. For others, it conveys a much looser and broader idea about the nature of ultimate reality, whatever it is. Some believe that we are all on a religious path because it relates to the philosophical questions about life and death that most of us have, at one time or another, asked ourselves and others. In this view, religion is the quest for meaning. In *The Scientific Study of Religion* (1970), John Milton Yinger writes: "Religion is a system of beliefs and practices by means of which a group of people struggles with the ultimate problems of human life". Einstein said that he was religious in the sense that he was aware of something that the human mind cannot grasp and whose 'beauty and sublimity reaches us only indirectly and as a feeble reflection'. The British philosopher and mathematician A.N. Whitehead (1861-1947) defined it mysteriously as “what the individual does with his own solitariness” – a very private activity indeed.

The French sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858-1917), however, stressed its social function in defining religion as "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say set apart and forbidden, beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community, called a church, all those who adhere

to them". In other words, it is a product of the collective life and an embodiment of the moral requisites of human social existence. Humans are religious because they are members of collectivities, and neither individuals nor groups can long exist without religious—that is to say, moral—constraint.

In what follows, I shall be concerned largely with the narrow definition of religion, though that should not be taken to imply that a wider conception is not possible. In his book *The World's Religions* Ninian Smart describes seven dimensions of religion, though not all necessarily have all these seven aspects: the practical and ritual; the experiential and emotional; the narrative or mythic, the doctrinal and philosophical, the ethical and legal, the social and institutional, and the material. Thus, saying prayers, singing hymns, sacrificing goats, repeating sacred formulae, burning incense, fasting, flagellation, and so on, may be as much part of 'religion' as, say, the Argument from Design – even if it is difficult to see the common connection between ancient ritual and philosophical argument. In other words, religion in this view is not merely assent to certain propositions about the nature of life. Rather, it involves what people do in their lives.

(C) GOD

If religion is as all-embracing as Smart implies, then the god of philosophy would appear to be only one element in a complex tapestry of beliefs, actions and institutions though, as Dennett suggests, a religion without God or gods is like a vertebrate without a backbone. The god of the philosophers is also a somewhat abstract principle - the First Cause or Grand Watchmaker. How do such abstractions connect with the God of Abraham or Noah or the God who ordered Joshua to annihilate with the sword 'everything that breathed' in the city of Jericho? The former concepts are susceptible to rational argument, whereas the latter stories inhabit a world of faith and make-believe. Some

of the Bible narratives actually read like a horror film starring Bela Lugosi or Boris Karloff as god. Yet philosophy helps us to question and overturn these old myths and rituals. And it is invaluable as a means of scrutinising the ethical and social claims made on behalf of religion.

The term 'God' is also open to many definitions. For Don Cupitt in *The Sea of Faith*, it is 'the sum of all our values'. This is a long way from the Judaic-Christian conception of an infinite personal spirit who created out of nothing everything other than himself, who is himself eternal and uncreated, omnipotent, omniscient and all-loving, and who made his creatures for eventual fellowship with himself. Other definitions include: whatever entity (entities) created the universe; the prime mover; the uncaused cause; the totality of everything that exists; the all-pervading universal force in and of all things which coordinates evolution; or even the partner of our most intimate soliloquies.

The statement that 'God exists' is also problematic in its verb. Some theologians would argue that the term 'exists' can be applied only to entities within the created realm, so that it is wrong to assert of the ultimate creator that he 'exists'. Thus, according to Paul Tillich and others, the question of the existence of a god can be neither asked nor answered. However, we shall not adopt this benumbing approach but instead assume that we are referring to the Judaic-Christian god and that either He exists or He does not.

(D) THE ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

There are a number of traditional 'proofs' of the existence of such a god. It might be supposed that one would be enough, but perhaps there is safety in numbers. Aquinas (1225-74) listed five 'proofs': the unmoved mover, the uncaused cause, the cosmological argument, the argument from degree and the

teleological argument. However, the first three are essentially variations on the same theme. So we shall propose a somewhat different list of five (in her 2010 work of fiction Rebecca Goldstein presents, and rebuts, no fewer than 36 arguments).

The first, which the German philosopher Schopenhauer called a 'charming joke', is the ontological argument, which tries to prove the existence of God by abstract reasoning alone. Ontology studies the nature of being and the word derives from the Greek *ontos*, which means 'being' or 'existence', and *logos*, which means plan. It maintains that God's essence proves his existence, that indeed existence is part of the definition of God and that God must therefore exist. It is an a priori argument, i.e. it rests independently of experience on purely logical considerations and if valid would achieve the kind of certainty exhibited by mathematical rules. St Anselm (1033-1109) formulated the argument in his *Proslogion* as follows.

1. God is a being than which nothing greater can be conceived.
2. Things which exist in the mind could exist in reality.
3. Things that exist in reality must be greater than things which exist in the mind.
4. Therefore God exists in reality and in the mind.

If we assume that 'nothing greater' implies 'perfect', then another way of putting it is to say that the most perfect and real conceivable being is the idea of a being which must and therefore does exist because a non-existent could never be the most perfect and real conceivable being. In other words, existence is a perfection and since God is perfect he must exist. Descartes (1596-1650) also accepted this argument. The existence of God is part of his essence, he wrote in the *Meditations*, because "existence can no more be separated from the essence of God than can ... the idea of a mountain from the idea of a valley".

The argument is fallacious. It is not one of the 'proofs' offered by Aquinas, who rejected it on the grounds that it is not self-evident that God exists. He suggested that we cannot know the nature of God and, therefore, cannot conceive of God in the way Anselm proposed. David Hume also rejected it on the grounds that we cannot prove a matter of fact by a priori reasoning. We simply cannot deduce from a mere concept an existing reality which corresponds to that concept. He also suggested that any concept of God we may have, we can conceive either of existing or of not existing. Existence is not a quality or perfection, so a completely perfect being need not exist and it is therefore not a contradiction to deny God's existence.

Hume is correct. We can all dream dreams of perfect love, perfect happiness, perfect peace, and so on, but it is invalid to suggest that they exist outside our imagination. Arguably, a perfect being is in the same category: it is a dream, not a reality. Kant in the Critique of Pure Reason disposed of the argument by saying that existence is not a real predicate. "Our consciousness of all existence belongs exclusively to the field of experience; any alleged existence outside this field is of the nature of an assumption which we can never be in a position to justify". He later adds: "We can no more extend our stock of insight by mere ideas than a merchant can better his position by adding a few noughts to his cash account".

And there it ought to rest. But theists don't give up that easily. Modern attempts to resuscitate Anselm tend to focus on his reply to the Benedictine monk Gaunilo of Marmoutiers, a contemporary of Anselm, who wrote a response to Proslogion called Reply On Behalf of the Fool. (in his argument Anselm had addressed the fool, who in the words of Psalm 14, "hath said in his heart, there is no God"). Gaunilo, in common with many theologians of the time, rejected the notion that we mere mortals could have any possible

conception of God or understanding of His nature. St Anselm, he believed, was trying to do just that by going beyond what we understand by sensible experience. So he tried to show that such logic would force one to conclude that many things exist which it is certain do not. The argument could be used to prove the existence of anything. Imagine, he says, there is a 'lost island', the greatest or most perfect island conceivable because of its abundance of food, supplies etc. The following syllogism in abbreviated form could be applied:

1. We can perceive of a perfect island.
2. A perfect island must be more perfect in reality than in the mind.
3. Therefore a perfect island exists.

Anselm wrote a short Reply to Gaunilo. The island, he said, cannot be defined as perfect or that than which no greater island can be conceived because you can always better an island (by adding more sand, more beaches or more palm trees, etc), whereas you cannot better God. Moreover, Anselm continues, if Gaunilo refers to chapter III of the Proslogion, he will see that the island is a contingent thing whereas God is a necessary being. A contingent thing or being logically might not have been and depends for its existence on other things or beings. If our parents had never met, we would not exist, for example. A necessary thing or being, on the other hand, could not be other than what it is: 2 plus 2 must always equal 4. It should be obvious by now that Anselm, and indeed any other defender of this argument, is merely playing with words. Existence has become part and parcel of the meaning of the term 'God'. Anselm is now saying that:

1. God is a necessary being.
2. A necessary being must exist.
3. Therefore God exists.

No matter how it is dressed up, this is a silly argument which demonstrates that God is nowhere except in some people's heads, but modern theists who desperately hold on like grim death to all the traditional arguments lest admitting the falsity of one becomes the thin end of a total theological freefall, cannot let go of it. So they have devised definitional ontological arguments, conceptual ontological arguments, modal ontological arguments, experiential ontological arguments, mereological ontological arguments, and so on. It should now be obvious that they all assume in one or more of their premises what they seek to prove. Parodies of the argument are legion, but suffice to say that it could be used to 'prove' the existence of the Devil.

- 1.The Devil is a being than which nothing worse can be conceived.
- 2.Things which exist in the mind could exist in reality.
- 3.It is worse for a thing to exist in reality than in the mind.
- 4.Therefore the Devil exists in reality and in the mind.

(E) THE COSMOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

A second so-called 'proof' is the cosmological argument. The term originates with Kant and derives from the Greek kosmos, meaning 'cosmos' or 'universe', and logos meaning 'blueprint' or 'plan'. It is basically the argument that the world is unintelligible without the existence of God, that indeed the world's very existence also proves God's existence. It is sometimes referred to as the first cause argument, though there are a number of different formulations. A simple version would be to state that:

- 1.Everything that exists has a cause of its existence.
- 2.The universe exists.
- 3.Therefore the universe has a cause of its existence.
- 4.That cause is God.
- 5.Therefore God exists.

The first cause argument goes back to Plato in his *Laws*. In order for there to be causes undergoing and transmitting changes, there must be an uncaused cause to originate the movement. Plato further suggested that the only kind of reality with the power of spontaneous movement is soul. In the *Metaphysics* Aristotle writes that change implies an ultimate unchanging source of movement because there cannot be an infinite regress of causes. “If there is nothing eternal, then there can be no becoming: for there must be something which undergoes the process of becoming, that is, that from which things came to be; and the last member of this series must be ungenerated, for the series must start with something, since nothing can come of nothing”.

Another formulation is the argument from contingency, which is the third of the ‘Five Ways’ or arguments for the existence of God outlined by Aquinas in his *Summa Theologica* and draws on the distinction between things that exist necessarily and things that exist contingently. He suggests that there must be a good reason why things exist or, as Leibniz put it in his *Monadology* (1714), there must be a ‘sufficient reason’ why something exists. The argument assumes that each item in nature points beyond itself – logically, it could have not have been, and its existence is contingent on something else for its sufficient explanation. Therefore, either the regress of explanations run out to infinity, with the result that nothing is ever finally explained, or else it must terminate in a self-sufficient or necessary being which neither needs nor is capable of further explanation.

This formulation could be expressed as follows:

1. Everything that exists contingently has a reason for its existence.
2. The universe exists contingently.

3. Therefore the universe has a reason for its existence.
4. The reason for its existence is a necessary being which is not contingent, i.e. God.
5. Therefore God exists.

This argument is easily challenged. What, for example, does it mean by a 'necessary being'? Logically the word 'necessary' is only applied to analytic propositions which it is self-contradictory to deny. And why cannot the universe be its own reason for existing? Hume makes this point in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779) when he says that if you explain each individual contingent thing in the universe you are actually explain the universe, and it is a fallacy of composition to suppose that you still have to explain the existence of the universe as a whole.

Kant also questioned the term 'necessary being' and suggested that it renders the cosmological argument the first step of the ontological argument or a concealed version of it. We never have any justification for assuming that the series of contingently existing things terminates in something absolutely necessary. Even if we could legitimately form the idea of something absolutely necessary, we can never prove the actual let alone necessary existence of such a thing from its concept because, once again, being is obviously not a real predicate. Being or existence is not something we can properly include in a concept but is actually something we add to a concept when we say that the concept has an object. Kant is of course absolutely right: we cannot prove the existence of a god from His concept alone. Indeed Kant insists correctly that all the traditional arguments illicitly assume the existence of something that is a mere idea.

In his book *Think*, Simon Blackburn mentions the story of the Indian philosopher who, when asked what the world rested on, replied ‘an elephant’, and when asked what the elephant rested on, replied ‘a tortoise’; and when asked what the tortoise rested on, begged to change the subject. Is it easier to assume that the universe is self-caused or that the universe is caused by a god who is self-caused? Applying Occam’s Razor – the principle of reducing assumptions to the absolute minimum – the former is the more appropriate assumption, whereas the latter makes another unsupportable statement. The same point applies to the contingency argument. It may be the universe itself which neither needs nor is capable of further explanation. As Bertrand Russell suggested in *Why I Am Not a Christian* (1967), “I should say that the universe is just there, and that’s all”. Or, as Hawking puts it in *A Brief History of Time*, "if the universe is really completely self-contained, having no boundary or edge, it would have neither beginning nor end; it would simply be. What place, then, for a creator?"

In *The Kalam Cosmological Argument* (1979) William Lane Craig adopted an argument presented by the Kalam school of philosophy in medieval Islam which assumes that, since actual infinity is not possible, the universe must have begun in a moment of time, which is caused by God. This approach highlights the paradox of the entire cosmological argument, based as it is on the ancient idea that nothing can come of nothing. For it argues the precise opposite, namely that God created the universe out of nothing. Superficially, the Big Bang might assume a creator, but most scientists think that it occurred ‘out of nothing’, or even that it is part of a series of events in which the universe expands, then shrinks, and then the process repeats itself forever in an oscillating universe. There may also be other Big Bangs in other universes and indeed we may be part of a multiverse or infinity of universes.

We might also add that a 'first cause' or 'prime mover' is not an ultimate explanation of anything unless we can explain this unmoved mover and its motives for creating the universe in the first place. Why is the first cause assumed to a personal being called 'God'? What did it seek to achieve? What benefits did it intend to bring about? Why was it not 'self-sufficient'? Does it have 'human' desires? Is it, indeed, in any way like ourselves? Was it lonely on its own? Did it create us for companionship? Or as a toy? Or even as a victim? Unless we can answer at least some of these questions satisfactorily a god as prime mover really explains very little of any significance.

(F) THE TELEOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

A third 'proof' is the so-called teleological argument (from the Greek 'teleos', meaning 'purpose' or 'aim', and logos, meaning 'blueprint' or 'plan'). This is the argument from design. It says that nature displays such order, complexity and beauty that it must have been purposely designed in this way – like a watch in the analogy made by many writers, most famously the English clergyman and theologian William Paley, whose work *Natural Theology* appeared in 1802. Paley writes about finding a stone and a watch while crossing a heath. We would regard the stone as part of nature but see the watch as an artifice put together for a purpose. Just as the watch implies a watchmaker, so an eye implies an eye-maker, and, according to Paley, that “would be alone sufficient to support the conclusion which we draw from it, as to the necessity of an intelligent creator”. And, since the universe is even more intricate and complex than a watch, it must have a great architect or designer behind it, namely God, who designed the stone and everything else.

Another way of expressing Paley's view of purposeful design is simply to say that there is striking regularity and order in the

universe, which seems to conform to basic scientific laws and that this orderliness requires some kind of explanation. For example, the law of cohesion ensures that objects hold together and the law of gravity ensures that stones will fall. Indeed the universe is so fine-tuned that it seems to have been designed to support life on earth – in the words of the British astronomer Fred Hoyle, it looks like a 'put-up job'. The so-called anthropic principle is sometimes presented as an updated version of Paley's watchmaker, though this is not so: the principle merely states that the properties of the universe are consistent with the existence of intelligent observers. However, it is often used by theists to argue for a universe intelligently designed for human habitation on the grounds that if the physical properties of the universe are precisely the values necessary to produce life, then it is unlikely that life arose by chance. God is thus seen as the fine-tuner who created a life-friendly universe.

The teleological argument can be presented in biological or cosmic form. First, it is argued that organisms have features that enable them to adapt to the environment. The eye, for example, helps us to survive by perceiving objects around us, yet if parts of it were slightly different, we would not be able to see. Second, in cosmic terms, the universe itself obeys certain stable laws and has certain physical features that permit human life to exist. For example, our sun is neither too hot nor too cold and the zone around it in which we exist – known as the Goldilocks zone – is not too hot or too cold but just right to allow our planet to have liquid water. Also, as a result of the unique properties of the hydrogen atom, water itself is lighter in its solid than its liquid form and therefore ice floats, yet if it didn't the oceans would freeze from the bottom up and earth would be covered in solid ice. Of course, if earth were not located precisely where it is, then we might also not have AIDS viruses, congenital deformities, or even death itself.

We also have to realise that there are possibly 30 billion planets in our galaxy and 100 billion galaxies in the universe. Indeed the tract of space-time that we inhabit may be just one of an infinite number of universes. If we inhabit a multiverse, then the chances of life somewhere out there are even greater. Even if there is only a billion to one chance of life, it is clear from the foregoing numbers that in our galaxy alone there could be 30 planets which are inhabited by life forms. 500 years ago Copernicus replaced the earth-centred model of the planetary system with a sun-centred model. Now, believers in intelligent design are again trying to place humankind centre-stage. But they are ignoring the distinct possibility of life in many other planets in a multiverse.

One obvious but important point is that, even if valid, the teleological argument points not to a singular designer but several. Just as several people are involved in the making of a watch, so the more complex the design in the living world, the greater the number of designers that would be necessary. To illustrate, a paper plane is easily designed by one person, but a space shuttle requires hundreds of people to get going. The complexity of the universe(s), by this logic, is so great that it would require many gods to construct: multigods in a multiverse. As David Hume wrote: “A great number of men join together in building a house or ship, in rearing a city, in framing a commonwealth: why may not several Deities combine in contriving and framing a world?” (Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion). In this reasoning, the sun would be made by a sunmaker, the snow by a snowmaker, life by a lifemaker, and so on. We do not have to assume that any one of these deities has any supreme intelligence. Indeed, considering some of the deficiencies of nature, we might conclude that some of them are, in Hume’s words, ‘stupid mechanics’.

Paley's argument is actually based on an internal contradiction and several flaws. First, he implies that the watch is both different from nature which, in the form of the stone, is uncomplicated and random, and also similar to nature, in the form of the eye, in being complex and ordered. Second, he illogically assumes that because two different objects have a common quality i.e. complexity, therefore they must have another common quality, i.e. a watchmaker/designer. We also have the problem of who designed the designer? Watchmakers have fathers, after all. Nor are watches made out of nothing: they require many different people producing at least 130 components, including the basic metal, a mainspring, balance wheel, escapement, gear train, winding stem, dial train, and so on, whereas Paley's deity apparently made the universe *ex nihilo*. Finally, as Hume indicated, we can only ascribe to a cause whatever qualities are needed to produce the effect. So the design argument, if valid, would only prove the existence of a designer. It would not prove that this being has any of the other attributes commonly ascribed to a god, such as omnipotence, omniscience and omnibenevolence.

The eye is not in any case, like Paley's watch, a model of perfection. As Richard Dawkins pointed out, the human eye is wired backward. In all vertebrate eyes the 'wire' from each of three million light-sensitive retinal cells passes in front of the retina, and the collection is bundled into the optic nerve, creating a blind spot. This arrangement of wires leading away from the backside, not light side, of the light-sensitive cells is the reverse of what any good designer would construct. On the other hand, the wires do lead from the backside of the separately evolved eyes of the squid, octopus, and other cephalopods. The notional designer would thus appear to favour squid over humans. The eye is also subject to several weaknesses, such as astigmatism, macula degeneration and presbyopia.

Other parts of our anatomy could have been better 'designed'. Our bones lose minerals after the age of thirty, our muscles atrophy, and our leg veins become large and twisted. The openings of our tubes for breathing and swallowing are so close that we often choke. The appendix serves no apparent purpose, but it is infection-prone, leading to inflammation and potentially fatal appendicitis. The male prostate gland enlarges in later life and impedes urine flow. A better designed human, one that would live to a hundred in better health, would have bigger ears, rewired eyes, a curved neck, a forward-tilting torso, shorter limbs and stature, better padding around joints, a reversed knee joint, and more – though he or she would not be very pretty by our present standards.

What we observe in nature is not design in Paley's sense. It is order, pattern, symmetry. If he had referred to a plant instead of a stone the point would be easily made that a human being is an organism like the plant rather than a machine like the watch, and perhaps even the universe itself is an organism which grows and reproduces in a regular manner. Thus 'laws of nature' are simply our way of describing how things behave. Many of them are statistical averages such as would emerge from the laws of chance. Nor were human beings 'designed'. It is not that the environment was made to be suitable to us, but that by slow, gradual, cumulative selection we grew to be suitable to it. As Richard Dawkins suggests, the only watchmaker in nature is the blind force of physics and, as far as life is concerned, the blind watchmaker is natural selection (The Blind Watchmaker, Penguin, 1988, p5).

In other words, the argument from design has been shown to be false by Darwinism. The discovery of fossils, the existence of transitional species, the DNA and anatomical connections between humans and other animals, the use of animals in medical research,

even the observation of evolution in the laboratory, all falsify the hypothesis of a God who created separate, unchanging species of life-forms at one time. Indeed evolution implies that humanity was an accident and not a special creation. However, while evolution explains steps in the process of the development of life, it does not appear to explain the origin of life itself, which means that some prebiological process may have been involved.

Some theists argue that the original non-living matter – which they call the ‘original replicator’ – from which the first living thing evolved must have been created rather than evolved, but biologists and chemists have long identified a number of naturally occurring molecules and crystals that can replicate in ways that could lead to natural selection. We can trace life back almost 4 billion years, about half a billion years after the earth was formed. Was there a spontaneous creation in which a random primordial soup of chemicals created the first living cell? Or was there perhaps an active generative phenomenon in which mutation and selection were already acting on molecules and when some of them began reproducing, outcompeting the others, then life began?

Since the late 1980s attempts have been made to revive the teleological argument, and the term ‘Intelligent Design’ surfaced in America after ‘creation science’ was ruled to be a religious concept and therefore constitutionally unfit to be taught in public schools. Its supporters maintain that it leaves open the question of who the designer might be. Nevertheless, it is really a religious concept cloaked in the language of science and nothing more than stealth creationism, neo-creationism or, if you like, creationism dressed up in a lab coat. In 1996 Michael Behe, a biochemist, published *Darwin’s Black Box: The Biochemical Challenge to Evolution*, in which he argues that complex biological structures could not possibly have been produced gradually by evolution

because they possess a quality he calls irreducible complexity and cannot function unless each of their parts is in place. Since natural selection can only choose among systems that are already working, there is no way that Darwinian mechanisms could have fashioned the complex systems found in living cells. And if such systems could not have evolved, they must have been designed. Examples are the lens and retina of the eye and the molecular components of blood clotting. Or, to simplify, a bird cannot fly without hollow bones, avian wing structure, and feathers. Take away any of these components, and flight is impossible.

This is patent nonsense. Fossil evidence indicates that a reptile mutation produced pinnate scales and, through a process of natural selection, the scales became feathers. After feathers evolved, front legs evolved to wing structures. Further down the line, natural selection favoured birds with hollow bones. To suggest that each and every piece of a machine, mechanical or biochemical, must be assembled in its final form before anything useful can emerge is just plain wrong. 'Irreducible complexity' fails to take into account numerous other pathways that a particular organism can evolve through – it assumes that evolution must go through 'additive' processes to achieve its conclusion and this isn't the case. For many organs, removal of a part may render it useless for its current function, but the organ could have been useful to the organism for some other function. Insect wings, for example, before they were large enough to be effective for flight, were used as heat-exchange panels.

Darwin himself pointed out in *The Origin of Species* that “distinct organs sometimes perform simultaneously the same function in the same individual. To give on instance, there are fish with gills, at the same time they breathe free air in their swimbladders... one of the two organs might with ease be modified and perfected so as to perform all the work by itself, being aided during the process of

modification by the other organ; and then this other organ might be modified for some other quite distinct purpose, or be quite obliterated". The illustration of the swimbladder in fishes demonstrates the important fact that an organ originally constructed for the purpose of flotation may be converted into one for a wholly different purpose, namely respiration.

Some neo-creationists have manufactured other arguments. In *Intelligent Design* (1999) William Dembski claims that design in nature is mathematically demonstrable. The Pythagoreans in the 6th century BCE declared that "all is number", and Galileo famously stated that our universe is a 'grand book' written in the language of mathematics. According to him, God is a geometer and created the universe as a geometrical pattern. Consider four modern discoveries. Einstein upended our universe using nothing more than careful reasoning and mathematical calculations. The Higgs Boson was predicted with the same tool as the planet Neptune and the radio wave, i.e. with mathematics. Is the universe therefore a mathematical structure? Max Tegmark, a physics professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, thinks so, and in *Our Mathematical Universe* (2014) he suggests that we are all part of a giant mathematical object, which in turn is part of a huge multiverse. This intriguing theory seems to be a flight of fancy: most scientists don't buy it and maintain that mathematics is a human construction. However, the theory of a multiverse conflicts with *Intelligent Design* because it argues that our universe is one of an infinite collection of universes that has existed and will exist for ever.

There is one final point to be made about the teleological argument. Return to the beginning and Paley's analogy of the watch. It is designed for something, i.e. to show the time. Theists are so preoccupied with trying to prove design in the universe that they generally fail to address the question of why a God made it.

We are back with the questions we posed in the cosmological argument. Why, for example, did God create such a vast universe and other planets if there is only life on earth? Why did he create human beings at all? Why did he create Hitler and Stalin as well as the Buddha and Confucius? Why did he create mosquitos, tsetse flies and carpet vipers? When asked such questions, the usual reply is either that he did it for his own glory or that his purpose is a mystery. We are thus left with the concept of a mixed up, enigmatic, egotistical deity whose creation appears to lack any coherent sense.

(G) THE MORAL ARGUMENT

The so-called moral argument has many possible formulations. Aquinas in his *Summa Theologica*, written between 1265 and 1274, states that “there must be something which is to all beings the cause of their being, goodness and every other perfection: and this we call God”. Kant, who dismissed the three previous arguments, concluded that the only reason we have for believing in God was our own morality. For him, it is not religion that grounds morality, but morality that grounds religion. He argues that our moral nature makes it necessary for us to believe in God as the ultimate good. But Kant avoided saying plainly that God actually exists, and he rejected the idea that our moral sense comes from God.

This is important, because many formulations of this argument claim that without God, there is nothing left of morality. In *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880) Dostoevsky has Ivan say: "If there is no God, then everything is permitted". In other words, without God there are no objective moral values and there is no binding duty to be good. John Locke accepted this kind of argument in his *Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689) when he refuses toleration to non-believers because “promises, covenants and oaths, which are

the bonds of human society, can have no hold upon an atheist". C.S. Lewis also supported this argument. In *Mere Christianity* (1952) he suggests that there is something over and above our observations of the natural world, something "which is directing the universe, and which appears to me as a law urging me to do right and making me feel responsible and uncomfortable when I do wrong".

The major problem with this Karamazov defence was posed by Plato in the *Euthyphro*. Socrates asks whether the holy is beloved by the gods because it is holy or holy because it is beloved by the gods. For instance, if the gods were to decree that all left-handed people be slaughtered, would it be right to do so? To put it negatively: is an act forbidden by a god because it is wrong, or wrong because a god says it is? Bertrand Russell disposes of this argument as follows: "If you are quite sure that there is a difference between right and wrong, you are then in this situation: is that difference due to God's fiat or is it not? If it is due to God's fiat, then for God himself there is no difference between right and wrong, and it is no longer a significant statement to say that God is good. If you are going to say, as theologians do, that God is good, you must then say that right and wrong have some meaning which is independent of God's fiat, because God's fiats are good and not bad independently of the mere fact that he made them" (*Why I am not a Christian*).

If we say that the will of God determines what is good, then we are implying a tautology that God commands what God commands and that if his divine whim orders us to kill, burn or rape, then we should do it, which is precisely what the Jewish people in the Old Testament believed. In his *Discourse on Metaphysics* (1686) the German philosopher Leibniz said of this divine command ethics: "So in saying that things are not good by any rule of goodness, but merely by the will of God, it seems to

me that one destroys, without realising it, all the love of God and all his glory. For why praise him for what he has done if he would be equally praiseworthy in doing exactly the contrary?"

If we assume that God commands right conduct because it is right, then we are implying that there is a standard of right and wrong that is independent of God's will. John Stuart Mill was very dismissive of the Divine Command Theory. In 1865 he wrote: "Whatever power such a being may have over me, there is one thing which he shall not do: he shall not compel me to worship him. I will call no being good, who is not what I mean when I apply that epithet to my fellow creatures, and if such a being can sentence me to hell for not so calling him, to hell I will go". Humanists would thus reject the notion that religion provides an adequate basis for morality. To be an independent moral agent implies that we are autonomous decision-makers who act according to precepts of which we intellectually and emotionally approve ourselves. And this is the crucial point: morality springs from human needs and human interests. Humanist codes of ethics are based on human reason, human experience and human compassion, not the arbitrary dictates of a deity.

A great difficulty in suggesting that God established morality is that the God as depicted in some holy books such as the Bible and the Koran did not establish what we now recognise to be morality at all. The God of the Old Testament is a monster who drowned nearly everybody including children and commanded people to keep slaves, mercilessly slaughter their enemies and execute blasphemers, homosexuals and adulterers. Slavery, torture and ethnic cleansing are surely wrong by our standards, yet they were sanctioned by ancient deities. And what of the morality of atonement in the New Testament? It is surely ethically dubious to suggest that justice is satisfied by the sacrifice of an innocent person for the sins of the guilty.

Another form of the moral argument is that for the remedying of injustice. The existence of a god is said to be necessary in order to establish ultimate justice. In the world there is often great injustice, the good often suffer and the less good often triumph. Some experience unbearable illness, others have rude health. So there must be a god and there must be heaven and hell so that in the long run there will be justice. This raises the so-called problem of evil and theodicy, which is the branch of theology that attempts to cope with this problem. The term, invented by Leibniz in his 1710 work *Théodicée*, literally means justifying God (from the Greek words *theos*, meaning ‘god’, and *dikē*, meaning ‘just’). Why does an all-good, all-powerful, all-knowing God permit evil or suffering in the world?

The free will defence is that suffering is due to man’s choice to do evil. But much of the suffering is due to natural causes: floods, earthquakes, hurricanes, childhood illnesses. And what of animals? The 19th century American agnostic Robert Ingersoll asked: “Who can appreciate the mercy of so making the world that all animals devour animals; so that every mouth is a slaughter house, and every stomach a tomb? Is it possible to discover infinite intelligence and love in universal and eternal carnage?” The 19th century Anglican bishop Charles Gore even suggested that “the pain of the animal world is the most serious of all objections to the Christian God”. The God of Christianity must be either impotent, ignorant or wicked to allow all this suffering. Could an all-loving God really have devised such a cold-blooded competition of beast with beast, beast with man, man with man, species with species? In *River Out of Eden*, Richard Dawkins asks: “If there is only one Creator who made the tiger and the lamb, the cheetah and the gazelle, what is He playing at? Is He a sadist who enjoys spectator sports?” In other words, the moral

argument, far from being a support for God, is a convincing case against the existence of a God.

In Sean Penn's bleak existential detective thriller *The Pledge*, Jack Nicholson plays retiring Nevada cop Jerry Black who vows to a grieving mother to catch a serial murderer who has raped and killed her eight-year old daughter. Although a mentally retarded Indian has confessed and then shot himself, Black believes he was innocent and, forgetting about retirement, devotes himself to finding the true killer. It is as if this obsession can give meaning to an existence that seems to have run out of purpose. Eventually, he follows a strong lead and lays a trap with the help of a sceptical police team, using 'live bait'. The twist is that, unknown to all, the killer himself is killed in a collision with a tanker en route to the scene of the sting. The officers leave Black, convinced that he is senile and that the Indian was guilty all along. Black finally turns to drink.

The point is that if you are looking for justice in this world, you may have a futile search, as Joseph K. discovers in Kafka's *The Trial*, a work which clearly influenced Friedrich Dürrenmatt, the Swiss writer of the 1958 novel on which Penn's film is based. In Kafka's novel a man is arrested by the state but has no redress or argument to make because the charge is never stated as the officials are only 'humble subordinates' who act under orders from a higher, impersonal authority. Is that higher authority the state? Or is it God? Is the 'trial' actually a trial given to every person by God? If so, then God finds Joseph K guilty for his scepticism and search for truth.

In Dürrenmatt's novel, of course, we might say that since the killer dies there is divine retributive justice. There may not be human justice but, as the Lord allegedly says, 'Vengeance is mine; I will repay'. But does he repay in this world or the next? Certainly, not

here. We look around us and we see misery and suffering everywhere. We see children dying of starvation or disease or killed in war. And we also see pockets of luxury and privilege. We see criminals prospering. We see some people suffering horrible or painful illnesses, while others exude rude health. We see people suffer the loss of loved ones, perhaps at an early age. And we cry out: "Where is the justice?"

Let's be clear: we are not just talking about retributive justice where crime, wrongdoing, exploitation abuse etc., all receive their 'just' punishment. We are also referring to distributive justice - are benefits and burdens shared fairly? - and corrective justice - where losses are compensated and gains are appropriated with some good. Those who believe in a god and an afterlife will say that the justice comes later. But what evidence is there of such an eventuality?

Certainly not in a physical sense, for our body dies with us. But certainly not in a theological sense either. For the God of the major religions is anything but just, if the sacred texts are taken as evidence. Take the Bible again. The god depicted here - far from being a 'just' god - is frankly a mass murderer who should be charged with crimes against humanity. The earliest example is in Genesis where he becomes angry with all of the people on earth and kills every living thing, with a few notable exceptions (Genesis 6 and 7). Later, he heeds the prayers of the Jews and helps them to slaughter the Canaanites, followed by the subjects of, first, King Sihon of Heshbon and then King Og of Bashan (Numbers 21 and Deuteronomy 2 and 3). The Midianites are next for the chop (except the virgin girls, of course), followed by Joshua's conquest of Jericho and the rest of Palestine. It is clear that the god of the Bible commands the Jews to commit genocide against the Palestinians. How can we expect such a god to guarantee justice in another life in view of his flagrant disregard

for justice whenever he intervenes in this world? Believers have a nerve in suggesting that moral standards are impossible without a god. On the basis of Holy Writ the reverse is the case: morality is only possible when we reject belief in this mass murderer.

Let's face it. We would all make a better job of creation if we had the power. It's not merely a matter of free will. There is what we might call 'natural evil' in the world as well as 'moral evil'. The latter is due to human actions, but the former arises through no fault of man. For example, an excruciatingly painful death resulting from an incurable disease is a natural evil, as is the suffering caused by catastrophic natural phenomena such as earthquakes, floods and hurricanes. If a god exists then he has made a botched job and should go back to the drawing board. Dürrenmatt himself said that humans are a loving God's failed experiment. There is much evidence of failure, but little of love.

(G) THE ARGUMENT FROM RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

A fifth 'proof' is the argument from personal experience. It asserts that it is only possible to experience that which exists, and therefore the phenomenon of religious experience demonstrates the existence of God. In short, if people experience God, then there must be a God. In *The Existence of God* (1979) Richard Swinburne asserts two principles in support of this argument. First, he refers to the principle of credulity, which states that: "How things seem to be is good grounds for a belief about how things are". For the most part, we should assume that things are the way that they appear to be. Second, there is the principle of testimony, which states that, for the most part, we should not doubt what people report about their experience, provided there are no special considerations such as being drunk or affected by drugs. If it looks like a duck, swims like a duck and quacks like a duck, then it probably is a duck.

The argument goes something like this:

1. If an entity is experienced, then it must exist.
2. God is the sort of being that it is possible to experience directly.
3. People claim to have experienced God directly.
4. Therefore God exists.

A number of objections arise here. First, if religious experiences exist, what criteria are there for distinguishing the genuine ones from the illusions? To claim that an experience indicates an objective fact, there must exist objective and rational methods of demonstration. Otherwise we would have to grant the existence of every god that various people have felt to exist, including rain gods, tree gods and war gods. Swinburne's principles are too trusting of the stories people tell. To report, for example, that we have 'seen God' arguably involves imagination rather than perception, so that the object of the experience is not something that exists objectively in the world but rather is something that exists subjectively in the mind of the person having the experience.

People often misunderstand the state of their own minds, and the cause of their feelings and emotions. Hildegard of Bingen, the 12th century abbess and mystic, claimed to have visions from the age of 3 but, from her descriptions of seeing 'the shade of the living light', many have concluded that she actually suffered from migraine. Epileptic seizures, sleep and food deprivation, drugs, hypnosis and neurological disorders can also cause hallucinatory effects. Temporal lobe epilepsy is a condition that may have affected a number of the world's spiritual figures, including St. Paul, Mohammed, Joan of Arc and St. Teresa of Avila, the 16th century Spanish nun and mystic. The last has been described by one expert as a 'severe hysterical psychotic'. Joseph Breuer,

Freud's colleague, described her as 'the patron saint of hysteria'. So-called near death experiences in which some people claim to have met Jesus or floated outside their own body can be explained by hypoxia, caused by lack of oxygen to the brain and the visual cortex in traumatic events.

A second criticism is the problem of conflicting experiences, which are inevitably shaped by the religious traditions in which they occur. Adherents of all faiths claim to have had experiences that validate those religions. But they cannot all be valid because the various religions are mutually inconsistent. A Catholic may have claim to have visions of the Virgin Mary, as did Bernadette of Lourdes, but we would be astonished to hear a Protestant describing such experiences. Neither, of course, would claim to have seen visions of the female Hindu deity Lakshmi, the goddess of light, not least because the single Christian god is traditionally male.

Again, if I gaze in wonder at the night sky or walk in daylight through the woods and experience birds singing, the wind blowing on my cheeks, numerous wild flowers in bloom and the sun shining through the trees, unless my senses have been impaired, I know that I have experienced these things, and I may feel awe at the sheer beauty of nature. But some people go further and say that they have experienced something transcending the self or even the actual presence of God. But can a god be experienced in this way? Many philosophers, including Aquinas as well as Kant, have argued that God is simply beyond our experience – so much so that for Aquinas our ability just to speak of God is strictly limited. It does seem odd that a god would let some people but not others 'experience' him. In much the same way, He apparently answers some prayers but ignores others and performs occasional miracles amidst wholesale disasters. All would appear to testify to a highly whimsical deity.

Finally, it is sometimes said that religion is only for those who need crutches. This seemingly frivolous remark actually expresses something quite important. You hear plenty of stories of drug addicts, terminal patients, bereaved relatives, murderers, terrorists and unhappy people 'turning to God'. But it would be absurd if someone said: "I was happy with my life, could cope with injustice, was not afraid of death and generally had a sense of wellbeing. Then suddenly I accepted Jesus into my heart!" It would be absurd because religion has nothing to offer a person like this. Of course, there are many people who are not so gratified with life. They may therefore choose to use the idea of a god to fill up the gaps in their happiness, just as others drag in a god to account for something which science has not yet explained.

All the main so-called 'proofs' of the existence of a god are thus seen to be be totally fallacious. On the other hand, there are many arguments against the existence of such a being. Can perfection create imperfection and yet remain perfect? Can an all-powerful and all-loving being create hatred, misery and suffering and yet remain both all-powerful to be able to prevent it and all-loving to want to prevent it? If God caused the universe, what caused God? If the universe always existed, what role is there for a god anyway?

Humanists believe that the idea of an all-loving and all-powerful god belongs to the dustbin of history. Nietzsche's question at the beginning is answered by saying that God is man's blunder and we should throw off the shackles of a discredited, outmoded, repressive, dangerous and unnecessary idea and instead assume responsibility for our own lives and the lives of others. We should have the courage to rely on ourselves and our own powers. We should think, feel and act for ourselves and abide by the logic of

results. We should, as Bertrand Russell suggested, remember our humanity, and forget the rest.

7. The 12 Myths of Christmas

THE FIRST MYTH OF CHRISTMAS - Christ was Born of a Virgin

This was an impossibility in those days, but the myth was nevertheless a common one. Zoroaster, Mithras, Perseus, Horus and Krishna were all alleged to have been born of a 'virgin'. It was taken as a sign of purity.

THE SECOND MYTH OF CHRISTMAS - Christ was born on 25th December

Quite wrong, of course. The error was first made by Dionysius Exiguus ('Dennis the Dwarf') in 525 AD, probably to fit in with the Roman date of Saturnalia, the sun God Saturn's official birthday. Jesus of Nazareth was probably not born in the cold rainy season, when shepherds did not 'watch their flocks by night', but more probably in the spring or summer.

THE THIRD MYTH OF CHRISTMAS - Christ was born 2015 years ago

This error can also be traced to Dionysius Exiguus. The flight into Egypt, described in Matthew's Gospel, if it happened at all, must have occurred before 4BC, because King Herod, from whom Joseph, Mary and their baby were fleeing, died in that year. So Jesus was definitely not born in the year 1CE. One theory about how he arrived at that year is that in Luke we are told that Jesus began his ministry at about the age of 30 when it was 15 years into the reign of Tiberius, and he became emperor in 14 AD. This would suggest that the author of Luke was wrong as well.

THE FOURTH MYTH OF CHRISTMAS - Christ was descended from David

According to Matthew, this was 28 generations back; according to Luke it was 41. Both give a list of names but, apart from Joseph, only two names are identical in both lists. In any case, we now know that the first 10 Books of the Old Testament are almost certainly fiction, written 1,000 years or more after the events they purport to describe. The David depicted in the Bible possibly never even existed.

THE FIFTH MYTH OF CHRISTMAS - Christ was God incarnate

A ridiculous claim, which even the Christ of the Gospels did not make. The early Christians didn't believe this myth either, but the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD decided to replace the myth of the Jewish Messiah by an even more fantastic myth and so declared the incarnation as official.

THE SIXTH MYTH OF CHRISTMAS - Christ offered salvation to all

The Gospel Christ is quite explicit that the rich would not be saved. "Woe unto ye that are rich, for ye have received your consolation". The rich would have no more chance of getting to heaven than a camel would of going through the eye of a needle.

THE SEVENTH MYTH OF CHRISTMAS - Christ preached peace and goodwill

The Christ of the Gospels is rather contradictory here. On the one hand, he exhorts the poor to turn the other cheek, while at the same time he says he has brought 'not peace, but a sword'. There would also be eternal punishment in hell, complete with 'wailing and gnashing of teeth, for those who refused to follow his teachings - "He that believeth not shall be damned".

THE EIGHTH MYTH OF CHRISTMAS -Christians invented Christmas

Quite wrong, of course: Christians hijacked a pagan festival and tried to turn it into their own. It was originally a celebration of the return of the sun god on earth. The ancient Romans celebrated Saturnalia. For the Persians it was the birthday of Mithras; and for the Egyptians it was the birthday of Osiris. In the Roman Saturnalia, roles were reversed, presents exchanged, and gambling,

feasting, drinking and singing naked in the street were part of the festivities. The poet Catullus described them as 'the best of days'.

THE NINTH MYTH OF CHRISTMAS - The original Father Christmas was Christian

Woden was the god of magic and healing and he rode across the sky on Sleipnir, his eight-legged horse. At midwinter, Woden came to earth and-down the smoke-hole in the form of Father Christmas to dispense goodwill, peace, plenty and presents. Christians stole this myth when they turned a 4th century Turkish bishop called Nicholas into a saint. The Americans corrupted his name into 'Santa Claus'.

THE TENTH MYTH OF CHRISTMAS - Christmas gifts are about love

This is only partly true. As Levi-Strauss has observed, gifts can be connected just as much with power relations. Men may give presents to women to establish power over them; the same can be said to apply to Christmas presents for children.

THE ELEVENTH MYTH OF CHRISTMAS - Christmas is a religious festival

Despite the pious platitudes about babes in mangers, wise men bearing gifts and 'peace on earth', Christmas is essentially an orgy

of animal slaughter, conspicuous consumption, alcoholism, hangovers and, for many, increased loneliness. For the vast majority of people, the 'meaning' of Christmas is far removed from 'the official version'.

THE TWELTH MYTH OF CHRISTMAS - Most people believe the Christmas myths

The vast majority in Christendom know in their heart of hearts that the Christmas story is a myth, but they play along with the whole charade, thus ensuring that Christmas is an orgy of hypocrisy on a grand scale.

8. Ten Facts You Should Know About The Bible

1. It is an ANTHOLOGY of writings by SCORES of authors spanning nearly a THOUSAND YEARS from the 8th or 9th century BC to the mid-second century AD.
2. There were HUNDREDS of texts regarded from time to time as holy Jewish or Christian writings, but the Bible as we know it was chosen by St Jerome about 400 AD. It contains 71 books and is still the basis of the Catholic Bible. The Protestant Bible has 5 fewer books because the reformers regarded these as unworthy of being called scripture.
3. As it stands, the Bible is a mishmash of poetry, history, legend, myth, philosophy, ethics, prophecy, parable and superstition. Good and bad, beautiful and ugly, savagery and tenderness, are inextricably bound up in its pages.

4. Many of the people and events it relates are unsupported by external evidence. There is no outside corroboration for Adam, Eve, Noah and the Flood, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Aaron, the Exodus. Saul, David, Solomon and even Jesus Christ himself. They are all unsupported legends.
5. Its Song of Songs is a collection of erotic poetry; its book of Jonah questions the very practice of prophecy which is so central to much of the Old testament; its set of laws in Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy contradict one another; its book of Ecclesiastes seems to have slipped in by mistake since it rejects life after death and man's special place in creation (3. 18-21; 9. 5-6) and its book of Joshua is nothing less than a warrant for genocide.
6. A basic CONTRADICTION exists between its two volumes. The Old Testament reports the successful military campaigns of a warlike tribe in the service of a WARLIKE GOD; whereas the New Testament seems to preach, at least in places, a message of peace. In the one, the message is clearly an eye for an eye, in the other it is the turned cheek.
7. It offers two contradictory stories of creation in Genesis. The first story in Genesis 1. 2,4 and the second story in 2. 5 - 3 . 24 tell of two different creations, both of which cannot be true because their details contradict one another. Man, beasts and plants are created in two different sequences, and man and woman are made in two different ways. In the first, it is plants (third day), then beasts (fifth day), then man (sixth day). In the second account, man is created before vegetation. We now know that these accounts were written by two

different people, and that the first was written about 200 years AFTER the second.

8. The Gospels offer CONTRADICTIONARY accounts of the birth of Jesus (see Who was Jesus?).
9. The Gospels offer CONTRADICTIONARY accounts of the ancestry of Jesus (see Who was Jesus?).

10. The New Testament also presents differing resurrection stories (see Who was Jesus?).

So this is the book which many Christians believe is the unerring word of God. This is the book which is stamped as God's word by act of the British Parliament. This is the book which is forced into the hands of children in our schools. This is the book which is used as a kind of fetish for swearing upon in our Courts Of Law. And this is the book for which we are still liable to imprisonment for bringing into 'disbelief and contempt'.

9. Who Was Jesus?

There are no eyewitness accounts of the life of Jesus Christ and no contemporary writer who was not a follower makes any mention of him whatever. So did he in fact exist at all? We are forced to rely on the testimony of believers. Strangely, the man who lived nearest in time to the Jesus of tradition tells us least about him. Paul's Epistles date from about AD 50-60, but he must have been a Christian by AD 40 because he informs us (2 Corinthians 2. 32) that the governor of Damascus under King Aretas, who is known to have died in that year, tried to have him arrested for his Christian activities. If Jesus was crucified around AD 30, then Paul was a contemporary. Yet he supplies us with astonishingly little details about the man. He says nothing about the time and

place of Jesus' existence., nothing about his parents or indeed about the so-called virgin birth; and nothing about his miracles or ethical teachings. He does mention death by crucifixion and a resurrection several times, but he says nothing about when, where and in what circumstances these momentous events occurred. In fact, the Jesus of Paul is not a recognisable person at all but instead a supernatural, pre-existent being. It is an essentially mystical vision, which is all the more curious for being about someone who supposedly lived, not in some vague, distant past but contemporaneously with the writer.

As for the Gospels, they are a mass of contradictions and confusions. It is perhaps a sad reflection on human credulity that so powerful a force in human history as Christianity should be based largely on the testimony of a quartet of incompetent charlatans. Consider, for example, the time and place of Jesus' birth. According to Matthew (Matthew 2. 1) and Luke (Luke 1. 5), he was born in the reign of King Herod. Since Herod died in 4BC, his birth could have been no later than that date. However, Luke also tells us that he was born at the time of the census conducted by the Roman governor of Syria, Quirinius (whom Luke calls Cyrenius). But this census occurred shortly after Judaea had been annexed by Rome in AD 6, and it certainly could not have happened in the reign of King Herod when Rome had no jurisdiction over the area. This census story is mentioned only in Luke and it smacks of fiction. But why did Luke consider it necessary?

The answer brings us to the question of Jesus' birthplace. Mark says that he 'came from Nazareth of Galilee' (Mark 1. 9). Matthew, however, says that he was 'born in Bethlehem of Judaea' (Matthew 2. 1). It is Luke who tries to reconcile these two traditions by suggesting that Mary and Joseph had indeed been living in Nazareth but that the census required everyone to return 'into his own city'. (Luke 2 . 3), and Bethlehem was where Joseph had been

born. But no such census was conducted in the reign of Herod and in any case such an order would have been plain silly. One of the purposes of a census is to record the movement of people, so why on earth should it require them to move back? Moreover, Joseph would have paid his taxes where he lived and worked, so it would have been totally unnecessary for him or anyone to undertake such a journey. Bethlehem is 70 miles as the crow flies from Nazareth, a long and hazardous trek in those days, especially for someone like Mary in late pregnancy.

The real reason for giving Jesus a Bethlehem birth is provided in John's Gospel. He reports that many Jews of Jesus' time disputed whether or not he was the Messiah because he came from Galilee, whereas "hath not the scripture said, that Christ cometh out of the seed of David, and out of the town of Bethlehem, where David was? (John 7. 42). Luke and Matthew were thus clearly anxious to establish that Jesus had fulfilled the Old Testament prophets such as Micah: "Yet out of thee (Bethlehem) shall he come forth unto me so that is to be the ruler in Israel" (Micah 5. 2). As with so many of the Gospel narratives, it is not unreasonable to suspect an invention, either by Luke or his source, to ensure a prophecy.

To give substance to the prophecy that Jesus came 'out of the seed of David', both Matthew and Luke provide a genealogy. Matthew starts with Abraham but Luke daringly takes it all the way back to Adam! Ignoring such implausibilities, let us stick to that part of each linking Jesus and David - a period of about a thousand years. Whether there was a real David is far from certain, but anyway these two Gospel writers differ in the number of generations, Matthew offering 25 and Luke 41. And apart from Joseph, only two names are identical in both lists. They do not even agree on the name of Joseph's father, whom Matthew calls Jacob and Luke calls Heli.

This anxiety to provide a Davidic lineage for Jesus by both Matthew and Luke goes hand-in-hand with the startling claim of a

virgin birth. On the one hand, Joseph's paternity and Jesus's Davidic ancestry are dwelt upon, while on the other it is denied that he had any earthly father at all. Now the virgin birth myth is very old. The ancients concluded that an offspring of a god should have a, purer, higher and holier maternal origin than that of ordinary mortals. So, for example, Juno bore Mars by touching a flower and gave birth to Vulcan by being overshadowed by the wind - or conceived of 'The Holy Ghost' if you like, since 'ghost' originally meant 'wind'. The Mexican god Quexalcote also had an immaculate conception and coincidentally was crucified and rose again from the dead after three days. Osiris of Egypt, Krishna of India are two other cases of immaculate conception.

The New Testament presents us with different Resurrection stories. According to John, it is Mary Magdalene alone who discovers the empty tomb. According to Matthew, it is she and 'the other Mary' who come to see the tomb, while in Mark it is three women who come to anoint the body with sweet spices. In Luke there are several women and two men in 'shining garments'. Neither Mark nor Luke mentions a great earthquake, which is recorded in Matthew. There are also different versions of Jesus' supposed appearance after death. Paul has him appearing not only to the disciples but also to "above five hundred brethren at once" (1 Corinthians 15. 6), and "last of all he was seen of me also" (1. Corinthians 15. 8). But he implies that these appearances were spiritual: "Now I say this, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Corinthians 15. 20). In the Gospels, however, his presence is clearly physical. In Luke, for example, we have Thomas feeling the wounds of the cross and Jesus insisting that a spirit has flesh and bones "as ye see me have" (Luke 24. 39). Again, while Paul says nothing about the locality of his appearances, Matthew locates them in Galilee while Luke has him appear in Jerusalem, 70 miles away.

But what does all this tell us about the real Jesus? Nothing, of course, for the simple reason that we know nothing. Whether he was a carpenter, a holy man, a rebel, or even a nonentity, we simply cannot say. There is insufficient evidence to enable us to sort out the fact from the fiction. All the Gospel stories should be approached with extreme scepticism, not least the alleged miracles the man is alleged to have performed. The man of the Gospels is really a man of his time, who believed as they did that the world was about to end and that diseases are caused by evil spirits which enter the body and need to be cast out.

And what should we make of the claim that Jesus would save mankind? The idea of a divine self-sacrifice is frankly absurd. God's justice made him require the death of his innocent son in order to defeat human sin (inherited from Adam). God apparently needs to have a sacrifice before he can forgive us. And what of all those who have never heard of Jesus' sacrifice? As Jean Meslier put it, "What are we to think of a God who comes to be crucified and to die to save the world, and who leaves so many nations to damnation?"

10. Science and Religion

Science is defined both by its aims and its methods. It aims to discover the facts, the truth, about the natural and human worlds. It aims to be objective; that is, to seek the truth independently of our own wishes and desires, to remove personal values from the inquiry. In other words, it seeks to make positive statements of fact or logic and to eliminate normative, or value, statements: to say what was, is, or will be and not what ought to be.

A science is also defined by its methods. To be scientific is to be methodical, systematic, precise, orderly, logical, etc. Many scientists would accept the hypothetical-deductive model of the scientific method outlined by Karl Popper. First, we make assumptions or hypotheses. Second, we form deductions,

predictions, implications and conclusions from these assumptions. Then we test these deductions by observation and experiment to discover evidence for them. If the evidence supports the theory, we accept it; if it does not quite fit, we modify the theory in the light of the evidence; if it does not fit at all, we reject the hypothesis and seek an alternative which better fits the evidence.

Science cannot be dogmatic. It is not infallible because scientific theories are subject to revision. Since we can never have a logical guarantee that a theory will not be falsified, we can never claim that we are in possession of the final truth. Thus the 'truths' of science are held 'until further notice'. This implies that science is open-minded. It also implies that a theory is not scientific if it could not conceivably be refuted by contrary evidence. Clearly, therefore, a crucial aspect of a truly scientific approach to any matter is the critical attitude, which works with the judgements confirmed by experience thus far, but holds even the best confirmed views in principle ready for modification or even complete replacement.

Religion is open to persuasive definition. It may be taken to mean simply a commitment to certain ideals of life - any committed faith. In this sense, Humanists could be described as religious. However, most Humanists dislike this description because in the Western World of Jewish-Christian traditions 'religion' means something more specific. It almost always refers to a creed involving belief in a personal god who created the universe, who commands our obedience and deserves our worship, and who made us immortal.

Religion in this sense does claim to be scientific because it offers explanations of the universe and our place in it. The monotheistic tradition maintains that there is one and only one god, that he is all-knowing, all-powerful and all-loving, that he created the universe, that he made human beings as special creatures with a soul, and that when we die this soul survives our body in 'another

place'. The Christian tradition makes further claims. Until recently, all Christians believed that god intervened in this world in the form of Jesus Christ. However, many Christians would now reject this claim that Christ was god incarnate and argue instead that he was a prophet who embodied many of the best Christian values.

Many of the assumptions of religion in the sense outlined above have been refuted or at least challenged by science. Physics indicates that we are not living in the centre of the universe but in the backwoods of space. There may well have been a Big Bang but it does not follow that everything began in this way. It is entirely possible that an infinite universe contains local pockets of expansion and contraction. What we call 'the universe' may therefore be only one of many possible universes, or a region of a single universe, each of which has its own scientific laws. And none of these universes necessarily required a creator to get going. They may simply have arisen from random quantum fluctuations.

Biology indicates that we are part of nature and descended from other animals. "Slow, gradual, cumulative natural selection is the ultimate explanation of our existence" (Richard Dawkins: *The Blind Watchmaker*). If humans and other animals have a common ancestry, we cannot have been created with a soul at the beginning, unless they too have souls. All the biological evidence suggests that we are mortal, like all living creatures.

The social sciences also challenge religion in various ways. Anthropology views its origins in terms of fear of the unknown, sociology regards it as a means of social control or the worship of 'community', and Freudian psychology sees it as a projection of the need for a secure father-figure. The perspective of the social sciences leaves us with the possible conclusion that religion is not really a cognitive belief at all, based on reason and intellect, but an emotive belief, based on need.

The methods by which religion reaches its conclusions are also totally unscientific. Ultimately, it relies on faith - which is literally 'belief without reason'. We might as well have faith that the moon is made of green cheese. 'Faith' is not a word in the scientific dictionary.

11. Ulster's Killing Faiths

They're not fighting over religion, are they?

The terrorists have not been waving Bibles or rosaries as they plant their bombs or shoot their victims. BUT to maintain that religion is a cloak for a struggle over constitutional allegiance is to simplify a complex and dynamic relationship. It also implies a narrow conception of politics. In its broadest sense, politics embraces the ideologies which dominate or criticise any society. It is a myth that ideas do not profoundly influence actions. In suggesting that the world is indeed ruled by ideas, Keynes pointed to the so-called 'practical' men who believe themselves to be exempt from intellectual influences but who are in reality 'the slaves of some defunct economist'. In Ulster, the enslaved is to two defunct brands of Christianity.

"The Northern Ireland conflict is a religious conflict. Economic and social considerations are also crucial, but it was the fact that the competing populations in Ireland adhered and still adhere to competing religious traditions which has given the conflict its enduring and intractable quality"

- Steve Bruce: *God Save Ulster*, Oxford, 1986, p249

To say that the Ulster Problem is not about religion since people are not killing over theological doctrine is to make at least three false assumptions:

- It assumes that the Problem is only confined to those who do the killing. But if the fighting is related to the disagreements and divisions in society, as it surely is, then it has to be explained in

terms of the issues which divide the two communities. And doctrinal differences are bound to be relevant because they determine the nature of these two communities i.e. Protestants and Catholics.

"Politics in the North is not politics exploiting religion. That is far too simple an explanation: it is one which trips readily off the tongue of commentators who are used to a cultural style in which the politically pragmatic is the normal way of conducting affairs and all other considerations are put to its use. In the case of Northern Ireland the relationship is much more complex. It is more a question of religion inspiring politics than of politics making use of religion.

It is a situation more akin to the first half of seventeenth -century England than to the last quarter of twentieth century Britain"

- John Hickey: *Religion and the Northern Ireland Problem*, Gill and Macmillan, 1984, p67)

- The reasons for the killing offered by the participants and their supporters may not be the true reasons. The fact that they are rarely expressed in overtly religious terms does not render religion irrelevant. For we do not have to accept their explanations of what they are doing. There may be underlying causes of their actions which they fail to discern. The IRA man who says he is killing for age-old republican ideals is not behaving in accordance with the republicanism of Wolfe Tone but instead following a more modern myth of nationalism which is essentially religious in character. It is a sacral nationalism descended from the spiritual vision of Patrick Pearse and is essentially Catholic in character. So, without being aware of it he has transferred his Catholic beliefs and traditions into a political language.

- Above all, the fallacy assumes that a religious war can only be waged over subtle theological arguments. What is overlooked here is that these doctrinal differences - which are certainly real enough for those who think about them ~ have also political, social,

economic and cultural implications which may deeply affect the whole community. In short, religion is not merely a theology; it is also an ideology - a whole way of life and thought, whose concepts and assumptions are diffused throughout the society of believers, informing their morals, customs, political principles, social relations and attitudes to believers of differing ideologies. It is in this sense more than any other that there is no escape from the religious dimension of the Ulster Problem.

How is Religion politicised?

The Catholic strand of Christianity has been a strong and enduring force in Ireland since the arrival of Christianity on the island in the 5th century AD. Paganism was destroyed much more easily than in Britain - Ireland was the only country in Western Europe whose conversion produced no martyrs. Another peculiarity of the early Irish church was that the typical religious centre was the monastery rather than the episcopal see. The monks and friars were poor, scholarly and evangelical and these features were crucial in the survival of the Catholic faith.

It is therefore not difficult to see why the Reformation failed in Ireland. The general backwardness of the lay people and the absence of a university meant that there was no critical atmosphere in the 16th century to challenge the position of the Church. It in turn was not rich enough to stir the anger of an Erasmus or a Luther or to arouse the jealousy of the nobles that was common elsewhere. Also, a nascent national sentiment was being identified with the cause of Catholicism.

"The often uneasy, but remarkably durable, blending of religion and nationalism, was an affair of Catholics"

- Conor Cruise O'Brien: *Ancestral Voices*, Poolbeg Press, 1994, p17

Nevertheless it remained basically a Gaelic Catholic Church until the 19th century and the growth of modern Irish nationalism. The Church played a prominent role in Daniel O'Connell's Repeal movement, O'Connell himself admitting that to win the people over it was necessary to have the priests on his side.

This union of nationalism and Catholicism caused Thomas Davis to warn that "to mingle politics and religion in such a country is to blind men to their common secular interests, to render political union impossible and national independence hopeless". But Davis's warning went unheeded, for as the century progressed, the Catholic clergy took leading parts in all aspects of the nationalist movement, providing the spiritual unity and organisational talent.

Modern Irish nationalism maintains this Catholic character. "Since Parnell, there has been no Protestant leader of Irish nationalism, nor has any Protestant, ever since, been admitted to the inner circles of Irish nationalism"(Conor Cruise O'Brien: Ancestral Voices, p29).

Contemporary Irish republicanism is descended from this tradition and, above all, from the ideology of Patrick Pearse. Pearse identified the Irish nation with Jesus Christ. Ireland was a crucified nation which would have its resurrection and redemption. He and his fellow nationalists would re-enact the sacrifice of Christ, and thus redeem the nation as Christ redeemed the world. For the symbolism to be complete, the national crucifixion and resurrection had to take place at Easter. It is no

coincidence that the seven signatories of the 1916 Proclamation were all Catholics, for the Easter Rising was the most exalted expression of Irish Catholic nationalism. Arguably, little has changed. The offensive of the Provisional IRA begun in 1971 is a Catholic and nationalist offensive, "not only (as claimed) against a British occupation but against a Protestant and unionist population

in Northern Ireland" (O'Brien, op. cit. p4). It is essentially an Irish Catholic imperialist enterprise to force the Protestants of Northern Ireland into a United Ireland.

"The ancient quarrel is, of course, about power, and about its economic base as well as about its political manifestations. But such clichés can hardly satisfy us. If we ask further what are the ends for which the possession of power is coveted, we may perhaps come closer to the truth about Ulster. In that small and beautiful region different cultures have collided because each has a view of life which it deems to be threatened by its opponents and power is the means by which a particular view of life can be maintained against all rivals. These views of life are founded upon religion because this is a region where religion is still considered as a vital determinant of everything important in the human condition. And religion is vital because there have been in conflict three (latterly) two deeply conservative, strongly opinionated communities each of whose Churches still expresses what the members of these Churches believe to be the truth"

- F.S.L. Lyons: *Culture and Anarchy in Ireland*, 1984, p144

The dominant strand of Protestantism is the Puritan outlook. The settlers who came to Ulster from England and Scotland were seeking to establish in Ulster a society which reflected their predominantly Puritan values. One of these key values is a deep-seated hatred of the Catholic religion. As time progressed, they sought to maintain the link with a Protestant state rather than be subsumed into what they saw as a Catholic theocracy. That, ultimately, is the basis of their resistance to a United Ireland.

How does religion divide society?

- The two dominant brands of Christianity are reactionary and inflexible. They are also utterly opposed and have refused to compromise with each other. They regard disputes about the Bible, the role of the Church, tradition, popes and priests,

transubstantiation, sacraments and other rituals as more important than the so-called Christian ethic.

- Politics in Northern Ireland is dogmatic, impassioned and uncompromising because the brands of Christianity which provide meaning to the lives of most people are themselves dogmatic, impassioned and uncompromising.
- The fruit of this sectarian divide is a system of social apartheid. The majority of Catholics and Protestants live in different areas, attend separate schools and clubs, play separate games and worship in separate churches.
- The sectarian division manifests itself in terrorism. The struggle between loyalism and republicanism is in no small part a politicised expression of the religious division in which the active participants are in reality fighting a Holy War on behalf of their opposing religious ideologies. They are the unwitting slaves of defunct theological ideas.
- The Troubles of the last 25 years have put the Christian churches firmly to the test. And they have failed for the same reasons that they have failed for nearly 400 years. They have refused to examine and civilise the nature of their own beliefs. They have persistently placed their own power and influence above real and risky attempts to reconcile the people. Above all, they have failed because in willfully pursuing their own tribal deities and rituals they have made a mockery of the loving ethic which is allegedly the basis of their faith. They can never save Ulster because they heart the heart of its Problem. *

"If the characteristic mark of a healthy Christianity be to unite its members by a bond of fraternity and love, then there is no country where Christianity has more completely failed than Ireland"

- W.E.H. Lecky

12. Religion in Schools

This is a crucial area for Humanists in Northern Ireland. Education plays a very important part in Humanist thought. We believe that it is the duty of every community to make the future better than the present. Education is an investment, not only or even mainly in a narrow economic sense but also socially and morally. It should try to fulfil at least three basic functions: the development of talents and skills; the fostering of independence of thought; and the improvement in moral and social behaviour. It is also essential that children should be taught in a relaxed, friendly atmosphere to encourage them to love and be loved, to enjoy a social life.

The vast majority of schools in Northern Ireland are segregated along religious lines and although the number of integrated schools is increasing there is evidence that in many of them religion assumes an even greater importance than ever .

According to the League Tables, Ulster schoolchildren are often top of the class. For this we congratulate ourselves on the allegedly superior nature of our education system. Yet in some ways we do not treat our children as if they actually deserved this honour. Indeed, in one key area we seem to assume that they are dunces. That area is Religious Education.

Before considering the specific case of Northern Ireland, we should first set it in the UK context. Britain is at odds with other democracies such as France, India and the USA in making religion compulsory in schools. Indeed, whereas in America to cite just one stark contrast it is against the law to teach religion in state schools, in Britain it is actually against the law NOT to teach it! Recent reforms left the 1944 (1947 in Ulster) Act largely untouched, with religion being designated as a 'compulsory additional subject' and schools still legally obliged to hold a daily act of worship in morning assembly.

The law does not in fact compel children to attend either of these activities but instead empowers parents to compel them. It then makes the assumption that parents are indeed compelling them unless they formally state in writing that their child is 'contracting out'. Recently, the law was changed to allow Sixth formers in England and Wales to opt out without parental consent, but this change does not apply in Northern Ireland.

What has daily worship in schools got to do with education anyway? Even some religious groups and individuals like the Evangelical Alliance and the Archbishop of York are beginning to question its effectiveness on the grounds that the worship forced on children probably does more to alienate them from religion than any other single factor. While this may be pleasing to unbelievers, it is hardly a satisfactory way to treat a serious subject.

The situation in Northern Ireland is made even worse than in the UK as a whole by the treatment here of RE. There is no central syllabus for RE in England and Wales, and English education authorities draw up their own syllabus. Take, for example, the Agreed Syllabus for the London borough of Hounslow. It is entitled Widening Horizons, a title which itself speaks volumes. It aims to develop and extend knowledge and awareness of belief systems which cover the major world faiths and life stances. Its core areas include Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Sikhism and Humanism.

In marked contrast we in Ulster have a Core Syllabus which seeks not to open children's minds but instead strives to keep them firmly closed. The main reason is that it was drafted by the main Christian churches. In their wisdom' they presumed that since most adults here are Christians, the Core Syllabus should be exclusively Christian also. So much for the rights of the child and minorities. As a result of pressure, they have recently included the

study of two other religions at Key Stage 3, but this change does not go nearly far enough.

The rights of the child do not really figure very prominently in Ulster's dominant educational philosophy. An ingrained feature of both Protestant and Catholic ideology is the notion that schools have a fundamental duty to provide young people with a 'Christian' education. But what precisely does this mean? What is a characteristically Christian form of schooling? It would be rather absurd to claim, for example, that there was a distinctly Christian form of Mathematics or Geography. Nor is there any readily discernible Christian approach to punishment and discipline. And there is no peculiarly Christian view of what constitutes a balanced curriculum.

In fact, the true meaning of a 'Christian education in Ulster is much less substantive than this analysis might suggest. It is quite simply that children should be 'educated' in the Christian faith. What message does this restrictiveness convey to Moslems, Hindus and members of other faiths not to mention the 14 per cent or more who have no religion? In other words, it is a perfect example of what has been called the primitive concept of education the view a primitive tribe might have when it seeks to pass on to the next generation its rituals, its way of farming, and so on, according to its own customs and beliefs. Not the least problem with this concept of education is the fact that in Ulster there are two warring tribes and two distinct sets of Christian beliefs.

James Madison, author of the First Amendment of the American Constitution, asked a pertinent question: "Who does not see that the same authority which can establish Christianity, in exclusion of all other religions, may establish with the same ease any particular sect of Christians, in exclusion of all other sects?" Owing to the almost total tribal segregation in Ulster schools, covering about 97% of young people, this is precisely what has

happened, with the version of Christianity promoted depending on the denomination of the particular school.

The frightening extent of this tribal indoctrination is indicated by the almost total absence, as revealed in surveys, of any attempt to discuss the basic beliefs of the neighbouring tribe. In the early 1970s, for example, Greer discovered from questioning Heads of RE departments that at Sixth Form level the beliefs of Hindus, Buddhists and even Humanists were often mentioned, but "no mention was made of the problems of comparative religion which lies at the root of so many social problems in Northern Ireland, the Protestant Roman Catholic division". If this holds true today, and one suspects that it is still largely the case, then Ulster children grow up in almost total ignorance of the religious beliefs of the other basic strand of Christianity.

It seems that the dominant ideology of a 'Christian' education is narrowly conceived in terms not just of instilling Christianity to the almost total exclusion of other faiths and life stances but also specifically of instilling one brand of Christianity to the exclusion of the other. There is absolutely nothing to counter the widespread assumption on the one side that the pope is the antichrist or on the other that Protestants are not 'real' Christians. Here is a shocking dereliction of duty by the main churches in the face of 25 years of sectarian strife and bigotry. Even their conception of Christianity in the new Core Syllabus should be strongly challenged. It is as if Darwin, Strauss, Schweitzer and a host of other scholars and scientists had never existed. For this Syllabus adopts an obsolete, fundamentalist approach to the Bible, implicitly rejecting evolution and endorsing Adam and Eve. It thus reflects one notable defect of Irish Christianity in general, namely its very simplicity. It merely serves to perpetuate a frightening certitude about what constitutes true belief and an almost willful refusal to admit that Christianity is open to doubt.

This kind of denominational brainwashing negates the whole purpose of an advanced educational system. Education is certainly not about bringing up a child within any particular faith. It is about the opportunities for a child to learn of many different systems of beliefs and attitudes of mind, so that he or she can make a personal choice among them. This is surely one of the basic rights of a child ~ rights which are all too easily forgotten in Northern Ireland. Children are individual people, not private possessions of their parents or fodder to swell church membership. The latter will naturally prejudice children in favour of their own beliefs, so the school has a vital role in redressing the balance by making other views known. Ulster's schools singularly fail to fulfil this role.

This appalling situation is itself a strong argument for abolishing 'Religious Education' throughout the UK and for substituting 'Philosophy' or 'Moral Education' or 'Education in Stances for Living' as a subject in the curriculum. Religious pleading should be left to the home and the church. Children should certainly learn about religion in school, but on a comparative basis or in the context of examining various alternative belief systems. This comparative perspective is clearly necessary in view not only of the obviously plural nature of modern Britain but also of the deep religious polarisation in the province of Ulster.

Traditionalists will recoil in horror from any proposal to abolish 'Religious Education'. They see morality and religion as being inseparable, the one flowing from the other. Abolishing RE would mean to them a loss of any effective ethical teaching and therefore a further decline in moral standards in society generally. There is one, and only one, sense in which they may be right. To link moral education so closely with a set of beliefs which are themselves widely in question in the modern world runs the risk that, if the child comes to discard these beliefs, then the moral values associated with them will also be rejected. But this is another argument in favour of treating the moral sphere as independent of

religion and of granting to Moral Education the same autonomy as any other subject in the curriculum ..

In any case, the record of Christianity in Ulster and elsewhere is hardly a model of morality or humanity. It has certainly not provided a reliable guide to the development of values such as independent thought, respect for truth and reason, open-mindedness, tolerance and respect for life. If anything, it has in practice promoted the opposite of such values. Christianity in Ireland has a lot to answer for, and yet the predominant view is that children would all be much worse if they were not taught it!

Research in fact points to the relative moral naiveté and backwardness of Ulster children compared to their counterparts in Britain and America. The roots of this ethical underdevelopment do not lie in any intellectual inferiority on the part of the province's young. They lie, rather, in the pressures from the home, the church and, sad to say, the school to conform to traditional modes of thought. And not the least cause of this conformity is an overdose of religion in 'Religious Education' and a marked deficiency of secular moral teaching. On the British mainland RE in many schools has, in fact, broadened away from the inculcation of a distinct set of beliefs and in some areas has become Moral Education in all but name. This has not yet happened to any real extent in Northern Ireland's schools, where ethics are still largely filtered through a religious prism.

Secular Moral Education would not invoke the beliefs of one particular section of the community but would be genuinely undenominational. There is no shortage of material in the contemporary world or in relevant literature on the subject to provide detailed and interesting syllabuses throughout the school years. The aim should be to assist in the development of autonomous, morally responsible adults. This should lead to the independent arrival at a conviction of one's own accountability to

one's fellow human beings and to a rational and emotional concern for justice, freedom, tolerance, truth, and other humane values.

But Moral Education is not just a subject for the school curriculum. It is also an aspect of the school itself For it also lies in the daily influences and experiences through which children learn the basics of self-respect, joy in co-operation, concern for others, tolerance of their ways and beliefs, and so on. And if Moral Education is in large part a practical process of inter personal and group influences, then schools in a divided society are totally failing in their moral duty if they themselves remain a microcosm of that division. In other words, moral education cannot be effectively taught at all in Ulster while schools are segregated. Proper Moral Education is inextricably linked to integrated schools.

The way forward in Ulster education is to establish schools that are both integrated and pluralist. Ideally, Humanists would like to see state subsidies removed from voluntary schools altogether, or they should be nationalised with compensation, As far as possible, integration should be on a basis of numerical equality of Protestant and Catholic children, who each represent about 50% of the total child population. Both collective worship and RE should ideally be abolished and replaced with agreed syllabuses in Religion, Philosophy and Ethics.

These proposals are clearly radical, but it cannot be emphasised enough that the segregated and church dominated system of education in Northern Ireland does greatly contribute to the province's Problem, and only when Protestants and Catholics mix freely and equally from nursery school level upwards is there likely to be any real progress towards a harmonious community.

Yet there are signs that the main churches are endeavouring to tighten their grip on schools. The main Protestant churches, through a Transferor Representatives Handbook, are encouraging

governors of state schools to appoint teachers and principals who support Protestant values, and Catholic schools blatantly advertise for teachers who share the Catholic ethos of the school authorities. Even the integrated movement is being targeted. Protestant churches are encouraging some state schools to acquire integrated status in the hope that they will continue to educate mostly Protestants and instil a Protestant ethos.

These disgraceful attempts to manipulate the educational system for theocratic ends should be strongly opposed by all parents. The time has come for a revolt of the people against clerical power. It is time to secularise the schools. For too long the churches have been allowed to dictate the rules of the educational game. The moment has come to expel God from our schools. If we did this, then we would have begun the real peace process.

13. A Humanist Ethical Code

Think for Yourself

Ethics is not simply a matter of what we do. It also compels us to think before we act. Nor can we act morally simply by appealing to what others think, because they may be wrong. As Socrates, the founder of moral philosophy, realised, moral thinking arises when we pass beyond the stage of being directed by traditional rules and begin instead to think for ourselves in critical terms. We have to think out our principles in the light of which we make our decisions. A key word is autonomy, which here means acting as independent moral agents. Unfortunately, only a minority of people ever seem to reach this stage. A common classification of cognitive moral development is the pre-conventional, conventional and post-conventional. Most people rarely proceed beyond the conventional stage, and this fact

will be especially true in very traditional and conservative societies where there is likely to be a large measure of consensus on what is right and wrong and where there is little exposure to alternative viewpoints. In a society like Northern Ireland there is no shortage of authoritarian figures - priests, teachers, youth leaders, politicians - telling others how they should think. This conformism is particularly prevalent in religious societies, for religion has always been the greatest foe of free thought. The main agent of change has to be education. If morality has to be learned, then the young have to be led along the path to autonomy. So far, education has failed in this task, and it will continue to fail until at the very least there is integrated schooling and moral education becomes a subject in its own right, freed from the constraints of RE.

Respect Truth and Reason

The world's ills are not simply the result of human wickedness; they are also due to ignorance, stupidity, and misunderstandings. Knowledge and intelligence are therefore of crucial importance in any advanced code of ethics. We may not logically be able to derive 'ought' from 'is', but our nature and our needs require that we use knowledge to enhance the good life. 'Knowledge itself is power', noted Francis Bacon, and whether it is the medical discoveries that assist us in curing disease, the technological advances that improve our material welfare, or the psychological and sociological insights that enable us to make people happier and more fulfilled, knowledge clearly enriches human life. It is a primary means to achieving mental and physical health. Moreover, the search for truth is itself a good and the joy of discovery can be one of our greatest pleasures. The philosopher David Hume suggested that "'tis not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger". But reason

does play a crucial role in ethics as well as in the acquisition of knowledge. It is by our reason that we acquire the ability to sympathise with another's situation because we have to think out what it would be like to him or her in that situation. To empathise with others is to use our reason. The role of empathy explains the importance which Humanists place on the Golden Rule of human behaviour. This principle is older than Christianity and is found, for example, in the Sutra Kritanga (circ. 550BC) and in Confucius: "Do not do to others what you would not like for yourself". Reason in ethics also means taking into consideration all our relevant desires and not just the desire that happens to be strongest at the moment. In other words, it involves us thinking about the consequences of our actions. Thus, as Bertrand Russell put it, "a man is rational in proportion as his intelligence informs and controls his desires" (*Can Men Be Rational?*). It is also in this sense that Leonard Woolf spoke when he remarked: "the sordid and savage story of history has been written by man's irrationality, and the thin precarious crust of civilisation which has from time to time been built over the bloody mess has always been built by reason" (BBC broadcast, 1949).

Be Sceptical, Yet Open-Minded

Much harm in the world results from, ideas, whether religious or secular, which are held dogmatically and imposed on whole communities. Humanists are naturally critical of religious ideologies, such as Catholicism or Protestant fundamentalism. But we are also critical of most political ideologies. This does not mean that we reject them all, but it does mean that we subject them to the severest critical scrutiny. It also means that we believe facile certainties are mistaken and dangerous, however secure they make their supporters feel in their own minds. From our more sceptical perspective, we think that there are no final solutions, that societies will always have problems, that life cannot be neatly wrapped up, and that knowledge is always expanding. We believe

that people have no need to feel unhappy or insecure about a state of scepticism and doubt and that the world would be a better place if more people were, in the words of Francis Bacon, 'committed to uncertainty'.

Respect Values

Values are of crucial importance to Humanists. We believe in the fullest realisation of the best and nobles that we are capable of as human beings. We value reason and science, human intelligence, justice and fairness, altruism, integrity, honesty, truthfulness, freedom and responsibility. Humanists also prefer to stress the positive side of our natures: optimism rather than pessimism, hope rather than despair, learning in the place of dogma, truth instead of ignorance, joy rather than guilt or sin, tolerance in the place of bigotry and fear, love instead of hatred, compassion over selfishness, and so on.

Being a Humanist means BELIEVING IN HUMANE VALUES. It means, for example, supporting the rights of women and the rights of minorities such as Blacks or Gays. The following parts of the code outline some of these humane values.

Respect Life

Humanists n-tight not go as far as Albert Schweitzer who advocated a total reverence for all life, including insects and plants as well as humans and other animals. We would, however, argue that - apart from special cases like self-defence or war - it is wrong to kill human beings irrespective of their race, religion, class or nationality. Even in those exceptional cases where killing may be justified, we should not kill unless there are no other alternatives or the alternatives have been full explored. It may be necessary to kill in order to avoid greater killing. But even in war the means

should be just. The actual killing should not be disproportionate to the goal; serious attempts should be made to avoid civilian deaths; aggression should be directed towards its true object and not at the harmless; and the use of cruel weapons or weapons of mass destruction should be avoided.

Some, but not all, Humanists accept a hierarchy of rights to life. They argue that the more autonomous, self-aware and conscious the being, the greater its right to life. This would mean that human beings in general have more right to life than other animals but that there is also a hierarchy of rights in the animal world itself. Other Humanists are convinced of the equality of all animals. We would certainly all agree that we should avoid inflicting suffering on other species.

Be Open and Honest

Respect for others entails that we do not deceive, abuse exploit them. Personal relationships should be based on trust, and this can only be secure if we are open rather than secretive and honest instead of deceitful. This honesty applies to opinion. While Humanists want to create a good impression, it would be against Humanist principles for us to pretend that we agree on everything. We are essentially freethinkers, which implies that we disagree on many things and indeed welcome argument and debate. It is indeed one of our strengths. Therefore, we should not think that we must conceal our opinion in order not to offend others or in order to present a 'good' image. We hope that openness and honesty is the best policy and that others will respect more for it.

Be Loving and Kind

Christians do not have a monopoly of love. We all believe in its

crucial importance in morality. We would however, reject its Christian basis in 'posthumous self-interest', to use Milton's phrase. To love others because a god commands it is to promote self-centred preoccupation with our own individual virtue and salvation. Instead Humanists see love as grounded in our nature as social animals. Like all gregarious creatures, much of our behaviour is quite naturally co-operative and altruist "The inclination to goodness is deeply imprinted in the nature of man", wrote Francis Bacon. Darwin reached a similar conclusion: "It can hardly be disputed that the social feelings are instinctive or innate in the low animals; and why should they not be so in man?" The difference, of course, is that we have the capacity extend our loving nature outward from the immediate family to the whole of humankind. And that is what we mean by moral progress. It is, as the 19th century Irish historian Lecky noted, an expanding circle: "At one time the benevolent affections embrace merely the family, soon the circle expanding includes first a class, then nation, then a coalition of nations, then all humanity and finally, its influence is felt in the dealings of man with the animal world" (The History of European Morals). Consider also the words of Alfred Adler: "Every human being strives for significance; but people always make mistakes if they do not see that their significance must consist in their contribution to the lives of others" (What Life Should Mean To You).

Help The Weak And Needy

There is much suffering and hardship in the world. Millions live on the margins of existence, dragged down by malnutrition, disease, squalor and illiteracy. Possibly 40% of the people of less developed countries, or at least a quarter of the world's population, live in absolute poverty. In relative terms, too, the gap between rich and poor nations has widened in recent years, and the level

poverty in many developed countries also rose during the 1980s and early 1990s. Since Humanists strive to work together for the common good of humanity, we deplore this trend, both within countries and between them. Regarding the Third World, we would therefore support projects which minimise the dependence of poor nations on the importation of goods from developed nations, and would also commend policies which improve their terms of trade.

We also call for an increase in aid programmes and note that the UK's official aid as a percentage of GDP is lower than that of many European countries. We also favour aid distributed through multinational agencies rather than bilateral aid, which often has strings attached. Within the UK we deplore policies which increase poverty and unemployment.

Respect Nature

Humanism is not just a philosophy of humankind; it is also, because we are a part of the cosmos, a philosophy of nature. We are conscious of the essential unity of the natural and the human worlds and so we wish to protect and enhance the earth and preserve it for future generations. Ecological humanism seeks more humane priorities for production, in which there is achieved a balance between progress and conservation, a compromise between industrial modernisation and environmental protection. We are not advocating a return to a pre-industrial era but rather supporting a policy of sustainable development which tries to conserve instead of depleting natural resources.

Support Worthy Causes

Humanism is not just an armchair philosophy; it is also a springboard to action. Humanists do not just sit around and talk but are also actively involved in attempts to improve society and the long run betterment of humankind. Most Humanists belong to

other organisations in various walks of life and regard them also as expressions of their Humanism.

Humanists themselves give active support to such causes as: the Peace Movement; the campaign to extend the provisions for abortion which apply in Great Britain; greater availability of advice on sexual matters for young people, such as the Brook Centre; greater equality of rights for women in Ulster; equality of rights towards minority groups, such as homosexuals; voluntary euthanasia; the campaign for integrated education; replacement of RE by moral education; and the campaign to persuade other parties, such as Labour, to organise in Northern Ireland. *

NOTE.

The above principles are not the 10 Commandments of Humanism. We do not believe in dictating

morals to one another. Not all Humanists will agree with ALL the sentiments expressed in them. For we value, above all, free thought and tolerance. They are therefore only intended as a guide.

14. Abortion and Women's Rights

NORTHERN Ireland is a highly patriarchal society. The leading figures in politics, the professions and the judiciary are predominantly male, while women are still generally deemed to be best suited as mothers and wives. This second class status in a society which is part of the United Kingdom in the 21st century is truly astonishing and must be a major cause for concern to Humanists.

Ulster's patriarchy stems from a fundamentalist religious outlook in which women are regarded as secondary creations. Indeed, the one thing that all traditional religions have in common is their treatment of women as inferior, and in theocratic states this

inferiority is enshrined in legislation and social custom. In Northern Ireland, there is not one but two reactionary religious forces, Calvinist Protestantism and Roman Catholicism, and both are opposed to equal rights for women. This opposition can be seen clearly on the issue of abortion, where the denial to women of the right to control their bodies reflects the general lack of control over their lives.

Abortion is still illegal in both parts of Ireland. The Abortion Act of 1967, which applies in England, Scotland and Wales, was not extended to Northern Ireland. The present law in the province dates back to the 19th century and prohibits abortion, except when it is necessary to save a woman's life. In practice, abortions are performed in Northern Ireland only when there is a serious risk to health or life.

If the medical professional refuses to perform an abortion on a woman, she has three basic choices: make an expensive journey to England, where she has to pay privately for the operation; endure her unwanted pregnancy; or have a backstreet abortion. Nearly 2,000 women annually make the journey, possibly as many as 35,000 altogether since the 1967 act, to obtain a service which is legal in all the rest of Western Europe with the exception of Ireland.

Arguments against abortion in this country are usually hypocritical. They generally revolve around the so-called 'right to life'. A typical syllogism goes as follows: direct killing of innocent life is morally wrong; a foetus is an innocent life; therefore direct killing of a foetus is morally wrong.

First, 'innocent life' is generally restricted in the argument to humans. This is surely unwarranted. If we defend the foetus as having a life with a stronger claim on us than animal life, then we must be able to point to morally relevant properties it has but which animals lack. In point of fact, on any

fair comparison of such characteristics, like rationality, self-consciousness, awareness, pleasure and pain, and so on, chickens, pigs and calves come out well ahead of the human foetus at ANY stage of pregnancy. A fish or even a prawn shows more signs of consciousness than a human foetus of less than three months.

Yet all these forms of life are killed throughout Ireland – a country with large agricultural and fishing sectors – with no protest from anti-abortionists, most of whom are quite happy to eat them regularly. It is difficult to take seriously an ethic which vents so much anger at abortions and yet remains silent at the widespread slaughter of far more developed forms of life for the taste of their flesh or for profit.

One counter to this argument is that a foetus is a potential human being and human beings have more rights to life than other life forms. But this will not do. Prince Charles is a potential King of England, but he does not now have the rights of a king. There is no reason why a potential person should have the rights of a real person. And this is precisely why the rights of the mother are more important than the rights of the foetus.

It is also possible to make great play of ‘innocence’. It may allegedly be morally justifiable to kill other human beings when they are aggressive and attack us, but in this case they are not ‘innocent’ whereas a foetus is always innocent. This argument might seem convincing until we realise that (1) innocence is a quality of the living not of a collection cells, and (2) those who kill other human beings can always claim that their victims were not entirely ‘innocent’. The plea for the ‘innocent’ foetus is, in fact, a type of moral blackmail which obscures more important moral rights, such as the rights of women and children, the rights of suffering animals and the rights of innocent victims of sectarian murders and beatings.

Humanists are concerned with the QUALITY of life, so in general we believe it is right that some pregnancies should be medically terminated to avoid greater suffering and distress. Women are the best judges of their own situation and the choice of abortion should be available to them, particularly where there is grave physical or psychological risk or where the child would be born severely handicapped. Most Humanists would therefore call for the belated extension of the 1967 Act to Northern Ireland.

The number of women here with unwanted pregnancies has much to do with the lack of childcare facilities, the inadequacy of sex education, poverty and unemployment. Equality of rights for women, advice on sexual matters for young people, and the eradication of poverty are only some of the issues on which Humanists have campaigned, and will continue to campaign, until we see a just, fair, liberal and humane society.

15. Gay and Lesbian Rights

Homophobia is very strong in Northern Ireland, and there is little doubt that much of the prejudice derives from the influence of fundamentalist Christianity. The Catholic Church officially regards homosexuality as an 'unnatural' disease, as do many of the Protestant churches.

Although in the Gospels Jesus Christ pronounced nothing on the subject of homosexual behaviour, it would be wrong to assume that he condoned it. On the contrary, all the evidence points in the opposite direction. He is represented (Matthew 5, 17-20) as endorsing every pronouncement of the Mosaic Law, which required the death penalty for men guilty of homosexual acts (Leviticus 20, 13), and he is presented elsewhere in the Gospels as extremely rigorist in his views on sexual matters.

For example, he wanted to go much further than the strict Mosaic Law in condemning what he regarded as sexual sins. While the Law allowed for divorce in certain circumstances, he condemned it outright and claimed it made people adulterers (Matthew 10, 2-12). He even encouraged his followers to mutilate themselves rather than give way to sexual temptation (Matthew 18,7-9). As Gerald Larue writes (*Sex and the Bible*), the Biblical attitudes towards homosexuality are “the product of a small group of peoples who inhabited a corner of the Mediterranean world some two or three thousand years ago”. It is no more relevant to the modern age than, say, another injunction in Leviticus not to 'round the corners of your heads' or 'mar the corners of thy beard' (Leviticus 19, 27).

Antipathy to Gays and Lesbians is also part and parcel of the negative attitude to sex in general displayed by the churches. This springs from the puritanism of Irish Christianity, with its prejudice against pleasure and desire. In its historical treatment of sexuality as essentially sinful and 'dirty', it is a repressive tradition which has done much harm to Irish people.

For Humanists, on the other hand, sex, whether straight or gay raises no special moral problems at all. We regard it as a basic human want and as one of our most intense pleasures. We believe that individuals should be permitted to express their sexual proclivities as they wish, provided they do not harm or exploit others. It is exploitation and abuse which we oppose, but not free adult consent.

We do not approve of people being treated as sexual objects, why is why we favour intimacy, sensitivity, respect and honesty in this as in all interpersonal relationships. Beyond that, we maintain that sexual matters are no more special ethically than, say, driving a car, and therefore we deplore the overemphasis on sex in the province to the neglect of more serious injustices and immoralities in our society. We would like to see morality focused on the really

pressing political, social and economic problems inherent in contemporary life.

Humanists favour freedom of choice in matters of sexual conduct between consenting adults. We believe that it is each person's individual responsibility to behave in accordance with humane principles and only in the case of protecting minors should the state rightly intervene.

The International Humanist and Ethical Union Policy Statement on Homosexuality, 1994

The IHEU affirms:

1. That one of its aims is to secure justice and fairness in society and to eliminate discrimination and intolerance.
2. That this extends to all people regardless of their beliefs, sex, sexual orientation, or race. 49
 1. That homosexuality and bisexuality are the natural orientation of a human minority which has existed throughout history.
 2. That lesbians, gays and bisexuals make as valuable a contribution to society as their heterosexual counterparts. They are a cross-section of humanity, differing in no perceptible way from their fellow human beings, other than in their sexual orientation.
 3. That the fear and hatred of lesbians and gays, known as homophobia, is totally irrational. It is a social evil akin to racism and, as the Nazi experience has shown, can have the same evil consequences. It harms both the victimised

individuals and the society which tolerates it.

16. The Right to a Gentle Death

About a third of us will die in pain. To put it more strongly, death for many will be agonising and protracted. Yet the law still refuses us the right to ask a doctor to help us die with some dignity.

Why are we still denied the ownership of our own bodies? The religious view, of course, is that our bodies do not belong to us at all. Life, it is said, is a gift of God, and just as only God can give life so only God can take life. Some religions even offer an 'explanation' of terminal pain. *The Papal Declaration on Euthanasia* (1980) states: "According to Christian teaching, suffering, especially suffering during the last moments of life, has a special place in God's saving plan; it is in fact a sharing in Christ's passion".

Religious people are free to believe whatever nonsense they like. Whether they have a right to impose their beliefs on others through the law is an entirely different matter, especially in an increasingly secular society. According to a recent poll, 40% of British people now say they do not believe in a God, and the churches cannot be allowed to dictate to them or even to the majority of their own followers who, according to an NOP poll, are in favour of voluntary euthanasia for the terminally ill.

In any case, most clerics who use this argument do not really believe their own logic. If they did, they would oppose all medical progress and all effort to preserve life. Life and death are subject to the laws of nature and causation and our behaviour can determine them. As David Hume put it: "Shall we assert that the Almighty has reserved to himself in any peculiar manner the disposal of the lives of men, and has not submitted that event in common with others, to the general laws by which the universe is

governed?" (*Of Suicide*). Doctors 'play at God' by prolonging life; why then can they not also shorten it for us if we wish?

And what are we to make of the argument from suffering? God appears to act in a highly selective and arbitrary manner in choosing those who will have the dubious privilege of re-enacting Christ's sacrifice. Many of us, for no apparent reason, will thus be subjected to a living hell, while others will die peacefully in our sleep. What sort of God would contemplate this injustice?

This kind of twisted reasoning is nothing but a sadomasochistic glorification of pain. To regard suffering as part of God's plan is not far removed from justifying the infliction of suffering on other humans. It is the type of pernicious logic that cheapens life.

This leads to another argument. Whether from a religious perspective or not, it is often claimed that euthanasia is a denial of the sanctity of life. This doctrine may well have a religious origin, though it is now part of a broadly secular ethic. But what exactly does it mean? Does it imply that taking life is always intrinsically wrong? If so, it would entail a commitment to absolute pacifism and absolute veganism. We would totally oppose all war or killing animals, even putting the incurably ill pet 'to sleep'. Surely not many would commit themselves to such an extreme position? Most of us would accept that there are special cases when taking life is justified, though we may disagree about what they are. And this is the point voluntary euthanasia is one of those special cases.

Again, it is often suggested that euthanasia devalues life by making it disposable. Therefore, to allow voluntary euthanasia is the first step on a slippery slope which ends with euthanasia becoming involuntary. The spectre of mercenary relatives, eager to dispose of a burdensome mother or father or to lay hands on their money, is often raised. At the very least, many old people may feel that they are a nuisance to others and so opt for euthanasia when in their hearts they want to continue living. It was this argument

which particularly concerned a House of Lords Select Committee a few years ago. It felt that removing the ban would put pressure on elderly or vulnerable people to request 'mercy killing': "It would be next to impossible to ensure that all acts of euthanasia were truly voluntary and that any liberalisation of the law was not abused".

Yet every right and every law faces the possibility of abuse. This fact is hardly a convincing argument for having no rights or no laws. Should we refuse to allow trade unions because some people may be bullied into joining them? Should we ban all marriages because of wife beating? Of course not. The absurdity of this argument should be abundantly clear.

In any case, safeguards against abuse ARE possible. In the Netherlands doctors can practise voluntary euthanasia under strict guidelines laid down in 1985. There are essentially three conditions: voluntariness - the patient's request must be persistent, conscious and freely made, unbearable suffering - the patient's suffering, including but not limited to physical pain, cannot be relieved by other means; and consultation - attending physician must consult with a colleague regarding the patient's condition and the genuineness and appropriateness of the request for euthanasia.

A final argument against voluntary euthanasia is that it would harm the doctor-patient relationship. The purpose of a doctor, it is said, is not to shorten patient's life deliberately but to preserve it, as the Hippocratic Oath in its original form clearly states. Yet the doctor also have a duty to relieve pain, and one of the strongest arguments FOR euthanasia is precisely a compassion for the suffering others. This is why vets put suffering animals 'to sleep'. Why do we show LESS compassion for humans on this matter?

The right to life is meaningless unless we can end it if we choose. Moreover, as the BHA briefing on Voluntary Euthanasia suggests,

"individuals must be free to judge the value of their own lives". The person who makes a genuinely free and rational choice to die is thus exercising his or her right of self-determination. It is we ourselves who own our own lives, not the state or churches or even doctors, and the last right in our lives should be the right to end it the way we want.

The fact of the matter is that the principle of autonomy exists in regard to passive euthanasia. We can refuse treatment. The Voluntary Euthanasia Society encourage us to sign Advance Directives in which we state what treatment we do or do not want if we are rendered incompetent and lose our capacity for rational existence. It is sad that we can refuse treatment in order to die but we cannot yet ask our fellow human beings to help us on our way.

17. A Guide to Humanist Literature

Karen Armstrong: *A History of God* (1993); *Fields of Blood* (2014)

H.J. Blackham: *Humanism* (1968)

J Bronowski: *The Ascent of Man* (1973)

Allan Bullock: *The Humanist Tradition in the West* (1985)

Peter Cave: *Humanism* (2009)

Richard Dawkins: *The Blind Watchmaker* (1988); *The God Delusion* (2006)

Daniel Dennett: *Breaking the Spell* (2006)

A.C. Grayling: *Against All Gods* (2007); *The God Argument* (2013)

Sam Harris: *The End of Faith* (2005)

Hector Hawton: *The Humanist Revolution* (1963)

Christopher Hitchens: *God is not Great* (2007); *The Portable Atheist* (2007)

Stephen Law: *Humanism: A Very Short Introduction* (2011)

John Loftus, ed.: *The Christian Delusion* (2010)

Michael Martin, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism* (2007)

Lloyd and Mary Morain: *Humanism As the Next Step* (1998)

Richard Norman: *On Humanism* (2004)

Michael Palmer *The Atheist's Creed* (2010)

Alom Shaha: *The Young Atheist's Handbook* (2014)

Ariane Sherine, ed.: *The Atheist's Guide to Christmas* (2009)

Richard Stahl, ed.: *Atheism: A Beginner's Handbook* (2007)

Victor Stenger: *God: The Failed Hypothesis* (2007)

Mark Vernon: *Teach Yourself Humanism* (2010)

Nicolas Walter: *Humanism: What's in the Word?* (1997)

A.N. Wilson: *Against Religion* (1991)

18. Guide to Humanist-related Films

<https://www.amazon.com/gp/richpub/listmania/fullview/RS2IHCMMYN2MB>

<https://reelrundown.com/movies/AtheistMovies>

19. Famous Humanists

Alan Stanford (1949 –) Actor, Writer and Director. ‘Distinguished Supporter’ of the Humanist Association of Ireland.

Ronnie Barker (1929 – 2005) TV Comedian in ‘Open All Hours’, ‘Porridge’ and ‘The Two Ronnies’. Humanist funeral

Peter Ustinov (1921 – 2004) Writer and Actor. Humanist Laureate

Stephen Fry (1957 –) Author, Comedian and TV presenter. ‘Distinguished Supporter’ of the British Humanist Association

Linda Smith (1958 – 2006) Comedienne. Ex President of the British Humanist Association
James Randi (1928 –) Stage Magician, challenger of paranormal claims and pseudoscience
Steve Allen (1921 – 2000) Composer, comedian and American

TV personality

Bjorn Ulvaenus (1945 –) Composer. Member of ABBA

Jane Asher (1946 –) Actress, author and entrepreneur

Frank Zappa (1940 – 93) Composer, singer-songwriter, record producer and film director

Writers
Salman Rushdie (1947 –) Author of fiction, including ‘The Satanic Verses’

Isaac Asimov (1920 – 92) Biochemist and science fiction writer, Humanist Laureate
Arthur C Clarke (1928 –) Science fiction writer, Humanist Laureate

Gore Vidal (1925 – 2012) Author and political activist

Christopher Hitchens (1949 – 2011) Author and journalist

Mark Twain (1835 – 1910) Humorist and author of “Tom Sawyer”, “Huckleberry Finn”
Jakob Bronowski (1908 – 74)

Polymath and author of “The Ascent of Man”

Richard Dawkins (1941 –) Biologist and author. Humanist Laureate

Aldous Huxley (1864 – 1963) Author of “Brave New World”

Scientists

(22 of the 54 living Nobel Laureates consider themselves to be Humanists)

Brian Cox (1968 –) Particle physicist and TV personality

J. Robert Oppenheimer (1904 – 67) Theoretical physicist, ‘father of the atomic bomb’

Sigmund Freud (1856 – 1939) Neurologist. Founder of psychoanalysis

Albert Einstein (1879 – 1955) Theoretical physicist. Served on the Board of the first Humanist Society of New York

Pervez Hoodbhoy (1950 –) Pakistani nuclear physicist

Jonas Salk (1914 – 95) Medical researcher and virologist. Devised first polio vaccine. 1976 Humanist of the Year

Andrei Sakharov (1921 – 89) Soviet nuclear physicist and human rights activist. 1980 Humanist of the Year.

Niels Bohr (1885 – 1962) Physicist and part-founder of quantum theory. (Nobel Prize 1922)

Stephen Jay Gould (1941 – 2002) Paleontologist and writer. Humanist Laureate

Francis Crick (1916 – 2004) Molecular biologist and joint discoverer of DNA

James D Watson (1928 –) Molecular biologist and joint discoverer of DNA in 1953. Humanist Laureate

Thomas Szasz (1920 – 2012) Psychiatrist and academic. 1973 Humanist of the Year
Richard Feynman (1918 – 88) Quantum electro-dynamicist, particle physicist

Abraham Maslow (1908 – 70) Psychologist, founder of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. 1967 Humanist of the Year

Carl Sagan (1934 – 96) Astronomer and cosmologist. Humanist Laureate

Erwin Schrodinger ((1887 – 1961) Physicist. Researcher in quantum theory, wave mechanics and matrix mechanics

Steven Weinberg (1933 –) Theoretical physicist. Nobel laureate and 2002 Humanist of the Year.

Philosophers

A.J. Ayer (1910 – 89) Philosopher – Logical Positivist

Noam Chomsky (1928 –) Linguist, philosopher and political

activist Bertrand Russell 1872 – 1970) Philosopher and Mathematician

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Daniel Dennett (1942 –) Philosopher and author. Humanist Laureate

A. C. Grayling (1949 –) Philosopher and author of The Good Book, A Humanist Bible

Karl Popper (1902 – 94) Scientific philosopher. Humanist Laureate

B.F. Skinner (1904 – 90) Poet, behaviourist, inventor and philosopher. 1972 Humanist of the Year Social Activists

Helen Caldicott (1938 -) Phgysician, author and anti-nuclear activist 1982 Humanist of the Year

Margaret Sanger (1879 – 1966) Birth control activist. Established 'Planned Parenthood'. 1957 Humanist of the Year

William F Schultz (1949 –) Director of Amnesty International. 2000 Humanist of the Year

Others

R Buckminster Fuller (1895 – 1983) Architect, inventor, futurist. 1969 Humanist of the Year John Kenneth Galbraith (1908 – 2006) Keynesian economist. 1985 Humanist of the Year

Che Guevara (1928 – 67) Marxist revolutionary and physician

Julian Huxley (1881 – 1975) Biologist, eugenicist and self-described 'scientific humanist' Jean Paul Sartre (1905 -1980) Existentialist, Marxist, playwright, activist and author