

# IFH MONTHLY

Irish Freethinkers & Humanists

Formerly IFH NEWS

Vol. ii No. 3 March 2024

## 1. WHAT'S IN *IRISH FREETHINKER* - SPRING 2024

### 2. IGNORANCE

### 3. HUMANISTS AND GAZA

### 4. SECULARISM - A FEMINIST ISSUE

### 5. HUMANIST MEETINGS IN IRELAND

*THEY SAID ...*

*THE IRISH FREETHINKER - DETAILS*

## 1. WHAT'S IN *IRISH FREETHINKER* - SPRING 2024

The Spring 2024 edition of *IRISH FREETHINKER* is to be published in February and will be dispatched by post to subscribers; it is otherwise available for purchase in shops.

The contents are as follows:

- *Olympe de Gouges: French Feminist*
- *Losing Religion, Finding Myself*
- *The Evil of War*
- *Humanism & Christianity*
- *Believers and Nonbelievers*
- *2022 Census and the Areligious*
- *Interview with Daniel Dennett*
- *Education and the Slavish Mindset*
- *The Enlightenment & Modern Ireland: II*

The IFH website ([www.irishfreethinkers.com](http://www.irishfreethinkers.com)) continues to be developed and editions of *IRISH FREETHINKER* for the period before May-June 2020 and back to Autumn 2016 will be gradually put up on it, as eventually will back copies of *IFH NEWS* no 2 onwards. There is now also an online payment system on the website. Copies of recent editions of these items not online may be purchased through our site.

DEADLINE FOR SUBMISSION OF ARTICLES FOR THE SUMMER '24 EDITION OF *IRISH FREETHINKER* IS 15 APRIL 2024 (Editor: ifh.sde@gmail.com)

## 2. IGNORANCE

*Pete Hutton*

I'm constantly amazed at my ignorance. I do read a lot, both novels and online stuff, news especially. Perhaps that's the reason I feel my ignorance, because the more you inform yourself, the more you discover things you didn't know. 'Ignorance is bliss' goes the saying (originally from the English poet Thomas Gray in 1742). But it's the bliss of dumb animals.

Pit ponies – have you ever heard of them? I only knew them as a name, but not a reality,

not until a few days ago, when I found myself on page 68 of Emile Zola's novel, *Germinal*. The place is northern France, the date is late 1800s, the pit is the coal mine, and down in the coalmine some 500 metres (half a kilometre - pretty deep) are the miners, including children as young as 12 and women. And also down in those hellish depths, amidst the noise and gloom and coal dust and extreme cold or extreme heat - are pit ponies. Either ponies, as

they are small enough to walk under the low roofs of tunnels, or small horses, their job is to haul waggon-loads of coal for kilometres through the stifling darkness for up to twelve hours a day. That's bad enough, as bad as the work the miners do. But there is worse: these tortured animals *live* underground. They don't go up and down, seeing some of the world of light and sun and fresh air every day as the miners do. Once hauled off their birth meadows and imprisoned in a net, they are lowered down to their doom to stay there for the rest of their lives. Never again will they see day, smell meadow grasses, canter around in wind and sun and rain. They will of course die early (the lucky ones), or perhaps live for ten, fifteen years underground (the unlucky ones). This cruelty is almost unimaginable. In late 1800s Britain, there were more than 200,000 such animal machines, if you can believe it. Nearly a quarter of a million big, strong, intelligent beasts of the fields hidden away in darkness for all their adult life, to labour and die in darkness.

Perhaps I had vaguely heard of all this, but not really registered it in its full horror, or perhaps I just added it in my mind to all the other suffering of animals and humans, an awareness one simply needs to block out. But reading about the pit ponies of Zola, I saw these creatures, looking like ghosts through the gloom, I smelt their foul breath mingled with the fumes of coal and poisonous gases, I heard the endless clip-clopping of their worn hooves along the narrow corridors of coal, the coal of death. That's the great thing about literature: it gives you so much more than knowledge, than facts. You *feel* things. I use 'great' with some irony: how great is it to suffer vicariously? Yes, I woke in the night and thought about the pony in *Germinal*, Bataille, ten years underground, and I couldn't sleep.

This is not a piece about animal suffering; it's a piece about humans, because it is humans who inflict cruelty on animals, and most often they do this because they themselves are undergoing cruelty, the cruelty of their awful daily lives. So, which is worse, the suffering of the animals or of the humans? "The humans", we are supposed to say. If you beg to differ and say, "the animals" - you are accused of getting your priorities wrong, of being heartless towards your own species in favour of another species. The point, however, is that the suffering of both is just two sides of the same coin. And yet, should we not as humans keep our suffering to ourselves, rather than share it with animals? After all, most of human suffering is caused by humans. Animals don't share their suffering with us.



When you are in pain (mainly physical, but also mental), whether you are a person or an animal, your tendency is to externalise this pain by loading some of it onto something animate near you - your partner, your pet (the 'kick the dog' reaction). This seems to be instinctive. The wounded animal is dangerous. My question is, firstly, why do animals and humans do this? Secondly, is it excusable in the case of humans? In particular, is it excusable in our treatment of animals? (It's clearly inexcusable in the case of our treatment of other people.) Is the appalling case of pit ponies excusable because alongside them in the mines are suffering people? Indeed, the pit ponies' job was to lessen the suffering of the miners, by dragging the heavy trolleys of coal. And their use rapidly increased after 1842, when a law was passed in Britain to ban children under 10 from being sent down into mines to do that job. So, here we have the dilemma: animals were being made to suffer so humans didn't - or didn't quite so much. We allow ourselves to exploit other species, as well as each other. An-

imals eat other species, as we do, but they don't exploit them.

I wonder if I can pose this question: if I were suffering terribly but could reduce my suffering by making an animal suffer (as the miners in a sense did by using pit ponies), would I do so? Probably. Would I do so with another human. Probably not, and if so, why not? Because I need to be loyal to my own species? What does loyalty to one's species mean? Does it have an ethical basis, or just a practical one - the reciprocal need for species loyalty?

Anyway, what this is really all about is my original point: how one's ignorance can cause one such a shock when it is confronted by knowledge. For me, the most shocking moment in my life when this happened was about the age of sixteen. You are expected to be rather ignorant of many things at such an age, but I was ignorant of what was probably the most horrific event in human history: the Nazi gas chambers for the Jews. Perhaps I had learnt quite a bit about that war, and many other wars,

but by chance had never come across the details of the holocaust. When this moment of discovery occurred, in some book or article which I can't remember, I thought about it day and night. It even made me find fear in the very word 'chamber'. (But what an ironic contrast with the French word *chambre* - bedroom, so safe and comforting.) I could not exorcise the thought of those gas chambers. They changed my perception of human beings forever. There must have been other shocks of discovery in my life because there is so much to discover, as one ignorance after another is painfully revealed. And it seems that such shocks are always awful ones. But if you search you will keep having them.

No wonder they say 'ignorance is bliss'. Perhaps the pit ponies were ignorant of their suffering, of what was up there in the world of light that they would never see again. Let's hope so.

•.....•

**3. HUMANISTS AND GAZA**

*Daltún Ó Ceallaigh*

Those of us who were born in the middle of the last century, were witnesses, from childhood on, to some of the most violent episodes in human history. One thinks of the Korean War and then the prolonged conflict in Vietnam along with, later, as the century was drawing to a close, the shocking scenes in the Balkans. One had already emerged into childhood with depictions of the worst atrocities ever committed by our species in the shape of the Holocaust, whereby a systematic and industrialised attempt was made to eliminate the Jewish people. Then, locally, if one lived in the north of this island, there was the violent conflict throughout the Seventies, Eighties and Nineties. As we entered the new millennium, there was the hope that, both nationally and internationally, peace might come to prevail.

However, here we are just about quarter-way into the 21st century, and our screens are filled with images of blood and destruction. There are still conflicts, of one sort or another, in Latin America, Africa and Asia. But those which understandably loom largest today are in Ukraine and Gaza. While there are still casualties in the former, the situation there seems to be largely at a standstill. But, in the case of the latter, there is massive slaughter which is ongoing.

It is truly tragic that some of the representatives of the Jewish people, in the shape of the Israeli government and armed forces, are carrying out a massacre, using methods of a kind that were typical of the Nazis. Of course, the scale is different, but the indiscriminate killing of innocent men, women and children, by

bomb and bullet, and now being extended by means of starvation through the withholding of humanitarian aid, is like a betrayal of the memory of the Holocaust. At the same time, it has to be stressed that many Jews throughout the world in no way support this obscenity and in fact have denounced it and protested that it is being done in their name. It is also true that there are Jewish citizens of Israel who likewise disavow the atrocities in question. Unfortunately, however, opinion polls would indicate that a substantial majority of Israeli Jews do indeed support the actions of the Netanyahu government.

One fully recognises that the Hamas attack in southern Israel on 7 October 2023 involved indefensible actions which have already been widely denounced in the international community. However, the actions of the Israeli government and armed forces subsequently are grossly disproportionate and outrageous in response to the events of October 7th.

At the same time, it is important in all of this to distinguish between anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism. The first is a horrific creed which no civilised person can adhere to. The second is a legitimate political position which holds that to preach a God-given right to the ownership of Palestine, with the concomitant policy of expelling or eliminating Arabs therein is a theocratic, reactionary, and sectarian ideology. Not

insignificantly, it was supported by imperialist action such as in the Balfour Declaration of 1917 from Britain promising a Jewish homeland in Palestine, which London took control of following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. In fact, the first British Administrator in the territory referred to the incoming Jews as Britain's Ulster in Palestine. The redolence of plantation was quite clear, as the Arabs were soon to find out.

There is an attempt by the Israeli establishment to suppress anti-Zionism by suggesting that anybody who opposes Zionism is an anti-Semite. But the bullying attitude here is obvious and has to be firmly repudiated.

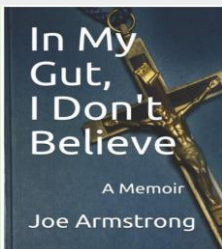
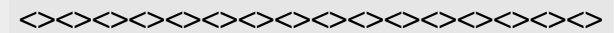
The United Nations has rightly called for an immediate ceasefire, release of hostages and open access for supplies of food and medicine to

be delivered to the population of Gaza.

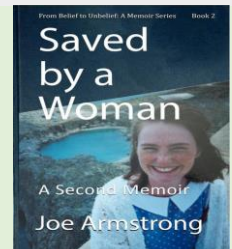
As we go to print, it seems that the Israeli government is prepared to defy world opinion and even specifically its closest sponsor and ally in the United States of America. Nonetheless, all right-thinking people must continue to urge that the fighting and killing comes to an end, hostages are released and that there is a negotiated and democratic settlement as regards the future of the whole of Palestine.



Image not from Belsen but of Palestinian boy being starved to death by Israel



**IN MY GUT, I DON'T BELIEVE**  
&  
**SAVED BY A WOMAN**  
available in kindle, paperback & hardback  
editions on Amazon. Book to left also available in audible  
form as narrated by author



*Megan Manson*

(A VIEW FROM THAR SÁILE)

*The following article is adapted from a talk given to the Leicester Secular Society on 3 March 2024.*

In 1877, a woman was put on trial for publishing what the prosecutor called a ‘dirty, filthy book’.

The book was a manual on rudimentary contraception, called *Fruits of Philosophy*. And the woman was Annie Besant - feminist, freethinker and vice-president of the National Secular Society. She and Charles Bradlaugh, the founder and president of the NSS, were both prosecuted for obscenity over this ‘dirty, filthy book’.

Besant’s story is extraordinary. In a highly patriarchal, highly Christian society, she fought fearlessly for the right of couples in Victorian England’s desperately poor and overcrowded slums to access information which would allow them to control their family planning. Alongside that, she fought for the right to free speech, and the right of women to control their bodies.

Incredibly, Besant’s ‘dirty, filthy book’ is still upsetting religious fundamentalists even today, nearly 150 years later.

Last November, the NSS held a history talk in London all about Victorian birth control, including the fight to publish *Fruits of Philosophy*. To our astonishment, our talk was picketed by an anti-abortion Christian group. This was particularly bizarre; the manual argued one of the main aims of contraception was to reduce abortion. But, when questioned, the protestors revealed that their group is not just against abortion - they are against all forms of birth control.

While it was somewhat amusing that an anti-abortion group would embarrass itself by protesting against this small and rather tame

history talk, it was also disturbing. The incident revealed the extent to which the religiously-motivated desire to control women’s bodies, women’s choices and women’s participation in society is still alive in Britain.

Secularism is a feminist issue. This was true at the time of Besant’s trial, and it is true today, worldwide.

The religiously-motivated desire to control women’s bodies, women’s choices and women’s participation in society is still alive in Britain.

The 2023 United Nations Gender Social Norms index found that there has been no improvement in worldwide biases against women in the last decade. It also found that gender hierarchies in religious practices can strongly influence behaviours and attitudes.

It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that in recent years we have seen some dramatic and devastating leaps backward - driven, in part, by fundamentalist religion.

In 2021, the Taliban retook Afghanistan and immediately set about imposing its fundamentalist Islamic ideology on women and girls. Women there are now banned from most public places. To visit the few places where they are permitted outside their homes, they must now be clad in a burqa. Girls cannot attend school from over the age of 11.

Male doctors have been banned from treating female patients, a policy with deadly implications. Naturally, the Taliban ordered pharmacies to clear their stocks of contraception. Is it any wonder that, since the Taliban takeover, Afghanistan has seen a surge in women attempting suicide?

Then there is Iran. Following the Islamic Revolution in 1979, the theocratic Iranian state has required all women and girls over the age of nine to wear hijab in public. Women who

break this law are often subject to brutal punishment, as horrifically demonstrated in 2022 when Mahsa Amini died at the hands of Iran's notorious 'morality police'. She had been arrested for failing to wear hijab correctly. Witnesses saw her being brutally tortured in the back of a police van. She died days later. She was 22 years old.

Mahsa Amini's death sparked huge waves of protest in Iran, which were described as the biggest challenge to the government since the Islamic Revolution. The regime's response was to double down on its laws, rather than make any meaningful change.

But perhaps it is a matter of time. Consistent surveys find that most Iranians oppose mandatory hijab and, on top of this, support a secular state. Protests may have died down, but the mood of resistance has not been extinguished. As one banner displayed during international protests against Iran said: 'To the world leaders. Iranian women do not need you to save them. They only need you to stop saving their murderers.'

So how are leaders in the UK responding to the brutal oppression and killing of women in Iran, Afghanistan and other countries where religion prescribes patriarchy and misogyny?

Well, the suffering of women forced to wear hijab did not stop UK schools, universities, and even the Home Office this year observing 'World Hijab Day' - an event which explicitly celebrates the veiling of women.

And it did not stop Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council last year approving a 16-foot steel statue of a veiled woman for a park in Smethwick, Birmingham. The statue, called 'The Strength of the Hijab', was revealed to the public just days before the first anniversary of Mahsa Amini's death. It is as if it was timed as

an act of triumph against Iran's courageous women who dare to show their hair; a tribute to the morality police.

Much of British authorities' enthusiasm for the hijab comes from a concern to appear 'respectful' of minority groups. But an unwillingness to think critically about religious practices which are at odds with democratic values spells disaster for women's rights. It also does Muslims a disservice by erasing debate and dissent from within that community.

This attitude is coupled with a fear of challenging religion - a fear which is, sadly, quite rational. There are now too many examples of

people being accused of bigotry, losing their jobs, being threatened and even being physically attacked for questioning, criticising or poking fun at religion.

And it is something that schools with concerns about hijab have had to

face. In 2017, St Stephen's Primary School in east London told parents that girls under eight should not be sent to school in hijab, because of concerns about integration and the promotion of ideologies which are incompatible with British values. This sparked a furious backlash from Islamist fundamentalists, who bombarded school leaders with emails, many of which were threatening. As a result, the school backed down on its policy.

Decision-makers in the UK still operate under the belief that religion is a wholly positive force that should be respected, accommodated and showcased, not something to be questioned. This is particularly evident in the charity sector.

Incredibly, there are registered charities



Annie Besant

promoting the idea that husbands can dominate and even beat their wives, and that women who dress 'sexily' (for example, by wearing trousers) are to blame for rape. We have even seen charities signposting material which says the torturous and illegal practice of female genital mutilation has benefits, including reducing 'excessive sensitivity of the clitoris' which is 'very annoying to the husband, especially at the time of intercourse'.

These charities do this in the name of religion. 'The advancement of religion' is a recognised charitable purpose in law. [On the problems with the 'advancement of religion' provision, see further in *The Freethinker* and *New Humanist* - Ed.]

As long as a charity is registered under this purpose, it seems to have carte blanche to say just about anything. Charities are meant to provide a public benefit in return for the generous tax breaks and Gift Aid they get. But it is difficult to see how promoting misogyny benefits the public—at least the female half of the public.

The fact that the state is willing to forgive misogyny when it is cloaked in religion reveals just how normalised it is. And what else could we expect, when the UK's own state religion, the established Church of England, is itself drenched in sexism.

It is quite incredible that, in the 21st century, 500 Anglican churches ban female priests. The Church has said this is because it is 'committed to enabling' those who are 'unable to receive the ministry of women bishops or priests' to 'flourish'.

The established Church's commitment to helping chauvinists within their ranks 'flourish' tacitly implies that there is something so subversive about women with authority that it is reasonable for men to reject them.

Let us not forget that, as the established church, the C of E is part of our state. The lines between theology and politics are blurred

when it comes to a state church. This is institutionalised, structural sexism at the highest level.

Religiously sanctioned notions that women exist to serve men translate into decision making which limits women's opportunities, and feed into relationships which are coercive, controlling and abusive.

While women's rights in the UK have inarguably progressed, women are still under-represented in positions of power and overrepresented as victims of domestic violence. A meagre seven per cent of FTSE 100 companies had female CEOs in 2023. Only 35 per cent of members of the House of Commons and 29 per cent of the Lords are female. According to Refuge, one in four women in England and Wales will experience domestic abuse in her lifetime, two women a week are killed by a current or former partner, and domestic abuse drives three women a week to suicide. Ninety-three per cent of defendants in domestic abuse cases are male while 84 per cent of victims are female.

To protect the rights of women and girls worldwide, we must not allow religion to pull the veil over our eyes when it comes to injustice, discrimination and oppression.

If Annie Besant were alive today, what would she think?

While she would no doubt welcome the many successes achieved by feminists and secularists in improving equality for women, I think she would also be dismayed and bewildered at the numerous and complex threats posed to women by fundamentalist religion today.

Progress on women's rights can only go so far if we only treat the symptoms of misogyny, and not the causes. And one of the most important causes is patriarchal religion, which is not only tolerated by the British state, but nurtured, protected and endorsed.

We must be free to look religion in the eye,

to challenge it, and to criticise it in the strongest terms, without fear of punishment by society or the state.

We must stop letting religious extremists exploit our good intentions to promote pluralism and inclusivity by portraying symbols of misogynistic oppression as symbols of social justice.

And we must separate church and state to

ensure women's rights are never subordinated to religious agendas.

The National Secular Society is holding a free online talk on April 10<sup>th</sup> with Michael Meyer, the author of a new biography on Annie Besant. [More info on NSS web site.].

*This article is reproduced from [‘The Freethinker’](#) (UK)* ♦

## 5. HUMANIST MEETINGS IN IRELAND

### **Belfast Freethinkers**

Meeting quarterly, 8.00 p.m.  
Holiday Inn, University St, Belfast  
Contact: Roger 0777 858 3435  
[roger.kelly.2@ntlworld.com](mailto:roger.kelly.2@ntlworld.com)

### **North Down Humanists**

1st Sunday of month, 11.00 a.m.  
Coffee Cure, Bangor Castle  
Contact: Andy Barr, 078 889 20063

### **North Dublin Humanist Community**

3rd Monday of month  
Contact: Alan Tuffery  
[atuffery@tcd.ie](mailto:atuffery@tcd.ie)

### **South Dublin Humanist Community (SDHC)**

Contact: 086 857 2005  
[Janielazar@gmail.com](mailto:Janielazar@gmail.com)  
Mailing List: southdublinhumanistcommunity

### **Humanist Association of Ireland**

Monthly meeting at rotating venues, mostly Dublin  
Details of next meeting at [humanism.ie](http://humanism.ie)  
or HAI Facebook Page

### **Westport Humanists**

2nd Sunday of month at 12.30 p.m.  
Wyatt Hotel  
Contact: Seamus O'Connell  
087 245 3536/098 50802  
[shayoc37@gmail.com](mailto:shayoc37@gmail.com)

### **Cork Humanists**

Contact: Geraldine O'Neill 086 812 8892 <http://corkhumanists.weebly.com>



**Humanists West (Galway)**

1st Sun of designated month, qly, 11 a.m.  
Knocknacarra Cmtty Centre (H91 E7KW)  
Zoom meetings for other months  
Contact: [Donalfinnegan@hotmail.com](mailto:Donalfinnegan@hotmail.com)

**Kilkenny Humanist Group**

2nd Sunday of month, 11.00 a.m.  
Langton House Hotel, Kilkenny,  
Contact: Patrick Cassidy 089 463 0005  
[patrickacassidy@gmail.com](mailto:patrickacassidy@gmail.com)

**Mid-West Humanists (Limerick, Clare, Tipperary)**

3rd Wednesday of month in Limerick  
Contact: Peter 086 815 5102  
[info@midwesthumanists.com](mailto:info@midwesthumanists.com)  
Also check <https://midwesthumanists.com>

**North West Humanists**

2nd Tuesday of month  
Radisson Hotel, Sligo  
Contact: Gill Bell 087 295 8206  
[humanistgb@gmail.com](mailto:humanistgb@gmail.com)

**Waterford Humanists**

3<sup>rd</sup> Monday of month, 7.30 p.m.  
Phil Grimes Pub, John St, Waterford  
Contact: Teresa [graham22@gmail.com](mailto:graham22@gmail.com)

---

**THEY SAID**



*Imagination deserted by reason creates impossible, useless thoughts. United with reason, imagination is the mother of all art and the source of all its beauty.*

Francisco Goya

*Movements that view quantum mechanics as a turning-point in thought ... include fly-by-night mystics, prophets of a New Age, and relativists of all sorts ...*

Paul Gross & Norman Levitt in 'Higher Superstition'

*Learning without reflection is a waste. Reflection without learning is a danger.*

Kong Fu Zi (Confucius)

*Pantheism is but a painted atheism.*

Samuel Taylor Coleridge

*... some people view demystification as desecration.*

Daniel Dennett

*One who knows when it is enough, always rests in sufficiency.*

Tao Te Ching

*I find that much unclear thought exists as an excuse for cruelty, and that much cruelty is prompted by superstitious beliefs.*

Bertrand Russell

*... one who is alone has no joy.*

Bhrhadaranyaka Upanishad

---

## IRISH FREETHINKER

### *An Saorsmaointeoir*

ISSN: 2399-7621 09> what is wanted what

[ifh.sde@gmail.com](mailto:ifh.sde@gmail.com)

[www.irishfreethinkers.com](http://www.irishfreethinkers.com)

*Also on Facebook & X [Twitter]*

Subscription, £40/€40 per annum, includes:

by post, the quarterly periodical IRISH FREETHINKER,  
and an emailed monthly review, IFH MONTHLY

#### ONLINE

You can pay sub [here](#)

or order copies of *Irish Freethinker* @ €5.60 (incl p&p) each [here](#)

or you can make a donation [here](#)

Or pay by cheque or postal order,

payable to:

**Irish Freethinkers & Humanists**

Send to Administrator: Roger Kelly,

8 Eastleigh Drive, Belfast, BT4 3DX

[roger.kelly.2@ntlworld.com](mailto:roger.kelly.2@ntlworld.com)

Tel: 077 7858 3435 [in N Irl]

00 44 77 7858 3435 [in Ir Rep]

**Bank Transfers:- BIC: ULSB GB 2B**

**IBAN: GB84 ULSB 9809 6013 2238 97**

---