

# IFH NEWS

Irish Freethinkers & Humanists

No.10 - October 2023

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## 1. WHAT'S IN *IRISH FREETHINKER* - AUTUMN '23

The 2023 Autumn edition of *IRISH FREETHINKER* was published in August and dispatched by post to subscribers, and is otherwise available for purchase in shops.

The contents are as follows:

- Humanism and Evil
- First Conference of Humanists in Ireland
- Evolution - Definition & Implications
- Human Nature
- Subversive Thought of George Ensor
- After God
- Mary Wollstonecraft: Part II
- 'Humanly Possible' Book Review
- History of Naturalism: Part 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 WINTER EDITION OF *IRISH FREETHINKER* IS  
16 OCT 2023

(Editor: ifh.sde@gmail.com)

## 2. SCEPTICISM - A REFRESHER

*Max Carlisle*

### Understanding Scepticism

Scepticism, at its core, is the practice of questioning the validity and authenticity of information, claims, or beliefs. Sceptics are naturally inclined to seek evidence and critically evaluate assertions before accepting them as true. In the realm of healthy scepticism, individuals are encouraged to be curious, open-

minded, and analytical in their approach to new information. This form of scepticism is an essential tool for promoting critical thinking and preventing the uncritical acceptance of misleading or false ideas.

### Cognitive Dissonance: The Clash of Beliefs

Cognitive dissonance occurs when an individ-

ual experiences mental discomfort as a result of holding contradictory beliefs, attitudes, or values. The human mind tends to seek consistency and harmony in its thoughts, so when conflicting information arises, it can lead to feelings of unease. To alleviate this discomfort, individuals may resort to various strategies, including changing their beliefs, justifying their current beliefs, or selectively ignoring information that contradicts their existing viewpoints.

### **Confirmation Bias and its Influence**

Confirmation bias is the subconscious tendency to seek out, interpret, and remember information in a way that confirms one's pre-existing beliefs. In essence, individuals are more likely to notice and remember information that aligns with their existing worldview while disregarding or downplaying conflicting information. This bias can contribute to the reinforcement of stereotypes, the spread of misinformation, and the entrenchment of divisive ideologies.

### **Strategies for Mitigating Cognitive Biases**

*Awareness:* Recognizing the existence of cognitive biases is the first step towards managing them. By acknowledging the potential for confirmation bias and cognitive dissonance, individuals can approach new information with a more critical and open mindset.

*Diverse Sources:* Actively seeking information from a variety of sources, including those that

may challenge one's beliefs, can help counter confirmation bias. Exposure to diverse perspectives fosters a more well-rounded understanding of complex issues.

*Fact-Checking:* Verifying information before accepting it as true is crucial in an age where misinformation can spread rapidly. Fact-checking and cross-referencing information can help individuals make informed judgments.

*Encouraging Constructive Conversations:* Engaging in respectful and open dialogues with those who hold differing viewpoints can help reduce cognitive dissonance. Constructive conversations allow for the exchange of ideas and the potential for growth.

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Scepticism, cognitive dissonance, and confirmation bias are intricate threads woven into the fabric of human cognition. While they can lead to flawed judgments and reinforce narrow perspectives, the awareness of these phenomena equips individuals to approach information with greater discernment. Here at Atheists for Liberty, we strive to cultivate a habit of critical thinking, seeking diverse viewpoints, and staying open to revisiting one's beliefs. To the extent that we can build these habits, it becomes possible to navigate today's complex landscape of information and arrive at more informed and balanced conclusions.

*Atheists for Liberty* (USA) Sept 15



3.

## **'SO HELP ME GOD'?**

*Does oath swearing in courtroom scenarios impact trial outcome?*

**Ryan T McKay, Will Gervais, Colin J Davis**

### **Abstract**

In countries such as Britain and the US, court witnesses must declare they will provide truthful evidence and are often compelled to publicly choose between religious ("oath") and

secular ("affirmation") versions of this declaration. Might defendants who opt to swear an oath enjoy more favourable outcomes than those who choose to affirm? Two preliminary, pre-registered survey studies using minimal vi-

gnettes (Study 1, N=443; Study 2, N=913) indicated that people associate choice of the oath with credible testimony; and that participants, especially religious participants, discriminate against defendants who affirm. In a third, Registered Report study (Study 3, N=1821), we used a more elaborate audiovisual mock trial paradigm to better estimate the real-world influence of declaration choice. Participants were asked to render a verdict for a defendant who either swore or affirmed, and were themselves required to swear or affirm that they would try the defendant in good faith. Overall, the defendant was not considered guiltier when affirming rather than swearing, nor did mock-

juror belief in God moderate this effect. However, jurors who themselves swore an oath did discriminate against the affirming defendant. Exploratory analyses suggest this effect may be driven by authoritarianism, perhaps because high-authoritarian jurors consider the oath the traditional (and therefore correct) declaration to choose. We discuss the real-world implications of these findings and conclude the religious oath is an antiquated legal ritual that needs reform.

September 2019

*British Psychological Society*



#### 4. SAYINGS OF JESUS

- I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. (John 14:6)
- If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out. (Mark 9:43)
- I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! (Luke

12:49)

- Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. (Matthew 10:34)
- If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters, yes, even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. (Luke 14:26)

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#### 5. N. IRELAND ENFORCES SAFE ACCESS ZONES

One year on from legislation passing in Stormont, Northern Ireland will implement Safe Access Zones outside abortion clinics from 30 Sept protecting vulnerable women from harassment and intimidation. Northern Ireland Humanists has welcomed this news and called for other UK jurisdictions to follow suit.

##### **What are Safe Access Zones?**

Recent years have seen a sharp uptick in the size and extent of religious protesters picketing abortion clinics in the UK. Using tactics imported from the United States, these protesters display graphic images, hurl insults, and call women and clinic staff ‘murderers’ as they ap-

proach the building. Women who have attempted to access abortion services have described this as a ‘gauntlet of abuse’.

Safe Access Zones are an innovation - piloted successfully in parts of the United States, Canada and Australia - to uphold women’s fundamental right to access healthcare. They require the space around abortion clinics to be free to access for all patients. This means protesters may have to move their signs and soapboxes down the street, or direct their attention to policymakers, rather than vulnerable women and girls, including women who are victims of domestic violence, rape, and sexual assault.

### **The Story in Northern Ireland**

The Abortion Services (Safe Access Zones) Act was passed in March 2022. It was challenged by the Northern Ireland Attorney General but the UK Supreme Court ruled that the Act did not ‘disproportionately interfere’ with protesters’ rights.

This means that from Friday 30 September 2023, women will be able to access clinics without being subjected to unsolicited approaches from activists. These activists’ primary intention is to cause distress when women are undertaking an emotional and significant decision. But it does not ban or in any way prevent anti-choice activists from organising such activities. Instead, it offers women a meaningful choice about whether they wish to engage with these activities or not. Humanists UK is a founding supporter of the Back Off campaign, coordinated by BPAS, which aims to change the law to make it possible to establish safe access zones around clinics. The campaign was started due to an intensification of anti-choice protests around clinics. At such protests, anti-choice activists have accosted women without solicitation, shouted abuse, exposed them to distressing and graphic images, either in leaflets or on large banners, filmed people entering and leaving clinics without their consent, and blocked the entrances to the clinics.

### **England, Wales, and Scotland**

Northern Ireland is the first part of the UK to implement Safe Access Zones.

In the UK Parliament, legislation was passed to introduce Safe Access Zones in England and Wales in March this year. However, UK Home Secretary Suella Braverman has yet to implement the law. In the Scottish Parliament, a similar Bill is being considered to introduce safe access zones. Humanist Society Scotland has been campaigning to see this passed and implemented.

### **N Ireland Humanists Co-ordinator Boyd Sleator commented:**

‘We welcome the introduction of safe access zones outside abortion clinics in Northern Ireland. This law balances the rights of free speech with women’s sexual and reproductive rights. It will not silence protesters - instead, it will remove the ability of protesters to harass women while doing so.

‘Once again Northern Ireland is ahead of the rest of the UK, while legislation in England and Wales has not been put into action, with no clear reason for delay. With growing protests outside abortion clinics harassing women and staff, these laws are needed now more than ever. It is time for the rest of the UK to catch up and implement their own safe access zones to uphold women’s reproductive and health-care rights.’

*26 Sept, ‘Humanists UK’*

## **6. HOW TURKEY ABANDONED SECULARISM**

### **Kunwar Khuldune Shahid**

*Why Turkey has increasingly slipped back into Islamisation, and how the hijab has become the ‘unofficial flag’ of this movement*

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan triumphed in a closely contested election in May, ensuring another five years in power and extending his two-decade-long reign over Turkey. As he edged out his opponent, Republican People’s

Party (CHP) leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, 52 per cent to 48 per cent, in the first ever presidential runoff in the country’s history, Erdoğan reaffirmed his control over a Turkey that is more divided than ever.

There are many reasons why the opposition missed out on arguably its best opportunity to oust Erdoğan in recent years, including the regime's use of the state machinery to influence election results. However, a major cause behind Kılıçdaroğlu's defeat was his abandonment of the Turkish secularism that was rooted in the founding principles of the republic.

Turkey, and the CHP, were both founded by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, based on the ideology he propounded, which has since become known as Kemalism. The latter is best illustrated in his thirty-six-hour-long speech, *Nutuk*, delivered to the party's second congress in 1927. Kemalism is often summarised using six bullet points, and depicted as six arrows on the CHP's flag. One of these is laicism.

Atatürk took up the task of creating a Turkish republic from the remnants of a long-decaying Ottoman Empire, where Islamic dogma had reigned supreme and was, indeed, a critical contributor to the realm's downfall - despite the way that Ottoman sultans intermittently toyed with a skewed enforcement of religious pluralism as a means of exercising arbitrary rule over a multiethnic and multireligious realm. Their privileging of Muslim elite over non-Muslim populations, or Sunni over Shia majority regions, eventually created separate, non-Muslim nation states in Eastern Europe and sectarian fault lines within Islam across the Middle East.

Therefore, where secularisation would have been a practical remedy to the religionist quagmire in Turkey, the sheer extent of the Islamist inertia necessitated a state more assertive in its separation from religion. Hence *laiklik*, the Turkish brand of laicism that echoes French *laïcité*, was as much an existential requirement for Turkey to loosen its Islamist stranglehold, as it was a reflection of Atatürk's own modernist worldview.

Yet when the CHP presented a bill endorsing the hijab in public institutions in October last year, Kılıçdaroğlu effectively surrendered his party's secularist legacy. Turkey's ban on religious and anti-religious manifestations in state institutions, the bedrock of laicism, had already been lifted a decade ago. Hence this provision of exclusive protection for sexist Islamic headgear was nothing but a comprehensive capitulation to Islamisation, and was clearly intended to win votes.

The CHP's endorsement of the hijab was also an extension of the frequently regurgitated misinterpretation of laicism as an exclusively 'anti-Islam' phenomenon, which has been especially echoed in criticisms of France. The CHP appear to have conveniently forgotten that *laiklik* was, like French *laïcité*, equally applicable to all religious displays, such as the Christian cross. The CHP's prioritisation of the protection of Islamic symbols, while the Turkish government has been busy demolishing, or converting, churches, including Hagia Sophia, represents a categorical abandonment of Atatürk's vision.

It is not the departure from an individual's guidelines, no matter how critical their position in any people's history, that makes the renunciation of ideals damaging for a nation. In fact, the idolisation of Atatürk, which included a sweeping ban on criticising him, has helped foster the Islamist opposition in a country where *laiklik* has long been collectively treated as one man's decree and not as the empirically provable foundation of Turkish progress. Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) have managed to successfully channel the religionist backlash, merging Islamist parties under one big umbrella that has now ruled over Turkey for over 20 years.

Many have deemed Kılıçdaroğlu's legisla-



tive endorsement of the hijab a political necessity, since he was leading a wide coalition which included many parties that wanted to demonstrate their support for the Islamic garb. Supporting the hijab could be said to be especially necessary on a political level, given how hotly debated the issue has been in recent years. And yet Kılıçdaroğlu has admirably defended LGBT rights in Turkey, albeit without overtly supporting them, thereby categorically contradicting the beliefs of the same Islamist stakeholders. The CHP's support for the hijab, including within the party's own ranks, stems not from *realpolitik*, nor from an exhaustive endorsement of Islamic injunctions, but simply from its succumbing to the Islamisation of Turkish nationalism. The AKP have long used Islamic headgear as the unofficial flag of this movement.

As the Erdoğan regime has rekindled Turkey's Ottoman past, using modesty codes as a way of Islamising society, and suppressing non-Muslim emblems as a way of Islamising politics, it has also used a newly found neo-Ottoman soft power to Islamise its diplomacy. Where global Muslims were traditionally drawn to glamorous Turkish 'soaps' depicting lifestyles often violently punishable in their countries, in recent years they have been infatuated by shows narrating fictionalised renditions of Ottoman conquests. After undertaking the Islamisation of Turkey, Erdoğan aspired to position himself as the leader of the Muslim world, boosted by reminders of the Ottoman caliphate and its power over Islam's holiest sites in the Arabian Peninsula for four centuries.

This is why Erdoğan has been the first to claim a 'Muslim genocide' in France over satirical caricatures of Muhammad. By doing so, he seems to be hoping to undermine laicism in France, as he already has in Turkey. Similarly, he has threatened to cut ties with Muslim or Arab states maintaining diplomatic relations

with Israel, even though Turkey has recognised the latter since 1949. A similar paradox can also be seen in the way that Erdoğan is still pursuing Turkey's stalled application for EU membership, while simultaneously aligning the country more closely with the Islamic states that he is wooing. And yet it is precisely Turkey's alignment with the Islamic states that might have actually cost the country its best opportunity to consolidate its position as leader of the Muslim world.

The lessons from the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire were not limited to the Atatürk-led Turkey, but also extended to other parts of the empire, as well as the broader Muslim world, as states in these regions gained their freedom after World War II. In the Arab world, a secular nationalism emerged, albeit under the control of dictatorial rulers, such as Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt. Some were swayed by the Western powers that colonised the area: French *laïcité*, for instance, influenced Tunisia, Syria and Lebanon. By the 1970s, which saw the rise of the socialist and Arab nationalist Baath party in Syria and Iraq, Arab secularism had become synonymous with absolutist regimes. The monarchy in Iran, led by the Pahlavi dynasty, and the republic of Afghanistan briefly proclaimed by Daoud Khan, also demonstrated the way in which secularism was adopted by autocracies in the wider Muslim world. From Algeria to Afghanistan, military regimes became protectors of secularisation because they wanted to quell populist Islamist parties and groups. In Turkey, too, the army was the defender of secularism.

When the region imploded into the Saudi-Iran proxy wars in the 1980s and the jihadist radicalisation that followed, in Turkey, the army stepped in, taking charge of the country following the 1980 coup d'état. Turkey's membership of NATO helped protect it from the jihadist spillover, because NATO gave it support to resist jihadist infiltration and to fight

against the Islamic state, while military rule prevented the Islamisation of the country. Unfortunately, just because secularism was implemented by the army, this only reinforced *laiklik* as a coercive ideology and further emboldened its Islamist opponents with their long-festering grievances.

Despite this, as jihadism wreaked havoc with the Muslim world at the turn of the millennium, it was Turkey that remained the bastion of Muslim secularism. Its proximity to the West, and its aspirations to join the EU, ensured that freedoms and human rights were provided with much better safeguards, in addition to the long tradition of uncompromising separation between mosque and state. As a result, Turkey remained the constantly cited inspiration for Muslim states that wanted to undo Islamist radicalisation. This became even more evident after 9/11, as jihadism spread around the world, leading to counter-efforts to defuse militant Islamism and reform Islam. Turkey was in the pole position to lead the much needed secularisation of the Muslim world; this would have been bolstered by the country's transformation into a truly liberal and sec-

ular democracy. However, it was at this point that Turkey, under Erdoğan and the AKP, opted instead for Islamisation.

As a result, the baton for Muslim modernisation has once again been taken up by a few totalitarian Arab regimes such as Saudi Arabia. These kingdoms are largely responsible for the global explosion of radical Islam, the economic interests of which now align with selective progressivism centred on the support of these Arab monarchies. The failure to undertake a populist secularisation movement within the Muslim world, compounded by the failure of the Arab Spring, means that Islam, and its deployment at state, regional, or global levels, currently remains under the control of autocrats. And the ideological surrender of the CHP underlines the point that Turkey, formerly a model of secularism in the Muslim world, has conclusively capitulated to Islamisation.

*Kunwar Khuldune Shahid is a political journalist and Pakistan correspondent for 'The Diplomat'.*

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[www.freethinker.co.uk](http://www.freethinker.co.uk)

## 7. 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](mailto: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 Cmty Centre (H91 E7KW)  
Zoom meetings for other months  
Contact: 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**

2<sup>nd</sup> 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)

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***THEY SAID ...***

*What can be asserted without evidence, can be dismissed without evidence.*

*Christopher Hitchens*



*... the most barbarous of our maladies is to despise our being.*

*Montaigne*

*[Referring to Bertrand Russell on the 'afterlife']: Fear was the greatest enemy of happiness, and religion in turn was one of the biggest sources of fear.*

*Sarah Bakewell*

*Man is the highest end for man.*

*Karl Marx*

*Baptism is a healthy practice, as long as it is done thoroughly with soap.*

*Robert G Ingersoll*

*[Ubuntu]: We belong in a bundle of life. We say a 'person' is a person through other people.*

*Desmond Tutu*

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