

# IFH NEWS

Irish Freethinkers & Humanists

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*IRISH FREETHINKER*

## 1. WHAT'S IN *IRISH FREETHINKER* - WINTER '23/'24

The Winter '23/'24 edition of *IRISH FREETHINKER* was published in November and dispatched by post to subscribers, and is otherwise available for purchase in shops.

The contents are as follows:

- *Losing Religion, Finding Myself*
- *Evolution - Definition & Implications: II*
- *Prometheus Agonistes*
- *The World of Humanism*
- *The Enlightenment & Modern Ireland*
- *Humanists International: Declaration, '22*
- *The God Concept*
- *'Is the Atheist My Neighbour?'*
- *The Amsterdam Declaration*
- *'Before the Big Bang'*

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 SPRING '24 EDITION OF *IRISH FREETHINKER* IS

15 JAN 2024

(Editor: ifh.sde@gmail.com)

## 2. THE HORSE & GOD



*Daltún  
Ó Ceallaigh*



Why on earth the comparison of God with the horse, I can hear you inquire. Has this writer just been let out for the day?

Permit me to elaborate.

Up until the end of the 19th century and somewhat into the early 20th, when we travelled on land and other than by foot, we used horses, either riding one ourselves or using

them to pull a vehicle, such as a trap or a carriage.

Next, the wonderful invention of the internal combustion engine came along. In time, this was developed as a component of vehicles to propel them forward. Therefore one had the motor car or omnibus, and so on. Thenceforth, horses were no longer needed.

However, when a person was invited to purchase a vehicle driven by an internal combustion engine and substitute it for a horse or horses, it would be asked how much power this generated in comparison to the horse or horses being replaced. A formula was worked out which purported to translate engine power into horse power. An engine was then said to numerically have such and such a horsepower.

Naturally, this was not altogether scientific. The precise way of measuring the power of an internal combustion engine is in kilowatts. As a result, the typical family car, which is classified as having 150 horsepower, possesses a strength of 112 kilowatts. But nobody, outside of a specialist, talks like that.

The reason is substantially American influence. When Ford launched his mass produced motor car, he in particular promoted it in terms of horsepower. That then became the sales language for cars and other vehicles throughout the world. Similarly, due further to americanisation, we no longer watch a film, but rather a movie. If you're really sophisticated, you do not refer to Europeans as Whites (an inexact term in itself), but rather as Caucasians. And, increasingly, we no longer go to the shop, but rather to the store.

In other words, 'horsepower' carried over, as a largely American inspired and lasting description (of motor vehicles anyway) by way of metaphor when horses themselves had long ceased to function in that regard.

Now, let us turn to God.

For most of the presence of homo sapiens

on earth, there has been a tendency to think of a supreme being (or beings) as responsible for phenomena which human beings cannot explain. The human being is cognisant, potent, and finite. The supreme being (to speak in monotheistic idiom) is omniscient, omnipotent, and infinite. This is obviously anthropomorphism, which is the norm for most 'believing' people. And that prevails, despite the abstruse reconfigurations of 'God' attempted by neo-scholastic theologians who, in earlier times, would have been the type to ponder how many angels could dance on the head of a pin.

However, anthropomorphism has long since been superseded. If the combustion engine made the horse redundant, modern science did the same for God. More and more scientific explanations have left the God of the Gaps fewer and fewer gaps to fill.

But there are two main gaps left, namely the exact origin of life (abiogenesis) and of the universe (cosmogony). Yet advanced physics has been gradually eating into these as well, with the latest nibble being the unveiling of evidence that the Big Bang was not the beginning of all. (*Pace* Pope Pius xii who averred that God gave rise to it.)

The search is now on for the Theory of Everything (TOE) which will eliminate those remaining gaps. In the meanwhile, the residual unexplained is seized on by some rearguard religious to propound a post-anthropomorphic God of quintessential vagueness. Or as one might say, the hope is to insinuate a sort of 'godpower' into the age of contemporary science just as 'horsepower' was insinuated into the age of the combustion engine. When the TOE arrives, an attempt also will no doubt be made to portray that likewise as the outgrowth of an increasingly amorphous and arcane Divinity.

In reality, what is involved in all of this neo-theism is not just simple metaphor, but a case of furtive remarketing. The God of our fore-

bears does not exist anymore; consequently, He (not She of course) has to be reinvented as a comfort for the religiously distressed in what is, in reality, our post-theistic world.

Or to put it another way, and switching to Nietzsche, God may indeed be dead, but certain people have difficulty in getting rid of the body. Their insecure nostalgia counterpoints mature realism and they are reduced to theological necrophilia.

As for the physics of today and its limita-

tions, just as the internal combustion engine is being overtaken by the driverless electric car, such physics may well be overtaken by a TOE that, disappointingly for theists, in fact finally and definitively puts all attenuations of the God idea to rest. By then, both horsepower and godpower may at last be completely relegated to distant memory as quaint notions of yesteryear.



**3. DARK THOUGHTS ON A PICTURE**

*Pete Hutton*



In countries such as Britain and the US, court A picture is worth a thousand words. This is one of the truest sayings I know of, except that it should be not ‘a thousand words’, but ‘a million words’. I am going to tackle here something which many much greater minds than mine have tried to understand, the only differ-

ence being that my thoughts arise spontaneously, on an entirely personal level, from a picture I have just seen, which has given me my own (partial) understanding.

At breakfast I am leafing through one of the illustrated books conveniently kept in a shelf near me. Anne is looking at it too, but as she sits opposite me she has to look at it upside down, which she doesn’t seem to mind doing. The book is called *Paris-Berlin 1900-1933*. It’s the (massive) catalogue of an exhibition that was held at Paris’s Centre Pompidou in 1978, an exhibition of the art and design of two cities which had strong links at that time. We must have bought the book when we visited the exhibition. Among the many illustrations, one catches my attention. It’s a poster made as a collage showing something we have seen many times: Hitler and his adoring crowds. There is the man, epitome of evil, and behind him thousands of deliriously happy ordinary people. The words, in that German Gothic script so typical of the backward-looking nationalistic ideology of Nazism, say “Yes - Leader we follow you.”

I realise that the image is so powerful because it is a photo-collage not a single photo. Hitler appears as a huge grim figure, the cheering people, a sea of them, are small and look

almost as identical as a flock of sheep - because they have all been welded into one being, the being that Hitler has created. Or a flock of sheep, those sheep which are such dumb animals. And, as inevitably would happen, the dumbness of these people would lead to their own slaughter: how many of them were still alive by the time Hitler had killed himself and left Germany in ruins, not to mention much of Europe?

Throughout history there have been Hitlers, though none of them (apart perhaps from Stalin) have had the power to cause so much suffering. So, Hitlers are not uncommon - and therefore the hordes of their supporters are not uncommon. But when I look at this poster, I see those hordes, tens of thousands of them at each of Hitler's rallies, as having lost their minds, or rather as having allowed their minds to be captured by their *Führer* - who is, in effect, their Messiah. And a Messiah is a saviour: Jesus Christ was called the Messiah. But in tragic contrast to Jesus, malevolent Messiahs have arisen regularly in history and are still popping up everywhere. Some of them are dangerous, some just unpleasant. But all of them depend for their power on the capacity of people to *make* themselves stupid, to erase their critical and rational thinking so that they can become obedient sheep.

But looking at them, in the poster again, I find it hard to believe that they are in reality stupid. All of them? None of them? They act as one undifferentiated whole, so it must be all or none. And I ask myself: could I be like them? Were some of them, at least, like me and you - educated, rational, not unintelligent, sensible, etc? If the fans of Hitler had been just a tiny group of fanatics, one could understand that. But such vast numbers?

My question, I think, is this: when ordinary people (not fanatics) are seduced by a malevolent person whom they see as their saviour, and apparently lose their minds to such a person,

how can that not be called an act of pure stupidity? It sounds so demeaning to say this, as if we who are not like this, are better than them, because we are not stupid, not gullible, not seducible. Not vulnerable to losing our minds.

Perhaps, therefore, one has to frame the question in a different way. Not in terms of stupidity versus intelligence, but in terms of authority and anti-authority. Is the human race divided into those who need authority, and those who reject authority? All authoritarians, many of whom start off as Messiahs, have mass support - they don't reach their positions of power just from brute force. Many people, it seems, have the need to feel controlled by a powerful figure, and presumably expect such a figure to be benign. But, as the saying goes, "Power tends to corrupt; absolute power corrupts absolutely". In other words, an initially benign figure of authority will frequently become a malignant one. If so, why don't people understand this and resist such figures long before they can become powerful? We will always have leaders and will always need them. Without them, nothing can function for long. But leaders do not have to be figures of authority in the sense of having great power. And why do we even need figures of authority - if authority can so easily become *authoritarian*? Is life unbearable for us without a figure who takes charge of us?

One of Britain's most thoughtful journalists, and a leftist writer on political and social issues, was Christopher Hitchens, who died in 2011. He was a strongly committed atheist, and eventually described himself as an 'anti-theist'. He argued that all religions, which by definition have a God concept, are intrinsically authoritarian because God is an authoritarian figure. Therefore he did not just not believe in God, but was hostile to the very concept of God. God, after all, is often compared in religion to a father, and across the ages the family father has been allowed to take on the role of

authority, towards both his spouse/partner and towards his children. But he has been not just the family leader - the benign figure who guides selflessly - but the family figure of power, hence the authoritarian: the embodiment of God the Father. (Thankfully, many of today's fathers, in European countries at least, are not like this.)

How have I ended up here, from Hitler to God? Because of the picture I saw at breakfast and that you see above. Those ecstatic faces praising their leader, their soon-to-be authoritarian, they submitted themselves willingly to him just because they wanted to be 'saved'. They didn't want or expect evil to follow. They wanted a leader, a good one, a kind one, a loving one - as God is supposed to be. Perhaps

they were not stupid therefore, but in a fundamental choice we all have in life, they chose wrongly: they chose to desire an all-powerful protector, instead of rejecting all figures of authority. Put simply, the picture screams at me that we should all be anti-authoritarian, which means that we should mistrust all figures of authority. We should never allow ourselves to become sheep in need of a shepherd.

Yet all over the world today people in vast numbers are doing just that, as they have always done. No wonder we live in a world of conflict.

*Note: the poster was produced in 1934 by the NSDAP, the party of the Nazis.*

#### 4.

#### TOM WHITE

**b. 4 September 1949. d. 12 November 2023**

*Regular readers of the Irish Freethinkers and Humanists magazine will be familiar with the rich, varied and always enjoyable contributions made by Tom White over the years. These same readers will no doubt be saddened to hear the news of Tom's death on November 12, 2023, during a recent period of illness and hospitalisation. I am honoured to write Tom's obituary for the IFH, though I am more honoured to have called Tom a friend. The writing of this obituary has very much been a collaborative effort, with contributions from those of us involved in local Humanist groups along the West coast, and attendees and founders of the online Humanist Network Ireland. This is what we believe Tom would have preferred, for he belonged to us all.*

*The best narrator of Tom's early life, is of course, Tom himself. We can thank P J Conneely for rescuing this gem of a contribution that Tom made to the then online Humanist West website. Following this autobiographical account, I will recall Tom's more recent years,*

*with the aid of friends and fellow Humanists.*



#### **TOM WHITE, IN HIS OWN WORDS.**

I was born in 1949, into a tiny community of Presbyterians in Ballyshannon, Co Donegal. I was lucky in one way, as my parents were relatively well off. Growing up in the austere 1950s I became aware that some of our neighbours still had earth floors in their cottages; corduroy and snots was the school uniform for most of us. My father was an elder of the

Church, and took his duties seriously. Attendance at Church was obligatory. My brother and I were beaten if caught playing football on Sunday. For Catholic children, this ban on enjoyment ended at noon on the Sabbath, for us, the greyness seemed to stretch into eternity. We moved North in 1959.

The first day at my new primary school was celebrated by having my arm twisted up my back. My obvious Donegal accent was too Catholic for the school bully. Three years later, my Protestant school uniform meant I was dragged up an entry for interrogation by three Catholic youths. Victimised by both sides, I wanted out of organised religion. I seemed to be everyone's "other sort!"

My father died in 1967, and that was my chance to strike out for freedom. I had a memorable farewell. The local Minister dropped in on the remains of our family unit for a quick prayer session. A man with my father's rigid faith, the Minister gave us a broadside for a half an hour, and then enquired if we were all safe in the arms of the Lord? With the injudicious candour of youth, I raised a hesitant hand. Doubts! The Minister sat down and wrestled for my soul. All-in after an hour, he retreated through our front door. "That boy has problems!" he warned my mother *en passant*.

Bloodied but unbowed, I escaped to Trinity College, Dublin, a bastion of common sense in an increasingly violent Ireland. My tutor there once asked me what I would do if things got even worse in the North. "Fight", I said. "For which side?" "I don't know, but there's not much sense in standing in the middle of a civil war." It didn't come to that, thank goodness; I would have made a rotten soldier. But I gradually came to have a clearer insight into the pernicious role religion was playing in the conflict. So few people seemed capable of breaking away from the beliefs of their parents, of thinking for themselves, of making rational decisions for themselves.

My own physical journey led me to Australia, where I lived for about eight years. I worked as a Public Servant and trade union official. Work for my trade union was challenging and stretched me to the limit; it demonstrated to me that justice, ethics and human bravery were the products of human minds, not imposed by some "god"; poor people could achieve justice by cooperative action. Human generosity and joy are the most wonderful things. I will carry those ideals with me to the grave. I came back to Northern Ireland in the late 80s and became pen-friends with an intriguing woman who lived in Birmingham in the English Midlands. Friendship became love, and when we married, I moved to be with her. Thatcher had defeated the British trade union movement, and unemployment was rife; any hopes I had for a long-term career were pretty much crushed. I had a series of short term jobs until my wife and I were in a position to retire to Co Mayo.

Our neighbours here were warm and friendly, but our non-Catholicism inevitably left us outside the loop of so many occasions with religious trappings in rural Ireland. I felt the need to be part of a community I could share a philosophy with and found the Irish Humanists. I was very much an annual sub-and-magazine member until my wife died three years ago. She expressed the wish for a green, Humanist funeral, and I tried my best to make that happen. I was grateful to my Humanist friends for help in my time of need. Today, I'm trying to repay my debt; I started attending Humanist meetings about six months ago. Almost all of the wonderful people I've talked to within the organisation has a tale to tell - about initial doubt and fear - then there is a breaking point, and a final resolve to be free of all the childish baggage. Finally, the recognition that "I need to be with likeminded people; nothing changes unless people like me are prepared to work towards an easier future for

our children.”

Retired now, I'm back in my favourite role as union organiser, working for the biggest and best cause of all - the integrity, freedom and unity of the human race.

*(Tom White, ©2006, as published on the then Humanist West website).*

### **Tom White, the Nomadic Humanist**

Tom did indeed commence attending meetings, of the Humanist West group, monthly gatherings in Galway City. P J Conneely, one of the founding members of HW recalls the day he met Tom White and his good friend, Kevin Sheehan. In P J's words, they “strolled in and joined us. You can imagine us at a Sunday noon meeting, we are all pretty relaxed. However, when those two boys opened their mouths, some of us began to straighten up and sit in our chairs correctly. The REAL HUMANIST had arrived.”

Whether real or not, Tom found a home and an extended family of friends among the Humanist community in the West of Ireland. When Tom underwent cardiac surgery, Gary O'Loughlin, another HW founder, was his daily visitor. Post-surgery, Tom returned to HW meetings, a renewed man: from then on, he toted a shopping bag with an assortment of fruit to the meetings; I was happy to frequently join him for a pre-meeting walk on the Prom. The parks of Claremorris were where he took his daily absolution, living just down the road in the holy village of Knock, Co. Mayo.

When Séamus O'Connell, another regular HW attendee, decided it was time to “spread the word” further West, and set up a local Westport Humanist group in Co Mayo, he knew he could depend on Tom for support. This was also a much more local group for Tom, who did of course attend regularly, contributing to their conversations with his insights and knowledge, gleaned from his voracious reading, as well as his research into Hu-

manism, historically and contemporaneously.

Later still, when Gill Bell founded North-West Humanists, based in Sligo Town, that familiar face was her most loyal supporter. As Gill recalled this week:

“Tom appeared at our first ever meeting of North West Humanists in Sligo, back in April 2017. He was always helpful, supportive and contributed a great deal to our group, in the way of discussion, ideas, humour and resources. I would go as far as to say Tom was the embodiment of Humanism: respectful of all, compassionate, and with a great capacity for reason. He was a big presence in our group and is sorely missed.”

And so Tom became a bit of a nomadic Humanist, with three groups in his tri-county area. Discovering there was another Westport Humanist group, this one in the US state of Connecticut, Tom connected with Cary Shaw, of the Freeport Humanists (their official name). I was recruited to bring my ‘technical skills’ out to Mayo, so we could ‘stream’ meetings between the groups. When Tom's research revealed Westport Connecticut to be one of the wealthiest jurisdictions in the United States, he suggested perhaps our ‘American Cousins’ might fund a tour of Connecticut for their Irish relations. The tour never happened! We certainly enjoyed those cross-Atlantic connections, which Tom revived during the pandemic, as a forerunner to the online group - Humanist Network Ireland.

Of course, the pandemic ended Tom's wandering, but not his involvement in the Humanist groups in the West of Ireland. He was the obvious lynchpin that brought the three groups together, combining our efforts to stay connected in the online world. I recall some early efforts resulting in ‘zoom-bombing’ as we learned about the importance of online security! As 2020 rolled into 2021 with little letup in the online meetings, Edith Geraghty joined the efforts. Together, she and Tom reframed

the online group not necessarily as a stopgap for the three West of Ireland groups, but as an opportunity to bring together Humanists and freethinking people who would appreciate the convenience of the online get-together. In time the group found a name, Humanist Network Ireland, and a regular membership from all around the island and beyond. Our organising WhatsApp group has been filled with concern for Tom, these past few weeks, with Edith updating us. As news of Tom's death emerged, Janie Lazar, one of the organisers (and also known for being at the helm of End of Life Ireland) shared these lovely thoughts:

“When I think of Tom, I smile. When his name is mentioned, I smile. When his emails arrived, I would smile. Tom White. The world may be poorer now without him, what we go on to offer, ever richer, ever deeper for having known him”.

As a tribute to Tom, the HNI meeting of the end of November took on the spirit of an Irish wake online, dedicated to his friends and acquaintances sharing their memories.

### **Tom White the Author**

When he wasn't travelling the byroads of Connaught, Tom was also involved with the Pen and Ink creative writing group in Kiltimagh, Co Mayo. Emerging from this nurturing greenhouse for writers, was *Only What There Is* in 2013. This was followed by the *The Sense Behind Silence* in 2014. Both publications had proceeds dedicated to charitable associations, the Parkinson's (in 2013) and the Cystic Fibrosis (in 2014) Associations of Ireland. Tom's third publication, written during his recuperation from cardiac intervention, was aptly named *Open Heart Surgery* and published in 2016.

Readers of Tom's poetry will surely notice the prevailing themes.

In the quiet moments just before dawn on 12th of November We bade farewell to a dear

friend Tom White. He will be remembered as a remarkable writer, profound thinker, devoted Humanist and cherished friend. As a published poet, Tom painted emotion through verse, capturing the essence of life's complexities with wisdom and grace.

Tom's words were more than ink on paper they were a testament to his wit, wisdom, and unwavering belief in the inherent goodness within every individual. His passion for meaningful connection and his love for spirited debate enriched the lives of those fortunate enough to know him.

Tom's absence leaves a profound void, yet the legacy of his intellect, his kindness and love for humanity will endure. Simply put, Tom will be deeply missed.

*Ruth Healy, Westport Humanist Group*

### **THREE OF TOM'S POEMS**

#### **Ode to Goodness, Wherever Found**

Would to have the grace  
To have the wisdom  
And the will  
To act in the cause of goodness  
To ensure joy for the world  
To hear children laugh together  
For it is to be spring and green and new  
For it is to be music  
And exquisite  
To precisely fill your heart with such beauty  
That you might worship the perfect part of  
your god  
And of yourself  
And of the other Goodness  
O light of all ages  
O hope in the darkness of despair  
Thank you for loving me  
For compassion  
For your belief against all odds  
My god of Goodness

#### **A Fellow Man**

I have no prayers or charms of faith



If God there be, he'll know my weight  
If God be nought, I'll still do good  
And practise justice as I should  
We should not seek reward to do  
What decency expects us to  
Should Heaven be a kingly court  
I'll go elsewhere to prove my worth  
Don't get me wrong - I've sought belief  
But lust for faith brought no relief  
Mere logic leaves me where I stand  
I am not blest, nor am I damned.

**Pissing On Graves**

It shocked me at first  
She blamed a poor bladder  
But there was a pattern there -  
No megalith left willingly unwatered  
The graves are very old, she said  
The dead won't mind  
And true enough, no Carrie hand  
Shot out in protest from below

But still and all, the dead are slow  
To anger. The living though  
Are nosy. I was assigned  
Her lookout, tasked  
With whistling "Turandot"  
Should tourist busloads hove into view  
Being lookout meant I was  
Complicit in her deviance  
But she squatted with such glee to pee  
I soon forgave her female fetish  
I never got  
To whistle "Turandot"  
And now the lady's dead  
And though  
I know  
She wouldn't mind  
My bladder's made of sterner stuff  
I'm too repressed/refined.



**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 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**

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)

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**IRISH FREETHINKER**

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