

# IFH NEWS

Irish Freethinkers & Humanists

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*THEY SAID*

## 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*
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- *'Is the Atheist My Neighbour?'*
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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. CREATORS OR CRIMINALS?

*Pete Hutton*

In a prominent public place in London, the entrance to the BBC headquarters, there is a stone sculpture which is admired by almost everyone who sees it. It was made by an eminent British sculptor, indeed a very good sculptor. Its subject is *Prospero and Ariel* (from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*). It was made in 1932 and its style is typical of 1930s' art. It's a rather stylised representation of the



two figures, and somewhat erotic in the case of Ariel, who is shown as a nude male child. However, a man recently climbed up to the sculpture and began to smash it with a hammer - because its creator was Eric Gill, whose recently published diaries show him to have sexually molested his daughter and to have been a paedophile. After these shocking truths about him came out, those who heard about it took

sides regarding Gill's artistic works, in a type of dispute that has been happening more and more frequently.

The dispute has two aspects. One is the argument about whether an artist's work is something so independent of their private behaviour that one should be able to admire the work of an artist (whether visual artist, writer, musician, or any other creative person) even if they did/do morally unacceptable things in some way or other. The second aspect of this dispute is about important figures in history who did horrible things (such as slave trading) but who were important, and perhaps even good, in ways unconnected with their bad actions. Some slave traders from British history were also major philanthropists, for example. Are such people to be completely disowned by today's society, including removing as many references to them as possible (e.g. statues of them)?

I feel that these two aspects of the issue are connected: they both pose the question of moral judgement. How much right do we have to judge the morality of other people, given that (a) we all have different standards of what is moral and what is immoral, and (b) are we ourselves so morally perfect that we have the right to condemn others? The man who climbed up a ladder and tried to destroy the Gill sculpture (which is, incidentally, being repaired at a cost so far of £50,000) seems to be a pretty violent character? Would being so be more acceptable than what Eric Gill did? He would probably think so.

Let me reflect on the issue in relation to icons in the artistic fields, as follows.

In Rome last year, we stumbled across a church in Piazza Navona (in the very centre of the city) which held a triptych - a three-part painting - by the late Renaissance artist Caravaggio. It depicts the life of St Matthew. We



seldom use guidebooks, so we didn't know it was there. It was the most amazing work of art I have ever seen in real life, although I have looked at it many times in art books.

Should I, however, have been disgusted by it and gone out of the church immediately, or better still slashed it with a knife - in an act similar to the smashing of the Gill sculpture? Because Caravaggio murdered a man. He was also, as it happens, a paederast (look at his portraits of naked young males).

No one would today condemn Caravaggio for his terrible acts. Why not? Because he lived a long time ago? Because he was an artistic genius? I guess the reason is this: he carried out his shocking acts, but he also did a wonderful thing, painting some of the greatest works in European art. Like most people he did bad and he did good, and the bad, in his case, does not apparently negate the good.

So I find myself asking whether we can always separate a person's moral transgression from their positive acts, or whether there are people whose acts of 'evil' will always overshadow their acts of good.

Surely it can't be a matter of just putting these two opposites into scales to measure which has more weight, the bad or the good. The problem is that we have to choose: if we believe that these two moral opposites in one person are completely separate for the purposes of our judgement, then that separation must apply to everyone. If, on the other hand, we don't believe that the two can be separated - that a person's immoral acts somehow infect everything else that they do, even the good things - then very few of the world's great people, and I think of artists in particular, will be found to be acceptable, and their work therefore should be suppressed, or at least ignored.

I take the former position - yet I contradict my own position because, for example, I have

always refused to read the books of the Peruvian writer Mario Vargas Llosa. He won the Nobel Literature prize - but he is pretty far right, which I abhor. Of course, this doesn't make him immoral, he's just not to my political taste. However, I am 'guilty' of conflating his political position, which I strongly disapprove of, with his literary works, which must be very good. In other words, I reject his work because I disapprove of his person.

Another similar case: French writer Louis Ferdinand Céline. A few months ago, I read his best known work, *Journey to the End of the Night* (1932). It was extraordinary and brilliant literature. Then I read up about his life. He was a raging anti-Semite and supported the Nazis during their rise to power in Germany. I felt sickened and regretted having read his book.

But I don't feel guilty about admiring Eric Gill's art. Is there a difference between the political evil of one and the paederasty of the

other? I don't know, but the distinction I make seems logical and right to me.

And what about Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*? Or Emil Nolde, one of the great German Expressionist painters in the 1930s? He was another anti-Semite and Nazi supporter (of course, these two attitudes go together usually). Yet he is one of Anne's favourite artists - she who should more than anyone detest a Nazi, and I too love his work.

It seems the moral dilemma has no resolution. The inconvenient truth is that the human being has the capacity for both good and evil - and in many people the two exist side by side. But they are not fused into one essence. I can deplore the private life of Picasso (a serial exploiter of females) or Caravaggio, while profoundly admiring their art - and I do not believe that I am immoral for feeling this way.



**3. FAITH AND EDUCATION**

*The following letter to 'The Irish Times' of Sat Dec 9 2023 is worth looking at by Humanists.*

Sir, – Given the environment in which we now live in this country, perhaps taking religion out of our national schools might be the better thing for all involved.

At the moment, those children, of a different faith or none, must feel rejected during the religion classes, when they are either sent to a different room, or are made to sit at the back of the class. Their situation is even worse during the preparation period for first holy communion and confirmation.

And apart from the students, it is now pretty obvious that most of our young teachers are no longer practising the faith. So, we can only imagine how they must feel in their role as catechists.

However, if the parishes were to take on the roles of faith formation, and teaching religious

knowledge outside of school-time, they would benefit greatly. The critical aspect of the change from school to parish would involve the parents making a serious commitment to passing on the faith to their children.

And this would be in keeping with the acknowledged stages of faith development, whereby the parents are the ones who sow the seed of faith and nourish it in the children. At the moment, it is doubtful if many Irish families practice the faith in the traditional way, by saying prayers before bedtime and going to Mass at the weekend.

So, if religion were taken out of our national schools, a new approach to evangelisation would have to be devised so that, at least, we would have the faithful and the few.

Yours, etc,

Fr PAT SEAVER,

Farranshone,

Limerick.....▲

*Peter McGuire*

### **IS RELIGION A BARRIER TO GETTING A JOB AS A PRIMARY TEACHER?**

**Almost 90% of primary schools require a certificate to teach religion according to the Catholic faith. Some say it is an obstacle to entering the profession at a time of teacher shortages**

Luke Lennon has been teaching in a multidenominational school in Greystones, Co Wicklow, for ten years. He loves the job, but it is a long commute from his rural home where he lives with his wife, a nurse, and three children.

“With costs rising, I thought that we could save time and money if I could work in a more local school,” says Lennon, who teaches at Greystones Educate Together National School. “When a job came up in a Catholic school, I applied, but I was told that the religious cert was necessary. That was the moment when I realised that I could not apply for the majority of teaching jobs within a 30km radius of my house.”

With almost 90 per cent of schools under Catholic patronage, many teacher-training courses advise students that taking the certificate in religious studies - known as the CRS - is needed to boost their chances of getting a job.

The Catholic Education Partnership, an umbrella body for Catholic schools, confirms that the certificate is a necessary qualification to teach in a Catholic school due to the way religion is integrated into the curriculum.

“A person does not need to be of the Catholic faith to gain the qualification and religious affiliation is not something asked of candidates in interviews,” says Alan Hynes, the partnership’s chief executive. “Candidates are asked to demonstrate a knowledge of the Catholic

ethos.”

The content is described as offering knowledge and skills for “communicating the Catholic faith to children at primary school”, according to a document produced by Irish bishops

Many Church of Ireland schools also seek a Protestant version of the certificate. A separate certificate in “ethical and multid denominational education” is available for teachers interested in teaching in multid denominational schools such as Educate Together or Community National Schools managed by education and training boards.

Critics of the CRS requirement say would-be teachers who are not believing Christians, or who are unwilling to pretend they are, are effectively debarred from most schools at a time when the system is suffering from a shortage of qualified teachers.

Catholic groups, however, see the requirements of the religious certificate in a much different light. They say it also explores issues around interculturalism, religious diversity and the importance of promoting respect for all pupils.

They see the religious education programme as a subject that is taught in a manner that complements other curricular areas, such as history, geography, art and music.

So, how big an issue is the religious certificate in employment at primary level? And is it a barrier to recruitment at a time of teacher shortages?

Anecdotally, some teachers talk about pretending to be Catholic in order to secure a job. In a job interview situation, it’s hard to know how strictly a school will adhere to the requirement for a religious certificate.

A recent circular from the Department of Education, issued to school boards of management, forbids applicants from attaching their

religious certificate to their application form, yet some applicants say they were excluded from interview by schools because they did not send the form.

The Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) raised the issue; the upshot is the circular takes precedence. But, is it legitimate to exclude a teacher based on religion?

"It is legitimate, as the law says they can do it," says John Boyle, INTO general secretary, who notes that the Constitution gives primacy to religious education. "The Constitution gives primacy to religious education, so if a teacher doesn't want to teach it, they can teach in a multid denominational school."

Garret Campbell, project lead with the Migrant Teacher Project, which supports teachers from other countries to enter the profession, says it is very difficult to gather data on this issue - although he has tried.

"It has emerged as an issue, especially with so many Ukrainian teachers in schools," he says. "But we are hearing of more cases where the board of management chair, under instruction, is insisting on teachers having the cert."

One former teacher, who asked not to be identified, says religion is a key reason why she left the profession. She completed her graduate diploma in primary teaching in 2011 and was struck by how many students felt obliged to undertake the optional certificate, whether they were believers or not.

"I ultimately decided not to become a teacher, and one of the major factors was that I felt I would be untrue to myself if I was teaching Catholic faith formation," she says. "Over ten years on, I'm now a parent of two small children. It's very disappointing to see how little has changed."

Simon Lewis, principal, Carlow Educate Together National School, who is Jewish, says he had no choice but to work in an Educate Together school. He notes that section 37 of the Employment Equality Act allows primary

schools to discriminate against teachers on religious grounds in recruitment.

"I once interviewed for a position in a Catholic school. I was asked about upholding the ethos and I thought I could be honest and say I am Jewish. The interview lasted no longer than five minutes. So many teachers lie. I don't know how it serves Catholic children to lie."

Asking a teacher to uphold the ethos of a school, he says, means being a missionary and promoting Catholicism throughout the school day, with a Christian-centric world view.

"My job prospects are so limited. In the context of teacher shortages, this cannot be helping, but it's next to impossible to gather data on how many thought about becoming a teacher but decided against it due to these religious requirements," he says.

In Lennon's case, he studied for his teaching qualification in Edinburgh and didn't complete a certificate in religious education.

"People ask me why I don't just go along with it, as a lot of teachers do in order to get work. I hear anecdotally of some schools not checking, and I was even advised to go for a job and hope that I wasn't asked about having the certificate," he says.

"But I felt that I couldn't take that risk: my wages are essential for my family. It's also very expensive at €1,200 and with the cost of living so high, I didn't feel I could justify training to teach something that would make me unhappy."

He says Educate Together's "learn together" curriculum teaches about all major religions, morals, ethics, beliefs and justice. Lennon says he has no problem teaching this.

"I was baptised a Catholic, but I am not practising. I studied ethics in college and try to stick to my morals as much as I can. I don't want to be a hypocrite: what sort of example would that set to the children in my care?" he says. "I'm a fully qualified teacher with 14 years of experience. I should not have to lie to

get a public sector job. My job prospects are severely curtailed unless I agree to be dishonest.”

**Primary schools: in numbers**

- 3,095 – number of mainstream primary schools
- 2,749 – number of Catholic primary schools

165 – number of multi-denominational schools

*Source: Department of Education’s Indicators for Ireland report, February, 2023.*

*Article reproduced from THE IRISH TIMES 31 Oct 2023*



**5. MORAL FRAMEWORK FOR THINKING ABOUT SEX**

*Paul Murray*

**The body, and joys that can ensue from sex, are to be celebrated - not imprisoned in a musty religiosity – a Unitarian view**

Many older people will say that standards of sexual behaviour have dropped, that there must be barriers to certain types of sexual activity, that the family of man, woman and children is being weakened, and that the traditional Christian sex ethic is being ignored.

They are right on at least one thing, the way we have dealt with sex, love, pleasure, reproduction, and the ethics surrounding these, has certainly altered. So it is, perhaps, time for bravery, to seriously debate how we can develop an updated moral paradigm for how we go about sexual activity.

Many of us were brought up to believe that sexual pleasure was only allowed in marriage, and that one loved and married an opposite gender partner, only then could the couple set about the fun of making children and they would be together until death did them part.

But much of that scenario is crumbling. We are all much less likely to stay in intolerable relationships, there is divorce and gay marriage. And substantial numbers of couples live unwed. Sexual pleasure is now regarded as every man and woman’s entitlement, mirrored in John O’Donohue’s spiritual perspective that “your senses link you intimately with the Divine within you and around you”.

Mary Oliver in *Wild Geese* also puts pleasure on a heavenly plain. She suggests that we must treat the “soft animal” of our bodies with

kindness. We should allow ourselves to love what we love. Luther believed that lovemaking was not only sacred but also delightful. The best place to be at Christ’s second coming, he said, was to be united in the act of making love.

So, the body itself and the joys that can ensue from it, are to be celebrated, not imprisoned in a musty religiosity, which is not to suggest that the “soft animal” within us should have carte blanche to run wild. But where might we find a new framework for sexual activity?

One lead could be from the young who it is often suggested have indelibly decoupled love and sex. It is not now as often expected that, like a horse and carriage, love and sex needs must go together. For many young people, says Richard Holloway, sex is an appetite to be satisfied with no necessary connection to any kind of relationship. Recreational sex, he uses another word, is purely functional, pleasurable, and done for its own sake.

And, if it leads to sexual love and the development of a sexual relationship, a different ethic comes into play, requiring exclusivity, as well as honesty about other sexual encounters. But with recreational sex, he says, there is no relationship to be broken.

Many may doubt this, but Holloway directs us towards John Harris, who wrote *Wonderwoman and Superman*. Harris says that “for a

moral judgment to be respectable it must have something to say about just why a supposed wrong action is wrongful. If it fails to meet this test it is a preference and not a moral judgement". And Holloway adds that while the idea of recreational sex may be displeasing, we ought to be careful about dismissing it as immoral.

Another aspect of sex that needs more public understanding and an ethical basis, is sexual fluidity, how the sexual orientation of men and women can change. Such changes are a "common thread" in many people's lives, says Sabra L Katz-Wise. For AARP, (American Association of Retired Persons) a major US organisation for people of 50 and older, sexual orientation is "not carved in stone".

A great sadness in life is how, through inertia, cultural background, age, or society's disapproval, many people are denied an intimate partner who would fulfil many of their needs. They lose this opportunity because while a potential relationship may be loving in the widest sense, it would not be seen as what we traditionally regard as "love".

So, perhaps as an antidote to loneliness, if

nothing else, should we not encourage meaningful coupledness among men and women (men/men, women/women) even if Cupid misses the ultimate target of love? Should we not take into our ethical paradigm that sexual orientations are not immutable and that love, the ideal of course, and intimate alliances may (to misquote a bit) "alter when they alteration find"?

Indeed, should we not be discussing whether sex is a value, needing boundaries, of course, but an activity which can stand alone with minimal relationship requirements? Should we not open our minds to less understood modes of sexuality, and meld them within our ethical thinking?

Ralph Helverson (*Living in the Question*) says "we all have settled opinions that new ideas must confront". Some of these settled opinions are about sex ethics. It is perhaps time for fresh thinking, for inclusion in a revamped framework, recreational sex, the separation of love and sexual activity, and fluidity.

*Reproduced from THE IRISH TIMES  
web site 10 Dec 2023*

## 6. 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](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**

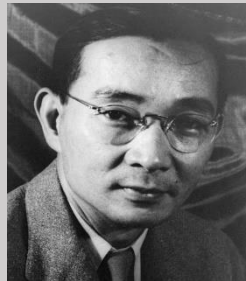
2nd Tuesday of month  
Radisson Hotel, Sligo  
Contact: Gill Bell 087 295 8206  
[humanistgb@gmail.com](mailto:humanistgb@gmail.com)

**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)

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***THEY SAID***



**Not to enjoy the present is to waste it.**

*Lin Yu Tang*

**Belief in an afterlife implies that health and happiness are not such a big deal ...**

*Stephen Pinker*

**[Religion] is the fantastic realisation of the human essence ...**

*Karl Marx*

**Imagination is more robust in proportion as reasoning power is weak.**

*Giambattista Vico*

**This cosmic order - the same for all of us, no god or man made it; but it always was and is and will be ...**

*Heraclitus*

**Reason's most important function is to uphold the force of ideals.**

*Susan Neiman*

**There is nothing more important than appearing to be religious.**

*Niccolo Machiavelli*

**I believe because it is absurd.**

*Tertullian*



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