

IFH NEWS

Irish Freethinkers & Humanists

No.2 February 2023

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1. *MORE ABOUT IFH NEWS & IRISH FREETHINKER*

This is the second monthly edition of *IFH NEWS*. Henceforth, it will only be immediately available through email for subscribers to IFH publications. Although, back copies will be inserted into the archive in due course. As for *IRISH FREETHINKER*, the first (Spring) edition for 2023 has been published and has been dispatched by post to subscribers. As in the case of *IFH NEWS*, the periodical will only be available to subscribers (by post) and for purchase in shops, and will likewise only be put into the archive in due course.

The IFH website (www.irishfreethinkers.com) continues to be developed and editions of *IRISH FREETHINKER* for the period before May-June 2020 and back to Autumn 2016 are gradually being put up on it. In particular, there is now an online payment system on it.

2. *ST BRIGID, THE GODDESS BRÍD & FRENCH LAÏCITÉ*

Roger Kelly

The recent hullabaloo surrounding the new public holiday in the Republic in honour of Saint Brigid yet again highlighted the need for a separation of church and State in civic matters. While I'm delighted that citizens in the South have an additional public holiday, the over-emphasis on the media on Brigid's religiosity was rather nauseating. Statues, shrines, and holy wells are familiar features that crisscross the country, both North and South, with churches, schools and GAA clubs using her name.

Little mention in the media of the Celtic pagan goddess called Brigid (Bríd) who was venerated for generations before parts

of her saga was hijacked by the early Christian evangelists.

In contrast, it was interesting to read that a French court in February this year had ordered the removal of a statue of the Virgin Mary in La Flotte on the island of Ile-de-Re, off the France Atlantic coast. The court said that the statute broke a 1905 law on the separation of church and State that outlaws religious signs and emblems in any public place in France. This stems from what the French call *laïcité*, a form of secularism that is central to the country's history and identity.

It is neither a form of State atheism nor

the outlawing of religion. Rather the concept enshrines in law the right to believe or not to believe, while at the same time keeping religion out of public affairs. No French president, for instance, could be sworn in on a holy book. No French school could hold a nativity play. No French marriage is legal if celebrated only in a

place of worship.

We still have a long road to travel in Ireland to achieve such a situation in discouraging religious involvement and influence in civic and governmental affairs. Berries off to the French!



3. BLASPHEMY - THE HERITAGE IN IRELAND & BRITAIN

David Nash

The themes of ‘history’ and ‘civil liberties’ in *The Freethinker* [UK] this September and October provide an opportunity to reflect upon the crime which has regularly tripped up atheists, agnostics, freethinkers and secularists - blasphemy.

It is relatively easy to trace the development of this offence in the nations of the UK and in Ireland. Although both Scotland and Ireland diverged from the experience of England, in later years the founding principle of the law in each of these countries was the same. Statutes were passed in England and Scotland, the latter witnessing the only execution specifically for blasphemy in mainland Britain in 1697. The statute law in England was barely used, and the principle of blasphemy prosecution was kept alive far longer than it might have otherwise been by the use of the English common law offence of blasphemous libel.

When invoked in court, this was a law developed by judges, who had to interpret the content of blasphemy cases in their contemporary context, and to consider what level of religious debate and criticism appeared to be permissible within society at any given moment. Thus, definitions altered and the law was made acceptable to each generation, sometimes even drawing praise from civil servants and others who

saw it as an organic, evolving solution in a country that was slowly but surely becoming more progressive.

Cultural History of Episodes

The history of these laws, or what Hypatia Bradlaugh-Bonner, daughter of Charles Bradlaugh, called ‘penalties upon opinion’, can be researched and followed through previous scholarship. But what needs recapturing and retelling to a wider audience is the cultural history of many of these episodes. Their interest extends well beyond the place which they occupy in the pantheon of principled stands against visible religious repression.

In the aftermath of the Napoleonic war, the ideas of Thomas Paine, and the Jacobin-inspired ideology that resulted from them, appeared to be a serious threat to an establishment which viewed Christianity as its vital foundation. Thomas Paine’s ideological heirs slashed away at this cosy conservative view which they believed had impoverished and misled the nation.

The campaigning of Richard Carlile, Mary-Ann Carlile, Jane Carlile and Susannah Wright in the 1820s aimed to educate their readership as much about the fundamental principles of the Enlightenment as they did about opposition to the power of religion. All of them were

defendants in blasphemy prosecutions who had campaigned against the restriction of knowledge, and, using their own prosecutions as evidence, castigated those who were convinced that awareness of new ideas would damage society. Such ideas ranged from the possibility of a society without a monarch to the importance of the unfettered right to publish literature even on controversial topics such as birth control.

These were all ideas that would empower their predominantly working-class audience. The defences of Wright and the Carliles invoked the argument that access to knowledge was freedom in its purest form. They defiantly argued that if their work to promote such knowledge could be proven to be harmful, they would immediately desist from it. This displayed a touching innocence and trust in the power of knowledge itself, in particular that of science (broadly defined). These were sentiments that inspired the struggle of Wright and the Carliles against irrationality, making sworn enemies of those who would censor knowledge, or confine it to a narrow circle, at the expense of society's wider collective benefit. Wright and the Carliles also proved that it might be possible, at least in theory, to win arguments in court; indeed, they almost transformed the courtroom into a highly visible stage for advanced ideas. Though defeated, their defence also highlighted the way in which the prosecution's arguments against them relied on outrage, fear and a compulsion to repress. Such emotions and reactions would not be acceptable to the audiences of succeeding generations.

The Freethinker Cases

The cases against *The Freethinker* itself during the early 1880s, and against its editor, George William Foote, and his

colleagues, contributed much to the cultural history of freethought that needs remembering. This series of cases spread ripples far and wide. *The Freethinker's* assaults on the Bible and Christian doctrine relied on ridicule. Its contributors tried to highlight both the primitive anachronism of the Bible in an age of steam trains and telegraphy, and, simultaneously, the absurdity of some of its stories, which claimed to be the truth underpinning Christianity. The establishment's version of Christianity and the Home Office prosecutions of Foote and the *Freethinker* were readily, and easily, painted as contrary to the 'spirit of the age', adrift from Victorian modernity.

The Freethinker itself was, moreover, part of a vibrant and widely read mass media, whose content ranged from its own sometimes waspish and scurrilous content, right through to the thoughts of respected literary figures in loftier publications. But even respected literary figures flocked to accuse the authorities of high-handedness; *The Freethinker* litigation was proof, if it were needed, that the government could no longer speak for, let alone control, public opinion at large. Invoking the idea of the 'spirit of the age' had let the discursive genie out of the bottle. The single largest lesson the authorities drew from the case was that interference with published religious opinions, however unpopular or disliked, was likely to be an act of supreme folly. Evidence from the Home Office papers suggests that civil servants, in the years after Foote's prosecutions, regularly prevented politicians from taking action against content they found offensive.

Edwardian Era

The Edwardian era saw prosecutions for blasphemy against John William Gott,

Thomas William Stewart and Ernest Pack, all members of the Freethought Socialist League in Bradford. Like Foote, these men wrapped their anti-Christian message up in the popular culture of the time, using cartoons, motifs and ideas from popular novels and the music hall. They might well have been left alone at other times, except that their speeches from platforms around the Midlands and the north of England began to attract the attention of local chief constables.

The constables became concerned about the circulation of birth control literature at the socialists' outdoor meetings, as well as about the dangers to public order that might ensue if opponents confronted the inflammatory message of the speakers. Gott, Stewart and Pack also had connections with anarchists, who had become the great bogeymen of the Edwardian era by threatening to bring covert terrorist activity against authority and governmental figures in England as they had overseas.

In this tense atmosphere, all three of them were convicted of blasphemy and given gaol sentences. Their agitation and irreverence drifted into the post-World War I years; Gott became the last individual imprisoned for blasphemous libel in 1922. His imprisonment became a particularly unpleasant symbol of repression: during this period, his wife died, and he himself died shortly after leaving prison. Gott's death seemed to be the final blasphemy prosecution deriving from the Victorian era, and to draw the curtain down upon a century of freethinkers rattling the gates of religious liberty. Public attention for the next fifty years would focus upon the desirability of repealing the blasphemy law and how to do it.

Blasphemy Again in the Seventies

As I have suggested, contemporary cultural trends can spawn blasphemy cases, or create vital contexts that see such cases actively promoted and pursued. This tendency perhaps reached its zenith in the sudden rediscovery of the crime of blasphemous libel in the late 1970s, when the editor of *Gay News*, Denis Lemon, was privately prosecuted for publishing James Kirkup's poem, *The Love that Dares to Speak its Name*, alongside an illustration of Christ with obvious genitalia. The poem also depicted Christ as an active homosexual who had indulged in sexual relations with many characters from the Gospel story.

The impetus behind the court case of *Whitehouse v Lemon* was one notable part of the campaign by Mary Whitehouse, a Christian conservative activist, against the widening and seemingly unstoppable tide of permissiveness which seemed to her to be overrunning the country. Arguably, she lighted upon blasphemy because she had been triumphant in preventing the Danish film maker Jens Jurgén Thorsen from entering the country to make his film *The Sex Life of Jesus*.

Church Betrayal

But there may also have been a deeper reason: that she, alongside others, felt her religion had been betrayed from within. Every piece of legislation that permitted homosexuality or easier abortion seemingly owed its passage to fearful bishops and accommodating clergy who were falling over themselves to 'modernise' after the apparent reverses of new liberal theology. Many Christians, like Whitehouse, felt this had been spearheaded and set running by interventions such as John Robinson's *Honest to God* published in the

previous decade. Thus, blasphemy was invoked by a Christian laity as a way of voicing its concerns that its own hierarchy would sell out its followers to accommodate an unworthy secular world.

The Nineties

The mid-1990s saw Nigel Wingrove's film *Visions of Ecstasy* becoming the subject of similar controversy. This film was a dreamlike recreation of religious and sexual ecstasy, as portrayed in the visions of St Theresa of Avila. Wingrove was dumbfounded when the British Board of Film Classification refused it a certificate on the grounds that it 'might be blasphemous'. He took his case to the European Court of Human Rights, where he initially won, but was subsequently outflanked and defeated by the British government's invocation of the 'margin of appreciation'.

This provision allowed individual EU nations to retain laws that were essential for the preservation of national culture. Seeing blasphemy laws through this prism suggested they were important to British identity and were a bulwark against some of the worst excesses to which membership of the EU might expose the country. The cultural watchwords of isolation, exceptionalism and perhaps even superiority hung over this result, alongside the chance to view at least nominal Christianity with some sustained and rejuvenated affection.

Blasphemy Law in UK & Ireland

The abolition of the common law blasphemy offences in England and Wales in 2008, and of similar offences in Scotland in 2021, ended their official history in most of the UK. Abolition of Northern Ireland's blasphemy laws is under consideration. In the Republic of Ireland, in contrast, new

blasphemy provisions criminalising the 'publication or utterance of blasphemous matter' were introduced via the Defamation Act 2009. The aim was make the offence apply to all religions, as was perceived to be required by the 37th Amendment of its Constitution. However, these were repealed in 2019, following the results of a 2018 referendum in which over 64 per cent of the electorate voted to repeal the Amendment.

In 2022, then, blasphemy is officially no longer a crime in most of the UK, or in Ireland. Yet in the UK, some critics, including the National Secular Society, and to an extent Humanists UK, have argued that incidents such as the Batley Grammar case, or the cancelling of films and books deemed 'offensive' by certain religious groups, risk reintroducing a de facto blasphemy law by the back door. As pointed out by both the NSS and HUK, similar concerns arise with the definition of 'Islamophobia' that has been adopted by Labour, which has a tortuous 'Islamophobia policy', as well as by the Liberal Democrats and some local authorities.

The sort of pressure exerted by religious groups in Britain today, and their rhetoric of offensiveness, take us back to the world of the eighteenth century, where vested interests could use a blasphemy accusation to prevent material being seen or read. The chilling effect which blasphemy laws had upon public expression prior to the twentieth century seems to be returning by other means in the twenty-first.

David Nash's latest book, co-edited with Eveline G. Bouwers, is 'Demystifying the Sacred: Blasphemy and Violence from the French Revolution to Today' (De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2022, open access).

1 October 2022, The Freethinker [UK]

4. CATHOLIC CHURCH - TAX AVOIDANCE & HOUSE BUILDING

Arthur Beasley

The Catholic Archdiocese of Dublin has made dozens of submissions to the city council seeking to delist as many as 32 churches and parish centres from a new tax that is supposed to spur housebuilding on vacant land.

The properties on the council's list include a large number of chapels in the city and suburbs such as the Church of St John the Baptist on Clontarf Road, the Church of St Agnes in Crumlin, and Our Lady Queen of Peace on Merrion Road in Dublin 4.

Such properties and 29 other Dublin churches are among hundreds of sites designated for inclusion in the Residential Zoned Land Tax in draft maps that the city council and other local authorities published in November.

The Government has been aiming to discourage land hoarding by imposing the new tax on property owners for unused land as it seeks solutions to the worsening housing crisis.

The 3 per cent tax, coming into force from next year on the market value of a property, will be levied on sites that remain idle despite being zoned for housing and supplied with services such as water.

Erroneously included

Owners were given an opportunity to make submissions to their local authority

challenging the listings on the draft maps if they felt their property was erroneously included.

A series of submissions to Dublin City Council from the archdiocese show it has pushed back strongly against the tax being imposed on its properties, saying in each case that "the land is currently used as a church providing a social and community use".

Citing laws on land use in residential-zoned land tax maps, the submissions said the properties did not meet the criteria for the new tax.

"In the case of the subject property, it is reasonable to consider that the land is required for social and community use," it said.

The submissions were made by the Laurence O'Toole Diocesan Trust, an archdiocese holding company that owns property in trust on behalf of parishes.

A spokesman for the archdiocese acknowledged the 32 submissions were made to the city council and another two to Fingal County Council after two church properties in north Co Dublin were listed.

*Extract from 'The Irish Times', 15 Feb
2023*

5. 'FAITH' FORMATION & EDUCATION SYSTEM

Letter to 'The Irish Times'

The latest review of the primary curriculum represents another wasted opportunity to tackle the place of faith formation in our education system ("Primary schools to teach foreign languages as religion time cut under new proposals", 'News', *The Irish Times* December 28th).

Some 2½ hours per week are currently devoted to the "patron's programme", code for religious indoctrination. For comparison, three hours are dedicated to history, geography and science combined.

It is an astonishing amount of class time to spend on material that is not required by a large cohort of the population and from

which increasing numbers of pupils are opting out.

The proposal to reduce this period by just 30 minutes to two hours is tokenistic and fails to take account of a rapidly changing population with respect to religious belief and practice.

The State continues to take a patron-centric, rather than a child-centric, approach to education by allowing bishops' impulse to evangelise the children in their care to take precedence over families' individual human and constitutional rights.

As modest as it is, this reform nevertheless reminds us that the role of religion in our schools is not above question.

Education Equality has consistently

argued that religious instruction should simply be moved outside core hours on an opt-in basis in all publicly funded schools. This would free up significant curriculum time and ensure that all children are treated with equal respect at school, whatever their family background.

Our proposals are cost-effective, inclusive and achievable. But they clearly require a degree of realism and political ambition that the Government has yet to find.

DAVID GRAHAM,
Communications Officer,
Education Equality,
Dec 30, 2022

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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

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

South Dublin Humanist Community (SDHC)

Contact: 086 857 2005
Janielazar@gmail.com
Mailing List:
southdublinhumanistcommunity

Humanist Association of Ireland

Monthly meeting at rotating venues, mostly Dublin
Details of next meeting at 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

Cork Humanists

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

Humanists West (Galway)

Last Sunday of month, 12 noon
Anno Santo Hotel, Threadneedle Rd, Salthill
Contact: Garry O'Lochlainn 087 222 2726

Kilkenny Humanist Group

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

Mid-West Humanists (Limerick, Clare, Tipperary)

3rd Wednesday of month in Limerick
Contact: Peter 086 815 5102

info@midwesthumanists.com

Also check <https://midwesthumanists.com>

North West Humanists

2nd Tuesday of month

Radisson Hotel, Sligo

Contact: Gill Bell 087 295 8206

humainstgb@gmail.com

Waterford Humanists

3rd Monday of month, 7.30 p.m.

Phil Grimes Pub, John St, Waterford

Contact: Teresa graham22@gmail.com

Intellect more than anything else is man. Aristotle

The sage does not seek to understand heaven. Xunzi

The unexamined life is not worth living. Socrates

Of moral purpose, I see no trace in nature. That is an article of exclusively human manufacture - and very much to our credit. T H Huxley

Of all the means by which wisdom ensures happiness throughout life, by far the most important is the possession of friendship. Epicurus

No one was ever injured by the truth; but he who persists in self-deception and ignorance is injured. Marcus Aurelius

A wise man proportions his belief to the evidence. David Hume



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