

IFH NEWS

Irish Freethinkers & Humanists

No.3, March 2023

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REMEMBERING BRIAN

1. WHAT'S IN *IRISH FREETHINKER* - SPRING '23

The first (Spring) edition for 2023 of *IRISH FREETHINKER*, has been published and has been dispatched by post to subscribers and is otherwise available for purchase in shops.

The contents are as follows:- After God; Frederick Delius, Music & Atheism; Humanist Network Ireland; Myth & Reality; Secularism & the Ills of the World; Origins of Religion; Of Angels & Demons; Did Jesus Exist?; A Humanist Herald.

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 as will be back-copies of *IFH NEWS*. There is now also an online payment system on the website.

2. THE STATE OF HUMANISM IN IRELAND

Daltún Ó Ceallaigh

It is timely to consider the state of Humanism in Ireland, given that we are increasingly becoming a secular society.

If one is to seek to identify the Humanist presence by cyber means, a simple way of doing this is to look for websites which describe themselves as Humanist. In fact, there are six which can be so found. Based in the North, there are sites for Humani (Humanist Assoc of NI) and N Ireland Humanists (a branch of Humanists UK). Based in the South, there are the Humanist Association of Ireland (HAI), Atheist

Ireland (AI), and Daonnachas Éire (DÉ). The Irish Freethinkers and Humanists (IFH) group has a virtually 50/50 cross-border presence. There is a limited number of northern members of some other, southern-based associations.

The website of Humani does not indicate any activity since June 2021. There is, however, a grouping entitled North West Humanists which has a Facebook page linked to HAI. Daonnachas Éire is a comparatively recent phenomenon, which has published a certain number of articles

and documents on its site.

It would appear, therefore, that the main Humanist actors in Ireland are HAI, IFH, and AI. Operationally, these may be assessed under three headings, i.e. as to how far they are engaged in: officiation, agitation, or articulation: that is to say, respectively, - provide celebrants and chaplains; engage in campaigning and propaganda; or give published expression to Humanist ideas and analyses.

Of the three associations mentioned, only the HAI offers persons to officiate at weddings and funerals. It does have an online journal, but no longer produces hardcopy. As for campaigning and propaganda, it is being considered how far it is confined in these regards, owing to its current legal status. AI is prominent in campaigning and propagandising, while also having an online weekly bulletin. The IFH, while holding meetings on occasions, is principally engaged in publishing the quarterly hardcopy *Irish Freethinker* monthly email bulletin entitled *IFH News*. It may thus be seen that the three associations are distinguished according to the emphasis of activity for them, i.e. for - HAI, to officiate; AI, to agitate; and IFH, to articulate.

These associations, and the others mentioned in the North, grew up at different times and in different circumstances. The

question now is how the cause of Humanism can be taken forward in Ireland in the light of these realities. While the idea of some all-Ireland, integrated organisation might arise from the point of view of structural streamlining, that might be very difficult to achieve in practice and much time could be consumed in just striving towards that end.

In fact, there is perhaps no reason why all the associations concerned should not continue as they are and do what they are doing, in a manner that may be viewed as complementary rather than competitive. Obviously, it is only sensible that all the associations should be aware of the others' endeavours so as to avoid unnecessary duplication. At the same time, there will probably be a small amount of overlap, but that is not essentially a bad thing insofar as it may just help to reinforce the Humanist message.

There will likely come a time again when coordinated campaigning will be preferable in the light of, for example, further proposed amendments to the Irish constitution or other initiatives in respect of statute law, North or South. If such events arise, it is then that the various associations might agree to function under a temporary, coordinating umbrella in order to assure the maximum effort towards the most desirable ends. ♦

3.

INCONVENIENT ETHICS

Pete Hutton

At least once a day, sometimes twice, my spouse and I struggle with an ethical dilemma and a practical dilemma. These occasions are mealtimes, lunch and supper. Breakfast is no problem. The dilemmas concern what we are about to ingest: food and drink. The latter, drink, is a practical

problem and perhaps less troubling: should we have a glass of wine or beer, or neither, with the meal? That infuriating burden on life - trying to stay healthy - is of course the problem. From having been told by various experts that a glass of wine a day is OK, or even beneficial (highly unlikely), we are

now given regular updates on the latest medical science and told to reduce our consumption from one glass a day to one every three days, then to one a week, then to one a month, etc. Basically, though the experts don't dare say it because it would be like pissing into the wind, don't drink a drop alcohol, ever. EVER! Well if they are the pissers and we are the wind, our wind of alcohol consumption goes on blowing gently (we have one glass of wine with nine out of ten suppers, my spouse's glass slightly less than mine because she is a female and therefore more sensible and prudent - she has about one centimetre less than me and vigorously prevents any attempt by me to have a quick sip of hers if I finish mine first, which I always do). The point is that this problem only really affects ourselves, our own bodies, there's no ethics involved (unless you disapprove of the vast areas of productive agricultural land used for growing the ingredients of alcohol).

No, the real problem arises with that troublesome human invention, ethics. Look, I don't want to knock ethics - it's good for us I suppose, like green vegetables (and water instead of booze). But ethics does add a large dimension of guilt to life, for some people at least: there are lots of lucky people who don't give a *uck about ethics. Unfortunately, my spouse and I do give a f*c* - sometimes, i.e. when behaving ethically doesn't interfere too much with pleasure.

Anyway, talking of green vegetables, this piece is about that completely overworked subject, meat-eating, in fact the eating of any animal product. By the way, I used to ask why vegans don't eat eggs, providing they are fully free-range and their hens are untainted by antibiotics, etc. Now I know the answer (but how many vegans do?). All birds naturally only have one or

two clutches of eggs per year, because (a) they don't want to overpopulate the world with birds and (b) producing eggs is hard on their body. If their eggs are removed before hatching, they lay more, and more, endlessly. Not good for their health and shortens their life span. I realise hens are not too worried about their life span, not being good at counting (most birds can count up to about 2 apparently - if they return to their nest where there were 2 eggs and find only one, they realise something is wrong, but if they return to their nest where they had laid 6 eggs and find only 2, their weakness in mathematics is clearly shown: they don't notice any difference.) So, by eating eggs what we do is not fair to hens. It's mildly cruel.

Sorry about these diversions from my subject. To get back to the main topic: last night as we ate our vegetarian meal (but not vegan - there was grated parmesan on the risotto) - we happened to watch a documentary on why most humans insist on eating meat or fish, given that we don't actually need to. If you go to India, you will notice that the vast majority of its population of over 1,000,000,000 are vegetarian and are apparently healthy, if rather thin. I can count on the fingers of one hand the number of times I ate meat in the nearly five months I spent in India on four different trips. Yes, I came back looking skeletal each time, but there might have been other reasons for that (getting stressed out trying to buy tickets for Indian trains?). The documentary was predictably horrific. Pigs being killed in the slaughterhouse by suffocation with carbon dioxide (the standard method in Europe), an agonising death taking several minutes. Hens with eyes pecked out by other hens. Cows that have never seen grass. Turkeys made to grow so quickly (they're slaughtered at five

months) that their legs cannot support their oversized bodies. You know it all - I hope. BUT, I eat cows and pigs and chickens and very rarely turkeys, knowing - in fact, almost visualising as I eat them - the suffering they've gone through. This is the ethical dilemma: I eat them because I like to eat them. Personal satisfaction overrides ethics. What a bloody nuisance!

At the beginning of this piece I said we face an ethical dilemma once or twice a day. Not quite true, most of our suppers do not include meat (but often include cheese), but then there is often a bit of smoked ham at lunchtime or some paté, or a quiche (egg) and inevitably cheese. Of course, a quiche doesn't look like a suffering hen, and a morsel of paté doesn't look like a squealing pig being crammed into a tiny cage, while standing in its own faeces on a slatted floor. How can I do this? How can you do this? How can anyone other than a selfish and stupid bastard do this? How can anyone who believes they act ethically do this? Answer: we don't act ethically, because acting ethically often limits our pleasure.

What else do we do that puts our pleasure or convenience above our ethical sense? Plenty. We buy cheap clothes made by exploited workers - including in Britain. One of the largest UK fashion labels, *Boohoo*, has been found paying its Leicester workers (mainly Asian women) £3.50/hour. We go on holiday to countries with undemocratic governments, thereby giving economic and moral support to these regimes. (Along with millions of other Brits, my parents, with me, took several holidays in 1960s Spain, the era of Franco, knowing what a brutal dictator he was - because they liked Spain.) We drive around town in our cars (most of you have one),

poisoning the air for people who have to walk because they don't have a car, often poorer people. We keep cats and dogs, even though feeding them consumes vast quantities of food produced on land that could grow food for people (or be left to nature). We do all these unethical things *knowing* them to be unethical: if you do bad things because you are ignorant, you are not being unethical of course. Or perhaps you are: isn't allowing yourself to be ignorant in such matters in itself unethical?

Yes, I know what you will say. You try your best to balance bad actions with good ones, taking into account the need for a few pleasures in your brief life, a life otherwise "nasty, brutish, and short" according to the English philosopher Hobbes. You cannot avoid acting unethically in a capitalist system that is intrinsically unethical. You are going to give up eating meat soon, but you haven't had time to get round to it. You are much more ethical than most other people (no you aren't - all of us of us who live in the rich West are far more unethical than those who live in poor countries, because they have so few choices about how to live). And so on with your excuses.

Tonight, there is a second part of a documentary about meat-eating. We will watch it unhappily, over a meat-free meal (pasta with vegetables - and cheese), will drink a glass of wine, which hopefully won't be unethical in any way, just bad for our health. In other words, we will muddle along being partly ethical and partly unethical as seems to be the natural state of human beings.

Let me leave you with the wise words of someone rather intelligent: "I have from an early age rejected the use of meat, and the



time will come when men such as I will look upon the murder of animals as they now look upon the murder of men.”

(Leonardo Da Vinci)

Peteprovokes Blog (supplied by courtesy of Andy Barr)

4. RESPECT EQUALLY THE RIGHTS OF ALL PARENTS

Reproduced from Atheist Ireland, 25 February 2023

Minister respects the rights of religious parents while undermining the rights of nonreligious parents.

The Minister for Education, Norma Foley, has just given a telling example of how the Department of Education gives privilege to religious parents over nonreligious parents in Irish schools.

As Carl O’Brien reports in *The Irish Times*, the Minister has stressed that parents have a right to ensure that their children can withdraw from the updated sex education course on the basis of conscience. But she has not put the obstacles in their way that the Department puts in front of nonreligious parents who want their child to not attend religious instruction.

This reflects what Fintan O’Toole recently wrote about the Enoch Burke case: “In that context, Burke is not just some kind of freak. He is expressing in an extreme way a logic that has permeated Irish education for most of the history of the State: that religious conviction is the primary value around which all other rights must be shaped.”

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment are updating the Relationship and Sexuality course and Primary level and the Social, Personal and Health education course at second level. Here’s what Minister Foley says about religious parents who don’t want their children to attend the updated sex education course:

“I want to be clear around this: we operate in our schools a spirit of partnership

with our parents, the wider section of stakeholders and partners within education. We retain within our schools parental consent at all times for parents to feel that they have freedom to withdraw their students from anything that is happening within a school environment...

“I think what is important is that our students in our schools feel that they are valued within the school system. I equally feel it is important that parents have a right to determine what they want their students to avail of, or not avail of, within the school context and indeed outside ... I believe in parental consent - and at no point would I seek to undermine that at any point.”

Minister Foley is right about this. This right is guaranteed in Article 42.1 of the Constitution and reflected in Article 30.2(e) of the Education Act 1998. Article 42.1 guarantees that the state must respect the rights of parents in relation to the education of their children.

But this Article also includes Religious Education. The Supreme Court has found that in relation to Religious Education under Article 42.1 that it must be read in the context of Article 44.2.4, the right to not attend Religious Instruction.

Furthermore, the Constitutional right of parents to remove their children from any religious teaching is actually written into the text of the Constitution. Article 44.2.4 guarantees this right and puts a duty on the Oireachtas in relation to it.

Despite this, various Ministers for Education over the years including Minister

Foley, and the Department, have claimed that curriculum Religious Education is suitable for our children and the right to ‘not attend’ does not apply.

They have even put this in a Circular Letter (0062/2018). When administering a Constitutional right, the Department of Education decided to redefine the right, interfere in the constitutional right of parents, and ignore the will of the Oireachtas in Section 30.2(e) of the Education Act 1998.

Circular Letter 0062/2018

“Following on the clarification in Section 2 above in respect of the Religious Education syllabuses which may form part of the normal range of subject choice that may be provided by a school, the approach outlined in Section 4 of Circular 0013/2018 of parents seeking a withdrawal from the NCCA-developed Religious Education syllabus is no longer necessary.”

Department Press Release
“The other significant clarification is that classes following the NCCA Religious Education syllabuses cannot have any element of religious instruction or worship, which also means that opt-out does not arise.”

The Minister sees no contradiction in unequivocally upholding the constitutional rights of mostly religious parents who want their children to not attend sex education teaching that is against their conscience, while actively undermining the constitutional rights of nonreligious and minority faith parents who want their children to not attend religious teaching that is against their conscience.

Can the Department of Education and the Minister not see that they must treat all parents equally with regard to respecting their conscience?

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5.

THE IFH PROJECT

This is the main content of an address given to the Humanist Network Ireland on 22 February 2023 by Daltún Ó Ceallaigh of Irish Freethinkers & Humanists (IFH)

Just over ten years ago, I took early retirement when it became financially possible for me and in order to concentrate on my extracurricular activities. Among other things, I sought out organisations in which I could participate with others of like mind or interest. One of those discovered was the Humanist Association of Ireland. I then started going to their interesting monthly meetings in the Aisling Hotel Dublin and next attended their Summer Schools that were jointly organised along with others, which included the Irish Freethinkers and Humanists.

It was there that I met Brian McClinton, then editor of *Irish Freethinker* and his

confrère, Roger Kelly. In the instance of Roger, the meeting was in fact a renewal of an acquaintanceship which had earlier taken place in the early Seventies in the context of the Northern Ireland civil rights movement. My reading and writing had already begun to include subjects to do with Humanist philosophy and I offered some of my output to Brian which he included in his periodical. Indeed, we built up a fairly regular connection in that regard.

Therefore, it came as quite a shock when I learned of Brian's death last year in June. In contact with Roger, I said that *Irish Freethinker*, being the only printed Humanist periodical in Ireland, was too

valuable to let lapse. I mentioned that I had considerable experience in editing and designing both periodicals and websites and offered to assist in trying to keep the show on the road. To cut a long story short, assistance unexpectedly morphed into the editorship roles which I am now endeavouring to discharge.

Taking over from Brian proved quite a challenge for Roger and myself. I will not bore you with all the details concerning hardware, software, elusive passwords, missing files, mysterious internet service providers, subscriber records, et cetera, et cetera. It did mean that the bimonthly issue of *Irish Freethinker*, which should have been brought out for July-August, could not emerge and we just about put together two other issues, albeit of reduced size, for the remaining four months of 2022.

We then reviewed the whole situation and arrived at the position where we are today. In 2023, *Irish Freethinker* will henceforth be a quarterly, the Spring edition of which came out at the beginning of this month [February] and has achieved the previous norm of 24 pages. It will, however, be increasingly built up to a size notably beyond that, and a careful effort will be made to ensure that there is a level of quality input from a wider range of individuals which is to be expected of a serious periodical. This will become clearer with the next issue of *Irish Freethinker* due in the Summer, and from thereon in.

In addition to the quarterly, we have launched an emailed monthly bulletin entitled *IFH News*. This will cater for items of a more current and laconic nature. *Irish Freethinker* is also now registered with the

Companies Registration Office and thus reserved as a business name. Between these two publications, we feel that we have taken the project of Irish Freethinkers and Humanists a significant step forward.

We are also monitoring various Humanist organisations abroad. In Britain, for example, there are Humanists UK, the Rationalist Association (which publishes *New Humanism*), the National Secular Society, Atheism UK, the online publication *The Freethinker*, and Humanist Association Scotland. In North America, there are Atheists for Liberty, the American Humanist Association, and Humanist Canada. In the Antipodes, there are Humanists Australia and New Zealand Humanists. Not to be trapped in anglophonia, we are also monitoring Libre Pensée and Union Rationaliste in France. I even consulted the site of the Russian Humanist Society (Российское гуманистическое общество) for what it is worth, which unsurprisingly is currently not much. I am looking out for some Humanists who could venture into the German and Spanish language areas, insofar as German has revived in central and Eastern Europe and Spanish is of course an intercontinental language.

On the international front, we are monitoring Humanists International, Rationalist International, Atheist Republic, and Naturalism.org

These are all sources for ideas and reproduction of relevant material.

(See also the article in section 2 above of this bulletin on *The State of Humanism in Ireland*, which also formed part of this talk.)

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)

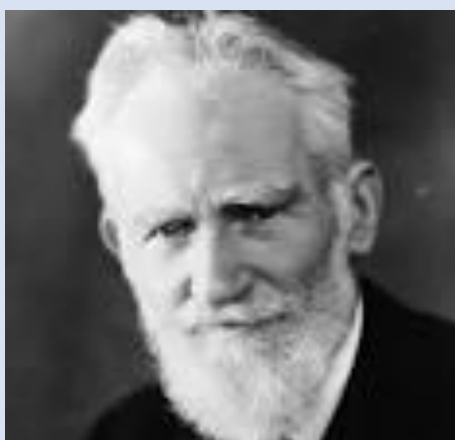
3rd Wednesday of month in Limerick
Contact: Peter 086 815 5102
info@midwesthumanists.com
Also check <https://midwesthumanists.com>

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



Beware of false knowledge; it is more dangerous than ignorance.

George Bernard Shaw

All things are made for mortals by their own toil and care. Archilochus

God is a hypothesis, and as such, stands in need of proof; the burden of proof rests on the theist. Percy Bysshe Shelley

Man is the measure of all things. Protagoras

Faith: a firm belief for which there is no evidence. Bertrand Russell

Our life does not know any place for irrational belief and groundless imagining, if we are to live happily. Epicurus

REMEMBERING BRIAN

I am aware that it is strange to receive a request from a Vicar to be included in an obituary for your Founder-Editor Brian McClinton. Please excuse me, but I must put pen to paper and pay tribute to Brian.

It was back in 1983 when I first encountered Brian. While he congratulated me on my stand against bigotry and intolerance in Ulster church life, he made it clear that, since his mid-teens, he had held an atheistic position. I noticed back in those days that he was a little fearful and anxious as he spoke, for, to hold the views he had, care back then was needed. However, we shook hands and I was impressed by his ability to hold his position and maintain friendship - something I felt the Church would need to do. I was aware back then that my Presbyterian colleagues were moving to the right with intolerance.

Brian, you may remember, asked me to address your members at the Malone Hotel. Later, I was asked to address your Bangor membership, under great leadership from Andy Barr. My wife was with me at both venues and we won't forget the kindness shown to us on both nights. It was at your special annual gathering at Carlingford that we will both treasure. Brian could not have been more helpful. After my address, he simply insisted we stay longer. He removed his belongings and his so faithful dog in order that we could spend an extra day with you all. Next morning, we had breakfast with Professor David McConnell and we were honestly very impressed.

Later that Sunday evening, we were both challenged by very very respectable Christian who asked, in a gruff manner: 'How did you put up being with those awful people?) I replied: 'Because they don't believe what we believe, don't call them awful. They may not believe in God but we were among good people.' Yes, we were, and Brian led the way. After many professing Christians put our family through hell (excuse the expression), I am convinced many humanists can outlive us. Our track record in this country as a Church is shameful and little to be proud of.

Once again, June joins me in saying how shocked and sad we were at learning of Brian's death. Your society has lost a very fine intellectual thinker and most able man indeed - someone

who endeared himself to us both and we are all the poorer for his passing. We salute you, Brian. Thank you for listening and teaching us, Brian, along similar lines of C S Lewis that life is not a dot but a line. Life's journey is more precious encountering people like Brian McClinton.

Sincerely,

Rev. David Armstrong.

ifh.sde@gmail.com

www.irishfreethinkers.com

also on Facebook & Twitter

