

IFH NEWS

Irish Freethinkers & Humanists

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THEY SAID

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

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

The contents are as follows:

- **The Way I Have come To Think**
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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 eventually will be back-copies of *IFH NEWS*. There is now also an online payment system on the website.

ARTICLES FOR AUTUMN EDITION MUST BE SUBMITTED NO LATER THAN 4 JULY

(Editor: ifh.sde@gmail.com)

2. RELIGIOUS CLAUSES IN THE CONSTITUTION

TIME TO ACT NOW! - WITH NEXT REFERENDUM VOTES

Brian Whiteside

The act of swearing an insincere oath to a god you don't believe in is effectively a lie.

Imagine if you will, just for a moment, that there was something in our Constitution which prevented a gay person from holding high office in this country. I'm talking about

becoming president, a member of the Council of State or a judge. There would be outcry and calls for equality - and rightly so. But there is a significant and growing cohort for whom this issue applies in a very real sense: the non-religious community.

The Constitution requires a religious oath to be taken by any person on appointment to these positions of high office. There is no option to affirm as there is in court; a religious oath as set out in the Constitution must be taken.

Over the years, the United Nations Human Rights Committee has told Ireland to remove the requirements for these religious oaths. The response by Ireland could more accurately be described as a non-response: Ireland simply ignores it.

In the 2016 Census (the analysis of the 2022 Census is not yet available), a total of 468,421 people, or 9.8 per cent of the population, indicated “no religion”. How, in all conscience, should any of these people be expected to swear an oath to Almighty God? Surely the very act of swearing an insincere oath to a god you don’t believe in flies in the face of the integrity of the office being assumed? It is, in effect, a lie - a fine way to take up one of the highest offices in the country.

For many years I served on the board of the Humanist Association of Ireland. Under the Structured Dialogue Process, set up during Bertie Ahern’s time as Taoiseach, we had a number of meetings with the Government. The purpose of these meetings was to raise awareness of issues needing to be addressed.

Ignored

But, no matter how many times we highlighted the issue of religious oaths, we got the same treatment as the UN Human Rights Committee: we were ignored.

If it wasn’t so serious you might find it funny. When we told Ahern what we were asking for was equality, he answered that the problem with equality was that if you gave it to one group the others would all want it as well.

The assumption, when the Constitution was drafted in 1937, was that everyone was religious - well, anyone who would aspire to high office, in any case. And, of course, there

were other assumptions as well - everyone was assumed to be heterosexual and marriages were between men and women and to last a lifetime.

But Irish society started to change and the change happened more rapidly than anyone could have foreseen. Suddenly we had contraception, divorce, abortion, same-sex marriages.

But still the assumption remained: everyone was religious and it was all right to require a religious oath for high office.

Over the years I kept a scrapbook of articles and letters to newspapers on this topic. Reading over them now, I see a piece I wrote on the tenth anniversary of a plenary meeting of all those taking part in the Structured Dialogue process. The meeting, in May 2011, was chaired by the then Taoiseach, Enda Kenny, and attended by the leaders of all the churches along with members of the government, senior civil servants - and me.

Everyone had their say - and each of them, except me, simply said how nice it was to meet in this forum and how it was a sign of a more inclusive, pluralist Ireland. I felt obliged to make my point and raised the issue of religious oaths.

I asked what would happen if we elected a non-religious president later that year and he or she declined to take up office because of the requirement for a religious oath. The Taoiseach's response was to ask Alan Shatter, then Minister for Justice, to “take a note of that”. Twelve years later, we’re still holding our breath.

It’s not so far-fetched, you know. Gone are the days when our leaders had to be white, straight and religious. But we continue to discriminate against non-religious citizens. Why does our Government have a problem addressing this?

I look forward to the Census 2022 details being released. The 2016 figures for “no

religion" showed a rise from 5.9 per cent in 2011 to 9.8 per cent in 2016. The indications are that the increase will continue. But, even if it doesn't, even if it goes backwards, which it almost certainly won't - it doesn't make any difference.

The State should respect all its citizens and treat them equally. Previous Taoisigh fobbed us off in a dismissive manner. Maybe

Taoiseach Leo Varadkar Tánaiste Micheal Martin will be brave enough to address this important issue: it needs to be done for the integrity of the State.

Brian Whiteside is a Humanist and funeral celebrant.

This article was originally published in 'The Irish Times'.

3.

WAR AND PEACE

ALAN TUFFERY

David Pollock, a great Humanist died on 12th May 2023. He had been an active Humanist since his student days at Oxford in the 1960s. He was an active campaigner on many issues and founded the All-Party Parliamentary Humanist Group.

David Pollock was the International Humanist and Ethical Union's representative at the Council of Europe, a Trustee of the British Humanist Association (now Humanists UK) and a President of the European Humanist Federation (2006-12). In 2011, the IHEU gave him the Distinguished Service to Humanism

Award for 50 years of activism in Humanist affairs.

At the All-Ireland Summer School of 2015, devoted to the topic of War and Peace, he gave a talk on the concept of the just war, memorable for its lucidity. In his talk, he considered the concept of 'Just War' from its beginnings. A modern human rights approach rejects the analogy between states and individuals and the idea that a state may wage war in its own defence. Rather, the state's duty is to defend the rights of its citizens. But war can only be justified if a greater evil will ensue if it is not fought.

SUMMARY OF DAVID POLLOCK'S TALK ON 'WAR AND PEACE'

The Just War?

David Pollock started from the premise that war is vile and examined views on its possible justification. One view of war is that it is inevitable, having developed at the time the first human groups acquired property which was coveted and had to be defended. Some argue that human nature is irremediably sinful and violent. This is false and has been supported by the Christian doctrine of original sin; 'primitive' societies generally live in harmony.

Pacifism can be justified by dogmatic prescription, but Humanist morality is 'much

more nuanced and more concerned with consequence'. This means that 'absolute pacifism' cannot be justified by Humanists.

The modern view has evolved from the thinking of the classical writers and later ideas of Augustine of Hippo and Aquinas and is now very detailed and is incorporated into international law. The three elements are *ius ad bellum* (the justification of war), *ius in bello* (the conduct of war) and *ius post bellum* (dealing with its aftermath).

David Pollock focused on the *ius ad bellum*, the causes of war, and examined the criteria, all of which must be met for a just war. However,

there are practical difficulties with each of them, in that it is not clear who should make the decisions and in some cases there is insufficient definition.

Just Cause - large-scale aggression or violation of human rights or a balanced view that 'the injustice suffered by one party must significantly outweigh that suffered by the other'. (But is pre-emptive force justifiable?)

Competent Authority - nowadays means a sovereign state. This criterion also leaves unresolved the position of resistance movements and international bodies such as the UN.

Right Intention - force may be used to achieve the just cause, and no more.

Probability of Success - But what probability of success is necessary?

Last Resort - War is justifiable only after all other attempts at resolution have been exhausted.

Proportionality - The benefits of war must outweigh its evils.

From the above, it is clear that, while just war theory provides a good starting point, it has serious limitations, and is often violated in practice. A serious drawback is that it is based on an analogy between states and individual rights. If states have grievances, they fight with armies of individual humans. To what extent is it acceptable to kill them - and non-combatants in a cause?

There are two possible alternatives to just war theory.

Utilitarianism - the principle that what is right is that which it the best for the greatest number. 'It suggests that you can produce the greatest total of happiness for the maximum number of people by heaping all the suffering on just a few people.' This would encourage unacceptable practices, such as carpet-bombing of civilians in order to bring victory in a just cause.

Human Rights - This provides a view based on

the rights of individuals: especially the right to life, rather than the perspective of states contemplating war. The idea of human rights has its modern embodiment in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights which enshrines the moral rights we agree everyone should have.

States have rights in order to protect the rights of their citizens. An individual has the right to self-defence, but when this is applied to states we reject the analogy because it personalises states and ignores the individuals in it. This leads to a possible justification for war in defence of human lives and rights. This would only apply to fundamental rights such as 'the right to life, physical security and a minimal freedom to choose how to live one's life.' However, given the requirement of proportionality - perhaps the most important of all the criteria for a just war - this is a difficult case to make. War is crude and difficult to control and is almost bound to conflict with some human rights.

Conclusion

'The conclusion from the above arguments - taken in conjunction with other just war criteria - is that a war can be morally justified only if:

(a) it is fought in defence of the human rights of individuals in a community suffering serious aggression or oppression, and

(b) you can be sure on a basis of reasoning that any violation of the human rights of individuals it entails will be clearly less than will be involved if the war is not fought but some other course taken to remedy or alleviate the ills.'

Discussion

The practical difficulties of applying just war theory were revealed in historical examples, where civilian populations were often not protected; history is typically written by the victors and involves retrospective justification. Humanism does not provide easy solutions. There is a clear need for effective international

organisations: has the UN failed? The Gulf War of 1991 was perhaps the best - or even only - example of a just war fought for a limited objective in order to liberate an invaded people. Some difficulties in applying just war

theory in advance of conflict are: the possibility of self-deception and failure to try to understand the point of view of the opposition. ■

4. WHAT'S IN A WORD?

PETE HUTTON

Why do we use euphemisms? And why do we avoid certain words, taboo words, as if they will offend or disgust or shock others - or even ourselves. As if they hurt us when they come out of our mouth. And what about the infamous PC (political correctness), which should really be called cultural correctness, an offspring of culture wars?

I believe in honesty and candidness, although I recognise the usefulness of white lies: "Do you like my new haircut?" Ugh, it makes you look like a geriatric hedgehog, you fool. "Oh yeah, it's really nice!". Don't we all believe in honesty and truth? Of course we do, but we are not always honest about believing in honesty.

Euphemisms and taboo words are usually denials of honesty and candidness. 'Euphemism', by the way, comes from Classical Greek and means 'good (eu) speech (pHEME)'. Let me give you an example.

For many people the words 'die', 'death', 'dead' etc. are to be avoided, because dying is something we want to avoid presumably. As we cannot avoid it, however, in either ourselves or other people, we avoid the words for it. So we (but not me) use the classic euphemism 'pass away' or 'left' ("Sadly, she left us recently ..."). 'Dead' is a hard word - it actually sounds dead. But death is a hard thing for us, so surely a hard word, a leaden word, a heavy word, is appropriate for such a hard thing. Would we want the word for dead to sound cheerful? The fact that 'dead' is so sombre does not make it ugly or bad. But I've seen people wince when I said that someone

close to me (or them) has "died".

Here's a word that seems to have become a victim of PC: 'handicapped'. And here's what the Cambridge Dictionary (online) says: "Handicapped: having an illness, injury, or condition that makes it difficult to do some things that other people do." This word is now considered offensive by many people, who prefer to say someone has a disability or is disabled. If a physical or mental handicap is your problem - and it is a problem, however it is dealt with - why would you prefer the word disabled to handicapped? What exactly is offensive about the latter word? If I knew, I would be willing to abandon using it, but we are usually never given an explanation as to why a newly offensive word has become offensive. We are just instructed by dictionaries and language inspectors to change our usage. Basically: 'handicapped' means you can't do some things because you are disabled, and 'disabled' means you can't do some things so you are handicapped. Big difference! I think we seem to hope that by changing the word we use for something, we can change the thing itself - handicapped people will be slightly less handicapped if we call them disabled. Anyway, the latest suggestion from hypersensitive America is that 'disabled people' should be replaced by 'people with disabilities'. Big improvement!

PC words can serve a purpose, but in moderation. I have in recent years come to feel uncomfortable using the word 'wife' in relation to my wife. Wife seems to have become a more or less taboo word (and

husband too, presumably) - when used in the context of today's world at least. We will happily talk about Shakespeare's wife, not Shakespeare's partner, but more and more people are reluctant to talk about their own or other people's wife/husband. So if I don't feel comfortable calling my wife my wife, and nor do I feel happy to call her my partner, perhaps I should use an entirely neutral term. My better half? My helpmeet (Bible word)? The person to whom I have been superglued for forty long years? I'm not sure of the reason for this problem of wife/husband. I guess it's because it sounds as if you believe the married state is superior to, or more significant than, the unmarried relationship ('partners'). It's not 'inclusive' in other words. But inclusiveness in language can lead to vagueness, to uncertainty, to imprecision. There is a difference between a couple (different sex or same sex) who have chosen marriage and a couple who have chosen non-marriage - that's why people make such a choice. They have chosen A rather than B, so why pretend that A and B are the same, i.e. must use the same word? It could be an issue of set theory (a field of mathematics): all people who are married have a partner (if they haven't separated, which many couples have), but not all people who have a partner are married - so the inclusive set is 'partner': it covers both statuses. Of course if you don't know whether someone's mate is a spouse or a non-spouse, you don't want to assume spouseness: "Is your husband coming to the party?" "We're not married actually, but yes my partner is coming." Awkward - good situation to use 'partner'.

A major current problem with appropriate terminology (i.e. PC usage) is what to use for non-white people. Most 'black' people are not in fact black, and white people are mostly pinkish, especially those just back from the Costa del Sol. But for simplicity's sake we have for some time called them black and

white. 'White' seems to remain acceptable, but 'Black' has gone through various stages of acceptability, and the PC word for black people also differs between countries, just to confuse things. I believe Americans who try to get things right use the term 'people of colour', or so I was recently told by an American. This sounds very similar to 'coloured people', but the latter is apparently also non-PC now. I cannot see the difference between 'coloured' and 'of colour', but there must be one. In Zimbabwe, which I know well, both blacks and whites use the terms black and white. 'Black lives matter' is the big slogan these days, so here the word black seems acceptable. Confused? The old word for black person was of course 'negro', which of course means black. This word is not intrinsically derogatory (it doesn't imply something bad in its etymology), but it has bad associations - with the slave past - so it's understandably avoided these days: associations can hurt. It has become in fact a taboo word, to the extent that even in the context of an academic discussion of black history it is avoided in some American universities, or it's called the 'n-word'. Ridiculous surely: every and any word has the right to be spoken or written in a context of serious discussion about the cultural impact of words or their historical usage. No word should ever be so taboo that it can never be spoken, whatever the circumstances. Incidentally, the worst thing is to refuse to refer to someone as black or white, on the grounds that a person's skin colour is irrelevant: as long as black people experience social inequality and prejudice their skin colour is very relevant unfortunately.

What is the conclusion of all this? Only that well worn cliché: words have consequences. However, they have different consequences for different people.

Let me leave you with a wonderful euphemism the British police used a few days

ago. Someone nasty killed someone else (who may also have been nasty, but didn't deserve to be murdered) with a knife. Apparently the word 'knife' was considered too explicit, or too un-PC, or too boring. So what did the police call it? A 'bladed weapon'.

Now I'm going to have my supper, which I will eat with a bladed weapon and a spiked weapon, then have dessert using a *poon. (Non-inclusive taboo word because some people have to eat with their hands as they are too poor to afford *poons.)

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

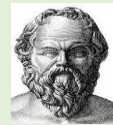
2nd Tuesday of month
Radisson Hotel, Sligo
Contact: Gill Bell 087 295 8206
humainstgb@gmail.com

Waterford Humanists

3rd Monday of month, 7.30 p.m.
Phil Grimes Pub, John St, Waterford
Contact: Teresa graham22@gmail.com



THEY SAID



*Knowledge becomes evil if the aim is not virtuous. Aristocles
(a.k.a. Plato)*

Wonder is the beginning of wisdom. Socrates

*I count religion but a childish toy, and hold there is no sin but ignorance. Barabas
in 'The Jew of Malta' by Christopher Marlowe*

*Only the perceived exists; the unperceivable does not exist; by reason of its never
having been perceived. Sarva-sidhanta-samgraha Upanishad, Adi Shankaracharya*

*Following the publication of printed books in England by Caxton, it was
proclaimed in 1474: 'If we do not destroy this dangerous invention, it will one day
destroy us.' Bishop of London*

*'Atheist' means without a concept of God that is logically convincing, not with
proof that God does not exist. Jim Herrick*

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