

IFH NEWS

Irish Freethinkers & Humanists

No.6, June 2023

1. WHAT'S IN *IRISH FREETHINKER* - SUMMER '23
2. THE CONSTITUTION AGAIN
3. CENSUS 2022
4. SCHOOLS & FAITH FORMATION
5. LIFTING THE VEIL
6. TEN PRINCIPLES OF HUMANISM
7. HUMANIST MEETINGS IN IRELAND
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**
- **The Linen Hall**
- **Fear**
- **World Without Borders**
- **In My Gut, I Don't Believe**
- **Mary Wollstonecraft**
- **Humanism and Atheism**
- **IFH News**
- **A Humanist Hero**
- **The Huxleys & 'The Best Idea Ever'**
- **Secular Society of Ireland**
- **Are You With Me?**
- **They Said ...**
- **History of Naturalism**

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 further backcopies 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. THE CONSTITUTION AGAIN

REFERENDUM IN AUTUMN?

In the April edition of *IFH NEWS*, we give an outline of religious clauses in the Irish Constitution. In the last edition (May '23), Brian Whiteside explained in particular the case for getting rid of obligatory, theistic oaths

required when taking up various offices of State.

As there is still a referendum on the Constitution looming in the Autumn, principally to deal with gender equality, but

also providing the opportunity to take other progressive steps as well, we reiterate here the Preamble which is of no real legal significance but, in its symbolical character, has no place in the Constitution of the secular Republic.

“In the Name of the Most Holy Trinity, from Whom is all authority and to Whom, as our final end, all actions both of men and States must be referred, We, the people of Éire, Humbly acknowledging all our obligations to our Divine Lord, Jesus Christ, Who sustained our fathers through centuries of trial, Gratefully remembering their heroic and unremitting struggle to regain the rightful independence of our Nation, And seeking to promote the common good, with due observance of Prudence, Justice and Charity, so that the dignity and freedom of the individual may be assured, true social order

attained, the unity of our country restored, and concord established with other nations, Do hereby adopt, enact, and give to ourselves this Constitution.”

Even if the oaths are not removed in the referendum (which they should be), and replaced by statutory provision allowing for both an atheistic and a nontheistic oath (as chosen by the person in question), there is no reason why the Preamble should be allowed to remain. This should be made clear in campaigning for reform under both headings.

The Preamble is Theistic, Sexist, Christian and Trinitarian. It is incompatible with the views of Humanists, Muslims, Hindus, Daoists and Unitarians, to start with, all of whom are to be found in Ireland.

◆

3.

CENSUS 2022

Preliminary results from the 2022 Census for the Republic (26 counties) reveal that persons identifying as Roman Catholic have dropped from 79% in 2016 to 69% now. Those explicitly stating that they have no religion, come out at 14%, while others not answering the question on religion amount to 7%. In other words, 21% in all have not signalled any religious affiliation.

Some Roman Catholics are trying to take comfort in the fact that 69% still constitutes a significant majority. However, they must know in reality that this figure is not a true indication of genuine adherence to Roman Catholicism. It is well established that, in answering the census question on the religion subject, persons often record their sociocultural background rather than their current belief system. One only has to consider the results of recent referenda on the Constitution to appreciate what the actual

situation is. For example, on the issue thus put before the people which was most basic to Roman Catholicism, namely abortion, just over 66% voted against the RC position. Moreover, we know from various statistics on attendance at mass and confession that there is a steep decline in these respects.

Survey data have also informed that there is

now widespread disbelief in various teachings of Roman Catholicism such as transubstantiation, virgin birth, and so on. This seems to be a reflection of a growing scientific cast of mind.

Although some citizens have an ostrich-like response to this overall situation, the plain fact of the matter is, also taking account of Northern data, that Ireland can no longer realistically be considered a Catholic country in any meaningful sense. Indeed, it is questionable as to far it can even be regarded as a Christian one. ■



4.

SCHOOLS & FAITH FORMATION

Education Equality has procured a legal opinion from senior counsel that states that, where a child opts out of attending religious instruction, the child is expressly excused from attending the classroom. The right to opt out is not met by insisting that the child remain in attendance during religious instruction, even where the child is excused from active participation. It states that a court would not accept that the opt out is effective in circumstances where the presence of the child in the class remains compulsory. It would not accept a defence from a school that it was unable to make arrangements for a child to be moved temporarily to another room during religious instruction.

Parents who protest to the Department of Education that their children’s constitutional right is being breached are advised that it is up to each individual school to decide how it facilitates the protection of this right.

When parents complain to schools on this issue, they are advised that they do not have the resources to provide a real and effective opt out. And who provides the resources? The Department of Education.

Advocates for religious education fought tooth and nail against the repeal of the “baptism barrier”, a clearly discriminatory provision. Schools can still discriminate against children seeking admission if they are of the view that they might undermine their

ethos.

Alan Hynes (Letters, May 5th) complains that Education Equality’s “vision is often for a uniform education system”. He is aware, I presume, that 95 per cent of our publicly funded primary schools are under religious patronage?

He bemoans “the Admission to Schools Act 2018, by which Catholic schools alone are forbidden to prioritise the enrolment of children of our faith”. He is arguing that Catholic schools are being discriminated against (presumably on religious grounds?) because they cannot discriminate against children on religious grounds, whereas other State-funded minority faith schools can.

The 2018 Act Introduced a requirement for schools’ admission policies to provide details of their arrangements in respect of students who do not want to attend religious instruction. Most schools fail in this obligation. Instead of providing such details, policies typically merely direct parents to make an appointment with the school principal to discuss the matter. The State and schools are complicit in breaching children’s clearly enshrined constitutional right.

ROB SADLIER,
*Human Rights Officer, Education Equality,
Rathfarnham, Dublin 16.*

(Reproduced from 'The Irish Times'.)

5.

LIFTING THE VEIL

**SHELLEY, ATHEISM
AND THE WONDERS OF
EXISTENCE**

Tony Howe



What did atheism mean to Percy Bysshe Shelley?

It seems fair to call Shelley an atheist. He did not believe in God. In 1811, while a student at University College, Oxford, he published a pamphlet titled 'The Necessity of Atheism', signing it 'An Atheist'. When the university authorities became aware of the publication, they burned any copies they could find, and expelled the wayward student. Later, during the dark summer of 1816, Shelley was travelling with his wife, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley (author of 'Frankenstein'), and Lord Byron. Shelley developed a habit of signing hotel registers in deliberately provocative style. On the 23rd of July, at the Hôtel de Londres in Chamonix, the poet declared himself, in Greek, a 'lover of humanity', 'democrat', and 'atheist'. These inscriptions were mostly removed, some crossed out by Byron himself.

But if Shelley called himself an 'atheist', what did he mean by the word? The Oxford English Dictionary gives the primary sense as 'One who denies or disbelieves the existence of a Go'. This definition is non-denominational – 'the existence of a God' could refer to any deity, active or passive, benign or malevolent. In Shelley's context, 'atheist' would apply specifically to the Christian God. It would also have a strong pejorative implication – the atheist is a godless person and thus not bound by God's commandments. He or she is not someone to trust in any given 'thou shalt not' situation. The OED definition also includes a choice – atheism can be denial or disbelief. The two words are not easily disentangled, but this is not a casual tautology. 'Disbelief' is defined as 'The action or an act of disbelieving; mental rejection of a statement or assertion; positive unbelief'. To positively disbelieve something we must simultaneously believe something else (positively) that contradicts the initial proposition. I do not believe in (an immaterial) God because I believe that the

universe consists purely of material and physical matter. This makes you an atheist, but also a dogmatist (a materialist); you may thus be required to account for your (materialist) beliefs, which in the early nineteenth century involved a very different discourse to that of twenty-first century science. As a young man, Shelley was influenced in this regard by the French Enlightenment atheist and materialist Baron d'Holbach.

The alternative is 'negative unbelief', plain or flat denial. I do not believe in God and that is the end of the matter. This has become a common version of atheism, although for Shelley such a position would hold little interest. It is giving up halfway through, disbelieving something without formulating an alternative. The intellectually respectable variation of negative unbelief is philosophical scepticism, a tradition of thought that can be traced back to classical Greece, and that played an important role in Shelley's development as a thinker and poet. The sceptic does not deny the existence of God and is thus not an atheist in a strict sense. She simply refuses to believe because she is not persuaded by the evidence. 'I deny nothing, but doubt everything', as Byron wrote in *Don Juan*.

This is broadly the position taken in Shelley's 'Necessity of Atheism', which, far from being a firebrand rant, is a perfectly reasonable and balanced statement that draws from well-established philosophical arguments (notably Locke and Hume). The most provocative thing about the work is its title, which, Shelley knew, would be taken as an attack on the established Church. After discussing the nature of belief, the author of the pamphlet analyses the different kinds of evidence that can be used to argue for the existence of a God. He gives three types, the most compelling being the evidence derived from the senses, actual experience of the deity: 'Those to whom the Deity has [...] appeared

have the strongest possible conviction of his existence'. Most of us, of course, cannot draw on evidence of this nature. The second kind of evidence is that provided by reason. But God, it is widely held, exists beyond the limit of human reason, and the numerous (and conflicting) attempts to rationalise belief do not command assent. The third, and weakest, form of evidence is testimony – accounts of others' religious experiences. Here Shelley repeats Hume's famous argument against miracles, that it is more likely for people to lie or be deceived than to have a genuine supernatural experience. From this analysis Shelley concludes that 'it is evident that having no proofs from any of the three sources of conviction, the mind cannot believe the existence of a God'. He might have inserted 'rationally' or 'reasonably' before 'believe'. Shelley does not deny the existence of a God, he simply withholds belief on the basis that the available evidence is not compelling. Inevitably, such a position was not acceptable – Oxford was still a training institute for clerics – but it remains a plausible and sensible response to the problems of belief. 'Atheism', in Shelley's notorious pamphlet, means nothing more, and nothing less, than this.

For all its biographical infamy, the 'Necessity of Atheism' could not be called a trailblazing work of philosophy. The sceptical arguments on which it is based were well established and had a long counter-radical history. Ancient sceptics used them to disengage the mind from controversy, to achieve tranquillity (*ataraxia*) in the face of contending metaphysical systems. During the Reformation, the same arguments were adapted by Catholic intellectuals, including Erasmus and Montaigne, to oppose Protestant innovation. If certainty in matters of religion is impossible, they argued, then we might as well stick with what we have (Catholicism). Scepticism of this tenor, while a strong

influence on Shelley, could never satisfy his questing, radically innovative temperament. Shelley wanted answers, and scepticism does not provide them. It is an attitude rather than a position.

Although Shelley remained an atheist in the broadest sense, the label does little justice to the originality of his mature thought. Tracing the complex web of influences out of which this thought developed has occupied scholars over thousands of pages and is beyond my current remit. But I will try to give a sense of Shelley's answers with reference to one particularly important influence, George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne (1685-1753). Berkeley was a brilliant writer and intellectual who attempted to reconcile contemporary philosophy – the empiricism that led Hume to scepticism – with a necessary belief in the Christian God. Shelley was Berkeley's ideal reader, a young philosopher who (as Berkeley put it in the Preface to his 'A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge' (1710)) has become 'tainted with Scepticism, or want[s] a demonstration of the existence and immateriality of God, or the natural immortality of the soul'.

To this end, Berkeley gave a twist to Locke's key proposition that all knowledge is based on experience derived from the senses. We have no direct experience, Berkeley pointed out, of what we habitually think of as an external world. When we talk about a chair, we are referring not to a thing that exists outside our minds, but to a set of sense impressions – the chair's colour, shape, texture, and so on. We can infer that something is causing these impressions, but we can have no certain knowledge of what that something is. The assumption that the impressions are caused by a material realm of entities that exist independently of their being perceived was, for Berkeley, a metaphysical fantasy. We can only conceive of things, he pointed out, in terms of

their sensible qualities – try imagining a chair as anything other than a composite of sense impressions – so on what basis can I credibly claim that the chair has any existence independent of my perceptions of it? This impasse, which Locke attempted to get past with his awkward distinction between primary and secondary qualities, led Berkeley to his brilliant central contention, that to exist is to be perceived (*esse est percipi*). This is a form of idealism, and had a profound effect on Shelley.

Berkeley's theory comes with some notorious problems. His brand of idealism appears especially vulnerable to the spectre of solipsism, the problem of how we prove, in philosophically valid ways, that other minds exist. If existence means being perceived, then are other people not just bundles of ideas perceived by my mind? There is also the problem of continuous existence. If a chair exists only as the perceptions of a given perceiver, does it cease to exist when its only perceiver leaves the room? Berkeley believed that there were other perceivers and that things do have continuous existence (they are continuously perceived) outside any given human mind because there is a universal, continuous perceiver – and that is God.

Shelley accepted all of this except the last bit, the positing of a necessary and active (Christian) deity. He proposed, instead, what we might roughly call a godless idealism. In his essay 'On Life' (1819), he writes that: 'The view of life presented by the most refined deductions of the intellectual philosophy [idealism], is that of unity. Nothing exists but as it is perceived. The difference is merely nominal between those two classes of thought, which are vulgarly distinguished by the names of ideas and of external objects. Pursuing the same thread of reasoning, the existence of distinct individual minds, similar to that which is employed in now questioning its own nature, is likewise found to be a delusion. The words I,

YOU, THEY, are not signs of any actual difference subsisting between the assemblage of thoughts thus indicated, but are merely marks employed to denote the different modifications of the one mind.'

The first three sentences recapitulate Berkeley, but in Shelley's provocative and probing style. It may be commonsensical to believe that external objects cause our sense impressions, but such an explanation is philosophically inadequate. The existence of things cannot be severed from the fact of their being perceived. This foundation, which Shelley takes to be solid, is pursued – as we might expect from a poet – in the direction of linguistic enquiry and critique. Our words and habits of expression, it is suggested, are storehouses of error. More specifically, language is prejudiced against idealism; it assumes – it uncritically talks about – discrete, material bodies and, unless used with great care and precision, will raise philosophical fantasies that fail to grasp the truth. Pronouns – always contentious – are a notable instance: the words 'I' and 'you' do not signify any 'actual difference' in the world as it really exists, Shelley proposes. Existence is simply 'an assemblage of thoughts' – or, as Shelley also terms it, 'the one mind'. He strips out God from Berkeley and this is the closest he gets to filling the void.

What Shelley means by 'the one mind' is another question. It is left enigmatic, although some have argued that the phrase is intended to signify a quasi-mystical entity. The 'one mind' is an alternative to God and exists in the way that God is taken to exist. What seems more likely, however, is that Shelley is varying his description of the extraordinary conception of existence to which his thinking has led him. His words come close to positing something that is not really there. Such moments are inevitable, as Shelley recognised, while we are bound to use a language that comes freighted

with error and which seems determined to substantiate non-entities.

Philosophy, for Shelley, was an extraordinary pursuit because it allowed the mind to conceive the wondrous reality of existence. But poetry, he came to believe, is more extraordinary still. Language, in its habitual uses, is obfuscatory: its mendacious repetitions damp down our perceptions of the truth. It forms a veil (a favourite Shelleyan figure) between the mind and life. But Shelley also knew that language is not bound to the drudgery of establishment use. It has huge creative potential. Through the words of the poet, the veil can be painted with lovely colours, or perhaps even ripped aside entirely. Shelley thought Christ a poet in the fullest

sense, but he hated the Christian God because His fabrication has been turned by men to the purposes of oppression. But Shelley's disbelief – inextricable from his disapproval – in God does not imply a dreary void. As conveyed through his poems, for him, existence is an obscured wonder, a ground-zero rapture that is both beyond, and within, words.

Dr Tony Howe is Reader in English Literature and Director of Graduate Research in the School of English, Birmingham City University.



Reproduced from 'The Freethinker' (UK)

6. TEN PRINCIPLES OF HUMANISM

HUMANISM is a view of life and a way of life. It is for those people who base their interpretation of existence on the evidence of the natural world and its evolution, and not on belief in a supernatural power. Humanism is the belief that we can live good lives without religious or superstitious beliefs. Humanists make sense of the world through reason, experience and shared human values. We seek to make the best of the one life we have by creating meaning for ourselves. We take responsibility for our actions and work with others for the common good.

It is important to stress that Humanism differs from atheism in that it is not simply a negative anti-religious stance but is a positive and forward looking philosophy concerned with the happiness and wellbeing of all humankind, now and into the future. Humanists are tolerant of those with religious faith and are prepared to work with them in a spirit of mutual respect. They ask only to be treated with equal rights.

In any case, some Humanists describe themselves as agnostic or sceptical rather than

atheistic and are more interested in promoting positive values than criticising religion. Ultimately, though, Humanists are essentially freethinkers and therefore a Humanist community will inevitably be a 'broad church', embracing a range of opinions on the nature of the universe and our place in it.

The Humanist vision for Ireland is a society where reason, compassion, justice and ethical living prevail in a liberal, tolerant environment that acknowledges both human diversity and common humanity, despite our differences. It is a society where each individual is able to choose his or her own identity and lifestyle, provided that they do not harm others. It is a society where each individual is granted basic human rights and human dignity, while also accepting his or her responsibilities to others as members of the same community.

HUMANISM has no 10 commandments. There are no dogmatic rules that must be obeyed unquestioningly in all situations, at all times. In keeping with a critical yet open-minded approach, Humanists question many of

the accepted notions that govern belief and behaviour and do the same with their own tentative opinions which are subject to constant scrutiny and reappraisal. Humanists are always searching for truth, justice and humane treatment. The following are 10 of the key principles.

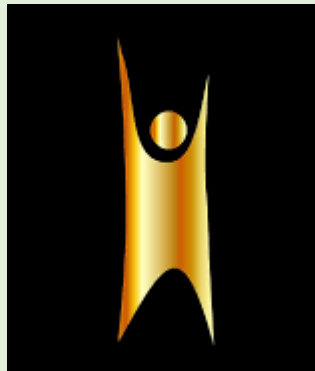
HUMANISM:

I. IS a philosophy of life based on reason, love, compassion, tolerance and our common humanity.

II. REJECTS authoritative opinion and believes that an individual should think and act for himself/herself.

III. REJECTS or is highly sceptical of belief in gods and an afterlife and affirms that human beings are as much a natural phenomenon as an animal or a plant.

IV. VIEWS scientific knowledge not as certain but provisional, theories not as final answers but working tools, and values not as god-given but springing from human nature and human needs.



V. ASSERTS that we can live decent, honest and upright lives, with full respect and consideration for others, without belief in the supernatural, religion, dogma, superstition or blind faith.

VI. AFFIRMS the worth, dignity and autonomy of the individual and the right of every person to the greatest possible freedom compatible with the rights of others.

VII. BELIEVES that we should try to live full and happy lives ourselves and help others to do the same.

VIII. THINKS that the meaning of our lives is not part of a supernatural 'plan' but rather lies in our enrichment of the lives of others.

IX. EMBRACES diversity while asserting the primacy of fundamental human values and

rights.

X. CAMPAIGNS for a pluralist and more secular state in which religion no longer occupies a privileged position or unduly influences government policy.

§

7. 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 ...

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



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

The ultimate value in life depends upon awareness and the power of contemplation, rather than upon mere survival. Aristotle

In a word, all that your priests and doctors preach to you with such eloquence, touching the grandeur, excellence and sanctity of the mysteries that they make you adore, all that which they recount to you with such gravity, with the certainty of their claimed miracles and all that which is given out to you with such zeal and such assurance concerning the grandeur of the rewards of heaven, and concerning the terrifying punishments of hell, are no more at bottom than illusions, errors, dreams, fictions and impostures, invented firstly for political ends and ruses, continued by deceivers and imposters; finally received and believed blindly by the ignorant and rude common people, and then eventually maintained by the authority of the great, and the sovereigns of the earth, who have favoured the abuses, the errors, the superstition and the imposture which are upheld by their laws in order to hold the mass of men in yoke and make them do all that their rulers want. Fr. Jean Meslier (d. 1729)

IFH NEWS no. 6, June 2023

IRISH FREETHINKER & HUMANIST
An Saorsmaointeoir

ISSN: 2399-7621 09>

ifh.sde@gmail.com www.irishfreethinkers.com
Also on Facebook & Twitter

Subscription, £40/€40 per annum, includes:
by post, quarterly periodical IRISH FREETHINKER,
and monthly email bulletin *IFH NEWS*

ONLINE

You can pay sub [here](#)

or order copies of *Irish Freethinker* @ €5.60 (incl p&p) each [here](#)
or you can make a donation [here](#)

Or pay by cheque or postal order,

payable to:

Irish Freethinkers & Humanists

Send to Administrator: Roger Kelly,

8 Eastleigh Drive, Belfast, BT4 3DX

roger.kelly.2@ntlworld.com

Tel: 077 7858 3435 [in N Irl]

00 44 77 7858 3435 [in Ir Rep]

Bank Transfers:- BIC: ULSB GB 2B

IBAN: GB84 ULSB 9809 6013 2238 97

