

# IFH NEWS

Irish Freethinkers & Humanists

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## 1. WHAT'S IN *IRISH FREETHINKER* - AUTUMN '23

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

The contents are as follows:

- **Humanism and Evil**
- **First Conference of Humanists in Ireland**
- **Evolution - Definition & Implications**
- **Human Nature**
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The IFH website ([www.irishfreethinkers.com](http://www.irishfreethinkers.com)) continues to be developed and editions of *IRISH FREETHINKER* for the period before May-June 2020 and back to Autumn 2016 will be gradually put up on it, as eventually will backcopies of *IFH NEWS* no 2 onwards. There is now also an online payment system on the website. Copies of recent editions of these items not online may be purchased through our site.

DEADLINE FOR SUBMISSION OF ARTICLES FOR THE WINTER EDITION OF *IRISH FREETHINKER* IS  
16 OCT 2023

(Editor: ifh.sde@gmail.com)

## 2. THE RETURN OF BLASPHEMY?

*The following item is an edited version of an article in 'The Freethinker' (UK) by*

*NOEL YAXLEY*

In October 2018, the archaic criminal law of blasphemy was removed from the Constitution. Almost one million people (64.85 per cent of participants) voted, in what Taoiseach Leo Varadkar called a 'quiet revolution', to delete the word 'blasphemous' from article 40.6.1.i of the Constitution. This had previously stated that "the publication or utterance of **blasphe-**

**mous**, seditious, or indecent matter is an offence which shall be punishable in accordance with law."

### **'Hate' Bill**

The Bill concerned was signed into law by the President later that year. However, just three years later, the Government is introducing a

new, even more authoritarian Bill that will severely limit free speech, and has the potential to criminalise modern blasphemers. Barring amendment or rejection, this Bill is set to become enshrined in Irish law.

Currently being debated in the Seanad, the Criminal Justice (Incitement to Violence or Hatred and Hate Offences) Bill 2022 would update and expand hate speech laws to include incitement to violence or hatred against persons or groups on the basis of protected characteristics, including religion, race, disability and gender.

Under this Bill, existing crimes such as assault and vandalism could lead to longer prison sentences if hatred is found to be the motive. According to Section 7, the mere possession of material that the State deems “hateful” could result in citizens being sent to prison for up to five years if their actions are held to be “likely to incite violence or hatred” against a person with protected characteristics. Should the Bill find its way onto the Statute Book, then, despite the Government’s insistence that it includes a provision to “protect genuine freedom of expression”, there is little doubt that Ireland would become the ignominious holder of one of the most comprehensive ‘hate speech’ laws, if not the most totalitarian, in Western Europe.

### **Progress of the Bill**

In April, the Bill passed through the Dáil relatively unscathed. Only 14 of the 160 Dáil members voted against the proposed amendments. Yet its provisions are comprehensive and authoritarian.

The Justice Minister, Helen McEntee, who is responsible for the Bill, argued that it was necessary in order to discourage the targeting of those with protected characteristics. Her comments were echoed by Pauline O’Reilly, a Green Party Senator, who told the Seanad that restrictions on free speech were necessary to protect vulnerable people from “such deep dis-

comfort that they cannot live in peace”. The Senator is also reported as saying that “the dirty, filthy underbelly of hatred in Irish society” necessitates “the restriction of freedom”.

### **Words and Actions**

On the face of it, these proposals may sound like a good idea. Few would oppose laws that protect the rights of individuals, especially if the individual belongs to a persecuted or marginalised group. No ordinary, sensible person would tolerate despicable acts such as racist or misogynistic violence.

Except that words are not violence. Verbal abuse is not the same as physical abuse. According to those who support hate speech legislation, living in fear of being ‘attacked verbally’ is a restriction on one’s freedom. A rhetorical question commonly deployed by opponents of free speech in this debate is ‘why is it acceptable to protect freedom of speech for everyone when doing so harms the right of some people, in particular, those with protected characteristics, to live in peace?’ The question is what conclusion should follow from this. Those who support the severe limitations on free speech proposed by the Bill would say that it is justified by its alleged ability to protect vulnerable people’s right to ‘live in peace’. But the alternative conclusion would be that everyone has to accept a certain amount of rough-and-tumble, and that no one’s ideas are above criticism. Sometimes, words can even act as a bulwark against physical violence - against which every liberal democracy has numerous laws to protect people.

### **Clarification Needed**

Clarification is essential when it comes to the application of laws, especially those relating to civil liberties. But tyranny likes grey areas. The Bill’s current definition of hatred (clause 2(1)) is vague and tautological:

“ ‘Hatred’ means hatred against a person or a

group of persons in the State or elsewhere on account of their protected characteristics or any one of those characteristics.”

This non-definition - “ ‘hatred’ means hatred against” - led Thomas Pringle TD, Independent, to criticise the Bill. He noted in a debate in the Select Committee on Justice that one “remarkable” feature of the Bill was that “hate is not defined in it”. Fundamentally, it is difficult to see how “hatred” or “hate speech”, where it does not cross the line into existing criminal offences, such as harassment, libel, death threats or incitement to violence, could really mean anything more than ‘offensiveness’.

Failure to define a crime can potentially lead to anyone being found guilty. When such vague definitions serve as the basis for a conviction, courts often have to base their sentence not only on a person’s actions but also on their beliefs.

### **Protection of Minorities?**

McEntee and other supporters of the Bill claim it is necessary to protect minority groups from actual verbal abuse. However, a provision deeply buried in the Bill indicates that its effects would reach much farther than that. Under Section 10, the preparation or possession of material “likely to incite violence or hatred” against people on account of their protected characteristics is a criminal offence punishable by up to two years’ imprisonment when such preparation or possession is “with a view to the material being communicated to the public or a section of the public, whether by [the defendant] or another person”, and “with intent” to incite hatred or violence or “being reckless” as to whether they are incited. In other words, if you privately possess material that might incite, not even violence, but the more nebulous response of hatred, and you are “reckless” about whether hatred is incited if the material is shared publicly, then you could be guilty of a

criminal offence - regardless of whether the material actually results in anyone being abused.

### **Possession of Material**

An even more chilling provision is then introduced (clause 10[3]): where the defendant is found to have possessed such material, and “it is reasonable to assume that the material was not intended for [his or her] personal use”, it is to be presumed that the material [is] not intended for personal use” unless he or she can prove otherwise. Thus, if the defendant is found to possess material likely to incite hatred, then, if it is reasonable to assume it was not for personal use, then they would be required to prove that it was, in order to escape conviction. In other words, this section, a little over thirty words long, effectively abolishes the presumption of innocence. The burden of proof will shift from the prosecutor to the defendant, on the grounds not of a proved intention, but of what it is “reasonable” to assume the intention was.

As the “possession” clause suggests, this Bill, like other hate-speech laws around the world, does not seek to protect vulnerable people from abstract definitions of hate, but rather is intended to limit what you can say or write. As such, it will curtail legitimate debate and pose a serious threat to free expression. Anything that prevents people from freely holding beliefs not sanctioned by the State, or viewed by the law as ‘dangerous’, is a threat to a free and liberal society. The idea of an informed citizenship is anathema to authoritarians.

### **Hate Speech and Equality**

As noble as they sound, laws against hate speech do not promote equality. They give victims an artificial sense of justice but, in reality, they do little to address the issues that have led to the supposed crime in the first place. If lawmakers want to reduce prejudice against pro-

tected characteristics, they must abandon this Bill and focus on education. Knowledge increases tolerance and acceptance. The irony is that this can only be achieved through the free exchange of ideas - which is exactly what this law is intended to prevent.

*The Freethinker* - <https://freethinker.co.uk>

### Gender

The term “preferred gender” is used in the Gender Recognition Act 2015 as the gender which a person applies to be specified in a certificate (i.e. male or female) for all legal pur-

poses.

Senator Michael McDowell has pointed out that in the ‘Hate Bill’ the term is now also to include the gender with which a person identifies and is additionally to include the undefined term “transgender”, and an open-ended undefined category of “a gender other than those of male or female”. He has said that no clarity has been given to these new and expanding needs of gender. So he has written to the Minister for Justice asking for clarity as to what these extended definitions are intended to mean. Apparently, thus far no response has been received. ❧

## 3.

## NEO-ENLIGHTENMENT

### *Daltún Ó Ceallaigh*

**On 10 August 2023 in Belfast, at Féile an Phobail, Fergus Whelan gave a talk on ‘Freethinkers and the Irish Enlightenment’ organised by Irish Freethinkers and Humanists. The text of this will be published in the Winter edition of *Irish Freethinker*. I was asked to chair the meeting and below is reproduced the main text of my introduction.**

This afternoon, we are dealing with an aspect of the Enlightenment. Usage of the term Enlightenment, as a description of certain major intellectual developments, principally in the late 17th and throughout the 18th century, seems to have entered the English language at the end of the 19th, due to a translation of the German *aufklärung* used in an essay on the period by Immanuel Kant. Whatever about its ideological etymology, it initially tended to be understood in a Francocentric way. Reference was saliently made to the likes of Voltaire, Montesquieu, Condorcet and particularly Diderot and d’Alembert in connection with their *Encyclopedia*. Rousseau is also frequently alluded to, although, from a progressive point of view, he is a bit of a mixed bag. And one

should not forget about that acerbic critic of religion, Baron d’Holbach. In time, others were placed under the Enlightenment umbrella - taking them by country: Spinoza in Holland, Leibniz in Germany, and Locke in England. Scotland came within the ken in respect of Adam Smith and David Hume. There was of course, also Francis Hutcheson there, who is not so well known today, but was still significant, and of course we are conscious that he was in fact an Irishman and more specifically an Ulsterman, but was placed under the Scottish rubric, owing to his occupancy of a post in the University of Glasgow for most of his life. America further was to be included in the persons of the English expatriate Thomas Paine and native colonialist Benjamin Franklin.

And, I am glad to say, that Ireland is being increasingly recognised as a part of the Enlightenment, and indeed a book was produced not so long ago in 2016 entitled *The Irish Enlightenment* by Michael Brown. I learned only recently from Fergus of the group Reclaim the Enlightenment based in Belfast and, from another friend, of the book published just last year, entitled *The Ghost Limb - Alternative Protestants in the Spirit of 1798* by Claire

Mitchell.

More generally, there is a Neo-Enlightenment taking place, at least in the North Atlantic. This is to be seen, for example, in the writings of people such as David Harvey and Jürgen Habermas and, more recently, Steven Pinker - all to be read critically in one way or another. But what they are contributing to is a reassertion of analytical rationalism and universalist principles, which take on board modern knowledge of psychoanalysis, ethnology, relativity and quantum physics, and discoveries in neuroscience.

For example, we now know full well that we are not delivered by our mothers *tabula rasa*; there has been an evolution of the brain as well as the body, and we emerge from the womb with an innate sense of structure in the world as a preparation for encountering it. An instance of this understanding is the universal grammar postulated by Noam Chomsky. This is far from the Cartesian notion that we are either born with an idea of divinity, or at least a predisposition towards a supernatural. The Neo-Enlightenment also rejects the exaggerated social constructionism, which almost amounts to a return to *tabula rasa*, that is typical of several postmodernists, and relatedly features in contemporary discussions about

sexual identity.

To some extent, the Neo-Enlightenment is a reaction generally to postmodernism with the latter's relativism, textualism, particularism, subjectivism, atomism and, at times, virtual anti-rationalism. Postmodernism has had its insights, but while presenting itself as against the establishment, it often just offers a nihilistic perspective, despite the early radical socialism of some of its representatives such as Lyotard (who introduced the term to philosophical discourse), Derrida and Foucault, who are accompanied by the less political Deleuze.

A number were notably drawn to Wittgenstein who famously said: "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent"; and then spent the rest of his life talking about it - with his postmodernist confrères themselves later writing copiously about it. Nor should we forget their often express gratitude to Nietzsche and his advice that "there are no facts, only interpretations." If Francocentric philosophy was reborn latterly in the last century, it was mainly under the heading of postmodernism.

Currently, there is a contest going on between Postmodernism and the Neo-Enlightenment. Interesting times lie ahead.



#### 4. CHRISTIANITY AND WOMEN

In the Garden of Eden, Eve ate from the Tree of Knowledge against the instruction of God and gave to Adam to eat as well. Therefore, as for God:-

"To the woman, he said: I shall give you intense pain in childbearing, you will give birth to your children in pain. Your yearning will be for your husband, and he will dominate you."

*Genesis, 3.16*

"A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet."

*Timothy 2.11-12*

[1] "Do you not realise that Eve is you? The curse God pronounced on your sex weighs still on the world ... You are the devil's gateway, you desecrated the fatal tree, you first betrayed the law of God, you who softened up with your cajoling words for man against whom the devil could not prevail

by force.”

[2] “Woman is a temple built over a sewer.”

*Tertullian*

“Women’s very consciousness of their own nature must evoke feelings of shame.”

*St Clement of Alexandria*

“For it is improper for a woman to speak in an assembly, no matter what she says, even if she says admirable things, or even saintly things, that is of little consequence, since they come from the mouth of a woman.”

*Origen*

“What is the difference whether it is in a wife or mother, it is still Eve the temptress that we must beware of in any woman ... I fail to see what use woman can be to a man, if one excludes the function bearing children.”

*St Augustine*

“As regards the individual nature, woman is defective and misbegotten, for the active force in the male seed tends to the production of a perfect likeness in the masculine sex; while the production of woman comes from a defect in the active force or from some material indisposition, even from some external influence.”

*Thomas Aquinas*

## 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](mailto:roger.kelly.2@ntlworld.com)

### **North Down Humanists**

1st Sunday of month, 11.00 a.m.  
Coffee Cure, Bangor Castle  
Contact: Andy Barr, 078 889 20063

### **North Dublin Humanist Community**

3rd Monday of month  
Contact: Alan Tuffery  
[atuffery@tcd.ie](mailto:atuffery@tcd.ie)

### **South Dublin Humanist Community (SDHC)**

Contact: 086 857 2005  
[Janielazar@gmail.com](mailto:Janielazar@gmail.com)  
Mailing List: southdublinhumanistcommunity

### **Humanist Association of Ireland**

Monthly meeting at rotating venues, mostly

Dublin

Details of next meeting at [humanism.ie](http://humanism.ie)  
or HAI Facebook Page

### **Westport Humanists**

2nd Sunday of month at 12.30 p.m.  
Wyatt Hotel  
Contact: Seamus O'Connell  
087 245 3536/098 50802  
[shayoc37@gmail.com](mailto:shayoc37@gmail.com)

### **Cork Humanists**

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

### **Humanists West (Galway)**

1st Sun of designated month, qly, 11 a.m.  
Knocknacarra Cmty Centre (H91 E7KW)  
Zoom meetings for other months  
Contact: Donalfinnegan@hotmail.com

### **Kilkenny Humanist Group**

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

[patrickacassidy@gmail.com](mailto:patrickacassidy@gmail.com)

**Mid-West Humanists (Limerick, Clare, Tipperary)**

3rd Wednesday of month in Limerick

Contact: Peter 086 815 5102

[info@midwesthumanists.com](mailto:info@midwesthumanists.com)

Also check <https://midwesthumanists.com>

**North West Humanists**

2<sup>nd</sup> Tuesday of month

Radisson Hotel, Sligo

Contact: Gill Bell 087 295 8206

[humainstgb@gmail.com](mailto:humainstgb@gmail.com)

**Waterford Humanists**

3<sup>rd</sup> Monday of month, 7.30 p.m.

Phil Grimes Pub, John St, Waterford

Contact: Teresa [graham22@gmail.com](mailto:graham22@gmail.com)

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## ***THEY SAID ...***

*Heaven is my father and earth is my mother, and I, a small child,  
find myself placed intimately between them.  
What fills the universe I regard as my body;  
what directs the universe I regard as my nature.  
All people are my brothers and sisters; all things are my companions.*

*Zhang Zai*



*Have the courage to use your own intellect.*

*Immanuel Kant*

*Without others there is no self.*

*Roel Sterckx*

*Incredulity is the basis of all wisdom.*

*François-Marie Arouet (a.k.a. Voltaire)*

*... deep truth is often beautiful.*

*David Deutsch*

*A military victory is not a thing of beauty.*

*'Tao Te Ching'*

*God, Immortality, Duty - how inconceivable is the first, how unbelievable the second, and yet how peremptory and absolute the third.*

*George Eliot*

*Mortals consider that the gods are born, and that they have clothes and speech and bodies like their own. The Ethiopians say they are snub-nosed and black, the Thracians that theirs have light blue eyes and red hair. But if cattle and horses or lions had hands, or were able to draw with their hands and do the works that people can do, horses would draw the forms of the gods like horses and cattle like cattle, and they would make their bodies such as they each had themselves.*

*Xenophanes*

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