

# IFH NEWS

Irish Freethinkers & Humanists

No.9 - September 2023

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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
- Subversive Thought of George Ensor
- After God
- Mary Wollstonecraft: Part II
- 'Humanly Possible' Book Review
- History of Naturalism: Part II

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 back copies 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. AN EFFECTIVE HUMANISM

*Peadar Conroy, Galway, August 2023*

The 2022 revision of the *Amsterdam Declaration* of Humanist principles states in article 4(b) as follows:

“For these reasons, we seek neither to avoid scrutiny nor to impose our view on all humanity. On the contrary, we are committed to the unfettered expression and exchange of ideas, and seek to cooperate with people of different beliefs who share our values, all in the cause of

building a better world.”

This is a noble aspiration but it may be stifled by the number of ex-religious humanists in our community.

Most of us in the first Quarter of the 21st Century CE in Ireland are descended from a Christian background and sometimes struggle to cast it off. Added to that difficulty is the fact that since the 4th century CE, our European

laws were largely derived from Christian writings and Roman dogma, in their many forms and influences. It feels like we are attached to a spring with one end moving towards enlightenment through Humanism and the other fixed in the medieval church - pulling us back.

In the past, religious professionals have been invited to address Humanist gatherings and, having been present to witness one such event, I was horrified, but not surprised, at how the speakers took the opportunity to explain the importance of their church's teachings and largely ignored the fact that they were addressing Humanists. Why, why, why do we do it?

We have great Humanist supporters among certain celebrated authors who have access to broadcast media, but they have often fallen into the trap of publicly displaying anger and frustration towards religious belief and getting themselves stuck in futile religious arguments, rather than using the opportunities to proactively demonstrate the value of Humanism in its own right, and not as a reaction to medieval culture.

In order to move on and embrace the Humanist philosophy in a truly enlightened way, we need to cast away our religious baggage completely. We need to be able to describe ourselves as Humanists, as descendants of the Enlightenment, not as atheists or agnostics, because these terms refer to theism, and theism is not relevant to enlightenment, but is a distraction, and one that we need to avoid.

The challenge we face is to expand on the Humanist principles set out in the Declaration so that they can be a practical blueprint for a better society. We will have to explain that greed and cruelty are bad for society, that there is no such thing as a 'just war', that the notion of 'rules for war' is ridiculous. We will have to explain how we can resolve conflict between people without resorting to violence; we will have to convince selfish people to share with others and to stop destroying our fragile envi-

ronment; and on and on and on ...

We need a comprehensive set of books rather than a one-page summary!

We can help ourselves to focus on Humanism by giving up the anger-emotion directed towards the religious. It will take generations. Those people in society who are guided by irrational belief and religious dogma will not change easily, so we can waste a lot of effort trying to turn their ship of belief that has set its course in ice over millennia.

Rather, we can put our effort into demonstrating a better alternative and not in contrast to the old ways, but proactively focused on Humanism and enlightenment independently.

The religious systems of the world have failed to provide comprehensive good guidance for modern society. They have facilitated or oftentimes encouraged almost constant strife and war, misery and death; great wealth alongside cruel poverty.

It would be inspiring to see our Humanist leaders begin a process in Applied Humanism, based on the 2022 Declaration, on how the principles can be applied in a practical way to build a more successful society.

As a Humanist community, we will have to deal with the notion of the 'freethinker'. Although the word is delightful from a philosophical perspective, it has an individualistic aspect. How do we get a large number of 'freethinkers' to agree on anything detailed? If we are ever to move beyond the broad principles of the 2022 Declaration and expand them into structured proposals that can be implemented, the individuals that comprise the group will have to accept consensus for the greater good.

Many of us will have difficulty with this and instinctively resist, but like individual straws protesting our individual hue, we can either be blown to the four winds or stand together in strength. Making change happen requires us to stand together and speak with one voice, clearly articulated and supported by all. ▲

*Carmel Heaney*

*This article is taken from 'The Irish Times' of 4th September 2023, because it has been recommended by some IFH subscribers as worthy of reproduction, given its insightful overview of the subject. Some readers may not agree with a couple of references to 'grace', but it is believed that these should not take away from appreciation of the general thrust of the piece.*

President Michael D Higgins has emphasised the need to embed philosophy in the Irish education system and to promote it more widely in society. He spoke of “a reflective atmosphere in our classrooms, in our media, in our public space”.

When the psychiatrist Carl Jung was asked what was needed to fix the ills of modern life, he replied “when each person looks to the inner life”.

So, how can philosophy help? It can help distinguish between truth and fallacy in an argument; it can guide you to decide whether you have a moral duty to intervene in a troubling situation that is “none of your business”; it can reinforce psychiatry in resolving personal hurts or anxieties.

In Irish public affairs, philosophical thinking could facilitate the kind of changes needed today. A wealth economy grappling with social problems, population growth and a newly ethnically diverse society, are among the issues challenging traditional norms.

Philosophy cannot necessarily activate correct conduct or decisions. The mystery of grace must come into play. Sometimes the two elements converge.

Active exploration of new possibilities in science and technology enriched modern life greatly, not least in medicine. However, a philosopher would say that these advances were the result of right answers to wrong questions.

Nuclear power is used for deadly weaponry as well as for fuel in homes and industry. Synthetics have introduced a new level of convenience into modern living, but discarded plastic material is killing off fish.

Contemporary culture discourages introspection. American journalist Krista Tippett addresses this lacuna. She created and hosts the PBS programme and podcast, *On Being*. The American way is to value self-help, competition, getting results. Now in its 20th year, the podcast examines what it calls “the animating questions at the centre of human life: what does it mean to be human, and how do we want to live?”

Asking the right questions is what philosophers do. In this, language is critical to achieving clarity and an understanding of complexity. Ludwig Wittgenstein pioneered research in this field. His contemporary, George Orwell, brought the vital role of language in society to the attention of the general public. In his novel, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Orwell exposed how influencers could not only distort the truth but could suppress thinking altogether. “Newspeak” was the language that Big Brother devised to distort truth. This strategy is echoed today in the use of terms like “collateral damage” and “friendly fire”. In everyday affairs, it is common for a public figure exposed in wrongdoing to refer to his/her “mistake” rather than admitting guilt. Such euphemisms debase the truth.

Since Orwell, the impact of social media has unleashed on society a tsunami of unregulated, unresearched, random information and opinions. Never was critical thinking more necessary. There is a swerve in society towards the recognition of the importance of wellbeing over material gain. Mindfulness and empathetic leadership feature in the curriculums of business schools and are incorporated in the

brief of human resources managers.

Organisations like the International Charter for Compassion <https://charterforcompassion.org/> and the widespread appeal of the *On Being* initiative testify to this phenomenon. The vision which sees beyond self-interest takes shape in organisations dedicated to conflict resolution or to saving the environment. Such issues of topical concern extend the remit of traditional faith-based and community activities.

In Ireland, up to the late 20th century, racism and homophobia were endemic. Corporal punishment of children in schools and homes was common and only legally prohibited in 1982. Such practices still occur but are not tolerated and are now crimes.

In Ireland, up to the late 20th century, racism and homophobia were endemic. Corporal punishment of children in schools and homes was common and only legally prohibited in 1982. Such practices still occur but are no longer tolerated and are now crimes.

The swerve we're now seeing will not turn swords into ploughshares nor reverse the degradation of the planet. However, a critical mass

seeking well-directed change can have an impact.

The philosopher Hegel theorised that human history was a struggle, one system evolving into another until finally a synthesis was reached. He called this "the Absolute".

Scientist and mystic Pierre Teilhard de Chardin proposed a Christian narrative of an evolving human consciousness based on love and culminating in what he called the Omega point. These great thinkers, though proposing a totally different worldview, shared the concept of the possibility of positive change. History is a flow of energy, not a static situation in which we are trapped. The same idea, applied to public affairs as well as individually, could be liberating. Philosophy can help it along.

*Originally published under the title 'Why we need philosophy to help us navigate modern life'.*

**Dr Carmel Heaney is retired from the Department of Foreign Affairs and is a freelance writer.**

#### 4.

#### BELIEF & FAITH

##### *Daltín Ó Ceallaigh*

Recently, some Jehovah's Witnesses came to my door while I was on the telephone, and in order to shorten my encounter with them, I said that I was not a Christian. They then responded assuredly: "But you believe in God?" I replied simply (and shockingly to them) that I did not believe in God. And that, as desired, proved the end of the conversation. Another way of phrasing my response would have been to say that I believe that there is no god. Did that then mean that we were both believers, albeit with different answers to the same question?

However, usually, when one says "believe" or "believer" in a conversation about religion, it is construed as adherence to a theological

outlook. The alternative is normally just classification as a "nonbeliever".

Religious people tend to think that, in a philosophical conversation, "belief" and being a "believer" only refers to acceptance of religion. And when one enquires about the cause of their belief, particularly in God, one is customarily told that it is matter of faith in a certainty. In other words, one cannot prove that there is a God, but it is nonetheless believed that there definitely is such a phenomenon. The believers concerned are thus theists.

When a 'nonbeliever' states that she or he is specifically an *atheist*, while in turn conceding that one cannot prove that there is no God, it is

often claimed that one is thus likewise subscribing to a faith, albeit of a negative kind and that there is no basic mental difference in that regard between the believer and nonbeliever; it is just that the believer is right and the nonbeliever is wrong.

Apart from who is right and who is wrong, there is, however, an important distinction between the two situations. I, anyway, as an atheist do not have faith that there is no God. Rather have I formed a hypothesis that there is none on the basis of my thinking, reading (both of contemporary and historical literature), discussions, and observations over many decades. I am not out to defend that hypothesis as a dogma; instead, I merely hold to it until I am given any credible reason or evidence to revise

it. So far, that has not been the case.

Putting all this in another fashion, the process of adhering to faith is unscientific while that of adopting a hypothesis is scientific. In other words, the contrast is not simply in the conclusion; it is in the method of arriving at it and in the status that one gives it.

And getting back to semantics, I can therefore legitimately continue to say that I believe there is no God without thus having a sort of negative faith attributed to me, because the verb does not so determine the noun. Or to put it another way, while “believe” may indicate “belief”, belief does not necessarily infer faith.

Otherwise, I am a positive believer - in humanity rather than divinity.

❧

## **5. REPEAL THE PREAMBLE CAMPAIGN**

### *BEING SENT TO INDIVIDUALS AND ORGANISATIONS*

Sometime later this year or early next, a referendum will be held to amend the Irish Constitution.

It is intended that there will be at least one proposed amendment, probably two and possibly three.

The main amendment, if there is more than one put forward, will be to deal with the question of what has been called ‘a woman’s place in the home’.

A second may concern the definition of family insofar as it may no longer be required to depend upon marriage, among other things.

A third has been talked about in respect of gender, but it is not clear what may be in mind here.

Holding a referendum is an expensive business and full advantage of it should be taken to secure other amendments which may be regarded as urgent.

Irish Freethinkers and Humanists (IFH) have previously highlighted the Preamble to the Constitution which offends Unitarian Christians, non-Christian religious and Hu-

manists. That is insofar as it is trinitarian, specifically Christian and theistic.

We hold that such a Preamble has no place in the Constitution of a secular republic. Moreover, it is of no legal significance, while still being offensive as outlined, and its removal could take place without affecting anything else in the Constitution.

There is also the consideration that the Government proclaims that it is committed to reconciliation among different traditions on the island of Ireland. It should be pointed out that the Preamble is incompatible with that stance.

IFH therefore propose that a REPEAL THE PREAMBLE CAMPAIGN should be launched as soon as possible to lobby for the removal of the item in question in the referendum anticipated.

We would therefore ask for support in this regard and an indication of your willingness or otherwise to become involved in such a campaign. Following that, a meeting of interested parties could be held in order to decide how to proceed accordingly.

Finally, we would add that we should be careful about an oppositional reaction to proposed deletion being that instead it should be redrafted. That could be a clever way of embroiling us in lengthy deliberations, probably designed to lead nowhere, and therefore of postponing any tabling of an amendment in a referendum. The point should be underlined that there is no necessity for a Preamble of any kind and that we should not get involved in a discussion about redrafting.

#### THE PREAMBLE

*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.* ♦

## 6. 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](mailto: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](mailto: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>

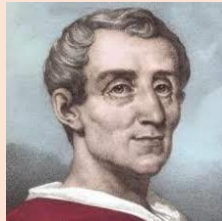
### **North West Humanists**

2<sup>nd</sup> Tuesday of month  
Radisson Hotel, Sligo  
Contact: Gill Bell 087 295 8206  
[humanistgb@gmail.com](mailto:humanistgb@gmail.com)

***THEY SAID ...***

***I call prejudices not what make one unaware of certain things, but what make one unaware of oneself.***

*Montesquieu*



***There is no calamity like not knowing what is enough.***

*Tao Te Ching*

***To be is to inter-be. You cannot just 'be' by yourself alone. You have to inter-be with every other thing.***

*Thách Nhất Hanh*

***... war appears to be as old as mankind, but peace is a modern invention.***

*Henry Sumner Maine*

***... atheism does not necessarily lead to the corruption of morals.***

*Pierre Bayle*

***[On the strategy of religion] - the common people need mysteries ... they must be deceived.***

*Voltaire*

***[To a student] - You do not yet know about life; why do you concern yourself about death?***

*Kong Fu Zi (Confucius)*

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