

# Agnostic About Everything

By Paddy Woodworth

This is an edited version of the talk given by the former Arts Editor of the *Irish Times* at the Carlingford Summer School in August

**G**OOD AFTERNOON. I would like to thank you for inviting me to speak here today, but I'm not sure if you will be happy with what I have to say.

As an agnostic, of course, I'm not absolutely sure about anything. But I am as sure as I can be that such uncertainty is a positive stance. That is the main point I want to make today. I will try to establish - a contradictory enterprise, of course - that uncertainty is a virtue. I'd go further than that: at a time when sectarian and bigoted forces, with access to weapons of mass destruction, threaten the survival of humanity and our planet, the promotion of doubt as a positive value could, paradoxically enough, be critical to the outcome.

I have been invited here, I think, because I wrote a column in the *Irish Times* some months ago, ranting against the cruel idiocies of organised religion. I denounced Zionists, Christians, Christian Zionists, Hindus and Muslims for pretending to lead us to heaven while making the world we live in more closely resemble hell. Somehow I could not bring myself to attack Buddhists, but that may have been a mistake. Bigotry and sectarianism have their adherents even among the ranks of this most gentle and least dogmatic of religions.

In any case, in this article, I described myself as an agnostic, a position I will attempt to defend throughout this paper. But I was also rash enough to describe myself as a humanist, with a small 'h', without, I have to confess, ever having given a huge amount of thought to what a humanist actually is.

Not unnaturally, people in the Irish Humanist Association thought I might like to get involved, and kindly invited me to sign up for membership. I was flattered but I declined, though this weekend may, of course, change my mind.

My gut reluctance to become a Humanist, with a capital H, is rooted first

of all in a strong personal aversion to joining anything. I hope you forgive me if, during this paper, I repeatedly refer to personal experience and anecdote. I think this is unavoidable when dealing with a topic as intimate as one's personal belief system.

This aversion to joining anything more ideological than a trade union and a gym - and I have since left the latter - developed rather late in life. In my twenties I used to be a great joiner. I longed desperately for a solid ideological framework which would replace the liberal Christianity I had inherited from my parents, and which I had torn asunder with all the energy of adolescence.

This quest eventually led me, after many diversions, to join a political party. The grouping I chose was Official Sinn Fein, aka the Republic Clubs aka the Workers Party. In fact, it had more names than you could shake a stick at, if you'll pardon the expression, but only one ideological framework. Some of my most prominent former comrades, I can't help noticing, have developed a convenient amnesia about what that organisation was actually like. For good or ill, I remember it all rather clearly. Some of my experience in that party is, I think, relevant to the argument I want to make today.

In 1974, Gardiner Place used to insist that its neophytes passed through a series of Herculean tests, otherwise known as new members' classes. These classes were constructed around the Leninist principle of Better Fewer, but Better. You had to be very committed indeed to survive the unique atmosphere of suffocating boredom and intellectual intimidation which some of the senior Stickies could induce. Let me describe one particular moment, which is pertinent to the matter in hand.

The ideologue instructing us on this particular evening had the unnerving habit of slowly and systematically scorching empty cigarette packets with

the glowing tip of a John Players while he spoke to us. At the time, I was concerned that this might reflect sadistic impulses; in fact, I think he was simply terrified of looking his audience in the face, and needed something bright to focus his attention.

In any case, the theme of his discussion was our omnipresent enemies. They were to be found, it sometimes appeared, in greater numbers inside the party than outside it. Things might seem complex, he told us, but we should not be fooled, it was all really very simple: "If we are right", he said, "they must be wrong. And they have no right to be wrong".

I think we can all recognise in this statement a deadly pseudo-logic, a dualistic dynamic which underlies all pogroms, whether ideological, ethnic, or religious. The concept of final certainty, of absolute truth, of total rightness, automatically produces a lethal perception: different points of view must be regarded as hostile and dangerous, rather than as alternatives which may be offered legitimately, and discussed in good faith. In my instructor's world-view, as in all totalitarianisms, whether secular or religious, the existence of the other became an intolerable affront which could only be purged by extermination.

As Salman Rushdie puts it: "Throughout human history, the apostles of purity, those who have claimed to possess a total explanation, have wrought havoc among mere mixed-up human beings". The roads to the hells-on-earth represented by the Soviet gulags, by Auschwitz, and by the prisons of the Holy Inquisition, are all paved with that most dangerous of materials: certainty.

It is easy, of course, to say this, blind to our own pious certainty that we would never be guilty of such a crude, Manichean approach. With that in mind, I thought it might be positive to tease out the implications of applying ►

agnosticism, as I understand it, to some of the belief systems articulated by humanists, that is, by humanists with a capital H.

As I have already said, I am no expert on humanism, nor have I any training in philosophy. Until I received the invitation to speak here, I was only faintly aware that there was any organised version of humanism in Ireland. I had read a little about non-religious marriage and funeral ceremonies, had attended one or two of them, and was broadly impressed by what I read and saw. In preparation for this conference on 'positive humanism', I have ventured a little further, and looked at the statements of principles on humanist websites, especially, but not only, Irish ones. I find much to admire, but also a number of points to take issue with.

I do not pretend to have come up with any comprehensive analysis, or counter-analysis. I simply hope that, by summarising some of my responses this afternoon, I may, as a friendly outsider, provoke some useful debate. Above all, I hope I may persuade of you of the value of agnosticism as a system of positive doubt.

To take the first, and biggest, bull by the horns, I was surprised to find that the Humanist Association of Ireland defined itself in its brief history as articulating "the atheist perspective of the non-religious community". The Ulster Humanist Association is rather less diplomatic: "Humanists believe that the idea of a god rightly belongs in the dust-bin of history." The Belfast Humanist Group, not unnaturally, devotes much space to religion and tribalism, and argues that if religion is jettisoned tribalism will wither away.

All three groups, therefore, appear - and I will be happy to be corrected here - to define themselves, more or less aggressively, as atheistic rather than agnostic.

I have to say that I have big difficulties with this approach. Atheism is a deeply problematic word. Its blunt, abrupt refusal of the possibility of God - a concept capable of a huge range of interpretations - seems as dogmatic and unscientific a position as those taken by the hardliners in the great religions. I don't have any personal agenda to defend here. I have long shared the view that the idea of a personal God is a pathetic, if sometimes heroic, fallacy - a wilful and contradictory projection of our fears and desires onto the blank canvas of

the unknown.

And it is all too obvious that belief in a personal God *can* be a deeply divisive factor in social relationships, a tribal emblem. It's dangerous enough to be certain about the rectitude of a political ideology. Stir in the blessing of an omnipotent being, to whom you have uniquely privileged access, and some people immediately feel an obligation to start slaughtering the infidels. Marxists had certainty, Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists, in their bigoted manifestations, have supercertainty. From the righteous anger of the saved, there seems to be no God who will deliver the rest of us.

However, it seems both unfair and simplistic to lump everything associated with religion as leading to the sectarian cesspool. Many of the bravest opponents of sectarianism in Ireland have been members of a religious tradition. And the historical roots of Irish sectarianism are watered by many factors apart from religious difference. Besides, people of different religions often co-exist perfectly happily in many places, even, occasionally, within Northern Ireland.

Moreover, those of us who have tried on the Marxist straitjacket, need be wary about any sense of moral superiority here. Religions do indeed shamefully promote sectarian conflict in some contexts, but so can secular politics. The God-factor can have a nefarious impact, but so can the certainty derived from a belief that one is the instrument of an abstraction called history, dialectical materialism, or, god help us, scientific socialism. Think of the savage start made by Lenin and Trotsky, the holocaust left behind by Stalin. Think of the countless victims, in both the human and natural worlds, of Mao Zedong and Pol Pot. Think of the continuing daft, dogmatic murderousness of the Shining Path in Peru, and of Kim Jong-Il's regime in North Korea, today.

All these things should remind us of how easily a system supposedly based on scientific rationalism can generate irrationality on a scale that might leave the Popes and Ayatollahs gawping in envy.

In this context, cheerful references to the dust-bin of history, do make my hair stand up on end, just a little bit at least. This was the phrase reached for by one of Marx's most ruthless interpreters, Leon Trotsky, at the moment of the Bolshevik imposition of dictatorship.

This context makes me feel deeply uneasy about the term atheism. It smacks too much of certainty, of the smugness that can so easily shade into bigotry and authoritarianism, of leaving no space for what we can't be, or shouldn't be, sure of. Now there is no convincing rational proof, that I am aware of, that establishes the existence of a deity. But neither can there be a compelling argument that can make us absolutely certain that no deity exists.

Atheism is, by definition, philosophically dogmatic. But my concern is not only that the term recalls the 19th century pseudo-religions which the 20th century should have made us very wary of. This word also misses the point of much of the best practice in contemporary religion.

Many religious people today reject the dogmas of their own churches. They lay much more emphasis on faith, commitment and personal experience than on a belief system. Faith and personal experience are not really amenable to rational contradiction. Humanists may not want to make this leap of faith, and we do not share the experience those who make it describe. But we can hardly dismiss that experience as of no human relevance or human value.

We also have to recognise the huge contribution made to the relief of human suffering, and to the advance of democracy and human rights, by people inspired by religious faith. Humanism, according to the documents I have consulted, shares these objectives, and makes them the centre of its program. In that case, then, many religious people are our natural allies, in a struggle which needs all the allies it can get. The stridently negative implications of atheism critically reduces the space for dialogue and collaboration with such people.

I am not suggesting for a minute that humanists who are absolutely convinced of the non-existence of God should conceal that conviction. Atheists deserve the same respect - no more and no less - as those who believe that they eat the body and blood of God in a wafer and a glass of wine. And they have, of course, every right to propagate their views. And no doubt the sensibilities of democrats and rights activists who happen to be religious can take the assertions of atheists with good grace and good humour.

What I am suggesting, however, is that atheism springs from the same deluded and potentially dangerous quest for certainty as the dogmatic tendencies in the religions it opposes. Atheism is understandable as the first response of a mind outraged by the irrationality of religious

religious dogmas, or of a heart appalled by the catastrophic cruelty and vicious hypocrisy that the great religions have so often been guilty of.

But it is only a first response, and it seems to me to be a static and inflexible position, one which precludes any movement outside the limits it has set itself. If humanism is genuinely to embrace the totality of human experience, then atheism seems to me to be an obstacle to its advancement. Atheism also runs counter to the scientific spirit, which, according to Bertrand Russell, holds that complete certainty is hardly ever possible.

Agnosticism, on the other hand, should cultivate a permanent state of openness. Some atheists find agnosticism suspect because it appears to them weak, uncommitted, fence-sitting and so on. In fact, agnosticism requires considerable inner strength. It is a difficult stance to maintain, because it runs counter to hundreds of generations of human conditioning. Perhaps, just perhaps, certainty may have been an evolutionary asset to human beings living in small groups under threat from all sides. Like the armour of certain dinosaurs, however, it has long ceased to be a positive factor in our relations with the world, and with each other. It is not too much to say that it threatens us with extinction.

Without the reassuring comfort of certainty - whether the dogmatic certainty of the religious bigot, or the reactive certainty of the militant atheist - the agnostic has to approach each new experience without any preset response. This is extraordinarily difficult - and it is no doubt impossible to practise such an open attitude with total consistency. But the simple commitment to make this effort can have a transformative effect.

The agnostic should become capable of something which is very rare, but desperately needed, in human relationships, whether between individuals, social groups, or states. This is the ability actually to listen to the arguments put to her or him, rather than simply to react to each one as if every conversation were a game of chess. There is nothing wrong with robust dialectical debate, of course, but the agnostic should recognise that there is a strong element of role-playing in such contests. The agnostic should value the synthesis that such debate can produce above the idea of 'winning' the argument.

This recognition can lead to a real grasp of the meaning behind the cliché

that there are two - or twenty - sides to every argument. The agnostic approach, precisely because it tries to jettison the notion of certainty, fosters the kind of genuine dialogue and tolerance which stands some chance of resolving conflicts.

It is, in fact, the opposite of the approach of my Sinn Fein instructor, who believed that his possession of the right line implied the dispossession of all other arguments. The agnostic should understand that, while her or his argument may have much to recommend it, counter-arguments are also likely to throw light on a bigger and more complex picture than any of the participants could have recognised alone.

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As well as its value in promoting more fruitful, and less destructive, interaction between individuals, agnosticism also has great potential in terms of the individual's own relationship with aesthetic and, dare I say it, spiritual experience. This idea has been famously expressed by the poet Keats, in a letter to his brothers. Speaking of the quality which characterised the imaginative powers of great artists, he coined the phrase 'Negative Capability'. This may sound like a strange quality to commend in a lecture on *positive* humanism, but Keats certainly saw it as a life-affirming characteristic, existing when we are, "*capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason*". The key word is here is the peculiarly appropriate 'irritable'. Important as fact and reason are, it is evident from our experience that they are far from sufficient to sustain the whole human being. Keats is not saying that we should not

reach after them. As I understand it, he is only saying that we should not reach after fact and reason all the time, as an irritable knee-jerk reaction to states of mind we cannot fully explain or express in rational terms. The mindset he is describing here appears to be a kind of voluntary surrendering of the rational self to a way of being in the world which facilitates the free play of the creative imagination.

Those of us who are agnostics are likely to be periodically conscious, sometimes more acutely than others, of what has been memorably described as "the God-shaped hole in me". This phrase has attracted thinkers as different as Blaise Pascal, Jean-Paul Sartre, Salman Rushdie, and Bono, and may have its origins in St Augustine. Rushdie's observation on this sensation is particularly interesting: "I used to say: 'there is a God-shaped hole in me'. For a long time I stressed the absence, the hole. Now I find it is the shape which has become more important". What we do about this sensation will depend on our individual preferences. But, if we are genuinely open to new experiences, as the humanist manifestos I have consulted say we should be, then we should not exclude practices or disciplines derived from religion.

On the other hand, we frequently have to confront the dangers presented by fundamentalism and obscurantism. Muslim and Zionist fundamentalisms are so patently exclusive, intolerant and destructive that they hardly need further comment, though their complex social and historical origins in fact need very careful analysis. The growing strength of Christian fundamentalism in advanced industrial societies, especially the US, is perhaps particularly disturbing. This is because it suggests that bigotry can still find a big echo in countries with well-established pluralistic and democratic institutions, and widely distributed material well-being.

The real challenge for humanists, it seems to me, is to project a positive image of individual and collective lives lived without such certainties. The negative image from which humanism often suffers has a cause. It derives from humanism's own tendency to define itself in relation to those beliefs it does *not* hold, rather than in relation to the values it wants to promote.

In fairness, the statement of principles and values of the Humanist Association of Ireland, and the Amsterdam Declaration, and the Humanist Manifesto III all make serious efforts to address this issue. The stress in all these documents is on ethics, on sensitivity and

compassion, integrity and altruism, on democracy on human rights, on personal liberty and on lives lived to the full.

Foregrounding these positive values is all the more important given the other positive pillar on which humanism stands: prioritizing rationalism and the scientific method. Reason and science are invaluable tools for exploring and changing the world, but they are insufficient, to put it mildly, as guides to the totality of human experience and behaviour. Who uses, or would want to use, the scientific method to choose a life partner, or to determine their sexual tastes and preferences? Who would want to use purely rational criteria to choose a career, even if that career is in science?

Scientific studies can, of course, throw light on all these areas, but this light will never illuminate the whole picture. There are simply too many variables in human relationships and in human psychology for rationality to provide a completely reliable calculus here.

The Humanist Manifesto III tells us that: "Knowledge of the world is derived by observation, experimentation, and rational analysis. Humanists find that science is the best method for determining this knowledge as well as for solving problems and developing beneficial technologies".

In fact, our knowledge of the world also derives from emotional and affective experience, which is prior to and at least equivalent in ranking to our rationality. This is perhaps implicitly recognized in the next sentence in the manifesto: "We also recognize the value of new departures in thought, the arts, and inner experience - each subject to analysis by critical intelligence". This recognition is crucial, because the arts and inner experience explore precisely those parts of the human which science cannot reach - parts which may be irrational or non-rational, but which are essential to our well-being and wholeness.

The difficulty, of course, or rather, the challenge, which positive moral values like compassion, sensitivity, and altruism present us with is that they are abstract, and only become concrete and of practical value as applied to specific situations. And those applications will always be subject to debate: in other words we are back to uncertainty, and the necessity for an agnostic approach to moral issues.

The Humanist Studies website tells us that: "Humanists believe that moral values are properly founded on human empathy and scientific understanding." Well, human empathy is a rather vague term. The human empathy of scientists has in the last century excluded the sick, the physically and mentally disadvantaged, the sexually degenerate and so on. I am not talking about aberrations like Nazism here, but of the practice in enlightened social democracies like Sweden, where 63,000 people were subjected to forced sterilization between 1934 and 1975.

This is not to say humanism is wrong to emphasise the value of science, it is merely to point out that we should be as skeptical and agnostic about the claims made in the names of science and, indeed, of humanism as we are of claims made in the name of Christianity or Islam.

On thorny and painful issues of personal and social morality, humanists need to be careful not to be corralled into knee-jerk opposition to every position espoused by religious believers. The levels of gender and sexual oppression generated by religious interest groups in the past, and still defended by many of them today, tend to create a siege mentality among humanists, who may still tend to think negatively rather than positively on issues like abortion.

This can lead to positions like that articulated on the Ulster Humanist Association website, which tells us that: "On any fair comparison of ... characteristics... like rationality, self-consciousness, awareness, pleasure and pain, and so on, chickens, pigs and calves come out well ahead of the human foetus at ANY stage of pregnancy. A fish or even a prawn shows more signs of consciousness than a human foetus of less than three months". And the UHA text continues: "Yet all these forms of life are killed throughout Ireland ... with no protest from anti-abortionists, most of whom are quite happy to eat them regularly. It is difficult to take seriously an ethic which vents so much anger at abortions and yet remains silent at the widespread slaughter of far more developed forms of life for the taste of their flesh or for profit".

Frankly, I find it hard to take seriously a human being, let alone a humanist, who can be so dismissive of the value of the human foetus - these paragraphs in fact sound as though they had escaped from some extremist and misanthropic animal rights activists' manifesto.

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I find it a lot easier to concur with the much calmer and more rational tone of the conclusion of the same text:

"Humanists are concerned with the QUALITY of life, so in general we believe it is right that some pregnancies should be medically terminated to avoid greater suffering and distress. Women are the best judges of their own situation and the choice of abortion should be available them, particularly where there is grave physical or psychological risk or where the child would be born severely handicapped".

One can take this position, in defence of woman's right to choose, and still recognize that abortion is a complex matter, and that it is rarely a cost-free option in emotional terms. One can even recognise that the human foetus should be valued more highly by other humans than a chicken, or a prawn.

The extent of the use of abortion as a first-line contraception among teenagers and adults is a legitimate cause for concern to anyone who claims to advocate the positive human values of sexual responsibility as well as sexual freedom. Failures in our attempts to educate for responsible sexuality cannot all be laid today at the door of religious puritans. Some re-thinking may be necessary in this area.

I may, of course, be wrong about this, of course, as about everything else. But I raise this contentious issue to illustrate the value of taking an agnostic approach to questions we may prefer to regard as closed. For the humanist who attempts to combine rationality and compassion, no issue can be completely cut and dried. If we could begin to think of doubt itself as a positive value, one which advances open debate and undermines sectarianism and bigotry of any kind, I think we would be well on the way to establishing a road to a positive humanism. □