

Introduction of Darrin McMahon

By Chris Kijne

John Adams Institute

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Good evening and a special welcome to our honorable speaker of tonight professor Darrin McMahon,

If there is anything I'm grateful for to professor McMahon it is that by reading his book I was once again reminded of the best song-title ever. It happened towards the end of the book, 'Divine Fury, a history of Genius' which will be the basis for professor McMahan's talk and our subsequent conversation tonight. In these last pages Albert Einstein figures as what may well be the last of modern day geniuses and the counterweight to the other so-called genius of the twentieth century: Adolf Hitler. And of course Einstein's Jewishness plays an important role in that narrative. It is in that context that professor McMahon cites one of the praises that befell Einstein in England, where he was dubbed 'the greatest Jew since Jesus'.

It was at that moment that another genius came to my mind: the notorious Jewish-Texan country singer Kinky Friedman. Because he wrote that song with the best song-title ever: 'They ain't makin' Jews like Jesus anymore'.

Now apart from very funny, that song-title is more revealing in the context of professor McMahon's book than good old Kinky could have imagined. Because in the concluding chapter of his – and I'll stop short here and will merely call the book 'brilliant' – of his brilliant history of the concept of genius through the ages, from Socrates to Steve Jobs, so to speak, the conclusion is that in our times we have more or less done away with the idea of genius. And thus also of 'Jews like Jesus'. Or better still: we have so democratized and globalized genius that in fact anybody can be a genius these days, and therefore logically nobody is.

If that is a loss and if it is an inevitable product of human evolution, and if we can retrace our steps – that is one of the questions I'm very much looking forward to discuss with professor McMahon later on, but first of course we will enjoy his Burgerhart-lecture.

So let me conclude by telling you that professor McMahon is currently Professor of History at Dartmouth College in New Hampshire, that he used to be Ben Weider Professor of History at the Florida State University, that the list of other universities he has been teaching through the years is too long to be summed up here and that before 'Divine Fury' he wrote the widely acclaimed 'Happiness, a history' and 'Enemies of the Enlightenment'.

Furthermore he is a regular contributor to such publications as The New York Times, The Boston Globe, The New York Times Book Review, the Washington Post and the Wall Street Journal. And a much wanted public speaker. Therefore, professor McMahon, we are so glad to have you.