

Lent and Easter

As a founder member of SOF Network, David Paterson has lived through Lent and celebrated Easter for many decades, sometimes as a minister and sometimes as an 'ordinary person'.

Why religion at all?

The Sea of Faith Network's first television appearance after Don's *Sea of Faith* series was the *Heart of the Matter* programme about the resurrection debate, and it opened with a clip from the Vigil and Dawn Eucharist at St Peter's Loughborough. For me, understanding religion as a human creation and deeply loving the Christian Passion and Resurrection story are of equal importance. I believe that gods and the supernatural are created by the human imagination and poetic genius and do not exist in any other sense; I value them for what they are. We don't have to discard anything except literalism and certainty. Faith and commitment are best expressed in what we value and how we live.

Since my time at St Peter's I've had no position of authority as I had then – I've been just an ordinary person in two successive congregations, first in Oxford, then back in Loughborough. So I've seen church services and activities from three different angles, including two different theist positions, and I've learned a lot about widely varied needs and interpretations. I think this underlines the importance of non-theists staying within the church. We don't have to be fundamentalist about our views; we can be working for mutual acceptance of theism and non-theism. God's mere existence is not central to religious belief. It's a vague idea and hard to define. What people usually mean, it seems to me, is a sense of the *presence* of God, an inspiring and life-transforming relationship. Someone who read what I've just written said, 'I can't cope with ideas if there isn't a person there. Being close to a person is what's important.' The need to personify ideas varies from person to person. In my prayer life I often talk to 'God', and 'He' to me, and whether there's a 'Being' out there is irrelevant.

Most – but not all – Sea of Faith Network members regard religion not as an enemy, but as a valuable human activity which has evolved over many millennia, exploring and creating understanding and meaning for human life. It's still a continuing process, and we ourselves are part of it. Often people have personified their fear, pain, ideals and hopes; we have imagined into existence good and bad agents, guardians and saviours, leaders and ideals; we have made gods and told stories about them, feared them, honoured them, obeyed them. Environment and climate have had a strong influence on these; the rhythms of human life vary with time and place. There are many cultures, and many a god or gods evolve, giving rise to a wide range of religious belief and practice. Individual needs also vary widely; some may need a saviour, perhaps to save them from the domination of others, or to save them from themselves; others may need leadership and inspiration to find meaning for their lives, and to become agents of salvation for others and for the world. For some, such personification is not necessary. The Christian tradition has no more divine authority than any other; neither can any person's experience be rejected for being out of what's regarded as the norm. Our evolutionary development is deeply rooted in relationships with our fellow beings, inert and living, animal and human, and in them we find awe and wonder; we wish to express it in deed and ritual, and to celebrate holiness and spirituality wherever we perceive it. In the evolution of species, a large gene pool is important. I think it's the same for human cultures and religions – a large meme pool is healthy for human experience and creativity.

As Don has often written, the world of meaning wasn't there until we humans thought, expressed and communicated it. Maybe *something* was there, maybe we can study 'the thing in itself' as well as 'what is perceived'; but

if we do, we must recognise that it's not a thing existing over against other things. Don calls it *'it all'*, I prefer *'all-that-is'*. Identifying, describing and naming it are the stuff of our creative activity. Faith traditions have a variety of insights: the *Aum* of Hinduism, the *Tao* ("The Tao of which we can speak is not the Tao"), and the *mysterium tremendum*. It is the ground of all being, and by definition is self-existent, observable or unobservable, in space-time or not, and beyond any other concept we humans use in trying to understand what 'being' means. It wasn't created, it evolves. We are part of it. We can't step out to look at it, because there *is* no outside. We are it – in it – part of it.

So if some of us keep on going to church, why is that? Some of our humanist critics say it's nostalgia. We can't let go of the God of our childhood. Maybe, but I don't think so – rather it's a total, unafraid conviction that the gods are and always have been human creations.

The rhythms of existence, our place in *all-that-is*, our human evolution, our experiences, the depths of our relationships, these have always been the root of human religion. We do not need to discard anything except the mistake of interpreting the religions as science or history, and burdening them with literal certainty. That mistake could be understood as a lack of faith, a failure of trust and confidence in our vision of holiness.

Perhaps the first gods grew out of human vulnerability and fear, or perhaps from a search for meaning; but quite early they became personifications of leadership, especially in battle. Israel's god is 'Lord of armies'; he goes into battle with them, he conquers their enemies if he is pleased with them; he punishes them with defeat if they have offended him. The mythologies of most ancient religions have something similar, and the



Spring. Painting of leaping hare by Anne Mieke Lumsden

Hindu scriptures are a supreme example (the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and other texts). We're a quarrelsome lot. Humans coalesce into communities which compete with each other, fight each other, kill each other, as other species did and still do. The tribal gods fight parallel battles in another – a spiritual – world.

But running parallel with this evolution are the natural rhythms of day, month and year. Our human nature is immersed in a flux of day and night, of phases of the moon, of the seasons of the year, of birth, maturing, ageing and death. Religions – especially the 'pagan' animist traditions – develop stories for all of these, stories which at first were told under trees, in caves and round firesides, then encapsulated in rituals. Written scriptures are those stories and rituals (the Vedas and Pentateuch are typical examples) and later scriptures have moral laws (Confucius,

Deuteronomy and the Qur'an) and philosophy (the Upanishads, the Tao, the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament).

In particular, especially as the human species spread into higher latitudes, stories and rituals marked the cycle of spring, summer, autumn and winter, and after the invention of agriculture, these were important in shaping our environment, and using natural resources better than other animals could. We passed that knowledge on in story and ritual, bypassing the much longer evolutionary process of genetic mutation and natural selection. Religions (especially the pantheistic ones) were built round both delight, awe and wonder at the things of nature, and fear of natural powers (wind, earthquake, flood, drought, pestilence, plagues); but they also inspire confidence, expressed in story, in the power of humans to predict these forces, protect ourselves from them and harness them by building a relationship with them. They became our gods. And many other natural rhythms – the rhythm of birdsong, buddings of trees and flowers, swarming insects, migrations of herds – were incorporated into early rites.

So the old religions have cycles of prayer: Daily (Monastic offices, Muslim prayers), Lunar (the Jewish Sabbath, and especially Islam – originating in a desert without reliable annual seasons) and Solar (the Pagan Festivals of Solstice and Equinox, and annual commemorations). We still, deep in our being, are influenced by these daily, monthly and yearly rhythms. So the arts, religion, science and technology are aspects of our evolutionary development. Putting these together as distinct parts of the one history of human creativity is the stuff of poetry, and perhaps the insight that Sea of Faith can offer better than most other analyses.

Lent, Holy Week and Easter

In the Christian tradition, the emergence of festivals and rituals from the natural yearly cycle is most evident from the weeks before the winter solstice (Advent) to the Spring equinox (Easter), and 40 days of that time is the season of Lent. In the natural yearly rhythm of the northern latitudes, the lengthening (lenten) days bring new life to everything after the cold of winter. Humans

must get lean and fit for working in the fields or hunting or tending the cattle, slimming down from the fat which kept us warm in winter; and it's a natural time for emptying out the old rubbish we no longer need, and organising our resources for the new tasks ahead – time for a fast, both physically and spiritually, emptying for 40 days before the Spring Equinox in order to be filled anew. As the corn is beginning to grow in the fields to provide the harvest, our food, and our well-being, so the Christian ritual of spiritual growth and discipline continues the process of religious evolution. Communities – and the individuals within them – seek a new, creative way towards the promise of a rich harvest. We make new relationships, take new risks. Spring is a time of warmth, promise, challenge, hope, light, newness. Lent is for springing up, growing in understanding, depth, inner calmness, self-discipline, listening, kindness. It reminds me of Don's 'Fountain' analogy.

Some of the Lent Courses which churches run are good: meeting new people and new ideas, sharing needs, assumptions, beliefs and views. Some are less so, but it's often worth contributing some Sea of Faith insights (very gently: many people find them quite scary!)

Then the Lent season ends with Palm Sunday: first a triumphant pageant, then turning to betrayal, fear, anger, cruelty and shame; and we're into Holy Week. My experience of Holy Week started with the annual singing of Stainer's 'Crucifixion' in the choir of St Alban's Bourne-mouth. I'm grateful that I learned to love the Christian mysteries, not by being taught in a Sunday school, but by singing in a choir. They were never other than stories to me, poetic and beautiful and powerful, something to aspire to, leading me on. I don't remember ever needing a saviour; what I needed was a guide, a leader and a vision: Christ to believe in and follow because he 'wept for the sorrows and pains of men'. And later, at Lincoln Theological College, Holy Week was a liturgical meal of great nourishment.

Then, while I was Vicar of St. Peter's, we started Holy Week with a Jewish Seder meal in as near a genuinely Jewish way as we could (no Christianising) – because it's so easy to blame the Jews, and the first century antagonism between Judaism and Christianity was such a tragedy. Holy

Week continued with the Maundy Thursday supper and Eucharist, and an all-night vigil – the Agony in Gethsemane – which led into the Three Hours on Good Friday, which was an enactment of the Passion story. We drew from just one Gospel each year, to savour the variety of their interpretations and add our own in the present context. The story is rich in meaning.

In his song ‘Friday Morning’, Sydney Carter wrote:

*It's God they ought to crucify
instead of you and me
I said to the carpenter,
a-hanging on the tree.
God is up in Heaven
and He doesn't do a thing
with a million angels watching
and they never move a wing.
I wish that a carpenter
had made the world instead.*

And Brian Wren has written:

*Here hangs a man discarded
a scarecrow lifted high,
a nonsense pointing nowhere
to all who hurry by.*

*Can such a clown of sorrows
still bring a useful word
where faith and love seem phantoms
and every hope absurd?*

*Can he give help or comfort
to lives to comfort bound,
when drums of dazzling progress
give strangely hollow sound?*

*Life emptied of all meaning,
drained out in bleak distress,
can share in broken silence
my deepest emptiness;*

*and love that freely entered
the pit of life's despair
can name the hidden darkness
and suffer with us there.*

*Lord, if you now are risen
help all who long for light
to hold the hand of promise
and walk into the light.*



The Crucifixion by Bernardo Daddi, c. 1320-25.
National Gallery of Art, USA

The old god has come down to earth. He is fully human. He has suffered and died, and it is this self-sacrifice which lives and saves for ever; a vision of love and hope. The All-glorious, Omnipotent Lord of Hosts with His demands and threats is dethroned; the only throne now is the Cross and the only crown is of thorns. A great change, a new salvation has taken place within the evolution of god, and when humans believe in it and live by it new life is brought into being. Does this god exist? Yes, in so far as we live in this god and this god lives in us. Tragically, we can't claim that such faith, believing and living, has been common in Christian history, but it is the most wonderful idea we have to offer as our life-giving story, to share with the creative stories of other traditions.



Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene by Lavinia Fontana (1581).
Uffizi Gallery, Florence

slaughtered lamb and the blood on the tent posts, the hasty departure and the unleavened bread – all these were already there in the ancient rituals, and probably influenced the Biblical telling of the Exodus story. The growth of an annual Passover ritual might have started as late as King Josiah’s time, but certainly became a central part of Jewish life in the return from the Babylonian captivity, which was another time of liberation. In Jesus’ time it was well-established, and the early Christians, who at first were the Jews who believed in Jesus as their promised Messiah, re-interpreted it yet again as another liberation story – a new escape, a new dying and rising – in the story of the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus. The Christian Easter we know is not only a re-interpretation of the Pesach Seder in the Eucharist but also of the North European Goddess Oestre (the name ‘Easter’ gives the game away!) in the seed which dies in the earth and brings new life:

And so to Easter: Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote, in *God’s Grandeur*:

*There lives the dearest freshness deep down things
And though the last nights off the black West went,
Oh, morning at the brown brink eastward springs ...*

Most of our Easter rituals are in one way or another rooted in prehistoric times. At the spring equinox, the farming culture of Canaan celebrated a Feast of Unleavened Bread to hallow the growth of seed for the wheat harvest. The Hebrew nomads’ ritual slaughter of a lamb hallowed the birth of the year’s livestock. When the nomadic tribes of Israel settled down in Canaan they remained semi-nomadic shepherds, but also became settled farmers. They re-interpreted the two feasts together as a celebration of their migration from Egypt. The story incorporated the

*Now the green blade riseth from the buried grain,
Wheat that in dark earth many days has lain;
Love lives again, that with the dead has been:
Love is come again, like wheat that springeth green.*

*In the grave they laid him, love whom men had slain
Thinking that never he would wake again.
Laid in the earth like grain that sleeps unseen:
Love is come again, like wheat that springeth green,*

*Forth he came at Easter, like the risen grain,
He that for three days in the grave had lain.
Quick from the dead my risen Lord is seen:
Love is come again, like wheat that springeth green.*

*When our hearts are wintry, grieving, or in pain,
Thy touch can call us back to life again;
Fields of our hearts that dead and bare have been:
Love is come again, like wheat that springeth green.*

I find that Easter is exciting and uplifting, a new dawn from the darkness, new life, new hope; but

somewhat compromised and ambiguous. A lot of the Easter liturgy and its hymns are so triumphalist! No, Easter is not the coming back to life again of the old Almighty God, Lord of Hosts, maker of heaven and earth, judge and punisher. That god died on the Cross. A new god arises. Easter is not about victory and power, or Christ conquering the world, and it's not about a reward in heaven either. The Fourth Gospel story of Thomas is right: we do not believe in the risen Christ unless he bears the marks of suffering and death. Only then is he 'our Lord and our God.' His kingdom is not of this world.

The biblical resurrection stories are not only about the experience of a community, but show, in the personal experiences of individuals, something of what dying and rising can mean to different people. In Mark we join the women in shock and terror which paralyses them. In Luke we meet Jesus in the breaking of bread and we come together to bring new life through a new religious community. In John we join Mary who loves Jesus tenderly and intimately, the Beloved Disciple who is a mystic and understands, Peter the activist who has much to repent of and rises to a new confidence, and Thomas who has courage and integrity. And Paul writes of his own experience of dying daily and rising to new life in Christ. The Easter story has good news for anyone, but it isn't humanity's only source of meaning or of new life. As Christians we offer our story as a contribution to the wisdom, love and hope of all people. If we value the other stories, we will not treat them as rivals or try to destroy them.

*Turn back, O man, forswear thy foolish ways.
Old now is earth and none may count her days.
Yet thou, her child whose head is crowned with flame
Still will not hear thine inner God proclaim:
Turn back, O man forswear thy foolish ways.*

*Earth might be fair and all men glad and wise.
Age after age their tragic empires rise,
Built while they dream and in that dreaming weep,
Would man but wake from out his haunted sleep,
Earth might be fair and all men glad and wise.*

*Earth shall be fair and all her people one.
Not till that hour shall God's whole will be done.
Now, even now. once more from earth to sky
Peels forth in joy man's old undaunted cry:
Earth shall be fair and all her people one.*

There's an episode in *Life of Pi* (pages 51 – 58 in the paperback, here abbreviated) when Pi – from a Hindu family in Pondicherry – visits a Catholic Church and meets the Parish Priest:

He told me a Story. Humanity sins but it's God's Son who pays the price. I tried to imagine Father saying to me, 'Piscine, a lion slipped into the llama pit today and killed two of the llamas. I have decided that the only way the lions can atone for their sins is if I feed you to them.' What a downright weird story. What peculiar psychology. Divinity should not be blighted by death. It was wrong of the Christian God to let His avatar die. For if the Son is to die, the death of the Son must be real. Father Martin assured me that it was. But once a dead god, always a dead god. Why would God wish that upon himself? Love. That was Father Martin's answer.

This Son is a god who died in three hours, with moans, gasps and laments. What kind of god is that? What is there to inspire in this Son? Love, said Father Martin.

He bothered me, this Son. Every day I burned with indignation against Him, found more flaws to Him. I couldn't get Him out of my head. Still can't. And the more I learned about Him, the less I wanted to leave Him. On our last day, a few hours before we were to leave, I booted up that hill. Short of breath, I said, 'Father, I want to be a Christian, please.'

He smiled. 'You already are. Whoever meets Christ in good faith is a Christian.'

I thought I would explode with joy. I offered prayers to Christ, who is alive. Then I raced down the hill on the left and up the hill on the right, to offer thanks to Lord Krishna for having put Jesus of Nazareth, whose humanity I found so compelling, in my way.

(Pages 51 – 58 are well worth reading in full.)

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